# The Mighty Mo’

South Dakota has a road running through it, a road made of water, called the Missouri.

This great river cuts the state in half and has served as a kind of road for centuries. Its traffic has been central to South Dakota history. American Indians built the first riverboats here, stretching **bison** hides over willow-wood frames.

These trappers and traders often traveled in long, wooden crafts called keelboats, powered by paddles, and sometimes by **sails**. The river was always dangerous. To survive, keelboaters had to understand its powerful motion. They had to watch for tree branches boaters called snags or sawyers, and surging waters they called boilers.

North American tribes along the Missouri also helped the most famous Missouri River boaters of all time, Lewis and Clark. In 1804, the pair led an expedition of fifty explorers up the river from St. Louis, Missouri, on a mission ordered by the President of the United States, **Thomas Jefferson**.

About three months into their journey, Lewis and Clark reached what is now **South Dakota**. They were impressed by the native people and amazed by the wildlife they found. They kept written journals that described barking squirrels, we call them prairie dogs, and fast running goats we know as pronghorns or antelopes. Lewis and Clark also saw bison, bears, elk and mule deer. The mule deer were bigger than the deer they knew in the eastern United States.

Trappers soon turned their attention from beaver pelts to bison hides and tongue. Scientists also rode west from the river to the Badlands and collected petrified bones of **prehistoric** animals. And artists, like painters George Catlin and Karl Bodmer, helped the world understand American Indian life.

Steamboats like the Yellowstone were also called paddlewheelers, because of the churning wheels that moved the boats. The power came from steam created in red-hot tanks or **boilers**.

River towns like Fort Pierre, Pierre, Vermillion, Yankton, and many smaller places sprang up. Springtime floods threatened the towns. In March 1881, a torrent washed away hundreds of buildings. The town of Vermillion was almost entirely destroyed, and many big boats sank. The disaster signaled the end of the Missouri being the area’s main road. Towns were rebuilt, but some companies didn’t have enough money to replace their boats. By the 1880s a new technology had arrived on the scene, **Trains**.

Cars were becoming popular by then, so South Dakotans asked, why not bridges for drivers? In the early years people got their automobiles from one side of the river to the other by **ferryboats**. Or they drove across on ice in winter. Sometimes the ice wasn’t as solid as it looked, and cars broke through.

In the 1950s and 1960s, South Dakota’s piece of the Missouri changed completely. Engineers built four flood control **dams** to make the river less treacherous, and to use the Mighty Mo’s power to create electricity.

The dams not only controlled water flow and delivered electricity but created some of the finest **fishing** havens in the United States. The project also created controversy.

“…is the eastern landscape, eastern grass, with the look and smell of eastern America. Across the Missouri…it is pure west, with brown grass and water scorings and small outcrops. The two sides of the river might well be a thousand miles apart.”

