

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 14, 2014

**Life on the Mississippi:** In the early 1880s, Mark Twain wrote a short story entitled "Life on the Mississippi." It was the story of his life as a young steamboat captain in the years leading up to the American Civil War. When the war was over, he never went back to the river, saying the "glory days" were over, and there was no excitement in it any more.

I first crossed the great Mississippi into Hannibal, Missouri, on our long western trip in the 1937 Packard in 1941. Hannibal is the town where Twain grew up, and his characters Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn lived there. Ruth and I visited again in 1995 enroute from St. Paul to St. Louis on the "American Queen" during its first year of operation.

The great river and its major tributaries like the Missouri and the Ohio always fascinated me. In Will Rogers's last film, "Steamboat 'Round the Bend" in 1935, great shots of real steamboats were used, depicting a race on the Lower Mississippi (actually the "shooting" was done on the Sacramento River in California). As a travel agent in the early 1950s, I was excited about the river cruises offered by the Greene Line, with its paddle-wheel boats the *Delta Queen* and the *Gordon C. Greene*. The *Greene* was retired by 1960, but the popular *Delta Queen*, built in 1926 and quite different in design from the old river boats, had many reprieves before finally being retired about 2000. Probably in the late '70s, the Greene Line became the Delta Line, and in the 1980s, a new river boat, the *Mississippi Queen*, made to look like those of the 19th century, joined the *Delta Queen*. A beautiful boat with modern accommodations propelled by an authentic steam engine and paddle-wheel, it was a great success. Based on the popularity of these river cruises, the *American Queen* even larger and more elegant, entered service in 1995, and on this boat Ruth and I had accommodations on its very first trip in the Upper River.

The barge traffic on the Mississippi is unbelievable. The freight that is handled on the major rivers of America is still very impressive. Twenty-four barges hooked together is the maximum number permitted on the Upper Mississippi (north of St. Louis), whereas as many as 60 are allowed in one "tow" on the Lower River (this information is from 1995). I had photographed from the lookout tower near Cairo, Illinois, where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi on a mid-February day in 1981, and I witnessed the flows from melting ice in the rivers and the first tows following the freeze making their way northward toward St. Louis. What a sight!

On a warm August evening in 1995, Ruth and I started downstream from St. Paul on the new *American Queen*. Boats of all sizes and shapes followed the big passenger boat until dark, making her feel welcome on her first visit to Minnesota. Our cabin was near the "Front Porch of America," where lucky passengers could look ahead while resting in white rocking chairs. We had stops at Winona, Prairie du Chien, Dubuque, Davenport, Burlington, and Hannibal, before reaching St. Louis six days and 28 locks later. Steam calliopes seemed to be everywhere, on shore as well as on our boat. The weather got hotter each day, and when we reached our destination in front of the St. Louis Arch, the temperature was over 100 degrees.

We learned at least two things about river vocabulary: there is no such thing as a ship on America's rivers, and there is no such thing as a tug boat in mid-America. Even though the barges are pushed and not towed, they are still powered by tow boats. The Delta Line ran into financial difficulty sometime around 2000, and the *American Queen* fell into disrepair. It was rescued in 2011, however, and was completely restored and is now steaming again as the only boat of the American Queen Steamboat Company, headquartered in Memphis. Another huge passenger river boat called the *Queen of the Mississippi* operated by American Cruise Lines, also plies the Mississippi. On the Lower River, a number of smaller paddle-wheel vessels take happy passengers between New Orleans and Natchez and other river excursions.