

# A Buried Treasure Under the Old Missouri

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On September 5, 1856, the steamboat *Arabia* drifted dutifully down the Missouri River toward its next stop—Parkville, Missouri. Everything aboard the *Arabia* was running smoothly until the remains of an old tree trunk stabbed the belly of the boat. That night, the *Arabia* sank, taking only one life, but swallowing everything that was aboard the doomed steamboat.

Although the tales of those aboard the *Arabia* may not rival those of *Titanic* lore, the artifacts excavated from the steamboat *Arabia* tell their own stories - stories that can be learned at the Arabia Steamboat Museum in Kansas City, Mo.

The wreckage of the steamboat was excavated from below a cornfield in 1988 by David Hawley, his family, and other members of the community.

"After the excavation was completed we recognized the collection that we had just found was worth the effort to protect and display in its entirety," Hawley said.

What was left aboard the *Arabia* that fateful night?

Machinery, tools, guns, dishware, clothing - all remnants of lives that were turned literally upside down the night the *Arabia* sank.

The biggest exhibits include 4,000 shoes and boots, 25-foot-long boilers, and, of course, the paddlewheel, which is 28 feet tall.

And, the excavation team found pickles in jars.

"Still green," said Hawley. "And still edible."

The stern of the steamboat, with a trace of the original white paint still visible, is on display at the museum, as is a full-sized reproduction of the main deck.

And what would the museum be if it did not pay tribute to the life lost the night of the disaster? The Arabia Steamboat Museum is the final resting place of

the skeleton of a mule - the only life lost in the Arabia's sinking.

Tours of the museum are partially guided. Those portions of the tours introduce visitors to the history and sinking of *Arabia*.

"We offer something that really few museums do," Hawley said. "Those of us who helped excavate the boat are there to talk about it. We meet virtually all who visit the museum and provide time for those with questions to ask."

However, a discovery of "titanic" proportions in the Midwest is not all pickles and paddlewheels. There is an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the preservation and display of the items, Hawley said.

"We have always felt an obligation to take great care of the items that we found and to provide an opportunity for people to see and study them."

Where else, Hawley asks, will you see jars of blueberries, cherries, rhubarb and other pie filling that date to before the Civil War?

"The Arabia Collection is a time capsule of authentic and miraculously preserved 1856 frontier supplies. Many works of art and fine sculptures have survived the ages," Hawley said.

Visiting the Arabia Steamboat Museum is like window shopping on the frontier. The exhibits include 200 tons of items that would have decorated the shelves of shops during the days of old.

Hawley stresses that, while the Arabia Steamboat Museum is just that - a museum - it is different than other museums that tend to be on the "dry side."

"We are still in the process of finding more than over 400 steamboat wrecks that lay buried along the river's course. People enjoy hearing our stories." For more information on the museum and for dates and times visit [ww.1856.com](http://ww.1856.com) or call (816) 471-1856.