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### Review of Working the Mississippi: Two Centuries of Life on the River by Bonnie Stepenoff

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*Working the Mississippi: Two Centuries of Life on the River*

By Bonnie Stepenoff

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015. Pp. xv, 136. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$36.00.)

This work describes colorful sketches of incidents from the towns along the Mississippi River between St. Louis and Memphis, with a particular focus on the lives of those who worked on the river. Seven chapters are devoted to seven river towns—St. Louis, Ste. Genevieve, Cape Girardeau, and New Madrid, Missouri; Chester and Cairo, Illinois; and Memphis, Tennessee. The book is interspersed with chapters on types of work done on the river, including the labor of captains, pilots, deckhands, cooks, maids, engineers, and even gamblers and entertainers. From Bonnie Stepenoff's descriptions of floods, epidemics, lynchings, and steamboat explosions, the reader gets a sense of the insecurity the river brought to people living along its banks. At the same time, though, a desire for new opportunities—whether economic gain, adventure, or freedom from slavery—usually trumped the risks, and people flocked to exploit the river for their own benefit.

*Working the Mississippi* is one of hundreds of interesting accounts of the lives of those who worked along the river during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But Stepenoff's book is not so much a narrative as it is a series of local-history vignettes—largely drawn from collections of

stories published over the past two hundred years, or that the author has collected in oral interviews. These accounts evoke both the generous yet destructive side of the Mighty Mississippi and the river's role in the diverse lives of riverside inhabitants. If any common theme can be taken from the many tales Stepenoff tells, it is the river's power over those who worked on or near it.

Although grounding her research largely in primary sources, the author often takes these accounts at face value without contextualizing, historicizing, or theorizing the authors' perspectives. As a result, the reader is left with a romantic and nostalgic impression of the lives of those who worked on the river. This lack of critical engagement becomes especially problematic in her portrayals of race, as most appearances of black men in the book are of violent and even murderous characters. Without an analysis of why the types of sources she uses might lead to this common portrayal, the reader is left with a one-dimensional and disturbing impression of riverside black masculinity.

Although her stated intent is to show “the complex interaction, for good or ill, between workers on the boats and workers in the riverfront cities and towns of the Middle Mis-

Mississippi” (p. xix), the connection remains largely unexplored. Instead, *Working the Mississippi* is something of an odds-and-ends collection of interesting tidbits that the author has collected over time and then organized by location and occupation. This work reads also at times as a “who’s who” of these river towns—even if the person’s river connection is somewhat minimal. Such anecdotes could have benefited from a historical structure with a sophisticated argument connecting the tales to a coherent narrative of river life. Without this, her work reads like so many of the nineteenth-century memoirs and travel accounts that the author uses—interesting in and of themselves for the stories they tell, but useful more for what they reveal

about the attitudes of the authors than as actual documentation of life along the river. Stepenoff is a scholar, living along the river herself, who clearly knows and loves the river, and has created a work packed with stories about life within the riverside towns of the middle Mississippi.

ANN OSTENDORF is Assistant Professor of History at Gonzaga University. Her research on Mississippi River topics includes her book, *Sounds American: National Identity and the Music Cultures of the Lower Mississippi River Valley, 1800-1860* (2011). She is currently working on a manuscript dealing with Roma lives and the Gypsy image in nineteenth-century America.

