



### ***The Will S. Hays at Arkadelphia***

For centuries, the Ouachita River has carried the waters of its drainage area; sometimes in a raging torrent, but at others, in only a trickle. The upper Ouachita existed as an untapped resource, and even a menace to some. The river's change from a steep drop to a gradual descent resulted in a flooding problem for years: run-off from mountainous areas often exceeded the capacity of natural channels. Prior to the construction of man-made dams on the upper portion of the river, water flowed downstream rapidly from the northwestern Garland County area when the river was full, but naturally slowed down and spread out when it met slower-moving water below Camden in south Arkansas. These conditions resulted in extreme variation in streamflow as well, virtually eliminating the possibility of year-round travel on the river.

However, some river travel did take place on the upper Ouachita. The Indians used the waterway for years, then later, [French and Spanish hunters and trappers](#) utilized the river in travel. It is believed that Clark County pioneer Jacob Barkman was the first to bring a steamboat up the river past what is now Arkadelphia. Barkman lived near the confluence of the Caddo and Ouachita rivers, and used the river for trips to New Orleans. Barkman first traded with merchants to the south by means of pirogues, or large dugout canoes, but when his business began to grow, he needed larger and faster boats. So, he built a boat he named the "Dime." The *Dime* was said to be a very nice boat, and it made regular trips up and down the river before it eventually sank. It is rumored that the vessel got its name when a man who had seen much larger steamboats on the Mississippi River laughed and said, "Tain't no bigger'n a dime!"

The *Dime* was small, but the largest boat known to come up to the upper portion of the Ouachita was the *Will S. Hays*. The *Will S. Hays* could carry 2,000 bales of cotton, and eventually sank on the river by being overloaded with that cargo. Many other boats plied the Ouachita north from Camden prior to the Civil War, including the *Alamo*, *C.M. Humphrey*, *Jo Jacques*, *Arkadelphia City*, *Francis Jones*, *Susie B.*, and *Rock City*.

Navigation often proved difficult. For example, the *Rock City* once met with difficulties a few miles below Arkadelphia. The boat was apparently long and large for the river, and it lacked the power to successfully navigate the rapid and winding current for the upper Ouachita. Loaded with cotton and passengers, the boat failed to make a turn with the current and ended up broadside to an island, in danger of being broken to pieces. Several men drowned attempting to free the trapped vessel. It is believed the boat finally made it to safety.

Steamboats continued to travel the river even after the Civil War, but technological change brought a steep decline in river travel. The railroad's construction across Arkansas in the 1870s marked the beginning of a new era in transportation for the state as well as for Clark County.