

# Retail Time Capsule Below the ‘Big Muddy’

COURTESY DESOTO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE VISITOR CENTER



From instant coffee and lemonade to brandied cherries and French mustard, from cannon balls and suspenders to candlesticks and doorknobs, miners working in the Montana gold fields in the mid-19th century could look forward to buying both staples and luxuries in their local store. Or they might have — if the steamboat *Bertrand* and its load had completed its journey.

When the *Bertrand* snagged along the Missouri River's bank on April 1, 1865, crew and passengers put out a gang-plank, gathered their belongings, and stepped to safety some 20 miles north of Omaha. The ship — its cargo hold filled with more than 500,000 items meant to supply Montana settlements — sank into the river's depths.

Excavated from the Missouri mud 100 years later, those Civil War-era items now constitute the *Bertrand* Collection on exhibit at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center. Today they look like valuable antiques, but their assessed value in 1865 was considerably less, says Manager Larry Klimek. "At the time, most of the goods weren't worth salvaging. They were just everyday items. We often say the *Bertrand* was like a floating Wal-Mart."

It is, in fact, the everyday nature of the goods that makes the *Bertrand* Collection so unique. "We have Civil War re-enactors who come to see buttons, suspenders, cookware. They don't have to guess if what they are seeing is historically accurate. We know that these items are the ones that could have been bought in any store in the eastern states," affirms Klimek. "Visitors are amazed at the condition of all these goods and with the quantity." — C.B.

Located near Missouri Valley just off U.S. Hwy 30, the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center is open daily, except federal holidays, 9:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. For more information, visit [fws.gov/midwest/desoto](http://fws.gov/midwest/desoto) or call 712-642-4121.