

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 9, 2015

**Mississippi River Steamboats:** Thomas Jefferson knew a lot about the French, and he liked most of it. Keeping up with French politics as President of the United States, when the Emperor Napoleon needed funds to finance his many conquests, Jefferson jumped at the chance to pick up a huge portion of North American real estate for a nominal cost. The value of the Louisiana Purchase was then questionable, but access to the sea for much of the continent through the Port of New Orleans was vital to security and western expansion. There has never been a time in the 210 years since that the Mississippi River and its tributaries have not played an important role in the commerce and prosperity of the United States.

In the early 1830s, before steamboats were prevalent, young Abe Lincoln, his cousin, and one or two others guided a raft down-river to sell Illinois hogs in the market at New Orleans. Lincoln made this trip twice, witnessed a slave market, and walked or hitchhiked nearly 1,000 miles back home. Young Sam Clemens (Mark Twain), who grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, became a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi in the years just before the Civil War. General Grant came to President Lincoln's attention when he captured the fort at Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1863, opening up the river for the Union. The last Civil War story of the river is a sad one that happened just after the war's end. The steam boiler on an overloaded river boat carrying hundreds of Union troops back home for discharge blew up, costing nearly 500 lives. Most heavy river traffic was carried on barges, tied or chained together and steered by a towboat. The boat usually pushed rather than pulled, but it is still called a towboat. Tugboats do not exist on the Mississippi. Luxurious paddle-wheeled steamboats were numerous through the 19th century and carried both passengers and cargo. The last Hollywood movie that showed actual paddle-wheel boats in action was 1935's "Steamboat 'Round the Bend," which featured a race between captains Will Rogers and Irvin S. Cobb. The filming was done on the Sacramento River in California, depicting the lower Mississippi.

I got interested in the river when studying geography in elementary school. I first crossed the Mississippi during the long West Coast trip in our '37 Packard in 1941, westbound at Hannibal, Missouri, and eastbound at LaCrosse, Wisconsin. In 1944, I drove my '40 Packard 110 across the river at Memphis, as I made my way to Roswell, New Mexico (my parents drove the car back home the next year). On my first "Trans-Con" tour in our 1912 Stanley Model 87 in 1972, I crossed westbound at Minneapolis and eastbound at Keokuk, Iowa. In 1981, I realized how vital river traffic was to the heart of our nation when I observed the ice floes breaking up on the Mississippi and the Ohio at Cairo, Illinois. Dozens of river boats and barges were tied up near this junction until ice breakers finally cleared the way.

When I was a travel agent, the Greene Line operated two old river steamboats for passenger excursions on the Ohio and the Mississippi, the *Gordon C. Greene* and the *Delta Queen*. The "Greene" was scrapped in the 1950s, but the *Delta Queen*, built in 1926, continued to operate excursions from Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and other points on the Mississippi. The Greene Line became the Delta Line. I think it was in the early 1980s that a brand new steam-powered paddle-wheel steamboat named the *Mississippi Queen* joined the *Delta Queen*. In 1995, another new paddle-wheel steamboat, the *American Queen*, joined the fleet. About 2000, the famous *Delta Queen* was finally retired from service after her several Congressional reprieves could no longer be renewed.

For 40 years, I had wanted to take a river cruise, and in 1995 Ruth and I finally made it. We were in Minneapolis for Ruth's "Stuttgart" reunion, and at its conclusion we boarded the *American Queen* at St. Paul for the six-day trip down-river to St. Louis. This was the first visit of this brand new steamboat to ports on the Upper River (north of St. Louis), and everywhere we stopped during the six days, special events were planned. We enjoyed Winona (Minnesota), Prairie-du-Chien (Wisconsin), Dubuque, Davenport, and Burlington (Iowa), Hannibal (Missouri), and St. Louis. We went through 28 locks. Towboats pushing their 24 barges tied together have priority at the locks. The Corps of Engineers continually dredges the river channel. Families live on these dredging rigs in mid-river as if they were in a small hotel. There is still a *lot* of

commercial river traffic on the Mississippi. In early August, the temperature was delightful at St. Paul, but by the time we reached St. Louis it was 100 degrees. We flew back to Minneapolis-St. Paul to pick up my '90 Cadillac and begin the trip home.

I have not kept up with modern and luxurious paddle-wheel "steamboats" that now ply the rivers of mid-America. I understand that most of them are not powered by steam, but small boilers are on board for playing steam calliopes, a fixture on the old river boats.