

A STEAMBOAT CAPTAIN'S EXPERIENCE IN NICARAGUA.

His Account of the Capture of the Lake Boats—Sylvanus M. Spencer has a Letter from Commodore Vanderbilt.

Captain BUNKER, recently in command of one of the "lake boats" in Nicaragua, came on by the *Tennessee*. He went out to Nicaragua in May, 1855, and served on the river and lake boats in the capacity of deck hand, mate and captain. He confesses himself much in love with Nicaragua and its mode of life, and would eagerly leave in the next steamer, could he procure suitable employment from a responsible source. He is darkly complexioned, as all are who linger long so far South, and looks as robust and healthy as a hod carrier. In his view, no one need suffer from the cholera, fever, or anything else in Nicaragua, if they but repel the advances of aguadiente and other stimulating liquors.

All the delicacies of the table can be had in profuse abundance, if you only transfer an equivalent in hard cash—a commodity, by the way, supposed to be slightly scarce just now in Gen. WALKER'S camp, and hence the reputed predominance there of salt beef and hard biscuit.

Captain BUNKER took command of the *La Virgin*, one of the two lake steamers, in July last, and had charge of her up to the 27th of December, when she was captured by the Costa Ricans under SPENCER. The *La Virgin*, as originally built, was a small oce in steamship, and was subsequently altered to fit her for the navigation of Lake Nicaragua. The distance between the mouth of the San Juan River and Virgin Bay—about 80 miles—she usually accomplished in eight or nine hours; the *San Carlos*, the only other lake steamer, being much lighter in draft, and greatly her superior in speed, generally performed it in about six hours. During the rainy season, which commences in April, lasting five or six months, the lake is for the most part calm; but frequently, at other periods of the year, violent winds sweep across it, raising waves on which the boats dance like egg shells. The *Virgin* and *Carlos* had no state rooms or regular berth accommodations, though they were accustomed to start off immediately on the arrival of the transit passengers, by day or night: cots, however, were fitted up on occasion, and furnished opportunity for repose to a few. The *San Carlos* is a boat of 500 or 600 tons burden, about 185 feet long, and was built in Wilmington, Delaware: she is a fair looking craft, not unlike our North River steamboats in appearance, with a single smoke stack and paddle wheels.

The two lake steamers could be navigated a distance of some 30 miles down the San Juan River, to the Toro Rapids, and used to receive the through passengers at that point from the river boats plying below. Captain BUNKER relates that he arrived at the Toro Rapids with his steamer, the *Virgin*, on his last trip down the San Juan, about the middle of December, and found there the small river boat *J. Hogden*, which took off his passengers and freight and conveyed them to Castillo, returning the next day with arms and ammunition for General WALKER. This military equipment, which was still on board the *Virgin* when taken by the enemy, Captain BUNKER says, consisted of two twelve pound mountain howitzers; 480 Minié bullets; 100,000 rounds of cartridge, shells, &c. In addition there were some thirty demijohns of liquor, and about as many boxes of claret.

The little steamer *J. Hogden* lay alongside the *Virgin* until the 27th of December, when a canoe came up the river (sent by the Costa Ricans as it afterwards appeared) bringing information that Mr. SCOTT, Agent of MORGAN & SONS, was at Castillo with freight for the lake steamer. The *Hogden* steamed up as soon as possible, and put down the river in pursuance of this intelligence. About 12 o'clock on the same day she was observed returning by those of the *Virgin*, who however detected nothing suspicious either in her movements or appearance, until she approached nearer, when Capt. BUNKER states that he saw SYLVANUS M. SPENCER—a portion of whose history has already been set forth in the *Times*—standing on the deck of the *Hogden*. As soon as the little steamer was moored alongside the *Virgin*, some 200 Costa Ricans who had been concealed on the *Hogden* began to form on board Capt. BUNKER'S vessel, headed by SPENCER.

Capt. BUNKER was now addressed by SPENCER and informed that the six river boats below were in the hands of the Costa Ricans, and that of course he would see the necessity of yielding up his steamer without resistance.

Captain BUNKER, having only a mate and ten or twelve deck hands with him, was obliged to submit. The enemy at once pitched into the demijohns and boxes of claret, as well as what provisions were on board, to the great damage and loss of the Commissariat of the "Liberating Army." The arms and ammunition were subsequently placed in the hold of the *Virgin*, in such a manner as to be easily exploded, if in danger of rescue.

On the same day of the capture, SPENCER returned down the river in the *Hogden*, with ten or twelve men, for the purpose of bringing up General MOEA, of the Costa Rican forces, but came back on the 29th without him. Captain BUNKER was then ordered to go steam up on the *Virgin*, and head for Fort San Carlos, at the mouth of the San Juan, with SPENCER and his men on board. On approaching within a short distance of San Carlos, 60 men were landed in boats, with instructions to gain a position as near the works as possible, to be ready to act in case the ruse adopted for the Captain of the garrison should fail.

The *Virgin* then proceeded to a point opposite the fort and blew her whistle, which was answered by a corresponding signal from the garrison, and soon Capt. CREECH came off in a boat with three or four men, to get his papers, letters, &c. Of course he was detained after coming on board, and, as he had but fifteen effective men on shore, thought it prudent to surrender the fort. All of SPENCER'S force was now put on shore, with the exception of a dozen men, and he returned with them down the river on the *Virgin*, and afterwards returned with Gen. MOEA and about 400 men, making the garrison to number not far from 600.

On the 3d of January the lake steamer *San Carlos* arrived at Fort San Carlos, from Virgin Bay, with the Transit passengers, and was immediately taken possession of by a ruse similar to that practiced in the case of the *Virgin*. The passengers were subsequently sent to Greytown without unnecessary delay or inconvenience. The two lake steamers are understood to have been employed, since their capture, in plying between Virgin Bay and the Toro Rapids, conveying men, ammunition, and provisions to the allied forces, which, at the date of our last advices, were in the vicinity of Rivas. At the Toro Rapids the steamers *Virgin* and *Carlos* procure wood for fuel. When Captain BUNKER left, there were at that point about 400 cords of wood ready cut, lying at a distance of from a hundred yards to a quarter of a mile from the shore. SPENCER informed Captain BUNKER that he should procure cattle and have it all hauled to the shore ready at hand for use.

Of the six river steamboats seized by the enemy, only two, the *J. W. Scott* and *Morgan*, were in a serviceable condition. One had been blown up by the Costa Ricans, and one or two had sunk. Captain BUNKER says that none of the river boats can pass the Castillo rapids at this season, with the exception of the stern-wheel boat called the *Rescue*, and now in possession of Col. LOCKRING and forces. The *Rescue* is of 75 tons burthen, and has an engine of 350 horse-power, intended for a much larger boat; her wheels are about eighteen feet in diameter, and it is believed she can run over any of the rapids without difficulty. If, then, Col. LOCKRING and his men were able to carry all before them at Fort Serapiqui, where the last intelligence left them, they could easily ascend the river to San Carlos. The *Rescue* is large enough to carry 200 men.

Capt. BUNKER informs us that he had frequent opportunities of seeing and conversing with SYLVANUS M. SPENCER. This individual, it appears, was for a time in the employ of Mr. SCOTT, agent of MORGAN & SONS, and was finally discharged, much to his dissatisfaction. He then came on to New-York in the Fall of 1856, and called on Commodore VANDERBILT, to whom he portrayed in brilliant colors the golden opportunity then presented, of capturing the lake and river boats. The Commodore listened with complaisance, and in due time dispatched him with instructions to San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, via Panama. Here he conferred with the officers of that Government, ending with the expedition down the San Juan River, and the suspension of transit travel.

Captain BUNKER states that he read the letter of Commodore VANDERBILT, authorizing SPENCER to represent him in cooperating with the Costa Ricans, and that a liberal remuneration was stipulated therein. After the lake and river boats had been captured, SPENCER told Captain BUNKER that his errand was then done, and that he was first going to San Jose, whence he would proceed to New-York. It is not known he has yet reached this City.