



“I had a valuable cargo and a lot of passengers aboard. We left the levee at St. Paul just before dark. It was cloudy, and I felt sure that we were going to have a storm. As it was early summer and the river was low, I thought I might have a little trouble in a storm at the rapids about Merriam, as that was then the most dangerous place on the river. Sure enough, just before we reached the rapids, the storm struck. Lightning flashed almost continuously, and the rain came down in sheets. I was pretty badly worried for a while, but we made the rapids without mishap.”

At another time, George R. DeMers narrowly escaped drowning. He was a watchman then. “It was on the old Mankato,” he said. “I was sound asleep when the engineer whistled for the landing at St. Peter. I jumped up and miscalculating the distance from shore, dropped into thirty feet of water. They fished me out, and after that I was more careful!”

The boats on the Minnesota River in those days were stern wheelers and carried crews of from ten to twelve men, besides the officers and pilots. Each boat carried two pilots. The river men were a rough and ready lot, who settled all disputes with their first. But the veteran pilots called that they were a good-natured, kindly lot, for all that.

According to *The Diary of Daniel M. Storer from 1849 to 1905: A Pioneer Builder and Merchant in Shakopee, Minnesota*, steamboats were a regular appearance on the Minnesota River. Over time, the steamboats included Tiger, Humboldt, Soleo, Greek Slave, Nominee, Minnesota Belle, Lola, Globe, Black Hawk, Navigator, Monticello, and Reviler. Others included Equator, Frank Steele, Hennretta, Yankee Robinson, Ariel Jones, Albany, Stella Whipple, Antelope, Janett Roberts, Northern Light, Chippewa Falls, City of St. Paul, Lorna Doone, Daisy, and Flora Clark.



George’s brother, Charles, was also a pilot. One day the two brothers raced their boats from Mankato to St. Paul. George was on the Mankato, and Charles was in the Carver. The latter won by two hours. The brothers also spent several years on the Red River of the North, traveling between the headwaters of the river and Winnipeg. A prominent thoroughfare in Grand Forks, North Dakota bears the name DeMers Avenue.

With the advent of the railroads, steamboat traffic declined, and after a few years, the Minnesota River ceased to be an important avenue of transportation. George gave up his post as a pilot and worked in the Shakopee mills, owned by G.F. Strait. He served as head miller ten years, retiring several years later. He married Katherine Galvin, and they had two boys and two girls.

Modest and unassuming, the Shakopee veteran holds lightly his service as a river pilot, but George DeMer’s record speaks for itself.

George’s wife, Kate Galvin DeMers, died in 1917, and was buried at Calvary Catholic Cemetery in Shakopee. George Robert DeMers died at age 78 in Minneapolis in December 1929, according to *The Minneapolis Journal*, December 9, 1929.



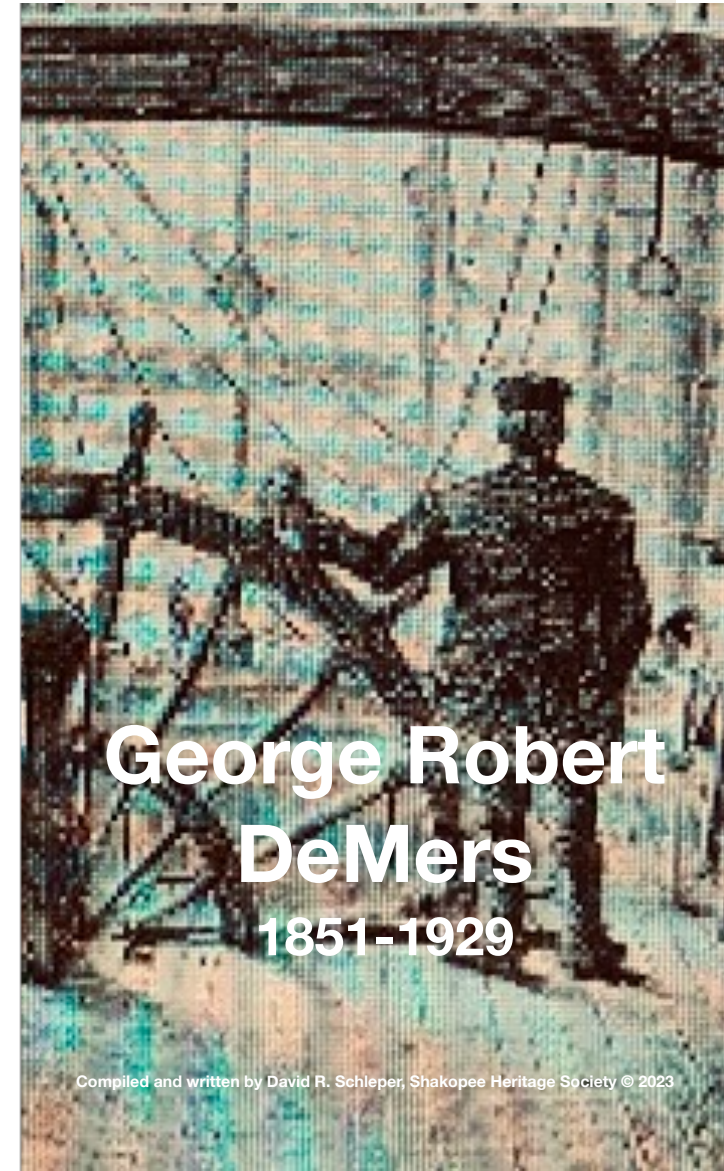
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## SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



George Robert  
DeMers  
1851-1929



In earlier days, the richest in romance, tradition, and pure excitement was the steamboats. Stories of the old steamboat days are always replete with action and interest. While the captain and the mate were important, the old river pilot stands out as the most interesting person in early American history.

George R. DeMers of Shakopee was a veteran river man and pilot of the Mississippi and Minnesota River. Starting as deck sweeper on a boat, he played the waters of the Minnesota River until he retired to become part of the land a quarter of a century later. From the time he went on the river at ten years of age, his career was as colorful and thrilling as any fiction writer could desire according to *Recollections of a Pioneer Citizens: George R. DeMers Relates Colorful Incidents of His Career as a River Pilot*, **Shakopee Tribune**, August 27, 1925, and in *Recollections of Early Pioneers, 1925* by Betty A. Dols, January 10, 2000, Shakopee Heritage Society.

Threading his way cautiously past sand bars, rocks, and rapids, sometimes through inky blackness, at others hampered rather than aided by lightning flashes as the boat nosed its way through a storm at night, George R. DeMers relied on his training, his knowledge of the Minnesota River, and that uncanny sixth sense possessed by the old-time river men. In all those years, he never lost a boat or experienced a serious mishaps.



George in inclined to attribute his splendid record to good luck. "I just didn't happen to have any trouble, that's all," he said in conversation in 1925, when he was 74 years old. But a more logical explanation is that he possessed a good measure the skill, coolness, and judgment indispensable in a good river pilot. Even in those days of low wages, pilots received \$125 or more a month.

George R. DeMers was born in Morris, Illinois on October 22, 1851. His father was Joseph Emile DeMers (1820–1893), and his mother was Marie Anne Antailla dit Pelletier DeMers (1823–1888.). Her grandparents were Étienne DeMers (1775–1843) and Therese Chretien DeMers (1779–1853); and Charles Pelletier (1792–1841) and Catherine Forcier dit Nadeau dit Gaucher Pelletier, who were born in Quebec, Canada.

The family moved to Merriam Junction. His father's farm was near the Minnesota River, and naturally, George became interested in the great boats that swept so majestically up and down the Minnesota River, and in the boisterous and carefree men that formed the crew. So George was taken on as a deck hand in 1861, the first year of the Civil War. He served as a deck sweeper for four years, and then became a watchman. Two years

later, he was granted his papers as a pilot, and was assigned to his first boat.

In years following, George R. DeMers served on many crafts that are prominent in river annals. Among them were the Minnesota, Diamond Jo, Otter, Mankato, Mollie O., and International.

Some of these were passenger boats, often with as many as 300 souls aboard, all in the keeping of the pilot. "It was pretty serious business," said George, "steering through the night with 300 people asleep behind you, and realizing that you alone were responsible for their safety." Certain responsibilities were attached to the office of captain and mate, he explained, "but the pilot was held accountable for his boat when he was at the wheel, as he was not subject to the captain's orders, except in certain minor matters of routine."

George Robert DeMers married Catherine Kate Galvin (1857-1917) on August 19, 1878 in Shakopee.

When asked to recount his most trying experience, George R. DeMers removed his hat and rubbed his head as a gesture of reflection. "Well," he said, "I remember one time coming down the Minnesota with the Diamond Jo, the biggest boat I ever took out."

