

THE DEEP WATERWAY QUESTION.

Why Rivers and Harbors Lose Commerce.
Board of Federal Engineers Make Supplemental Report.

Washington, D. C., June 24.—The people of the middle West have good reason to be alarmed over the future commerce of the great Mississippi river system if the conclusions of the board of engineers which opposes the construction of the 14-foot waterways between the lakes and the gulf are justifiable.

Congress has received another chapter of the report of the board, this time in relation to the present and prospective commerce of the region lying between Chicago and the gulf, and it is decidedly discouraging so far as water transportation is concerned.

"The past decrease of commerce," the report states, "and the present lack of increase of commerce on these rivers is not due to lack of depth in the Mississippi so much as it is due to the conflicting interests of land and water transportation, and to laws governing the movements of raw products toward the centers of consumption, combined, perhaps with a lack of development in steamboat construction and driving power.

"No river improvement can be expected to send either grain or coal, or iron, or manufactured products from the places where their value is high to other places where values are lower. At the present time the question is one almost entirely of demand and supply.

"No great development of boat commerce can be expected until it is evident that the goods carried can be moved from the place where they can be bought at low prices to

a place where they can be sold at higher prices, so that the freight charges can be paid out of the profits of sales.

"The present lack of development of commerce on the Mississippi river is properly due to economic laws governing the natural lines of travel of raw materials and manufactured products, and to the existing conflict of interests between steamboats and railroads."

The report admits that the small extent of water transportation over the waterways of the United States and the Mississippi valley, and its marked decadence in recent years, has been a matter of great surprise to many American engineers as well as to Engineers in Europe. The mileage of the navigable waterways of the Mississippi basin, including its canals, and depth and width of navigable channels therein, is great, even in comparison with those of the inland waterways of Europe, and river facilities, so far as the navigable channel was concerned, were good years ago, and have been much increased and improved in recent years.

In special cases, such as lumber on the upper Mississippi and coal on the Ohio, the individual load carried or towed by single boats is larger than in Europe, but the length of the river haul is long for the unit of population served. Except at New Orleans, the docking facilities are slight, sometimes nothing more than a sloping bank, and are always expensive, and save at New Orleans, the terminal facilities, including arrangements for transfer to rail connections, are almost entirely lacking. Freight rates by water are, therefore, high in the Mississippi valley as compared with rates by rail between the same terminals.

The Mississippi river, including its trib-

utaries drains about half the United States, and has a total of about 16,000 miles susceptible of navigation. The report repeats what every one knows, that it is not many years since this river was noted for its large steamboat commerce, large in proportion to the commerce of the entire country, and it in fact was a great highway for not only freight, but passengers passing into and through the middle West.

"For many years, however," the report continues "the water commerce of the entire country has been as rapidly decreasing, so that today its water supremacy is gone and this condition of affairs is well known not only to the Mississippi valley, but to the United States public in general, who are wondering why the river is not more utilized and how it can be made more useful.

"But it is also well known to the engineering public of the country that the present river conditions of the Mississippi valley are many times better than in the days of its greatest commerce; the river from St. Paul to deep water above New Orleans having now a navigable depth nearly twice as great everywhere as in former days, and its obstruction by snags and wrecks being at present so slight as to be rarely mentioned. The market diminution of commerce under such circumstances cannot be due to questions of navigation and river engineering, and must be due to other conditions, such as those of demand and supply, water and rail competition, and of business management in general."

This situation on the Mississippi river and its tributaries, the report says, is not the only case of its kind in the United States. Even Chicago, in spite of its size,

its increasing population and factories, its direct frontage on the deep water of the great lakes, and its excellent inner harbor of the olden type, has recently found itself in the same predicament and has been obliged to make special search for the reasons thereof.

The report describes the Mississippi river valley for miles back on each side of the river between St. Louis and the gulf as mainly an alluvial valley, richly endowed by nature, and susceptible of rapid, extensive and valuable future development which at present is delayed mainly by lack of population and funds. Although the large cities and towns of the Mississippi valley are few, they are doing finely in view of their limited population. No large amount of local commerce can be expected, however, when the population is as low as 86 to 24 per square mile, including cities, and where, in a total length of about 1,265 miles, there are only seven towns or cities of above 10,000 population, or only 23 of above 5,000 population each.

As the population increases in the rich alluvial valley of the lower Mississippi, so will the agricultural and manufacturing interests increase, and the lower valley will have a surplus of products to distribute to the upper valleys or to foreign countries. The development of the lower Mississippi river must necessarily affect the development of the entire river basin, including the basins of the upper Mississippi above St. Louis, the Missouri and Ohio.

"The states between St. Louis and St. Paul," the report asserts, "are still largely undeveloped. On the west side of the river some timber still remains to be cut, iron and cement ores are awaiting cheap transportation, agricultural products and

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