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A HISTORY OF SHOWBOATS ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

Volume I

By

Duane Eldon Reed

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

A HISTORY OF SHOWBOATS ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

By

Duane Eldon Reed

The intent in this study is to chronicle the extant information concerning showboats on the Ohio-Mississippi River system. Showboats have received little attention in otherwise thorough histories of the American Theatre. The reason for this is two-fold: records of showboats are obscure, and, information that has been recorded has been so romantically treated as to obscure the reality of showboats.

Utilizing interview material, correspondence, and newspaper and periodical information, this study attempts to bring together all existant showboat information for the first time.

There are four parts to this work. The first part deals with the geographical area concerned and with waterborn entertainment prior to the Civil War. Part II deals with the showboat operations of A. B. French, the original of which was the first showboat of merit after the War, continuing to 1907 and the sale of the fifth FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION. In addition to Captain and Mrs. French, this section deals with the McNair family and introduces Captain E. A. Price.

Part III of this study deals with the many enterprises of Captain Price and follows the heyday of showboating, with the building of the largest showboats ever to exist. The final part treats the decline

of showboats and the various attempts at rejuvenation up to just before World War II.

Despite the sketchiness of showboat records, sufficient material has been uncovered to provide a good view of showboats and showboat entertainment in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

PLEASE NOTE:

Many figures are photographs
that will not reproduce well
in xerographic copies. Filmed
in the best possible way.

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Mr. and Mrs. G. Harry Wright aboard the Showboat MAJESTIC during the summer of 1948 when the MAJESTIC was leased by Kent State University from Captain T. J. Reynolds.

This dissertation is gratefully dedicated to Harry and Lila Wright whose diligent research provided both inspiration and substance for this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Professor Frank Rutledge who served as Major Advisor for this study for his guidance and patience. My thanks also to Professors John Baldwin, Donald Treat, and Arthur Weld for serving on the committee.

I am extremely grateful to Mrs. Lila Wright for the loan of the G. Harry Wright Collection for such an extended period of time, and to Mr. Donald McDaniel for the material he provided. Too, I wish to thank Mr. Tom Denapoli for his extensive assistance with photographic reproduction of material herein.

Finally, I must extend thanks to my parents for their assistance and patience during the time of the final preparation of this dissertation.

FOREWARD

The nature of this work is that of a chronicle, setting down what is believed to be reliable information concerning showboats in the United States, per-force centered on the Western Rivers, with the further contention that showboats were uniquely American in origin.

In addition, it is my feeling that there are two standardly held conceptions of showboats and the fare they brought to their audiences. First, one of the most acknowledged of American novelists - Edna Ferber - gave to the reading public a somewhat romanticized account of showboats in her novel so named. The stage musical and consequent movie versions of Miss Ferber's novel carried this romantic conception still further. Miss Ferber herself, in writing to G. Harry Wright (letterhead: Treasure Hill, Stepney Depot, Easton, Connecticut), June 2, 1947, says, "You see, I just buttonholed people and sat talking and talking and talking to them; and then I did a lot of embroidery and characterization out of my own imagination. After all, I am a writer of fiction." The type of showboat that Miss Ferber gives us did not exist except in Hollywood and then not until the 1950-51 edition of the musical movie.

Secondly, many inhabitants of river towns who remember the "ham" acting in performances billed as "mellerdramers" in the latter 1920's and the 1930's believe this to be the quality of all showboat entertainment, when, in fact, it was a dim reflection of the showboat entertainment of the 1880's and 1890's. Hopefully this investigation will dispell such ideas as these.

This work would not have been possible except for the thorough exploration of Professor G. Harry Wright. This writer worked aboard the Showboat MAJESTIC when owned by Indiana University. On beginning to teach at Kent State University in 1962, this writer became acquainted with Professor Wright, then Director of Theatre at Kent State University, and his collection of showboat material. On Professor Wright's death Mrs. Wright loaned the material for this study; Mrs. Wright, herself, was in no small way involved in the research and assembling of the collection. The G. Harry Wright Collection will be housed in the Special Collections Department of the Kent State University Library.

The only other work dealing with showboats, by Professor Philip Graham (Showboats, the History of an American Institution, University of Texas Press, 1951), was published while Professor Wright was in the midst of his research. It is still available in paperback. The Wright Collection, with what has been added, extends Professor Graham's information and offers much greater detail and documentation. Too, most of the visual material has not been dealt with before.

All photographs herein are copied from the Wright Collection. Many of those in the Wright Collection are quite old and have been pasted into scrapbooks. Every effort has been made to include here the best photographs available, reproducing those that exist quite exactly without retouching or "improving" them.

Because the use of numbers in this study is so extensive and varied, Arabic numerals are used in direct connection with showboats to avoid confusion and make for easier comprehension, e. g. hull measurements, company size, number of performances, and amounts of money.

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PART I

A HISTORY OF SHOWBOATS ON THE WESTERN RIVERS[1]

PART I, Chapter 1 - An Introduction

It cannot be puzzling to anyone that the centers of the new republic in 1800, whether social or economic, industrial or artistic, were on the eastern seaboard. It was here that colonies were first settled in the "new world"; New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Charleston were points easiest arrived at in navigating from Europe, especially England. In 1800, despite the later idea of the United States as a melting pot, fifty percent of the population was either English or of ancestry derived from the British Isles.[2] For one hundred fifty years the area between the Atlantic and the Appalachians had provided sufficient room for western expansion. Although there were many other far-reaching reasons, Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana from the French

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[1]Frederick Jackson Turner in his work, The Frontier in American History, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1947), p. 126, in speaking of the ever moving frontier, discusses the "west" as having an ever changing meaning. Whereas once the west described the entire region beyond the Alleghenys and even the "Northwest Territory" was a misnomer, so is the term "middle west" today. To date, United States Coast Guard and Corps of Army Engineers manuals of regulations use the term "Western Rivers" with reference to the Ohio-Missouri-Mississippi River system.

[2]D. W. Brogan, The American Character, (New York: Random House - Vintage Books, 1954), p. 117; see also Louis B. Wright, Culture on the Moving Frontier, (New York: Harper & Row - Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 82.

Each census after those of 1789-90 and 1800 will show an increasing rate of immigration from all other parts of Europe, with a large influx of Oriental immigration by the mid-century.

is evidence that further expansion was soon to be necessary. At the time of Monroe's cautious dealing with the French, there were already between four hundred thousand and one half million "Americans" in the Ohio and central Mississippi Valley. "Indeed the purchase was in large measure due to the pressure of the settlers of the Ohio Valley to secure the necessary outlet. /The French had blocked the mouth of the Mississippi and New Orleans in 1802./ It was the Ohio Valley which forced the nation away from a narrow colonial attitude into its career as a nation among nations with an adequate physical basis for future growth."[3]

Negotiating the Louisiana Purchase itself was simple, however, compared to the problems of expanding into this greatest of all land development projects. The Appalachians - the Alleghenys, the Blue Ridge, and the Smokies - stood like a fortress guarding the Northwest Territory and this new acquisition that had more than doubled the size of the United States. In the first decade of the nineteenth century it was less hazardous and, more often than not, less time consuming to traverse the Atlantic than to journey from Philadelphia or New York to a point west of the Alleghenys.[4]

Many a historian has pondered the liklihood of a much faster expansion, and a consequent economic and political development, of the

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[3]Turner, op. cit., p. 167.

[4]Records for Atlantic crossings of ships under sail are erratic at best but despite dependence upon weather and from what port on one side to what point on the other, ships were crossing the Atlantic in as little as six weeks in 1800. In John Morrison, History of American Steam Navigation, (New York: Stephen Daye Press, 1958), p. 406, it is stated that the first steam powered ocean-going ship made a crossing from Savannah to Liverpool in twenty-seven days in 1819, but only eighty hours of which were under steam power. By the 1840's the clippers were making the crossing in as little as twelve days.

United States if the English had first stumbled onto the mouth of the Mississippi River instead of the mouth of the Hudson or of the Chesapeake or Massachusetts Bay. Travel by water had proved for a few centuries to be easier and faster than overland travel. Certainly of the four hundred thousand souls west of the Alleghenys in 1800, all but a small percentage had arrived there via the Ohio River, after an arduous overland trek to the headwaters of one of its many tributaries. The Ohio and Mississippi Rivers thus proved to be extremely important in the progress of the west.

The Ohio and Mississippi valleys were considered agricultural rather than industrial and in the early nineteenth century that person of the "west" who was not directly involved with the land or who did not offer some service to the agricultural community was considered a ne'er-do-well. The products of this fervent labor found its market somewhere"down the river." Raw materials, whether grain, meat, cotton, or lumber, once in the hands of a middle-man in Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, or New Orleans, might not find its way back to eastern industrial cities, but rather to European sites of industry, probably English. This was of major concern in the east which had become relatively non-agricultural, and until the election of Jackson the government of the United States was almost totally in the hands of the eastern gentry or "enlightened aristocracy." Steps were taken - river improvements, canal building, and governmental support of early railroad building - to prevent this type of foreign trade. The east was having to depend upon European trade for many of their basic needs. "The men of the Mississippi Valley compelled the men of the east to think in American terms instead of European." [5]

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[5]Turner, op. cit., p. 185.

In making comparisons between the development of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys and the east during the early nineteenth century, one finds many things on one side seemingly at odds with corresponding developments on the other side. Even in dealing with those aspects directly relating to the topic at hand the results are still a series of paradoxes. 1807 was the year that saw Robert Fulton's successful trip up to Albany with the CLERMONT (re-christened the following year as the NORTH RIVER,)[6] an event that would through a happy marriage of the steamboat and the Ohio-Mississippi River system soon make the latter the greatest highway of commerce in the world. This year also witnessed government approval of and appropriation for the National Road, to stretch from Cumberland, Maryland to the Ohio River at Wheeling and eventually through the rich farm land of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to St. Louis.[7] The latter, an example of early road building, as will be seen, would eventually detract from the river.

In 1811 one Nicholas Roosevelt, a partner in the firm that Fulton had helped to originate, made a successful trip from Pittsburgh to New Orleans on a steamboat.[8] This same boat remained on the Mississippi making profitable trade runs between Natchez and New Orleans, thus bringing to reality what had been a dream only five years before.

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[6]Fred Erving Dayton, Steamboat Days, (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1939), p. 13.

[7]Richard M. Current, T. Harry Williams and Frank Freidel, American History, (New York: Alfred Knopf & Company), p. 172.

[8]Charles Henry Ambler, A History of Transportation in the Ohio Valley, Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1932), p. 116.

The actual construction of the National Road was begun in this same year - 1811,[9] and it reached the Ohio River in 1817.[10]

As Drake and Ludlow and their troupe of players, who will be dealt with later, were traveling by flatboat down the Mississippi in 1817, construction was underway on the Erie Canal.[11] It is true that the canal systems did not directly detract from commerce or travel by river. In fact calculations from a number of sources show that four horses could move one ton on a wagon twelve to eighteen miles a day on the roads of the time, but the same four horses could draw a boatload of one hundred tons twenty-four miles a day on a properly constructed canal. It is also true that the canals connecting eastern cities with western waterways, as is true to a lesser degree of the first turnpikes, brought about trade that was beneficial both to the individual and the nation. However, government support, both state and federal, of canals and highways does represent both attitude and action that would eventually bring about a decline in the importance of river travel.

If roads and canals in their way took away from the supremacy of river travel, it was slight compared to that part taken away by the railroads. Cars pulled by humans and/or animals on track had been used in mines of Wales and England since the latter seventeenth century; the steam locomotive, as was the steamboat, was a product of the nineteenth century, however. In 1825, as the National Road was being completed

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[9]Ambler, ibid., p. 134.

[10]Seymour Dunbar, A History of Travel in America, (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1937), p. 602.

[11]B. Harry Meyer, A History of Transportation in the United States before 1860, (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Institute, 1948), p. 187.

through Ohio, the canal system was started in that state,[12] and when the Erie Canal was completed and being opened for freight, the Stockton and Darlington Railroad in England began to operate with steam power over a short length of track and to carry general traffic.[13] In the summer of 1831 as William Chapman and his family were launching their Cloating Theatre at Pittsburgh (the very first actual showboat), the Mohawk and Hudson Railway opened sixteen miles of track between Schenectady and Albany. By 1836 when Chapman opened his season with his boat re-christened as the Steamboat Theatre because he now had steam power, there were more than one thousand miles of railroad track stretching through eleven states.[14] On choosing any later important date in this study, investigation will reveal a growth of the railways in geometric graduation. By the outbreak of the Civil War there were thirty-five thousand miles of track, ninety thousand miles more were made operable in the next two decades, and the '90's opened with over one hundred sixty thousand miles of railway in operation.[15]

Any number of sources show that the railroads brought about a decline in river transportation. From the early part of the second quarter of the nineteenth century (989 steamboat arrivals in New Orleans in 1830,) to just past the halfway mark in the century (3,252 steamboat arrivals in New Orleans,)[16] commerce on the Ohio and Mississippi

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[12]William F. Gephart, Transportation and Industrial Development in the Middle West, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1909), p. 116.

[13]J. Stephen Jeans, Waterways and Water Transport, (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1890), p. 194.

[14]Current, et al, op. cit., pp. 282-3. [15]Ibid., pp. 496-7

[16]Louis C. Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 644-5.

had grown from a fledgling enterprise to a business whose tonnage was greater than that handled by all the vessels of the British Empire.[17] The Civil War quite naturally put an end to much of the river traffic as it was no longer possible to traverse the length of the Ohio and Mississippi without upsetting the sympathies of either North or South. In 1847 there were 3,178 steamboat arrivals logged at Pittsburgh and this number grew through the '50's; by 1870 there were only 1500 arrivals at Pittsburgh and the great majority of these were local boats transporting coal and iron ore from neighboring areas.[18] The railroads were faster, cheaper (both in basic fare and insurance),[19] and could service settlements not connected to others by water.

The biggest irony of all relative to a historical study of showboats is that from 1895 to 1910 when railroads were being questioned as having too much economic, and hence political, control of the nation, (through the so-called captains of industry or "robber barons"), there were more showboats than there had ever been before or would ever be again; freight and passenger steamboats and packets were still on the decline. There are several reasons why this may have been true and perhaps it is necessary here to deal with the romantic aspects of the Ohio and Mississippi and of river boats and river people.

The development of the "new world" and the United States in particular is a romance unlike the growth of any other nation, city, or place that history has recorded. It is the nature of the romantic to

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[17]Joseph P. Hartley, The Economic Effects of Ohio River Transportation, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1949), pp. 15-16.

[18]Hunter, op. cit., p. 563.

[19]Ibid., p. 591 (comparison of insurance: rail vs. water).

deal with the present in terms of recollections of a glorious past and/or the tremendous and magnificent possibilities of the future. When these two concepts do not come together, as they seldom do, the romantic relies all the more on which ever of these directions his dreams carry him. The romantic is not bound by practicality and ignores all strictures that the more conservative mind would impose upon him. The American romantic was not unlike Rousseau who stated in the opening passages of his Confessions, "I am not made like anyone I have ever met; I even venture to believe that I am not made like anyone now alive . . . ." In this light, from Columbus to Daniel Boone, from Charles Brockden Brown to P. T. Barnum, from Lewis and Clark to Andrew Carnegie, men who were influential in the progress of the United States up to the nineteen-teens were romantics at heart. The American Revolution, like its European counterpart in France two decades later, was romantic in spirit with the principal emphasis on the freedom of the individual and the fervant hopes of the struggling common man. Despite the classical influence and Augustan rigidity of European prototypes on Colonial and early Federal art and literature, truly American endeavors in the arts were romantic. Writers and artists depicted the glories of success in their handling of the Revolution, dealt with the Indian not only as noble and not really very savage but as the epitomy of the individual (free from artificiality and the falseness of civilization), and found wonder and mystery in the far-away, whether Gothic Europe or the natural wonders of unexplored or uninhabited America.

The American settler constantly sought that which would bring a better future, often going forward blindly reveling in past successes, if not of his own, of others who had been fortunate in their ventures.

> It took optimism to cross the Atlantic, optimism or despair and anger at the old world from which the reluctant pioneer had come. Until this century there was always tempting the adventurous or the unlucky the dream of a new chance a little further on. Movement became a virtue, sability a rather contemptible attitude of mind.[20]

Romantic thinking is very often inconsistent. The Virginia concept of government, although patterned after Greek democracy, gave a great deal of emphasis to the individual and was in this way romantic, but it overlooked the equality of individuals. The "gallantry" of Southern gentlemen and the beauty of the Southern belle was another aspect of romanticism in that the ante-bellum South chose to look at itself in a mirror that reflected only the rosy side of a regional way of life.

The Puritan foundations of New England stifled the romantic there until later than other areas of the country, but what is more romantic than Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales, the utopian concepts of Ripley's Brook Farm, or Thoreau's Walden.

Whereas freedom of the individual may have had to be preached and taught in the east, it was omnipresent in the west. The frontiersman in Kentucky or Indiana and Ohio was free from any influence other than his conscience; his nearest neighbor might be twenty miles away and he was as free from the social influence of Philadelphia or Charleston, both geographically and in spirit, as London was apart from the social centers of the continent. He could but aspire and work hard toward achieving the comforts of the east.

> In 1800 five million Americans were scattered over an enormous country that reached from the St. Lawrence Valley to the borders of Spanish Florida, from the sea-coast to the Mississippi. Not one in ten lived in a settlement of more than one thousand, and not but a

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[20]Brogan, The American Character, op. cit., p. 5.

> handful of people outside these towns were anything but farmers. They were self-sufficient though sometimes relying on the local cobbler, blacksmith, coopers and tanners, for supplies and necessities or services that their own quite complete household could not supply.[21]

The first evidence of commonality of the individuals of the Ohio and Mississippi Valley was the election of Andrew Jackson in 1829, and this was of itself a major romantic milestone. Perhaps the high point of American romanticism was from the elections of 1829 to the election of Lincoln, both true men of the people and both individuals.

The Civil War was another landmark of American romanticism, for here, although North and South respectively were united in their separate causes, and individualality seemed less obvious, an individual way of life was threatened in the latter, and the conscience of the individual was offended in the former. With the settlement of the conflict in 1865, the nation as a whole was forced to reconsider its former thinking.

> Generally speaking, public discourse during the post-war decades reveals surprisingly few traces of the agony that both North and South had undergone during the 1860's. Several factors contributed to this apparently rapid psychological recovery. Although there was much bitterness in the defeated South, the demands of economic recovery left little energy for recrimination.[22]

> The remarkable resilience of both Northern and Southern public opinion in the post-Civil War period was due in large part to the pace of economic expansion, but it was also fostered by habits of thought established during the early decades of the Republic. The eyes of Americans had always been fixed on the future rather than the past.[23]

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[21]Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller, The Age of Enterprise, (New York: Harper & Row - Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 3.

[22]Henry Nash Smith, ed., Popular Culture and Industrialism, 1865-1890, (Garden City, N. Y.: Double day & Company - Anchor Books, 1967), p. x (from Mr. Smith's introduction).

[23]Ibid., p. xi.

> Faith in progress had been direly threatened by the war but the triumph of union brought as a rebound an intensified confidence in the Manifest Destiny of the nation. Having survived its supreme test, the country was stronger than ever.[24]
>
> With the end of hostilities, however, the main emphasis in national self-congratulation began to turn from military to economic achievement.[25]

The results of all this re-appraisal was a move toward a more realistic outlook, and individuality and localism gave way to unity and organization, to reform and industrialism. Although new ideas did not move rapidly to infilter the more staunch strongholds of individuality, and sons and daughters made a valiant effort to retain the ways of parents and grandparents, the latter third of the nineteenth century was a period of slow transition from romanticism to a more realistic mode of life. This can be seen in social and economic affairs and in literature, art and the drama as well. The small industry gave way to the empires of Carnegie and the railroad tycoons (of course, even this can be looked upon romantically if one chooses to look at the Carnegies and Rockefellers as Horatio Alger figures); the extreme individuality of Whitman's and of Melville's characters gave way to the realism of Howells and Dreiser.

It is always in looking back that we put labels on movements or on styles or peculiarities of a particular time or group. With the exception of Hawthorne - who expressed his intent to write "romances" - [26] the writers of the earlier nineteenth century did not think of themselves as romantics, nor did Howells, Crane, and Dreiser consider

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[24]Smith, ibid., p. xii. [25]Ibid.

[26]Although it has been excertped many places, it was in the original preface to The House of the Seven Gables that Nathaniel Hawthorne so expressed himself.

themselves realists even in trying to break with the literature that had immediately preceded them.[27] An exception to this, however, can be found in the men and women who sought to bring drama and theatrical entertainment to the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys in the early years of this century via that uniquely American innovation, the showboat.[28]

All extant information seemingly states that until the middle of the first decade of this century the showboats were providing entertainment and much needed distraction to people who were many, many miles from a theatre of any sort. It is also a contention of this study that there was a consciousness on the part of showboat owners and managers from 1910 onward that they were a vestige of a colorful past, a part of romantic Americana that still stirred interest into the mid-twenties. The efforts of the true pioneers of showboating - French and Price - seemed to grow out of a feeling that there was a need for their services in

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[27]Howells did himself use the word realism in discussions of some of his own work.

[28]The only exception to the fact that showboats were original to America and specifically to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers comes from an article in the Fort Wayne Morning Journal of Sunday, August 25, 1895 (writer unknown). After speaking of a showboat enterprise being considered for New York City and coastal New Jersey, the following paragraphs are included:

> "The idea is not original with the people here. To the Russians is due the credit of thinking up the plan and carrying it to successful issue. . . . The steamer is just about to start out on a tour of the Volga, stopping at the principal towns on the way. . . ."
>
> ". . . The mamager of the show is a Russian named Strafanoff, and to him was entrusted the numberless ingenious details incident to a new venture of this kind."

It is curious that this writer, much closer to the Ohio River than to Long Island Sound, was totally unaware of French's and Price's operations on the Ohio and Mississippi some twenty years earlier and still in existence. Consequently this assumption of the Russian origin of showboats can be dismissed.

remote areas of the Ohio - Mississippi Valley. The showboat entrepreneurs during the two decades following the turn of the century, however, seemed to be cognizant of and took advantage of the public's melancholy willingness to retain a bit of the glorious past. In short the advent of showboats after the Civil War was due to a romantic altruism on the part of a few men, and a loss of such - with other more material causes - brought an end to showboating. In depth parellels to literature, drama, forms of theatre, and art in general during the same time period of showboats must be left for another study.

With this much as background in order to begin this chronicle, the following chapters are intended to show the development of showboats from the barest theatrical essentials assembled on a wooden barge to opulent "Floating Palaces" with equipment and decor almost equal to the finest theatres in major cities. By way of conclusion to this study, it is the intention to show how other modes of transportation, a lessening if not loos of romantic thinking, and the advent of motion pictures brought about the demise of a great American theatrical institution.

PART I, Chapter 2 - Showboats Appear

The homogeneity of New England and the eastern seaboard that had created Boston and the first and second largest cities in the United States - Philadelphia (seventy thousand) and New York (sixty thousand) - did not penetrate far into the west in 1800. Around the time of the Revolution small towns or forts grouped people together for protection against attack from hostile Indians or the British; such was the beginning of Boonesboro, Vincennes, Pittsburgh, and Detroit and they prospered according to location on navigable waterways. But by 1800 the majority of people in the Ohio and Indiana territories, in Kentucky and Tennessee, upon seeing a distant column of smoke rising in the sky, were not frightened at the thought of approaching Indians but by encroachment of other settlers. Large expanses of land were important to both mental ease and bodily subsistence and comfort. There were a chain of "cities" along the Ohio - Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Cincinnati and Louisville - and a like number along the Mississippi and its larger tributaries - St. Louis, Nashville, Memphis, and Natchez - which sufficed to receive eastern "necessities" and to ship out grain, lumber and cotton. The rigors of frontier agricultural life did not allow for much of what city life had to offer in the way of culture or even education.

Although it cannot be said that theatre actually flourished anywhere in the United States before 1800, cities along the east coast did have exposure to theatres and dramatic performances during the latter part of the eighteenth century, even earlier in Williamsburg and Charleston. As political and economic stability brought about a

greater affluence in the east, new theatres were built in response to increased interest during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Similarly, as the frontiersman cleared his land, built his house and barn, and had a family started, there was time for and interest in some sort of diversion other than that of his own devices. Amateur thespian groups performed in the Ohio Valley as early as 1797 in Washington, Kentucky, 1799 in Frankfort, 1801 in Cincinnati, and by 1814 and 1815 in Vincennes and St. Louis. A professional company had performed in Pittsburgh in 1806.

According to Noah Miller Ludlow, in the fall of 1814 a man by the name of Usher contracted with Samuel Drake of the Albany, New York theatre for a company to perform in his three theatres in Kentucky - one in Lexington, one in Frankfort, and a third in Louisville.[1] Drake and Ludlow, and a group of actors and actresses, worked their way to Olean, New York during the spring of 1815 by horse and wagon. As Mr. Usher had died on his return trip to Kentucky, Drake was to manage his three theatres. At Olean Drake traded the land travel equipment for a broadhorn, a kind of flatbottom boat, to make their way on toward their destination, at least as far as far as Pittsburgh.[2]

Upon arrival at Pittsburgh, and after recruiting additional actors (mid-August), Drake's company performed there until November before starting down the Ohio River for Kentucky. The company began performing at Frankfort in early December[3] and finished around March 1, 1816.[4] The company then moved to Louisville and eventually to Lexington, opening in that city for a fall season after a summer break. The group played

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[1]Noah Miller Ludlow, Dramatic Life as I Found It, (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), p. 5.

[2]Ibid., p. 17. [3]Ibid., p. 81. [4]Ibid., p. 88.

this three city Kentucky circuit until May of 1817 when certain of the company decided to leave Drake to form a company on the commonwealth system to perform in Nashville; Ludlow joined this group, leaving Louisville in June.[5]

After visiting various Kentucky and Tennessee towns, the new company opened in Nashville on July 10, 1817,[6] the season ending in mid-October.[7] On purchasing an old keelboat, they left Nashville on October 20 to work their way on the Cumberland River to the Ohio, then to the Mississippi with New Orleans as their destination; their craft had been dubbed "Noah's Ark" after young Mr. Ludlow. Reaching Natchez a little before mid-November,[8] the company performed there (November 15, 1817) before going on to New Orleans.[9]

One writer has stated that perhaps Ludlow's "Ark" was the first showboat.[10] If one is to deal with conjecture there is more substance to support the opposite conclusion. Ludlow states that after providing space for the company and a common room on the keelboat, there was no space for his horse, Mrs. Snarl - "We scarcely had room enough for the two-legged animals"[11] - and the beloved horse was sold and left behind. Also, there is no mention of having played on the boat in Ludlow's account of their watery journey, which would be a tremendous oversight considering his penchant for noting "firsts" (Ludlow gave P. T. Barnum his first break, as will be noted later). In spite of the fact that he was writing some sixty years after this trip, surely a performance on the "Ark" would

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[5]Ludlow, ibid., p. 109. [6]Ibid., p. 114.

[7]Ibid., p. 120. [8]Ibid., p. 132. [9]Ibid., p. 134.

[10]Philip Graham, Showboats, The History of an American Institution, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 7.

[11]Ludlow, op. cit., pp. 121-2.

have been as unique and memorable as so much of what he does recount.

More interesting and noteworthy is the friendly relationship the company had with Captain Lawrence of the Steamer NEW ORLEANS (probably not the same steamer, but a name-sake boat after that on which Nicholas Roosevelt made the initial voyage from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in 1811). Ludlow mentions that they made their return trip north to Natchez with Captain Lawrence after their New Orleans season: "We found Capt. Lawrence the same gentlemanly, liberal commander we had had the pleasure of traveling with on our downward trip." [12] This is very much like relationships between steamboat captains and showboat personel fifty-five and sixty years later, as will be seen relative to the Frenches. A similar comparison can be made concerning the river town inhabitants' initial waryness of and eventual kindnesses to show people.

Although it cannot be said that Mr. Ludlow's "Ark" was the first showboat, a great debt is owed him concerning the first showboat, this being his description of the first river craft built with the intent to perform aboard it. In otherwise discoursing on the Chapman family, Mr. Ludlow states:

> My first knowledge of this family was, if my recollection be correct, about the year 1831, when I beheld a large flat-boat, with a rude kind of house built upon it, having a ridge-roof, above which projected a staff with a flag attached, upon which was plainly visible the word "Theatre"! This singular object attracted my attention as it was lying tied up at the landing in Cincinnati, and on my making inquiries in regard to it, I learned that it was used for a theatrical company, under the management of a Mr. Chapman.[13]

Even though theatre historians have generally set the launching of the Floating Theatre in 1831, Ludlow, according to his own writings, would not have seen it in 1831 as he did not visit Cincinnati during that year,

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[12]Ludlow, ibid., pp. 152-3. [13]Ibid., pp. 568-9.

having passed the city hurrying to get his sick child from Marietta to a doctor in Louisville.[14] He did not return to Cincinnati until February of 1832.[15] Since it is the only first-hand account, it is unimportant whether Ludlow's first recollection of the Chapmans and the first season of the Floating Theatre coincided.

Keeping in mind that correspondence to faraway friends may not be the most factual source, one description of the Chapman operation comes from Tyrone Power, writing from Louisiana; his expression of interest in joining the troupe give his account credibility.

> This floating theatre, about which I make constant inquiry, and which I yet hope to fall in with, is not the least original or singular speculation ventured on these waters. It was projected and is carried on by the Elder Chapman, well known for many years as a Covent Garden actor; his practice is to have a building erected upon a raft at some point high up the Mississippi, or one of its tributaries. When he takes his departure early in the fall, with scenery, dresses, and decorations, all prepared for representation. At each village or large plantation he hoists banner and blows trumpet and few who love a play suffer his ark to pass the door, since they know it is to return no more until the next year; for, however easy may prove the downward course of the drama's temple, to retrograde, upwards, is quite beyond its power. Sometimes a large steamer from Louisville, with a thousand souls on board, will command a play whilst taking in fuel, when the profit must be famous. The "corps dramatique" is, I believe, principally composed of members of his own family, which is numerous, and, despite of alligators and yellow fever, likely to increase and flourish. When the Mississippi theatre reaches New Orleans, it is abandoned and sold for firewood; the manager and troup returning in a steamer to build a new one, with such improvements as increased experience may have suggested. This course Mr. Chapman has pursued for three or four seasons back, and, as I am told by many who have encountered this aquatic company, very profitably. I trust he may continue to do so until he makes a fortune, and can bequeath to his kin the undisputed sovereignty of the Mississippi circuit.[16]

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[14]Ludlow, ibid., pp. 368 & 370 [15]Ibid., p. 393.

[16]Tyrone Power, Impressions of America, (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1836).

As Mr. Power was writing in 1835 (published in 1836) the "three or four seasons back" would still put the launching date in 1831 or 1832. Odell in his monumental Annals of the New York Stage lists members of the Chapman family still playing the Bowery Theatre on September 10 and 15, 1831.[17]

The structure of the Floating Theatre can only come from the imagination as provoked by writings and remembrances after the fact. Already having given Ludlow's description here, Philip Graham gives the dimensions as "a little more than one hundred feet long and sixteen feet wide" with "The enclosed portion of the boat measuring one hundred feet long and fourteen feet wide, . . ."[18] These descriptions would make it similar to the typical flatboat of the day as described by various authorities.[19] A Dr. Judd, in an undocumented article of 1903, gives this account of the interior of the craft:

> Many long to see again those old thespians on the little stage built upon one end of the boat, the muslin curtain, and tallow candles for footlights. They would like to sit once more on the hard board seats, stretched from one side of the boat to the other. The only undesireable seats on the boat were under the blazing tallow-dripping chandelier, which consisted of a circular hoop with tallow dips, hanging over the audience from the ceiling of the old boat.[20]

There is nothing in the way of a photograph of the Floating Theatre. There is a drawing that accompanied Dr. Judd's article;

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[17]George C. D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, III, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), p. 563.

[18]Graham, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

[19]See Charles Henry Ambler, A History of Transportation in the Ohio Valley, (Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1932), pp. 41-42 and illustration p. 39.

[20]Dr. Judd, "The Water Days of the Drama", The Theatre, (New York: Aug., 1903), p. 204.

seemingly this drawing, with the author's name in the corner, was drawn from Ludlow's description of the Chapman boat.[21] To deal further with the Floating Theatre itself is to indulge in still more speculation and it is more important to deal with the people themselves and their influence.

William Chapman, Sr. had been a successful actor at Covent Garden before coming to America, as were his sons William, Jr. and Sam. Ludlow tells us that the elder Chapman first played in this country at the Bowery Theatre October 22, 1828, having arrived in this country in 1827; William, Jr. played the Bowery September 13, 1827.[22] The entire family are reported to have been very gifted and multi-talented, with Caroline - the illegitimate daughter of William, Jr. - being the most versatile:

> She got her early training performing in her father's floating theatre on the Western waters, and excellent training it proved to be; she has never been equalled in versatility and finish, in her line of business by any lady that has appeared upon the stages of America, excepting only Clara Fisher and Mrs. Fitzwilliam.[23]

After playing in New York and Philadelphia, Sam Chapman died in Philadelphia in 1830. William, Sr. was concerned about keeping the family together, which was difficult to do when jobs were obtained severally, perhaps in different cities. "Something more profitable,

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[21]Judd, ibid., p. 202. The article carries the line under the title "Described and Illustrated by a Veteran Manager."

[22]Ludlow, op. cit., p. 569; also George D. Ford, These Were Actors, (New York: Library Publishers, 1955), pp. 85-91. A descendent of the Chapmans, Mr. Ford says that William Chapman, Jr. came to America first, as a result of having an illegitimate child. His father and the other members of the family followed after hearing reports of America from William, Jr.

[23]Ludlow, ibid., p. 570.

on the one hand, and more economical, on the other hand, was needed."[24]

Cargo flatboats and barges of the day were built in an upper Ohio or Mississippi town to transport grain or produce down river, very often to New Orleans. These boats were then sold, the buyer would dismantle it and salvage what he could for re-usable lumber or firewood. Such was the plan of the Chapman family as was Captain French's intent nearly fifty years later. This procedure was followed for five years. A descendent of the Chapmans gives two different accounts of the operation which are slightly contradictory.

> Originally, the Chapmans' river boat, christened "The Theatre", was to be a seasonable occupation. During the warm months the family troupe could play the river towns and during the regular theatrical season perform in the established centers. But the "playhouse on a raft," forerunner of the elegant showboat, proved so successful that it took the full year to complete the tour.[25]

> "The Theatre" and flatboat which now accompanied it were dismantled, the wood sold for lumber, and a final accounting made.
>
> The Chapman coffers were indeed abundant and so they disdained to use the overland trail back to Pittsburgh this time. They decided to take a steamer to New York, where they would fill their time with whatever engagements might be secured until spring came again.
>
> The following year they made their way to the "Birmingham of America," Pittsburgh, where they constructed their new theatre and set out upon the water. A new season had been christened.[26]

At any rate the plan to play southern waters when northern rivers were filled with ice was to become the standard pattern for showboats for nearly a century. To the Chapmans must also go the credit of establishing the "family" type of operation, other examples of which will be dealt with in later pages.

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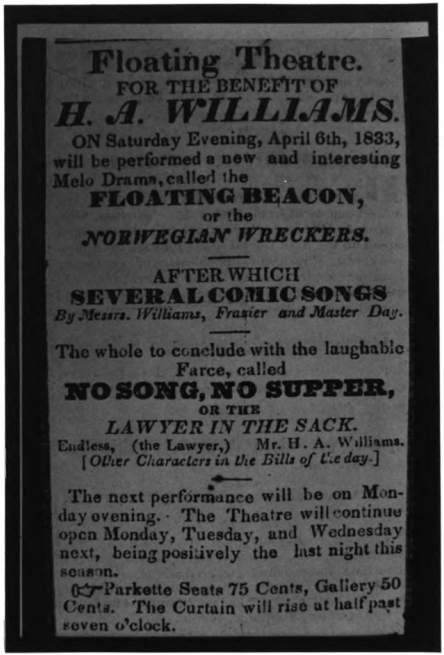
[24]Ford, op. cit., p. 115. [25]Ibid., p. 116. [26]Ibid., p. 123.

It must also be pointed out that the Chapmans were unique in that they performed full length plays, classics of dramatic literature as well as contemporary melodrama and comedy, with actors steeped in, if not trained in good sound theatrical tradition. Although the popularity and consequent "entertainment level" of showboats of the 1890's and the turn of the century may have surpassed that of the Chapmans, there is good reason to believe that their quality of legitimate drama, both in selection of material and its performance, was never equalled. Many contemporary newspapers confirm this.[27]

The Baton Rouge Gazette of March 6, 1833 gives an idea of what an evening of showboat theatre was like at the time the Chapmans were on the rivers. (See Figure # 1, p. 23). Supposition on one hand would eliminate the possibility of this being the Chapman boat: 1) the advertisement mentions gallery seating which suggests a larger boat than anything else about the Floating Theatre indicates; 2) there is no mention of any member of the Chapman family which by this time, the second or third season, would have attracted patrons; and 3) no classical repertoire is listed. On the other hand, a third season would have meant a third boat, which might have been larger, at least large enough for an elevated section or "gallery"; too, because of the benefit performance, the Chapman name might have been omitted so as to not out-shine Mr. Williams' name. Mr. Williams background was certainly of a calibre to qualify him for being part of the Chapman company. A. F. Varnado in a thesis submitted to the University of Wisconson

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[27]See contemporary issues of the Memphis Enquirer, the Vicksburg Register, the Natchez Free Trader, the Natchez Courier, the Baton Rouge Gazette, and the Baton Rouge Weekly Comet.



Floating Theatre.
FOR THE BENEFIT OF
H. A. WILLIAMS.
ON Saturday Evening, April 6th, 1833, will be performed a new and interesting Melo Drama, called the
FLOATING BEACON,
or the
NORWEGIAN WRECKERS.
AFTER WHICH
SEVERAL COMIC SONGS
By Messrs. Williams, Frazier and Master Day.
The whole to conclude with the laughable Farce, called
NO SONG, NO SUPPER,
OR THE
LAWYER IN THE SACK.
Endless, (the Lawyer,) Mr. H. A. Williams.
[Other Characters in the Bills of the day.]
The next performance will be on Monday evening. The Theatre will continue open Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday next, being positively the last night this season.
☞Parkette Seats 75 Cents, Gallery 50 Cents. The Curtain will rise at half past seven o'clock.

Figure # 1

Advertisement from the Baton Rouge Gazette of March 6, 1833.

This advertisement most probably announced Chapman's FLOATING THEATRE.

mentions that Williams had appeared in the Natchez Theatre in 1828 in low comedy parts, and then quotes Joseph M. Free:

> H. A. Williams, originally from the Boston Theatre, had been an Albany stage manager in 1817 and later the same year appeared in light comedy roles in New York, . . . his best role of the season (1828) was his Shylock, which was described as excellent.[28]

Whether or not this was the Chapman FLOATING THEATRE, the format of the performance can be assumed typical of the showboat fare of the day.

The Memphis Enquirer of September 29, 1826 announced that the Chapman THEATRICAL STEAMBOAT would play in that city October 1 through 8, performing The Stranger and Perfection; or, The maid of Munster. This is the first announcement of the Chapmans having a steamboat, a considerable advancement from a "floating" theatre. The STEAMBOAT THEATRE was to continue its operation for several years, the company growing each year due to marriages of the younger members of the family and also because financial stability allowed for hiring good personel from the outside.

The Baton Rouge Gazette of April 15, 1841 carried the following:

> Perhaps some our readers are not aware that Mr. Chapman's theatrical corps are now in town, and offer nightly a variety of scenic entertainments. Tonight, we understand they perform Bulwar's popular piece The Lady of Lyons, to conclude with The Swiss Cottage.

These performances were among the very last for the elder Chapman for he died on board his boat that summer near Cincinnati. The accounts

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[28]Alban Fordesh Varnado, "A History of Theatrical Activity in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1819-1900, (thesis, University of Wisconson, 1941), p. 7; see also Joseph M. Free, "The Ante-Bellum Theatre of the Old Natchez Region," Journal of the Mississippi Historical Association, (Jan., 1943), pp. 14 ff.; and Free, The Theatre of Southwestern Mississippi to 1840, (thesis, University of Iowa, 1941).

of Mr. Chapman's death and the disposition of the boat are varied. Dr. Judd in the afore mentioned article says that he dies on his boat in 1839 and was buried at Manchester, Mississippi. Ludlow states that he died at Cincinnati in the year 1840.[29] The Oxford Companion to the Theatre gives the inclusive dates for William Chapman as 1764-1839. These dates must give way to the writer for the Gazette who would not likely have written about any Mr. Chapman other than "Covent Garden Chapman," William Chapman, Sr.

The matter is made even more foggy by George D. Ford who writes of his great-great-grandfather thusly: "Here he was in Manchester, Ohio, on March 31, . . . Covent Garden Chapman was now ninety."[30] This March date and the April date of the Baton Rouge newspaper do not mesh at all. And even if the 1764 birth date given in the Oxford Companion is only an approximation, Will Chapman, Sr. would have been in his seventies at the time of his death, not ninety.

Philip Graham states that Chapman was "making plans to build a larger steamboat."[31] Ford leads us to believe that the old man's outlook was not so optimistic:

> The romance of the theatre on the Ohio was beginning to wear thin. Nothing had been said directly on the subject but he could feel it more and more as the weeks sped past. Sarah had already married young Hamilton, an out-of-the-family member of the troupe. Their ambition was to go back and play in London. The three grown boys read every newspaper they could buy for news of the theatre in New York. Caroline and Harry were no longer children. His work was done. His mind was set. Tomorrow he would call them together and tell them what was to be done.

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[29]Ludlow, op. cit., p. 569.

[30]Ford, op. cit., p. 163.

[31]Graham, op. cit., p. 20.

> There was no morrow for him. . . . He was burried in the graveyard of the Presbyterian Church in Manchester and his tombstone stood there until very recent years when a flood washed it away.[32]

Ford continues concerning the boat itself.

> The boat and all therein was sold to Sol Smith and the entire company took the next steamer to Pittsburgh, the coach and canal boat to Washington and the coach to New York. Everything turned out as Old Will had wished.[33]

Dr. Judd, in his erratic article of 1903, states the following:

> Mrs. Chapman then undertook the management and conducted it very successfully for a number of years.
>
> In 1847 Mrs. Chapman, who was getting old, retired from the business with ample means, and sold her floating theatre, which had been rebuilt for her a few years before, to Sol Smith, another well-known Western theatrical manager and actor of those days. But Sol Smith was not long in the possession of the boat. The first season he was out with it, when winding down the Ohio, he came in collision with a steamboat, which split his craft into halves. Sol Smith and his company managed to escape with their lives, and after a hard struggle up the precipitous and clay bank of the stream succeeded in finding a firm footing at the top, they were obliged to walk until daylight before they reached shelter.[34]

Graham adds to this, saying that the boat under Mrs. Chapman operated as Chapman's FLOATING PALACE.[35] It is curious that in all his writings and recollections Sol Smith gives no indication that he ever saw the Chapman boat, much less owned it, which would have been a noteworthy addition to his varied life and memoirs. Graham excuses this omission by suggesting that only in this way could Smith avoid ridicule from his sometime partner, Ludlow. Even though Smith was writing some years later when he and Ludlow were no longer partners, they were partners at

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[32]Ford, op. cit., p. 166

[33]Ibid., pp. 166-67.

[34]Judd, op. cit., p. 204

[35]Graham, op. cit., p. 20.

the time, and Ludlow could have hardly avoided knowing of the ownership of the Chapman boat and the accident.

The uncertain end of the family operation of the showboat did not end the career of the family. When the new St. Charles Theatre opened in New Orleans on January 18, 1843 under the management of Ludlow and Smith, the company included Miss Caroline Chapman, Miss Theresa Chapman, Mr. William Chapman, Jr., and Mr. H. (Harry) Chapman.[36] Newspapers and programs of the latter '40's and the '50's show the Chapman name to be very much alive in both New York and San Francisco, especially through the extremely capable Caroline.

Anecdotes about the Chapmans and their showboat are many and varied. Although it is doubtful that any of the events happened as they have been passed down, some of the stories do help to give a flavor of the time. (See Appendix C).

A major boon to navigation on the Ohio River was the completion of a canal around the falls at Louisville in 1828 - the Portland Canal.[37] Canals of various kinds were having considerable effect on the economics of the entire Ohio Valley. In 1825, the year the National Road was being extended through Ohio, the Ohio legislature passed an act providing for a canal system through the state,[38] having seen the example set by the state of New York with the opening of the Erie Canal in that year. By 1833 the Ohio River and Lake Erie had two water connections by improved river and canal, one from Cincinnati to Toledo and one from Portsmouth to Cleveland. And by 1835 "there were

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[36]Ludlow, op. cit., p. 561.

[37]William F. Gephart, Transportation and Industrial Development in the Middle West, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1909), p. 110.

[38]Ibid., p. 116.

shipped from Ohio86,000 barrels of flour, 98,000 bushels of wheat, 2,500,000 staves and many other products to New York by way of the Erie Canal."[39] With the growing commerce on the canal systems, it is only natural that the next showboat of which any record exists should be on the busiest of canals, the Erie.

Again relying on the questionable account of Dr. Judd, in 1826 one Henry Butler, who had been a theatrical manager touring the Mohawk Valley, decided to outfit a canal boat as a theatre.

> . . . he started from Troy, N. Y., with his floating theatre and museum, stopping from one day to a week in a place, according to its size. In the daytime he exhibited only the museum part of his show, which contained all the usual concomitants - stuffed birds, lions, tigers, Washington, Napoleon, Captain Kidd, the Twelve Apostles in wax, etc., etc. In the evening his small company of Thespians gave performances on the little stage erected at the end of the boat.[40]

Unfortunately there is no further account of this operation from which to reconstruct the exact nature of the boat or of Mr. Butler. (See Appendix C).

Although it was not a showboat on the western rivers, there is another boat to be mentioned here sequentially. With the pretentious title of TEMPLE OF THE MUSES, this craft opened at the foot of Canal Street in New York on April 2, 1845. Accounts vary, even contemporary newspapers, as to the exact nature of the boat: it may have been a "Man-of-War Built Steamship" or "an old southern packet brought up the coast into the Hudson", the VIRGINIA; it may have seated 1200 or 2000.[41]

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[39]Gephart, ibid., p. 118. [40]Judd, op. cit., p. 202.

[41]Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre, (New York: Samuel French, 1951), p. 145; see also Carl Carmer, The Hudson, (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939), pp. 259 ff.; and Graham, op. cit., p. 25.

The principal reason to include this boat is that Glenn Hughes in A History of the American Theatre credits H. S. Chapman with the idea.[42] It will suffice to acknowledge the existance of such a venture as per various New York newspapers which do share a common opening date.

Most information about other notable showboats prior to the Civil War is sketchy and fragmentary but there are several boats worthy of mention. The Cairo (Illinois) Delta of January 4, 1849 carried the following account:

> LENNOX THEATRE. - This floating theatre stopped at Cairo Saturday night about dark, and in a short time after their arrival opened doors and commenced performances to a fair sized crowd, considering the brief notice, and the fact that the theatre was not expected. The acting was really a treat to those present.
>
> Everything was conducted in the best style, and with as much correctness as if on the boards of a city theatre. We would judge the room capable of seating a thousand persons, and containing well arranged inclined boxes and parquette, with a good orchestra, under the management of Mr. Lennox, formerly of the Atheneum, Cincinnati.
>
> The acting at this floating theatre is much as might be expected only on the stage of a large and well managed city theatre. From this place the theatre proceeds to Memphis. The citizens of that place will find this theatre an excellent place of amusement, and Mr. Lennox a manager and actor of experience and ability.

Mr. Lennox did have considerable experience. He and Mrs. Lennox had been part of the company of Edwin Dean and Julia Drake Dean of Louisville when they visited Columbus during the 1837-38 and 1838-39 seasons.[43] After leaving this company he had joined Sol Smith in April of 1839 at St. Louis.[44] It is not known when Mr. Lennox was with the

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[42]Hughes, ibid., p. 144.

[43]Kathryn Elizabeth Utz, "Columbus, Ohio, Theatre Seasons, 1840-41 to 1860-61", 2 volumes, (Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1952), p. 105.

[44]William G. B. Carson, The Theatre on the Frontier, The Early Years of the St. Louis Stage, (New York: Benjaman Blom, 1965),

Atheneum in Cincinnati but he did return to Columbus in December of 1847 to manage his own company.[45]

As the Cairo newspaper had stated, the floating theatre did proceed to Memphis. But if it had been called the LENNOX THEATRE in Cairo, it was re-christened en-route, arriving in Memphis as the ROUGH AND READY. On tying up at Memphis the boat was impounded by the Chancery Court because of non-payment to the builders, John Fenton and Frank Williams of Cincinnati. This evidently brought an end to this showboat for it was sold in March of 1849 to defray debts against it and Mr. Lennox.[46] Several years later the Memphis Public Ledger (March 24, 1875) recounts that the boat lay at the landing for four years awaiting a court decision. This same article gives a not too reliable description of the boat, twenty-six years after it was built in Cincinnati, that does not quite assess it in the same glowing terms as the Cairo Delta.[47]

Showboats of any kind were curiosity pieces before 1850. Despite the number there may have been, it was small compared to the number of other steamboats, packets, and flatboats. Joseph Jefferson relates an incident of some uniqueness in floating from Nashville down the Cumberland to the Ohio to get to New Orleans, an indicent where scenery was

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[45]Utz, loc. cit.

[46]Minutes, Memphis Chancery Court, February and March, 1854. The information here given in connection with another suit against Mrs. Lennox.

[47]For the complete career of Thomas Lennox and Mrs. Lennox, particularly relative to the time of the incidents involved here, see Charles Clifford Ritter, "The Theatre in Memphis, Tennessee, from its Beginning to 1859", (Dissertation, University of Iowas, 1956).

"utilized in a manner never before attempted in the annals of the stage."[48] Using a drop with a forest on one side and a palace on the other as a sail they would increase their floating speed.

> The wonder-stricken farmers and their wives and children would run out of their log-cabins and, standing on the river bank, gaze with amazement at our curious craft. It was delightful to watch the steamboats as they went by. The passengers would crowd the deck and look with wonder at us. For a bit of sport the captain and I would vary the picture, and as a boat steamed past we would first show them the wood scene, and then suddenly swing the sail around, exhibiting the gorgeous palace. Adding to this sport, our leading man and the low comedian would sometimes get a couple of old-fashioned broadswords and fight a melodramatic combat on the deck. There is no doubt that at times our barge was taken for a floating lunatic asylum.[49]

In contrast to Mr. Jefferson's rather singular experience, the forties and fifties were deluged with another form of entertainment as uniquely American as the showboat. The exact origin of the Minstrel Show lies beyond the realm of this study, but by mid-century they had a stronghold on the theatre fare of every major city while touring companies brought minstrels to the hinterlands. Just as the Chapmans found the rivers an easier road than overland, so did the entrepreneurs of minstrelsy. There is but the briefest record of two early showboats carrying minstrel shows - the HURON on the Little Miami Canal in Ohio[50] and the DIXIE on the Wabash Canal.[51]

Somewhat more is known about the steamer BANJO, as even its name indicates the nature of the boat. Ralph Keeler, a minstrel performer

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[48]Alan S. Downer, The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 39-40.

[49]Idem.

[50]Edward LeRoy Rice, Monarchs of Minstrelsy, (New York

himself, mentions the boat as existing in 1849 at one place in his writings.[52] Elsewhere in Mr. Keeler's recollections, it would seem he did not see the boat until later.[53] Although newspapers mention its ownership by G. R. Spalding as early as 1852,[54] it was not enrolled by the Bureau of Marine Inspection until October 24, 1855: ". . . it was 'full built' (of wood), with a square stern, a tuck, no gallery, and a plain head."[55] Whereas Philip Graham states that the BANJO was "only eighty feet long . . ., and with a pit seating an audience of two hundred,"[56] Ned Davis' Minstrels were announced to play Natchez on May 21, 1856 giving the following description of the boat:

> THE PALATIAL STEAMER BANJO built expressly for this Company, upon an entirely new and unique plan, is fitted up with a capacious stage and scenery, and the Musical Saloon is capable of comfortably seating for 800 persons.[57] (See Figure # 3).

It is certainly possible that there were two different boats or that the original boat was rebuilt to accommodate a larger audience. The descrepancy of six hundred in the seating capacity would support the former. Too, the fact that laws requiring thorough inspection of boilers and equipment were sketchy until 1852 would give credence to a new boat and the enrollment at Cincinnati in 1855.[58]

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[52]Ralph Keeler, Vagabond Adventures, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872).

[53]Keeler, "Three Years a Negro Minstrel", Atlantic Monthly, XXIV (July, 1869), p. 85.

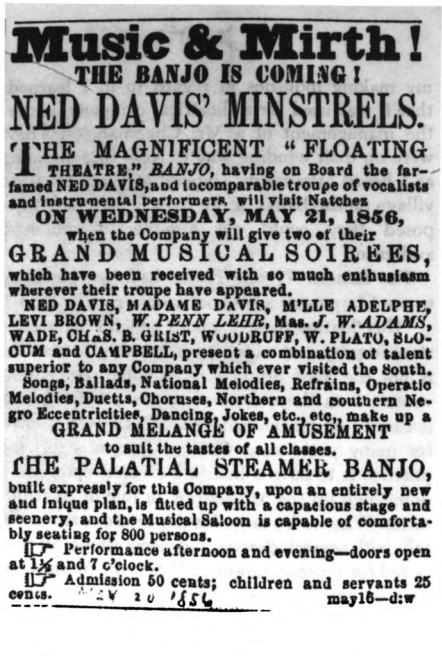
[54]See newspapers listed in Graham, op. cit., p. 29n.

[55]Enrollment record summarized in Joseph S. Schick, "Early Showboat and Circus in the Upper Valley", Mid-America, XXXII (October, 1950), p. 220n.

[56]Graham, op. cit., p. 23.

[57]Natchez Free Trader, May 20, 1856.

[58]See John H. Morrison, History of American Steam Navigation, (New York: Stephen Daye Press, 1958), pp. 591 ff. re Steamboat Inspection.



Music & Mirth!

THE BANJO IS COMING!

NED DAVIS' MINSTRELS.

THE MAGNIFICENT "FLOATING THEATRE," *BANJO*, having on Board the far-famed NED DAVIS, and incomparable troupe of vocalists and instrumental performers, will visit Natchez

ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 1856,

when the Company will give two of their

GRAND MUSICAL SOIREES,

which have been received with so much enthusiasm wherever their troupe have appeared.

NED DAVIS, MADAME DAVIS, M'LLE ADELPHE, LEVI BROWN, *W. PENN LEHR*, Mas. *J. W. ADAMS*, WADE, CHAS. B. GRIST, WOODRUFF, W. PLATO, SLOCUM and CAMPBELL, present a combination of talent superior to any Company which ever visited the South. Songs, Ballads, National Melodies, Refrains, Operatic Melodies, Duetts, Choruses, Northern and Southern Negro Eccentricities, Dancing, Jokes, etc., etc., make up a

GRAND MELANGE OF AMUSEMENT

to suit the tastes of all classes.

THE PALATIAL STEAMER BANJO,

built expressly for this Company, upon an entirely new and unique plan, is fitted up with a capacious stage and scenery, and the Musical Saloon is capable of comfortably seating for 800 persons.

☞ Performance afternoon and evening—doors open at 1½ and 7 o'clock.

☞ Admission 50 cents; children and servants 25 cents. MAY 20 1856 may16—d:w

Figure # 2

Advertisement for the Steamer BANJO

from

Natchez Free Trader

May 20, 1856

Newspaper advertisements such as this testify to the format of the shows aboard the BANJO. The extent of travel was the extremes of navigation at least on the Mississippi - from Stillwater on the St. Croix and Minneapolis-St. Paul in the north to Baton Rouge and New Orleans in the south. The BANJO was not inspected in 1857 and was presumed abandoned during 1858 by the Bureau of Marine Inspection.[59] However it played at Kansas City on September 6 and 7, 1860, and Wells and long's Star Minstrels and Brass Band were aboard as the BANJO played Baton Rouge on January 29, 1861.[60] What eventually happened to this boat is unknown.

Contemporary with the BANJO was the JAMES RAYMOND. The Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation of October 15, 1853 records the RAYMOND as 177 feet in length, 30 feet in width, with a draft of 5½ feet.[61] There was but one deck - no gallery - which contained "besides the dining-hall and state rooms of the employees, a concert-saloon fitted up with great elegance and convenience, and called 'The Ridotto.'"[62] It was in this room that Ralph Keeler, "in conjunction with a full band of minstrels" was to perform his "jog and wench dances."[62] The troup was probably the Dave Reed Minstrels who were most often advertised aboard this boat.[63]

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[59] Schick, loc. cit.

[60] Harold and Ernestine Briggs, "The Theatre in Early Kansas City," Mid-America, XXXII (April, 1950), p. 94; see also Varnado, op. cit., p. 24.

[61] Schick, op. cit., p. 219n.

[62] Keeler, "Three Years . . .", op. cit., p. 79.

[63] Most of Mr. Keeler's writings as cited in this chapter have no dates. In "Three Years a Negro Minstrel" he speaks of entering Kenyon College. Personal correspondence from Mr. Thomas B. Greenslade, Kenyon College Archivist (Sept. 30, 1975) states that Mr. Keeler entered Kenyon in the fall of 1858.

Both the JAMES RAYMOND and the BANJO are attributed to G. R. Spalding, although ownership was shared. Spalding had been a pharmacist in Albany, and, because he could prescribe medicine, he was given the monacle "Doctor."[64] He became a circus man by taking over the small Nichols Circus that owed him money. Under the banner of Spalding's American Circus he trouped for five years before joining the Charles Rogers company to form the Spalding and Rogers Circus. This circus was one of the most innovative, at least until the great combines later in the century. It instigated the use of quarter poles so as to increase the height of the main tent, developed portable sloping bleachers, and sought better methods of lighting. As the Railroad Circus in 1853, it was one of the very first to try this new method of transportation. In 1848 Spalding had sent a show out under his brother-in-law, a Mr. Van orden, which was to travel by steamboat but would perform on land.[65]

The partnership of Spalding and Rogers brought together sufficient capital to begin a large theatre boat to be built in Cincinnati; work began in 1851 with plans to launch the completed boat early in 1852. Not only was the operation unique but very practical. It was more waterproof than a tent and was not so likely to be affected by wind. Since it was self-contained, time and energy of set-up and take-down were saved. Earl Chapin May, circus authority, has stated that "Compared even to gorgeous river steamboats Spalding and Rogers' floating Establishment was palatial."[66] A contemporary Cincinnati newspaper

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[64]Earl Chapin May, The Circus from Rome to Ringling, (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), pp. 77-78.

[65]Charles Phillip Fox and Tom Parkinson, The Circus in America, (Waukesha, Wisc.: Country Beautiful, 1969), pp. 72-73.

[66]May, loc. cit.

article would certainly substantiate this statement:

> Novelty - the floating circus building, or, as it is called the "Floating Palace", now in process of construction at one of our shipyards, for Dr. Spalding, well known circus proprietor, will, when completed, be one of the largest, most unique, and, withal, most magnificent aquatic contrivances ever seen in the West. It is 250 feet long (half a city block), 60 feet wide, and is designed for the accomodation of 3,000 persons. The Palace requires but a few weeks longer to finish and will cost upwards of $ 40,000.

The first Cincinnati performance was announced for Monday, June 18, 1852, stating "Spalding and Rogers' Circus Fleet, on board the Floating Palace, totally eclipsing all circus projects ever conceived in Europe or America" would arrive at about 10 a.m. "Amid the stirring peels of the great chine of 20 bells - susceptible to the greatest harmony and adapted alike to the most lively and measured music." The description continued, promising

> . . . an amphi-theater more elegant, spacious and sumptious than any theater in the United States; and at night, when illuminated from within by countless gas burners and without by a concentration of Drummonds, electric Bengal, and locomotive lights, despensing an almost daylight brightness for a long distance, presenting a scene of almost fairy enchantment.[67]

Records of the first season are more sketchy than for the rest of the FLOATING PALACE'S career. One source states that there was a dedicatory performance in March of 1852 at Pittsburgh.[68] It was advertised at Baton Rouge in October and from the Baton Rouge Gazette of October 12, 1852 comes one of the best accounts of this boat as the

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[67]Charles H. Zuber, Curtains Down, Glimpses of Former Stages and Stars, Vol. II, (a book of clippings from the Cincinnati Enquirer of 1937-38), article from the Enquirer of February 6, 1938 but quoting the Times of March 8, 1852.

[68]George L. Chindahl, A History of the Circus in America, (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Press, Ltd., 1959), p. 25, citing an article from "White Tops", (Rochelle, Ill.: May-June, 1949), pp. 14-15. "White Tops" is a newsletter of the Circus Fans Association.

same issue carries both a paid advertisement as well as the editors report after having visited the boat.

> Through the kindness of the agent we have had a walk through the Floating Palace. The establishment all in all goes beyond our expectation. We had no idea that so complete an amphitheatre in all the details of grace, ease, and elegance could be made upon terra firma, and the boxes, and gallery as comfortable as any of our best theatres.
>
> The chime of bells is a novelty and the organ a perfect piece of workmanship. The whole affair is lighted by gas, generated on board and sent by means of conductors to every part of the structure. In connection with the Circus is a Museum well worth a visit. Tonight is the last night and "everybody" should avail himself of the opportunity of seeing this wonderful water craft.

The seating capacity is varyingly reported. At a performance in St. Louis in 1852 it is said that twenty-five hundred persons watched a show on board the FLOATING PALACE, many of them peering through the windows and paying a dollar for the privilege.[69] The Gazette advertisement must suffice here as an accurate description (see Figure # 3) since another newspaper assured its readers that the FLOATING PALACE "came full up to what it had advertised and professed to be and do."[70]

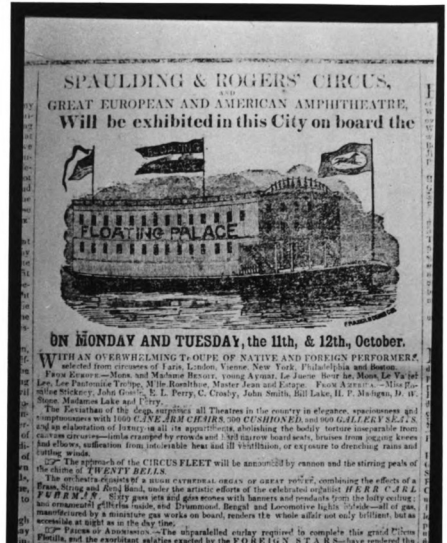
The previously mentioned article in "White Tops" states that after playing New Orleans the FLOATING PALACE was towed by the steamer NORTH RIVER (evidently a namesake of Fulton's first steamboat), presumably its tow for the entire first season, down the river and across the Gulf of Mexico for an engagement in Mobile. After these performances it played various towns on the Mobile, Alabama, and Rombigbee Rivers. On returning to New Orleans it barely escaped being wrecked in a storm. An undated drawing of this event survived.[71] (See Figure # 5).

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[69]A. M. Smith, "Transporting the Circus", Hobbies, LIV November, 1949), p. 34.

[70]Wabash Courier (Terre Haute, Indiana), April 31, 1853.

[71]Chindahl, loc. cit.



SPAULDING & ROGERS' CIRCUS,
AND
GREAT EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN AMPHITHEATRE,
Will be exhibited in this City on board the

ON MONDAY AND TUESDAY, the 11th, & 12th, October.

WITH AN OVERWHELMING TROUPE OF NATIVE AND FOREIGN PERFORMERS, selected from circuses of Paris, London, Vienne, New York, Philadelphia and Boston.

From Europe.—Mons. and Madame Renoir, young Aymar, Le Jocrie Bouvier, Mons. Le Valet, Lee, Lee Pantomime Troupe, Mlle. Rosalthine, Master Jean and Estope. From America.—Miss Pauline Stickney, John Gossin, E. L. Perry, C. Crosby, John Smith, Bill Lake, H. P. Madigan, D. W. Stone, Madames Lake and Perry.

The Leviathan of the Deep, surpasses all Theatres in the country in elegance, spaciousness and completeness with 1000 *CANE-BARCHAIRS*, 500 *CUSHIONED*, and 900 *GALLERY SEATS*, and an elaboration of Interior in all its appurtenances, abolishing the bodily torture inseparable from circus elevations—limbs cramped by crowds and hard narrow board seats, bruises from jagged knees and elbows, suffocation from intolerable heat and ill ventilation, or exposure to drenching rains and cutting winds.

☞ The approach of the CIRCUS FLEET will be announced by cannon and the stirring peals of the chime of *TWENTY BELLS*.

The orchestra consists of a HIGH CATHEDRAL ORGAN OF GREAT POWER, combining the effects of a Brass, String and Reed Band, under the artistic efforts of the celebrated organist *HERR CARL FUERMAN*. Sixty gass jets and gas scenes with banners and pendants from the lofty ceiling; and streamers of glorious music, and Drummond, Bengal and Locomotive lights, Calcium—all of gas, manufactured by a miniature gas works on board, renders the whole affair not only brilliant, but as accessible at night as in the day time.

☞ Prices of Admission.—The unparalelled outlay required to complete this grand Circus Flotilla, and the exorbitant salaries exacted by the FOREIGN STARS have rendered the following scale of prices indispensable to sustain the enterprise. Dress Circle (all arm chairs and numbered) $1,00. Family Circle, full cushioned 50 cents. Children and servants half price to Dress Circle and Boxes.

☞ The arm chairs may be secured at the ticket office on board.

The Floating Palace will exhibit in Baton Rouge on Monday and Tuesday, 11th and 12th October; at Bruin Landing, Manchac Church and Plaquemine, on Wednesday the 13th; at St. Gabriel's Church, Baton Goula, and Donaldsonville, on Thursday 14th; at Bonne Quarre Church, and Red Church on Friday the 15th.

Oct. 2d 4t.

Faber's Magnetic Water Guage. State of Louisiana—Parish of East

Figure # 3

Advertisement for Spalding and Rogers' FLOATING PALACE

This advertisement from the Baton Rouge Gazette of October 12, 1852 would have the total seating for the FLOATING PALACE be 2,200. Note, too, that the intended stops downriver of Baton Rouge are the same as those of showboats later in the century.

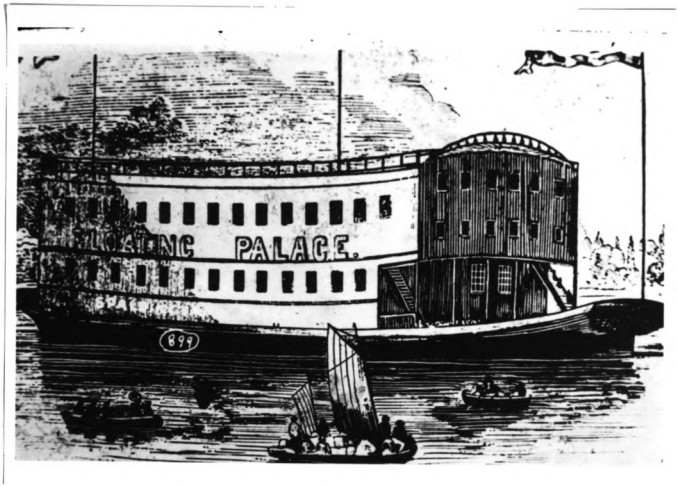


Figure # 4

Spalding and Rogers' FLOATING PALACE, Contemporary Sketch

This sketch of the FLOATING PALACE, although obviously of the same origin as that used in advertisements, is made more fanciful by the approaching skiffs and the small sailboat at the center.

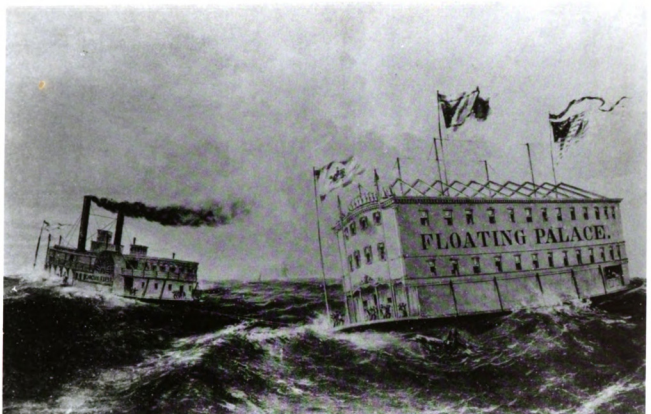


Figure # 5

Sketch of the FLOATING PALACE in a storm on the Gulf

This contemporary sketch depicts the FLOATING PALACE in a storm on the Gulf of Mexico after it had allegedly played in Mobile and along rivers in Alabama.

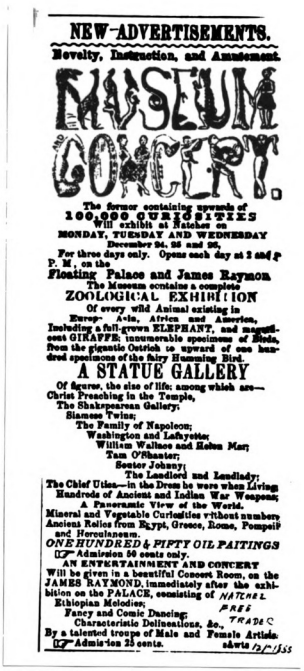
When the JAMES RAYMOND was built in 1853, it became the almost constant power source for the circus boat. (Contemporary newspapers from Minneapolis to New Orleans do note some exceptions to this practice.) "The two boats left Cincinnati with nearly a hundred souls on board, that being the necessary complement of the vast establishment."[72] In addition to the circus, the FLOATING PALACE carried a museum of curiosities and stuffed animals, (see Figure # 6). Combining this with concerts on the JAMES RAYMOND and a minstrel show on the BANJO, the fleet could bring to a town all the variety of entertainment that existed in any major eastern city.

Spalding and Rogers managed the boat with their own circus on board for two seasons and then, according to one source, leased the Van Amburgh-Raymond show.[73] However, there is another account from an advertisement in the Natchez Free Trader for Van Amburgh's Menagerie aboard the FLOATING PALACE "which has been purchased by Mr. Van Amburgh at enormous expense, and remodeled and renovated expressly for a short tour of the Valley of the Mississippi, so as to give the residents of this section the only, and probably last, opportunity of viewing his collection." (See Figure # 7). This was mostly likely a sales pitch as the same advertisement informs the reader that Mr. Van Amburgh "has just caused to be constructed two elegant steamers - the JAMES RAYMOND, . . .; the other, called the GAZELLE, only 60 feet long, expressly for his Agent, who will precede the Establishment several weeks, announcing its approach and the day of arrival." Obviously Mr. Van Amburgh's advertising man was not given to any great degree of

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[72]Keeler, "Three Years . . .", loc. cit.

[73]Fox and Parkinson, op. cit., p. 74.



NEW ADVERTISEMENTS.

Novelty, Instruction, and Amusement.

MUSEUM & CONCERT.

The former containing upwards of
100,000 CURIOSITIES
Will exhibit at Natchez on
MONDAY, TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY
December 3d, 4th and 5th,
For three days only. Opens each day at 2 and 7 P. M., on the
Floating Palace and James Raymond.
The Museum contains a complete
ZOOLOGICAL EXHIBITION
Of every wild Animal existing in
Europe, Asia, Africa and America,
Including a full-grown ELEPHANT, and magnificent GIRAFFE; innumerable specimens of Birds, from the gigantic Ostrich to upward of one hundred specimens of the fairy Humming Bird.
A STATUE GALLERY
Of figures, the size of life; among which are—
Christ Preaching in the Temple,
The Shakspearean Gallery;
Siamese Twins;
The Family of Napoleon;
Washington and Lafayette;
William Wallace and Helen Mar;
Tam O'Shanter;
Souter Johnny;
The Landlord and Landlady;
The Chief Ulies—in the Dress he wore when Living
Hundreds of Ancient and Indian War Weapons;
A Panoramic View of the World.
Mineral and Vegetable Curiosities without number;
Ancient Relics from Egypt, Greece, Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum.
ONE HUNDRED & FIFTY OIL PAITINGS
☞ Admission 50 cents only.
AN ENTERTAINMENT AND CONCERT
Will be given in a beautiful Concert Room, on the JAMES RAYMOND, immediately after the exhibition on the PALACE, consisting of NATIVE, FREE Ethiopian Melodies;
Fancy and Comic Dancing;
Characteristic Delineations, &c., TRADE
By a talented troops of Male and Female Artists.
☞ Admission 25 cents. adv'ts 12/1/55

Figure # 6

Advertisement for the FLOATING PALACE

This advertisement for the FLOATING PALACE if from the Natchez Free Trader of December 10, 1855.



VAN AMBURGH'S

Menagerie!

WITH OVER 350 LIVING SPECIMENS OF

Forest Beasts and Desert Monsters

AND NUMEROUS

TRAINED ANIMALS!

In their various stages of training and subjugation by the great master of animal power,

FEROCIOUS & TERRIFIC!

Fresh from their native forests; with innumerable specimens of the

RARE BIRDS THAT FLY IN THE AIR!

All to be seen for One Price of Admission

WILL EXHIBIT AT

At Natchez, on Thursday and Friday, December 15th, and 16th, 1853, FOR TWO DAYS ONLY, Performing at 2 and 7½ P. M., on Friday at 12 M., 2 and 7½ P. M.

Also, at Vidalia, on Saturday, 17th, at 2 and 7½ P. M.

ADMISSION.....50 cts.....Children and Servants 25 cents.

ABOARD THE FLOATING PALACE

Which has been purchased by Mr. Van Amburgh at enormous expense, and remodelled and rearranged expressly for the exhibition of his Menagerie and Performing Animals, forming the Largest and most splendid Travelling Zoological Collection ever exhibited in the United States, and particularly to afford the Public living the rare opportunity of visiting the Menagerie at all times, and at all seasons of the year, when it is impossible upon the land. By the use of a powerful Locomotive attached, and which has been expressly constructed for the purpose, the Floating Palace can visit the Towns and Cities on the banks of the Mississippi and its tributaries, and on the Ohio River, as it is now, a novelty to express that we attempt to say, that the Floating Palace will visit the principal towns on the Mississippi, Red River, Arkansas, Missouri and Ohio Rivers, and the Great Lakes, during the season of Navigation, and will visit the river Towns by land during the Winter months, commencing in the month of December next, and continue through the following Spring and Summer months.

These considerations, with the vast number of the Animals, and their many and various performances, rendering the exhibition of the Menagerie alone, one of the most extensive and complete that has ever been known in this country, and which the proprietor begs to assure the public will be found worthy of their patronage.

Besides the Palace, Mr Van Amburgh has just opened in connection two splendid Pavilions—the Lecture Pavilion, in a recent fire the Palace, and for the last two seasons of the United States, and the other Pavilion, 80 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 20 feet high, expressly for the Horses, which will precede the Exhibition several weeks, commencing to approach and the day of Exhibition.

. At a proper period during the Exhibition

Mr. VAN AMBURGH

Will Enter the Dens



OF HIS TERRIFIC GROUP OF

LIONS, TIGERS, LEOPARDS,

In the presence of the Audience, as he has often with so much zeal in Europe and America.

Dan Amburgh's Trained Animals

Consist of two Venerable Lions, a Royal Bengal Tiger, Four African Leopards, Asiatic Lions and Leopards, Black Tiger, and Brazilian Tiger.

Among the Rare Animals has Birds will be found

RHINOCEROS,



"OR, UNICORN OF HOLY WRIT.

Male Elephant Upper Ratna, Arabian Pure Camel, White Lions, Ayhe or Sprayer-the Small African Hyena, Caracine Cat, Chinese Hyena.

10 Lions and Lionesses, Asiatic & African,

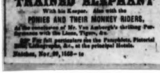
Royal Bengal Tigers, Pair Bengalese Tigers, Royal Java Tiger, Pair Sumatra Tigers, Pair Black Tigers, Pair Spotted Tigers, Pair Striped Leopards, Black Tiger, 2 South American Lions, Black Panther, Pair Ornamented Panthers, Pair Spotted Hyenas, Striped Hyenas, Black Bear, Pair Polar Bears, Pair Grizzly Bears, Pair Brown Bears, White Bear, Wolves from Siberia, Fox &c.

NEW HOLLAND OSTRICHES,

Pair Adelaide Crowned Cranes, Pair Black Swans, White Swans, Silver Pheasants, Gold Pheasants, Blue Cranes, Pair Demoiselle Cranes, Pair Ostriches, Blue Cranes, Pair South Africa, Pair Large Turkish Pelicans, Buzzards, Parrots, Cockatoos, Macaws, and a

Colony of the Monkey Tribe!

An evening Performance will be given by the



TRAINED ELEPHANT

With his Keeper, Also with the

PONIES AND THEIR MONKEY RIDERS,

At the conclusion of Mr. Van Amburgh's thrilling Performances with the Lions, Tigers, &c.

Mr. Van Amburgh's arrangements for the Exhibition, Pictorial Paintings, &c., at the principal Hotels.

Natchez, Nov 29, 1853—tc

Figure # 7

Advertisement for the FLOATING PALACE

This advertisement for the FLOATING PALACE is from the Natchez Free Trader of November 29, 1853. The column at the right is a continuation of the one at the left, originally making a full page column.

understatement for this same announcement states that Van Amburgh would soon retire and that so extensive a zoological tour will never again be available in the area. Mr. Van Amburgh's retirement must have been somewhat akin to that of Adelina Patti or Sarah Bernhardt for his "Farewell Visit" was still being announced in Baton Rouge over a year later for January 27, 1855, (see Figure # 8.)

Van Amburgh did retire, at least from the FLOATING PALACE, for the Baton Rouge Weekly Comet of December 23, 1855 announced the FLOATING PALACE and the JAMES RAYMOND without Van Amburgh, (see Figure # 9). In all probability the boats spent the month of January in New Orleans or small towns and landings below Baton Rouge, for by February 10, 1856 the Weekly Comet was again announcing performances for February 22 and 23 with new acts. (See Figure # 10.)

Isaac Van Amburgh had been a cage boy who grew to national prominence under the banner of the June, Titus, Angevine Circus as the "Lion King." When it was sufficient exhibition of courage to just enter a cage of animals, Van Amburgh trained lions and tigers to do dexterious feats, (see Figure # 7). During his career as manager he had several partners including James Raymond. After his death the name and circus was carried forth by his press agent, Hyatt Frost. The Van Amburgh Circus did not close until 1883 and in 1889 the Ringlings leased the prestigious Van Amburgh title to use with their own.[74]

That particular aura of the circus, that of displaying the bizarre and foreign along with the acts of unusual virtuosity dates from these two decades before the Civil War and it pervaded the theatrical arts. The same P. T. Barnum who, later in his career as legend has it,

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[74]Fox and Parkinson, ibid., p. 70 and p. 84.



on reference to the Clerk's office, where the address of the sufferer may be had
jan-21-11.

Farewell Visit of
VAN AMBURGH'S
MENAGERIE,
On Board the FLOATING PALACE
Will be Exhibited at BATON ROUGE,
SATURDAY JAN. 27 1855.
This is the farewell visit to the South of this large collection of Animals.
Numbering over 150 Specimens!
and including the greatest curiosity in the World,
THE GIRAFFE.
An Animal over seventeen feet high! and of the most striking beauty of form and color.
The collection of living wild Animals at present on board the PALACE, is
The Largest in America.
MR. VAN AMBURG, the far famed subdoer of Wild Animals, will enter the Dens of his trained Lions, Tigers, Leopards, &c., and go through his thrilling performances

At the close of this Brief Exhibition in the cabin, the Animals will be fed in the presence of the spectators.
Doors to open Doors at 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock, P. M.
Immediately after the performance on board the PALACE, A GRAND CONCERT will be given in the ROTUNDA SALOON, on which the eminent YANKEE Ramsay, by



of said Court.
nov 27. B. F. BRYAN. Clerk.

NOVELTY, INSTRUCTION, *Amusement.*

MUSEUM
—AND—
CONCERT.
The former containing upwards of
100,000 Curiosities.
Will exhibit at BATON ROUGE, on
MONDAY, Dec. 24, TUESDAY, Jan. 1st, on board the
FLOATING PALACE
—AND—
JAMES RAYMOND.
The Museum contains a complete
ZOOLOGICAL EXHIBITION
of every wild & rare animal existing in
Europe, Asia, Africa and America,
Inc. among a full grown ELEPHANT, and magnificent GIRAFFE! besides many specimens of birds, from the Condor of the Andes to the Humming bird, and of the Rare Species of
A Statue Gallery,
Of Agrees the size of life, among which are—
Count Paulinos in the Tropics, the Dance
Female Gallery (Second Floor); the Flight
of Hagar, & Ishmael in the Wilderness—
Wm. Watkins & Daniel Boone Visit Ossian—
The Last Days of Lord Byron—The Death of
The Usher Dance—at the Dance we Were used
Levee.
Historical of Ancient & Indian War Weapons.
A Panoramic View of the World,
Mineral and Vegetable Curiosities without number; Ancient Relics from Egypt, Greece, Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum.
ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY OIL PAINTINGS.
Admis's. 50cts. Doors open 2 & 7 P. M.
An Entertainment & Concert.
Will be given in a beautiful Concert Room, on the
JAMES RAYMOND,
Immediately after the exhibition on the PALACE, consisting of
Ethiopian Melodies;
Fancy and Comic Dancing;
Characteristic Delineations;
By a talented troupe of Male and Female Artists.
Admission..... 25 Cents.

Figure # 8

Advertisement for the
FLOATING PALACE

Figure # 9

Advertisement for the
FLOATING PALACE

These two advertisements are from the Baton Rouge Weekly Comet of January 19, 1855 (left) and December 23, 1855 (right).

offered Sarah Bernhardt a half million dollars to exhibit her amputated leg, was a product of this time; (we must assume that Madame Bernhardt had the good taste to refuse the offer). Exploitation, under the guise of "moral and educational," was the order of the day. Barnum not only had Tom Thumb on display but also an aged Negress who supposedly was one hundred twenty-five years old and had been George Washington's nurse.[75] The amount of money paid to Jenny Lind may remove Barnum's management of her from the heading of exploitation; virtuosity was the attraction in this case. Even Barnum's start was that of an exploiter-entrepreneur of a virtuoso. Noah Miller Ludlow gives us an account of one of Barnum's first attempts as manager.

> About the close of this year (1840), Mr. P. T. Barnum, now known as the "great showman," made his appearance in New Orleans, having very recently commenced his career as a public man. He had in his employ a lad of about sixteen years of age, whome he called "Master Dimond," and who, with blackened face and hands, performed negro dances, to the no small delight of many who admired such exhibitions of suppleness. He could twist his feet and legs, while dancing, into more fantastic forms than I ever witnessed before or since in any human being.
>
> Mr. Barnum waited on us with his boy, and proposed that we should engage him to dance for a few nights between the plays and farces, saying, as an inducement, that he would draw a gallery audience for us, and would not be displeasing to other portions of the house. As his demand for the services of the boy was modest - don't start, reader! yes, modest! Barnum's demands in those days were modest; he was not the "great showman" then; well, as I said, his demand being modest we engaged the boy for five or six nights, without ever seeing him dance, and the result was just what Mr. Barnum said it would be. This was Mr. Barnum's first start on his long road as a "great showman."[76]

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[75]Fox and Parkinson, ibid., p. 78.

[76]Ludlow, op. cit., p. 533.

Whether the former is simply a display of virtuosity or exploitation, certainly the Mr. Nellis of the advertisement in Figure # 10, "born without arms," would fall under exploitation;[77] this man later worked for Barnum both on tour and at his New York museum. The virtuosity of Jenny Lind improvising astounding cadenzas in arias from Rossini, Bellini, and Donnizetti, of Ole Bull playing all four strings of the violin at the same time, or of Louis Moreau Gottschalk playing Lizst and his own compositions with unheard of agility - such acts of virtuosity appeared in the circus in the form of Madame Olinza, the tight rope walker, or as the educated animals such as the FLOATING PALACE carried in the great elephant show of 1857. (See Figure # 11.)

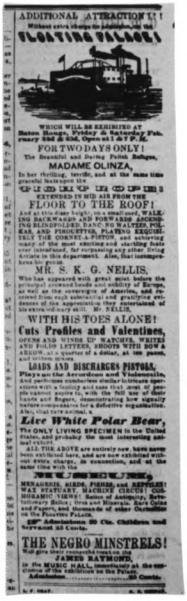
That the FLOATING PALACE was a tremendous attraction for everyone is supported by the following droll editorial from the Baton Rouge Daily Gazette and Comet of November 19, 1858 concerning the welfare of state officials in the Louisiana capitol:

> The Circus Coming. The Star Circus of Spalding and Rogers will be here in a few days on the Floating Palace. . . . Could Messrs. Spalding & Rogers be entertained during the months of February and March, at public expense, it would be a great saving of time and money to the State. It would obviate the necessity of adjourning the legislature on Thursday of each week, in order to allow the members a chance to go to New Orleans, and patronize metropolitan shows. If country members must need to go to the city once a week, during the session, would it not be well to have a standing committee on "visitations," to take charge of them, and see that they do not get coaxed off into evil company.

At the beginning of the Civil War the JAMES RAYMOND was seized by the Federal government and, as it was operating in northern waters,

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[77]Keeler, Vagabond . . ., op. cit., p. 172


ADDITIONAL ATTRACTION !!!
Without extra charge to Admission, at the
FLOATING PALACE!
WHICH WILL BE EXHIBITED AT
Baton Rouge, Friday & Saturday Feb.
ruary 23d & 24th, Open at 1 & 7 P. M.
FOR TWO DAYS ONLY!
The Beautiful and Darling Polish Refugee,
MADAME OLINZA,
In her thrilling, terrific, and at the same time
graceful Backsaptic Act.
UP! UP! UP! UP! UP! UP!
EXTENDED TO HIS AIR FROM THE
FLOOR TO THE ROOF!
And at the same height, on a small cord, WALK-
ING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS ACCORD-
ING TO THE MUSIC, AND WALTZING WITH
HERSELF, PRODUCTION, Flashing Fire, Pis-
TOLS, THE CORNET-A-PISTON, and astonish-
ing many of the most exciting and startling feats
ever introduced, for surpassing any other living
Artists in this department. Also, that incompar-
able feat gained
MR. S. K. G. NELLIS,
Who has appeared with great grace before the
principal crowned heads and nobility of Europe,
as well as the sovereigns of America, and re-
ceived from each substantial and gratifying evi-
dences of the appreciation they entertained of
his extraordinary skill. MR. NELLIS
WITH HIS TOES ALONE!
Cuts Profiles and Valentines,
OPENS AND WINDS UP WATCHES, WRITES
AND FOLDS LETTERS, SHOOTS WITH BOW &
ARROW, at a quarter of a dollar, at 100 paces,
and hollows drums.
LOADS AND DISCHARGES PISTOLS,
Plays on the Accordeon and Violoncello,
And performs numberless similar intricate oper-
ations with a facility and ease that must of ne-
cessity require to, with the full use of his
fingers, and astonish every beholder. He signally
refuses compensation for a definitive organization.
Also, that rare animal, a
Live White Polar Bear,
The ONLY LIVING SPECIMEN in the United
States, and probably the most interesting ani-
mal in existence.
ALL THE ABOVE are exclusively new acts
not exhibited here, and are now exhibited with-
out extra charge, in connection, and at the
same time with the
NEGRO MINSTRELS,
MENAGERIE, BIRDS, FISHES, and REPTILES!
WAX STATUARY, MACHINE CHECKS! CU-
RIOSITIES! Relics of Antiquity, Petri-
factions Relics, Ores and Minerals, Rare Coins
and Papers, and thousands of other Curiosities
on the Floating Palace.
Admission, 50 Cts. Children and
Servants 25 Cents.
THE NEGRO MINSTRELS!
Will give their unequalled concert on the
JAMES RAYMOND,
in the MUSIC HALL, immediately at the con-
clusion of the exhibition in the Palace.
Admission, 25 Cents.


ALL THE SHOWS COMBINED!!!
THE GREAT ELEPHANT SHOW
ON THE FLOATING PALACE.
Neil Davis' Ole Minstrels
ON THE STEAMER BANJO.
Dave Reed's Ethiopean Serenaders
ON THE STEAMER JAMES RAYMOND.
Messrs. Spalding & Rogers
Tuesday and Wednesday, Dec 22d,
and 23d, 1857,
The most Astonishing Animal show
LARGEST & BEST NEGRO BAND
Ladies Performing Elephant,
VICTORIA AND ALBERT!
Only Twelve Inches in Diameter,
Plays on an Organ,
Calliope, or Steam Organ!

Figure # 10

Advertisement for the
FLOATING PALACE

Figure # 11

Advertisement for the
FLOATING PALACE

These advertisements are from the Baton Rouge Weekly Comet of February 10, 1856 (left), and the Baton Rouge Daily Gazette and Comet of December 5, 1857 (right), respectively.

the government paid $ 32,000 for it. The last enrollment at St. Louis of October 8, 1862 listed William A. and Joseph G. Adams as owners. The FLOATING PALACE was confiscated by the Confederacy and turned into a hospital boat at New Orleans. As it did not have its own propulsion it never had to be enrolled and/or inspected and, consequently, no further record of it exists.[78]

If the FLOATING PALACE was so popular as to cause legislators to stray from official duties, the popularity of a single performer of the time eclipsed it. Dan Rice was an enigma to most people he worked with or for, as indeed, he is to the historian, but the public adored him. Throughout his career he learned new skills, discarding or leaving fallow old ones. His actual name was McLaren but at the age of ten, as Dan Rice, he was a jockey and gambler. At seventeen he was part owner of a Pittsburgh livery stable, having given up both the life of a jockey and gambler (although he may have given up cards and horses he never quite gave up gambling.) At various times in his early career he owned (at least part of) a trained or "educated" pig named Lord Byron, was a strong man and wrestler with various circus operations including Barnum's New York museum, and toured Europe performing a wide variety of feats.[79] In the latter 1840's Rice was in the employ of Dr. Spalding and in 1848 a separate show featuring Rice was sent out under Spalding's brother-in-law; this man, Mr. Van Orden, was to become the arch-rival of Rice later on. This operation was to travel by steamboat but play on land - Rice's introduction to floating entertainment procedures.[80]

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[78]May, op. cit., p. 66 and pp. 77-78 [79]Ibid., p. 60.

[80]Fox and Parkinson, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

It was as a clown that Mr. Rice was best known, often billed as a "Shakespearian clown," with political and topical comments and repartee with the audience that many have compared to Will Rogers. Nothing seemed to be out landish for Mr. Rice whether giving away a fortune, walking away from tremendous financial offers, or urging the crowd to cheer for himself. Noah Miller Ludlow gives us an account of a stunt that took place in New Orleans which serves as insight into the personality of Mr. Rice.

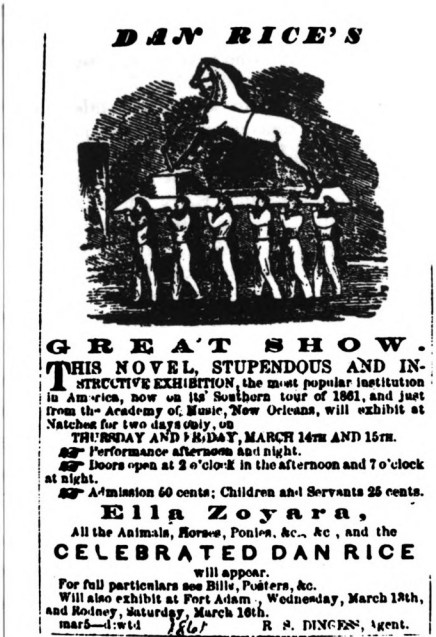
> On January 13th (1852) there was a heavy fall of snow in New Orleans, . . . As I was going from my lodging to the St. Louis Hotel, in the centre of the city, passing down St. Charles Street I beheld Dan Rice, the celebrated equestrian manager, in a sleigh, with a fine span of horses with bells, driving up St. Charles Street. I will venture to say it was a sight that no man living in that city had ever seen there before. The sleigh was composed of a large dry-goods box on a pair of temporary runners made of two-inch plank. This was not a splendid turnout, but it produced as great a sensation as would the lord mayor's carriage driven through the streets of New Orleans.[81]

Rice was friends with both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, seriously ran for President himself in 1868, and acquired and lost several thousand dollars in his life. His own show could not compete with the greater resources of Spalding and Rogers except for his own personality, and the rivalry with his old employer, through Van Orden, was itself a means of publicity whether intentional or not. One account tells of Rice spreading rumors that the FLOATING PALACE was a fire-trap, and of Van Orden responding with the news that Dan Rice had died,[82] tactics that even Forrest and Macready had not thought to employ.

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[81] Ludlow, op. cit., pp. 719-20.

[82] Graham, op. cit., p. 36.



DAN RICE'S

GREAT SHOW.

THIS NOVEL, STUPENDOUS AND INSTRUCTIVE EXHIBITION, the most popular institution in America, now on its' Southern tour of 1861, and just from the Academy of Music, New Orleans, will exhibit at Natchez for two days only, on

THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, MARCH 14TH AND 15TH.

☞ Performance afternoon and night.

☞ Doors open at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and 7 o'clock at night.

☞ Admission 50 cents; Children and Servants 25 cents.

Ella Zoyara,

All the Animals, Horses, Ponies, &c., &c, and the

CELEBRATED DAN RICE

will appear.

For full particulars see Bills, Posters, &c.

Will also exhibit at Fort Adams, Wednesday, March 13th, and Rodney, Saturday, March 16th.

mar5—d:wtd R. S. DINGESS, Agent.

Figure # 12

Advertisement for Dan Rice's Show

This advertisement is from the Natchez Free Trader of March 6, 1861; in this case the show is carried under Mr. Rice's name although he is not billed as a performer.

After the Civil War Rice was again trouping or "steaming" through the midwest. There are too many accounts of Rice's life to delve further here. Even though he traveled with his shows extensively via river boat, only a small part of his career had to do with actual performances aboard. Too, there was nothing really influential or lasting about Rice's shows, save the personality and ego of the man himself:

> In spite of egotism, dissipation, unwise generosity and unreliability, Dan Rice's admixture of shrewdness, simplicity and grandiloquence have left so many lasting impressions that as long as there are circus men they will glory in his many virtues and belittle his few weaknesses.[83]

The Civil War brought temporary end to showboats just as it called a halt to many of the country's cultural activities. The FLOATING PALACE had been a unique venture and nothing ever quite equalled it in size (at least capacity). Much has been written of such wonders as the ECLIPSE, the GREAT REPUBLIC, and the J. M. WHITE, their furnishings and accommodations, and their costs to the builders.[84] But few boats before the War were of the "floating palace" type, and wrecks rather than records were more noteworthy.[85] Just as many families in both north and south had to start over again after the hostilities, as did business and industry, agriculture and commerce, so did showboating seek a new start.

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[83]May, op. cit., p. 67.

[84]For specifics on boats built prior to the Civil War, see Tenth Census, vol. VIII, p. 179 f. Each census report is helpful and interesting, although most often only cost and tonnage is reported.

Other information on boats in this study can be gleaned from reports of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, Industrial Records Branch of the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

[85]Frank Donovan, Riverboats of America, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), p. 117.

THESIS





OVERDUE FINES:
25¢ per day per item

RETURNING LIBRARY MATERIALS:
Place in book return to remc
charge from circulation recc

PART II

PART II, Chapter 3 - The Fabulous Frenches

> Well, depends on how you look at it. The Englishman might have been first, or some other boat we never heard of might have been first. But to be first in anything, you've got to have something following you. . . . From the day they started out, there was never a season that showboats didn't play the rivers up to World War II. That's why I'd call them first.[1]

Such was John McNair's statement regarding the Frenches in answering a question about the first showboat. Accepting Captain McNair's particular kind of logic, the statement is difficult to refute.

John McNair had been with Captain and Mrs. French since 1884, as performer, handyman, engineer, pilot, partner and confidant until Captain French's death in 1902, and for five more years with Mrs. French.

Captain French's real name was Dolen. His father was a successful tailor in St. Louis and Cincinnati. He made men's suits and traveled by boat to New Orleans to sell his wares. On one of these trips he met and married Inez Mantanza, a Creole girl from New Orleans. On November 1, 1832 this couple was blessed with their only child, a son - Augustus Byron Dolen, this event occuring one hundred fifty miles north of St. Louis at Palmyra, Missouri. Inez Mantanza Dolen died while her child was still a baby. The boy was brought up under the austere care of his paternal grandmother, a grave widow of many years who had already supported six children of her own. At the age of nine "Gus"

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[1]Statement by John McNair in interview with G. Harry Wright, Calumet Plantation, Columbia, Alabama, March 28, 1948, as noted and later transcribed by Mrs. Lila Wright. (This material is in the G. Harry Wright Collection, Kent State University Library, hereafter referred to as GHWC.)

All interviews and correspondence cited in this study concern Mr. Wright, unless specified otherwise.

lived with "Uncle Earl and Aunt Nannie" Tibbetts of Cincinnati. They were not relatives at all but Uncle Earl was quite interested in the boy, taught him what he could and encouraged him to read.

After a few years in Cincinnati, Gus was bound out to a family in Augusta, Kentucky, the McColloms, who put him in school for a time, the only formal education he ever had. One day when a circus came to Augusta, it left with an additional person and several years elapsed without his relatives hearing from Gus. (The nature of his stay with the circus is not known.) During these years he used his mother's name - Mantanza.

In 1849, as a youth of seventeen, Gus hired on a steamboat, hoping to work his way to New Orleans to see where his mother had lived. But as the tasks of a deckhand proved too strenuous, he was relegated to the kitchen as scullery boy. This did not suit the lad and he left his first real job. His first encounter with show business, other than the circus, came when the steamboat on which he worked tied up at a Mississippi landing next to a little shantyboat called the QUICKSTEP. Gus met the owner, a Mr. Church, and his daughter Celeste. The girl was a singer and dancer, her father a magician, and they floated down the river performing in schoolhouses or town halls. Gus could play the banjo and sing, even dance a little, and the precarious existence of the Church family seemed more interesting to him than scouring pots and pans. He remained with the QUICKSTEP for nearly two years and it was most probably at this time that he took the name of French.

Gus then traveled the rivers for a short time with boat circuses, playing banjo for Dan Rice and performing magic that he had learned from Mr. Church for various Spalding operations. For a time he worked for

and with "Herman, the magician," who he was to meet again years later. Nothing is known of Gus French during the Civil War but by 1869 he was at Waterloo, Ohio, was half owner of a grocery store and was married; it is not known when or where he was married but the lady's name was Anna.

The most important connection made in Waterloo, perhaps it did not seem so at the time was his friendship with Robert W. and Mary Leach. They had a daughter Callie, who was only eight at the time Gus met the family, but the little girl visited Gus and Anna's home often to hear him play the banjo or to be thrilled by simple magic tricks. But in 1870 French and his partner moved their store to Clarksburg, Ohio, where French and his partner broke the partnership; French bought it all. At forty years of age, he had a good business and showed all signs of becoming a solid and permanent citizen of the small community. Certainly his business card would have so indicated. Following is the text of the card and an indication or approximation of spacing:

A. B. French
CLARKSBURG OHIO
GROCERIES,
NOTIONS, PRODUCE AND PROVISIONS

Beware of Debt! Once in you'll be
A slave for ever more.
If credit tempts you, thunder "No !"
And drive it from your door.
Cold water and a crust of bread
May be the best you'll get.
Accept it then, like a man, and swear
"I'll never be in debt !"

Many examples of Mr. French's dislike of debt, monetary or otherwise, will be seen later. The reverse side of the business card follows:

A SHORT SERMON, BY FRENCH
Text - "Man is Born to Trouble as the Sparks fly Upward"

ARGUMENT:

Man's ingress into the world is helpless and bare,
His progress through the world is trouble and care,
His egress out of the world is - nobody knows where,
If we do well here we shall do well there,
I can tell you no more, if I preach a year.

EXHORTATION.

You are the architect of your fortunes; let your motto be INDUSTRY, SELF-RELIANCE AND HONESTY. Enscribe on your banner: "Luck is a fool - pluck is a hero": Be kind, polite and punctual, and if you don't die rich it is no fault of mine.

(Signed) A. B. French

Everything in A. B. French's life bears out the fact that these were honest sentiments, but they did not lead Gus into a quiet life in Clarksburg.[2]

In the mid-seventies Anna died, leaving Gus French a middle-aged and very lonely widower. As he was a Mason, and as there was no Masonic Temple in Clarksburg, he began to drive to Washington Courthouse, Ohio, for lodge meetings. In the meantime the Leaches of Waterloo had moved to Washington Courthouse, and Gus stayed at their home on his visits to the county seat. Callie Leach was no longer just a little girl and her attitude toward Gus French was much different than it had been before, but there still must have been a lot of fascination with this man. Gus French's life took a new direction in the early part of 1878. In the spring he took an option on a small circus, repainting its equipment and in general got it ready for the road. He sold his grocery store and on June 18, 1878 he and Callie Leach were married at Washington Courthouse. She was a little over sixteen and Gus was forty-six.

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[2]This card was copied by Mr. Wright in 1948 (GHWC) when in the possession of Captain McNair. It was lost after the death of Mrs. McNair.



Figure # 13

Augustus Byron (Dolen) French

When this picture of Gus French was taken is unknown, but it is the earliest photograph that has survived.



Figure # 14

Callie Leach (Mrs. A. B.) French

The McNair family believed this photograph to be from around 1882. This would mean that Mrs. French was twenty or twenty-one at the time.

By the next week the little circus, womewhat boastfully titled "French's New Sensation" was underway. July of 1878, as the Ohio Bureau of Statistics and the National Weather Bureau will verify, was one of the wettest in Ohio history. Rain and wind kept the Frenches, animals, crews, and wagons fighting mud and floods. After a particularly bad wind and rain storm Gus French decided that if water were inevitable he would deal with water that he knew about and of which he had at least a partial understanding. The circus was sold it can be assumed, for there is no record of its disposal, and the Frenches went to Cincinnati to build a showboat; Gus French obviously could recall his days on the QUICKSTEP and with Rice and Spalding on their floating ventures.[3]

Unfortunately there is no record of the building of Gus French's first boat in the late summer of 1878. All who knew him testify that he kept meticulous records (for his own benefit, although cryptic to later readers) and the one existing log and his personal diary while in Europe bear this out. It was supposed by the McNair family that most of French's records were destroyed when his fourth boat burned in 1900. Consequently many questions arise: who built the boat and/or helped French? did the money come from the sale of the circus? how long did the building and preparations take? The only thing in writing is a letter written by Callie French stating that she and Gus went to Cincinnati, bought a barge eighty-five feet long and sixteen feet wide,

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[3]The background information on A. B. French given here was put together by the McNair family through recollections and letters from Callie French and from Walter Dolen (second cousin of A. B. French) to John and Ida McNair.

and built the showboat at the foot of Lawrence Street.[4] However, the boat was to play the rivers for nine seasons and during that time many people saw it and were aboard it, among them were the McNairs and an acrobat named Sidney Allen. Combining such reports with existing pictures supplied a good idea of the boat.

The single-deck cabin, or superstructure, covered the length and width of the barge on which it was built. At both bow and stern deck and roof extended six to eight feet beyond the barge and cabin to create a small porch or "rake" at either end of the boat. Along each side decking extended to provide a runway, or "guard," two feet in width. The overall size of the boat was then approximately twenty by one hundred feet. It was painted white with maroon trim. Along each side were eight windows with pea-green trim and shutters. Between the windows were large pictures of birds, beasts, jugglers, acrobats, characters from classical drama, and freaks - all in vivd colors - which were, according to Sil Allen, held in place by clamps for easy removal for repainting the boat or the pictures.

On the roof amidships were two large sweeps, or oars, one on either side, that were mounted on swivels for greatest effect and ease of manipulation. Aft was a similar sweep that served as a rudder for steering. There were two mast that stood upright from the roof, one forward and one aft. (See Figure # 15).

A door in the center of the cabin at the front end led to the auditorium. On each side doors opened into small rooms, one was to be the box office, the other the quarters of Ed and Caroline DeHass, the only married couple aboard the first season, other than the Frenches. The theatre was furnished with benched in rows, the floor sloping

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[4]Letter from Callie French to Ida McNair shortly before her death in 1935, in possession of Clarkie McNair.

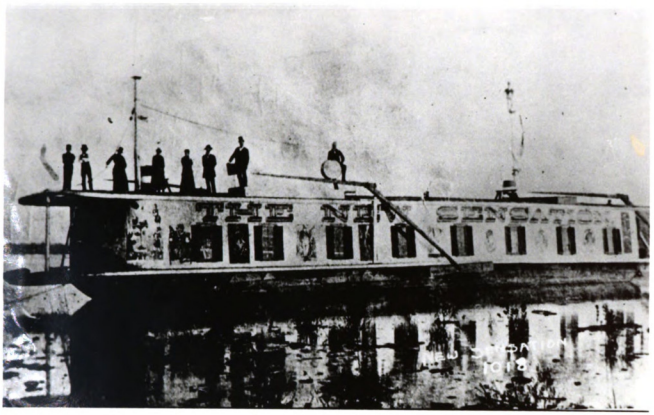


Figure # 15

The Original FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

The date of this photograph is unknown, but it is the earliest to be found. Note the sweeps and rear rudder in lieu of any means of propulsion.

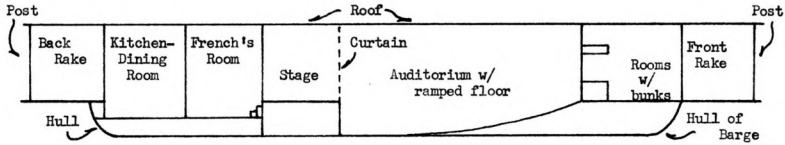
downward into the barge toward the stage, leveling off a few feet in front of the stage to allow space for trapeze and bar acts. The stage was even with the other decking. Six rows of benches closest to the stage were padded and covered with striped ticking, these being reserved at thirty-five cents, while general admission was twenty-five cents. Across the stage was a curtained close-off described by Sid Allen as "made of red table cloth material." Behind the stage was a room, also running the width of the boat, which was occupied by Gus and Callie French and served as part-time dressing room. The final portion before the rear rake was a room equal to the French's which was the all-important kitchen and dining room. The single men slept in the auditorium on cots that stored under the stage until needed. Midway in the auditorium and slightly to port side was a stove to ease the chill of evening when necessary.[5]

The first company and program consisted of the following: Ed DeHass, from Columbus, and his wife Caroline did a globe rolling act; Ned Martin was an Irish comedian from New York; Fred Webb was the only native Cincinnatian and he played dulcimer; Maurice Dolen, a cousin of Captain French from Lindale, Ohio was a black-face minstrel; and Newton Mowry, Callie's cousin from Waterloo, Ohio sang comic songs. Captain French was the "headliner" with magic, ventroloquism, and banjo playing. Callie was not yet a performer but did indeed perform a myriad of duties.[6]

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[5]The description of the original NEW SENSATION given here comes from Sid Allen who wrote a "history" of the Frenches. For the most part it was corroberated by the McNairs. (Copy GHWC).

[6]In his account of the first season Sid Allen mentions a six piece band which was probably made up of the already named performers.



CROSS SECTION (above) and FLOOR PLAN (below), not to scale.

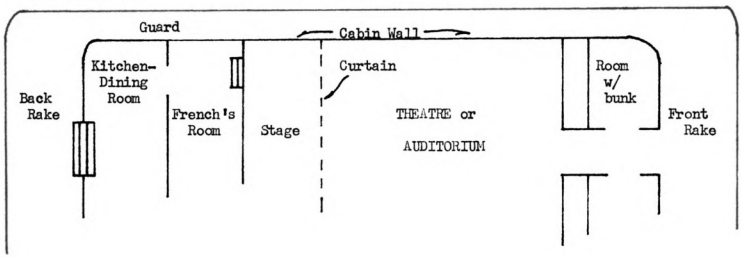


Figure # 16

Cross Section and Floor Plan of the original FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

The above drawings are conjectural as put together by G. Harry Wright and John McNair with some details supplied by Sidney Allen's "history".

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, as the lettering read above the windows on either side of the boat, left Cincinnati on November 3, 1878. As was to be proved, this was very late in the season to be in northern waters, especially with no propulsion, since ice often started forming above Cincinnati in October. The craft was steered as best wind and current would allow until it reached Louisville. The falls spanning the river from Louisville to the Indiana side between Clarksville and New Albany were the most treacherous on the river. There had been a canal around the falls for sixty years but the cost was prohibitive for Captain French. Finally a pilot appeared who offered to take the NEW SENSATION over the falls. Evidently this man did know the rocks and eddies of the area for the trip downriver was continued.[7]

With no money or food the company finally tied up at Elizabethtown, Illinois. The exact date of arrival at Elizabethtown is not known but it is known that the first performance of the NEW SENSATION was given there on Christmas Night.[8] Evidently sufficient cash was taken in to passify performers, buy food, and thus making it possible to continue down the river.

Still hurrying to keep ahead of the ice, the NEW SENSATION reached the area where the Ohio flows into the Mississippi at the worst possible time of year. Here, all the ice from the Upper Mississippi met with that coming down the Ohio, and the NEW SENSATION was nearly destroyed. According to Sid Allen, a small tug steamed out to the little showboat and after much maneuvering helped the Frenches to tie

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[7]Clarkie McNair stated that the pilot's name was Pink Varble, letter of Feb. 1. 1950 (GHWC).

[8]Interview with Mrs. Gullet, owner of the Rose Hotel, and Charles Ledbetter, bank cashier, at Elizabethtown, Illinois, Aug. 28, 1947 (GHWC).

up at Cairo, Illinois.

On landing, one of the first visitors to the boat was a former circus performer and magician, Fred Herbert, with whom Captain French had worked during his circus and wagon show days. Mr. Herbert had trained two young boys in an acrobatic act which culminated in the one being thrown into a double aerial somersalt from a hand pitch by the other. The boys were called "The Acrobatic Herberts" although they were not brothers and neither was named Herbert. Mr. Herbert wanted the boys to perform, gratis, just for the exposure, and Captain French agreed.

During the first night that the showboat was tied up at Cairo the river fell rapidly, and the company including French did not think to spar out the boat. When they awoke the next morning, the boat was setting at a strange angle with one side in the water and the other completely ashore. That evening the show went on with the audience seated in a somewhat uncomfortable position, and the position of the boat was even more precarious for the "Acrobatic Herberts." The act went well however and Captain French was particularly impressed with the "somersalt" half of the act, who turned out to be Sid Allen. The next day the Frenches visited Sid's parents with the request to adopt Sid and take him along on the showboat. The request was refused and the brief showboat career of Sidney J. Allen was brought to a close, but only for a year.

Shortly the river rose again so that the NEW SENSATION could float free and continue down the Mississippi. Some of the actors left the boat at Cairo but the number is not known; the globe-rolling act of Ed and Caroline DeHass must have been among the deserters, as they could not have played at Cairo on the curiously angled NEW SENSATION.

Also, Callie mentioned at one point that she remembered being the only woman on the trip from Cairo to New Orleans.[9] Sid Allen mentions in his writings that the Frenches kept his family up to date on their adventures and misadventures down the Mississippi.[10] Despite all, the boat and remaining company did reach New Orleans and, after two weeks of seeing the city,[11] plans for the future began to form in the mind of Captain French.

If the initial plan for the NEW SENSATION was to sell or dismantle it in New Orleans, as had been the procedure of the Chapmans and flat-boat owners, such a plan was abandoned after completing the first cruise. Captain French contracted to have the NEW SENSATION towed north by steamboat. In tow of the steamer SMOKY CITY, the NEW SENSATION arrived at Elizabethtown, where low water forced a landing.[12] Here, where the little showboat had given its first performance, the showboat spent the summer of 1879.[13]

During the summer Captain French calked the bilge, repaired windows, painted, and put the boat in general good repair. Callie French, always less a dreamer and more realistic than her husband, was worried since the only performers left were relatives, her cousin Newt Mowry and Captain French's cousin Maurice Dolen. After the

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[9]Letter to Ida McNair, loc. cit.

[10]It must be remembered here that Sid Allen was not on board this first season and was writing from second-hand knowledge.

[11]As will be seen from later seasons, New Orleans was always a favorite city as Captain French's mother was from there.

[12]Sid Allen stated that the NEW SENSATION was towed to Cairo by the E. M. NORTON and then up the Ohio by the SMOKY CITY.

[13]Gullet and Ledbetter interview, idem.

towing bill and the cost of boat repairs there could not have been much capitol left for hiring other acts. Callie decided that if they were to have a show for the coming season, she must become a performer. She was tired of being just cook, housekeeper, and general morale builder.[14]

The result was that Callie French took a piece of rope ashore, tied it between two large cottonwood trees, and proceeded to teach herself to walk this rope. In all probability it was at this time that she learned her first song - "By Killarney's Lakes and Rills." Mrs. Gullet, who was a child at the time but lifelong resident of "E-town", recalled that Callie's first tightrope walking performance was at Elizabethtown but not on the NEW SENSATION. In the late summer or early fall she performed her act at the Hardin County Fair, a run of three days. "Folks say she got fifty dollars for it."[15]

With a tryout under her belt and with the boat made ready by Captain French, the NEW SENSATION left Elizabethtown for its second tour in early fall. This year with an earlier start there was no problem with ice but the company consisted of only the Frenches and the two cousins. They decided to stop at Cairo again to try to obtain the services of Master Sidney Allen, and this time they were successful. So when the NEW SENSATION left Cairo, Sid Allen, once an "Acrobatic Herbert" was a regular company member and was to remain so for many years.

Physical dangers from the river and the elements were not the only

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[14]Comment of Ida McNair in interview, idem.

[15]Gullet, idem.

problems Captain French was to face; prejudice was a major difficulty. The townspeople along the river were basically hard working, honest people and having heard of amusement boats of the pre-war days were wary of anything that would bring disorder or unruly people to their communities. Such boats had not reappeared to any degree after the war, but anything other than a working steamboat put the populace on guard. There is a much-told story that sheds considerable light on the personality and character of Captain French.[16]

At a small Missouri town Captain French surveyed the audience at curtain time and found it consisted of all men. Stepping out before the curtain, he informed the men that his show was not for men only, that his wife was aboard and the men without their "womenfolks" were an affront to her, and that there would be no performance. The all male audience was told to pass by the box office and that their money would be refunded. After the lights were out that evening the little company was awakened by shouts from ashore declaring that the womenfolks were there and they wanted a show. A performance was given, complete with a curtain speech by Captain French: "a command performance at the court of virtuous womanhood."[17] There can be no doubt that this story has been embellished and told differently every time that it is told, but it does give an idea of the attitude of Captain French toward his wife, his shows, and his audience that was never to vary throughout his long career.

This second season of the NEW SENSATION was one of the worst the Frenches were ever to have. Business had not been good and bad weather

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[16]This writer heard the story repeatedly during the summers of 1960 and 1961 when with the Indiana University Showboat MAJESTIC.

[17]Sid Allen, loc. cit.

had prevented many performances due to remaining tied up at places of safety between towns or settlements. On starting to land at Vidalia, Louisiana someone shouted from shore that there was a better landing with better audience access farther down. Within a hundred yeards of this new landing the boat hit a submerged snag and began to sink. Shortly the boat was resting in two feet of water on the shore side and six feet of water on the river side. As the bow was only five feet from shore when the NEW SENSATION hit the snag, all aboard jumped to safety taking with them whatever they could grab; the exception was Captain French who was always at his worst in a crisis. The excitable man had spied a barrel of potatoes and, as he shouted orders and elequent oaths, threw potatoes one a time through the window in the general direction of the State of Louisiana.

Despite the fact that many people were wary of any showboat operation at this time, where he was known at all, Gus French had an excellent reputation. Such was the case at Vidalia and two of the town merchants were willing to lend him money. A produce barge across the river at Natchez was purchased and the process of restoring the NEW SENSATION began. The new barge was ten feet longer and two feet wider than the sunken hull. However, the entire cabin of the NEW SENSATION was sawed off, mounted on soaped skids and slid onto the new hull; the cabin sides were spread to fit giving the side walls a slant. If this sounds over-simplified, Sid Allen recounts that it took three months, whereupon there was a farewell performance given for the people of Viadlia to show "our appreciation to the folks who had been staunch in their efforts to see strangers through a seige of tough luck."[18]

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[18]Sid Allen, loc. cit.

Working its way on down river, playing at towns and plantations along the way, the NEW SENSATION arrived safely in New Orleans. After a few weeks in the riverman's Mecca, the showboat was tied to the side of the steamer OAKLAND for the northward trip. This was to begin an association that was to last many years, for Captain Clark of the OAKLAND and Captain French became good friends. Years later in his log Captain French referred to the OAKLAND as "that boxx boat." At St. Louis the NEW SENSATION cut loose from the steamboat and lay up for the summer of 1880.

The summer at St. Louis of necessity had to be spent in large part in repairing and refurbishing the NEW SENSATION. Whether Captain French was tired of the river and needed a change of pace or whether he needed money (most likely a little of the former and a lot of the latter), he bought into partnership with a German man and together they operated the merry-go-round concession at the St. Louis Fair that summer. Sid Allen, in two different places, gives two names to this partner of Captain French. In his story of his seasons with the Frenches he says that Captain French "purchased half interest in an old time merry-go-round from a little German by the name of Adolphe Friedman," but in a letter to the McNairs he states that the Captain "purchased half interest in a merry-go-round, powered by a blind mule, from a man named Titzman." Other accounts call the man Muley Titzman, but regardless of the partner's name, when the NEW SENSATION left St. Louis in November that year, the blind mule went along. As is true of many other animals that the Captain was later to own, it is unsure where the mule was housed, but it became a very helpful company member as the season wore on.

If the 1879 season was the worst financially and for attracting audiences, the 1880 season was the most adventurous and eventful. The company, according to Sid Allen, was as follows:

Mr. and Mrs. French	Magic
Mr. and Mrs. Leach	Aid to French Act
Maurice Dolen	Comedian
Newton Mowry	Singer Comic Songs
Sidney J. Allen	Acrobat
Amos Papworth	Cornetist
Curran & Stitz	Song & Dance Team
Lee Steiner	Violinist
Hugo Von Brun	Pianist
William McCoy	Handyman

Why Captain French delayed his start until November is a mystery in light of his past two trips. On leaving Cincinnati in November on the first trip he had trouble with ice, while leaving Elizabethtown a month earlier the second year he ran free of ice. This year ice was already forming in the upper Mississippi and the Missouri.

The first rouble came at Kennet Castle, Missouri, about thirty-five miles below St. Louis. There was an island there and the channel, which had been following the Missouri side, shifted across the river above the island. With the NEW SENSATION as a floater, Captain French was afraid to try the crossing for fear of being beached on the head of the island. Clinging to the Missouri side, the boat started down the chute, only to find that a rock dyke extended across the chute and stood a foot above the water. Tying up immediately, Captain French decided to wait for morning to resolve the problem. The only solution was to "cordel," or pull the boat by hand up and out of the chute. Lines were taken ashore and while one was attached to the blind mule, the men took the others. Some of the company stayed on board to pole the boat from shore to keep it in sufficient water.

By evening of the second day the showboat had moved two and one half miles, far enough beyond the head of the island to make a safe crossing possible. It is doubtful that Captain French ever again ignored a government light, day board, or channel marker of any kind, even though as a floater he was not bound as strictly to regulations as steamboats. The first show of the season was given at Chester, Illinois "to a fair & roudy audience, it may well be described as an under the hill crowd."[19]

Increasing ice prevented other stops and with twelve people aboard food was getting short. By running both day and night, Captain French hoped to reach Cape Girardeau, Missouri, find shelter from ice, and play to large audiences. But the landing at Cape Girardeau was blocked by ice so it was decided to try for Commerce twenty miles on down the river. At Commerce, however, conditions were even worse and the Captain decided to try for a landing on an island three miles below Commerce. Poling carefully in to land where the current split to go around either side of the island, the boat was tied up under a caved in tree whose roots still held fast to the bank. To protect the hull from the grinding ice, all lumber and planks aboard were lowered over the side and the company climbed to the island with saws and axes to fell willow trees to add to the barrier. When the NEW SENSATION was finally

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[19]Sid Allen's reference to "an under the hill crowd" stems from the situations that existed in many river towns where only those of questionable reputation lived on the river's edge, while the more respected citizens moved to higher ground. The most famous or notorious such place was Natchez and "Natchez-under-the-hill" before the Civil War. There are still under the hill, or more aptly "down the hill", areas of river cities and towns, where the town proper is away from the river on higher ground. Leavenworth, Indiana and Shawneetown, Illinois are two such towns but the move "up" had more to do with avoiding spring floods than undesireables.

safe, appetites were ravenous and food supplies were low. By the fifth day, still ice bound, there was no food at all.

The nearest town was Commerce, three miles up river. Five of the men launched the yawl and maneuvered it to the Missouri shore. After walking to the town they found only disappointment; there was no food since steamboats had not been able to land. Somehow the men did return with a sack of cornmeal, one hogs head (the only meat to be found), a few cans of corn and tomatoes, and a bushel of potatoes. A farmer was paid to help take the food to the river's edge. The following morning Captain French took charge of food and the kitchen, dumping all the acquired edibles into a large pot and began cooking it.

Sometime during this morning, one of the company spotted a box floating down the river on a piece of floating ice. The ice was poled to the boat and the box taken aboard; it was a large container of ginger snaps. These, too, were thrown into the stew pot. At last the concoction was served and must have relieved the growling stomachs of the twelve hungry company members. According to Sid Allen, someone asked what name was to be given to this stew. In all probability it was Callie, whose orderly mind and penchant for recipes (as will be seen later) demanded a name for everything. The Captain responded that it was to be called "Commerce Island Lobscouse."[20]

By the tenth day on Commerce Island, the ice cleared and the NEW SENSATION headed for Columbus, Kentucky, passing Cairo. Rain and mud brought poor houses at Columbus and Hickman. The Missouri towns of New Madrid, Point Pleasant, and Gayoso turned out poor

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[20]Philip Graham calls the contents of the pot "Stew Sensation Francaise", but since the story as related here is Sid Allen's, his recollection of the name must be accepted.

business also.[21] Heading for Tiptonville, Tennessee, a strong wind blew the NEW SENSATION onto a sand bar known as Iron Mound because of the large rocks and gravel resembling iron ore that covered the bar. The crew/company tried to get the boat off the bar but the bow was firmly stuck.

By the next morning, the showboat was high and dry, ten feet from the water, as the river had fallen rapidly. Within the week the boat was five hundred feet from the water, helplessly perched on the mound of snow-covered rocks. "What a life, what a life," wrote Sid Allen:

> I learned more of life in those two years than I had ever dreamed possible. With no salaried in sight, five of the troupe became thoroughly disgusted with the turn of events and they up in a body and deserted the Showboat. A heavy snow had fallen, but determined to get someplace somehow, the five of them started on a hike, through snow, woods and swamps back to Cairo, a distance of seventy-five miles. We later received word from one of the acts of the terrible trip they encountered, begging food and shelter along the route. With only about three and one half dollars among them to keep from actually starving. We were not much better off on board the boat.

Captain French made a trip to Tiptonville and talked with the town officials. A town council meeting was called and the elders decided to let the stranded company give three performances in the courthouse, Tiptonville being the county seat. There was to be no rental fee and no license. On returning to the boat, the Captain asked R. W. Leach to build a sled to take the props and scenery to Tiptonville. The blind

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[21] Sid Allen reports that the total take at Columbus, Kentucky was $34.50. If the boat seated eighty nine people as previously mentioned, and if no one paid general admission price but all paid the reserved seat price of thirty-five cents, calculations show that the box office receipts should have been $32.15. Why $34.50 was considered a bad evening's business is unknown, but other such discrepancies persist in Captain French's log later on.

mule was hitched to the crude sled and with the company walking behind, the strange caravan reached the town.[22]

The stage was erected in a corner of the court room and the following bill was played:

> Mr. French . . assisted by Mrs. French in LEGERDEMAIN
> Newton Mowrey . . COMIC SONGS
> A Comedy Farce . . "MR. & MRS. BROWN" by the Frenches and M. Dolen
> Sidney Allen . . ACROBAT & CONTORTIONIST
> Maurice Dolen . . STUMP SPEECH & BURLESQUE
> Mr. & Mrs. French . . THE AERIAL SUSPENSION ACT
> COMEDY FARCE "RAZOR JIM" by Entire Company
>
> (See Figures # 17 & 18).

The total receipts for the three performances was one hundred eighty dollars, sixteen dollars of which was tossed on stage during the three nights as Sid Allen performed. (One must remember from whence this account comes.)

Newspapers informed Captain French that the river was rising rapidly, so the company began to prepare the boat. The long stay out of water had opened her seams. With cotton and oakum the men calked the bilge and finally the high water came, floating the NEW SENSATION free of Iron Mound and on downstream. Whatever elation was felt among the company after a dry month was short-lived for the showboat was beginning to list to port; the company had done a poor job of calking.

Pumps were affected at each end of the boat but the small crew, even alternating shifts could not keep ahead of the leaking hull. As the boat passed Tiptonville the townspeople gathered along the bank

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[22]R. W. Leach was Callie French's father, who was helpful many times when the Frenches were in trouble. It may be assumed that Callie's mother, Mrs. Leach, took over some of Callie's former duties now that Callie was a performer.



Figure # 17

Sidney Allen, Acrobat

Sidney Allen was a child acrobat who joined the original NEW SENSATION on her second trip down river in 1879. He remained with the Frenches for many years, then went on to a long career in vaudeville throughout the United States. He died in Chicago in 1941.

Figure # 18

Sidney Allen in Performance

The original of this phtograph consisted of two tiny pictures pasted on a slip of paper. In a mixture of printing and longhand on the back appeared the follow:

A BIT OF HISTORY

- - - - - - - - - - - -

SID J. ALLEN
Age 12 years

- - - - - - - - - - - -

In the farce Razor Jim and the
Haunted Hotel - where at the finish
a large bed bug takes the little
nigger to the cealing /sic/.

- - - - - - - - - - - -

A Banjo act with Mr. French

Figure # 18

Sidney Allen in Performance

sensed the problem and several skiffs full of men rowed out to help. Most of the leaking seams closed themselves on becoming wet again but with extra hands to help pump and re-calk, the boat soon was well on its way to better times and climes. Arriving at Memphis the boat tied up in the mouth of Wolf River and supplies and food stuffs were loaded aboard. Floating on to Helena, Arkansas, the NEW SENSATION tied up and played to a full house. From here on the company was able to play almost every town, and very anxious to reach Louisiana.

Lake Providence was the first stop in Louisiana and from there on they were able to play every night along the "Sugar Coast", which stretches from Red River Landing to New Orleans. Business was very good as sugar grinding season had ended, the people were temporarily at leisure, and, best of all, they had money. At Donaldsonville Captain French decided to try something new: he wanted to try to play the small towns of Bayou Lafourche. This is a good indication that Gus French thrived on adventure, for after such a harrowing season another man night have hurried to New Orleans. But the bayou country became the favorite territory of the NEW SENSATION(s) for the next twenty-five years.

Bayou Lafourche also had its drawbacks; it was narrow and had a fairly swift current, which made navigating difficult.[23] Winds of even moderate velocity meant tying up at wherever the wind blew

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[23]At this time Bayou Lafourche served its function as part of the Mississippi delta in carrying away much of the water near the mouth of the large river to the Gulf of Mexico. In 1902 a dam was constructed at Donaldsonville and from then on this bayou had to drain only the area it flowed through. It became a narrower and more sluggish stream and for many years considerable money was spent to remove vegetation with large aquatic mowers, particularly water hyacinths.

the boat. Overhanging trees were hazards to the sweeps and windows. All of these things were compensated for by the friendliness of the Cajun people and the money taken in at the box office. Houses and towns were very close together in the bayou for as the area was settled, farmers saw to it that their land had frontage on the water, making for farms that were quite long or deep but very narrow. The NEW SENSATION played as far as Lockport, then entered the turning basin to start back upstream, since the palmetto swamps below Lockport set the towns farther apart.

Going upstream the Captain hired horses or mules at almost every stop to move the boat against the current to the next landing. After a total of three weeks in the bayou, the NEW SENSATION re-entered the Mississippi with coffers fuller than Gus and Callie French had ever known. After playing towns and plantations below Donaldsonville, the showboat reached New Orleans, tying up at Carolton at the up river end of the Crescent City. After the company had had a spree on the town, the NEW SENSATION again tied alongside Captain Clark's OAKLAND for the trip north. At Cairo the steamer SMOKY CITY took the showboat to Louisville, which was the northernmost the NEW SENSATION had been since it left Cincinnati over three years before.

As the 1880 season for the Frenches had been the most troublesome, at least in the early part, it was also the most lucrative to date. Although no letterheads exist until later seasons, it was around this time that Captain French adopted his life-long motto - "Always Good, Better Than Ever." Sid Allen describes the shows of the next season of 1881 as "new and better" with the following roster:

Mr. & Mrs. French	Legerdemain
The McQuithes	Musicians
Lon West	Black Face Comedian
Amos Papworth	Cornetist
Ned Hart	Irish Comedian
Sid Allen	Acrobat, Rope Walking, Contortionist, Drummer & Comedian
Cunningham & Curran	Acrobats and Song & Dance

(See Figures # 19 & 20).

Callie French was by this time one of the leading performers. She appeared with Captain French in the magic act which opened every show and she had two acts of her own: the slack wire act and a singing act where she dressed as a Simple Simon character. If Sid Allen's self-description of his part in the shows is correct, he must have developed considerably during the past two seasons; he was now fourteen.

Nothing of great moment happened during this season, save one event that turned trouble into novelty. The NEW SENSATION left Louisville in time to enjoy nice fall weather, at least as far as cold and ice were concerned, and the first stop at Shawneetown, Illinois was made on a bright morning. Tickets were sold and preparations were made for the season's first performance. By mid-afternoon the sky was full of dark clouds and within the hour a full scale cyclone was battering at the NEW SENSATION. Soon the lines parted and the showboat, loose from its moorings, was blown to the Kentucky side of the river. In a short time the skies were clear again, a perfect night to seat a good house, but the NEW SENSATION was in Kentucky and the people with tickets for the evening performance were in Illinois. At the suggestion of a man from Shawneetown, who happened to be in Kentucky and who was not about to miss the show, those who played musical instruments went to the roof of the showboat at seven o'clock and began to play. In a



Figure # 19

Sid Allen as a black-face comedian

The date of this picture is unknown but it is obviously seasons beyond those of his first joining the NEW SENSATION.



Figure # 20

Allen and Devaney

The original photograph is labeled Allen and Devaney, but there is no indication as to when it was taken; neither is there any record of Devaney.

The slack rope was obvious to the audience at the ends, but the actual "rope walking" took place behind a groundrow, which was "accidently" knocked over during the act as part of the comedy.

short time the river was full of skiffs and rowboats with the ticket holders, and the show was given as if planned for the Kentucky shore.[24]

Again this season the showboat played Bayou Lafourche and arrived in New Orleans in time for the company to enjoy Mardi Gras. By mid-March the NEW SENSATION was tied to the steamer JOSEPH B. WILLIAMS heading north. Another season had been profitable, having played larger towns where licenses had here-to-for been too expensive; the French's reputation as not just another shantyboat brought licensing fees, which had served their purpose in keeping undesireables away from landings, down to an affordable figure for Captain French. It must have been on this trip northward, where the problems of navigation were left to someone else, that the Captain began planning for an even more expansive season.

Shortly after the JOSEPH B. WILLIAMS delivered the NEW SENSATION to Louisville, Captain French tied to the steamer SMOKY CITY and proceeded northeast to Pittsburgh. Within a few weeks he had gathered a troupe and was rehearsing them for the new season.[25] In tow of a local tug the NEW SENSATION left to go up the Monongahela River with ten performers aboard. In addition to the Frenches and Sid Allen, Amos Papworth and Lon West of the previous season, there were the Farrow Brothers - dancers and musicians, Cunningham and Curran (of former seasons) - song and dance artists, and Rowan and Duffy - Dutch comedians.

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[24]Stories about being blown across the river are innumerable and any such story told will be topped by another from a veteran riverman. Today a "blown across the river story" may be any tall tale or yarn.

[25]Seemingly, boat repair, painting, etc. became less time consuming, or there was less repairing to be done as the Frenches became more familiar with the rivers. It is also possible that by now the Captain could afford to have it done for him which took less time.

The afterpiece was a new one, Irish Justice, which was to be a mainstay of performances for many years.

On the trip up the Monongahela there were no performances; Captain French was much too frugal to use up the time of a hired tow. However, as they passed each town the musicians played from the roof after a small cannon that the Captain had obtained was fired. The first performance was given at Rice's Landing, approximately two-thirds of the way on the river between Pittsburgh and the West Virginia border. The NEW SENSATION did good business in the steel and coal towns back down to Pittsburgh. On May 1, 1882, the showboat was ready for the first trip all the way from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, having several performances behind it and some money in Captain French's pocket.

During the 1882 season a new advertising or promotional gimmick was instituted. It became known as the "Outside Exhibition" or "Free Attraction." A rope was stretched between the two masts on top of the NEW SENSATION and a boom extended out from the forward mast from which a trapeze was hung. As the time to open the doors drew near, the cannon was fired, the musicians would play, and a crowd would gather on the riverbank. Then a funny little lady would climb one of the masts, skip out on the rope and chirp a comic song. This was Callie French. Next a boy would appear on the rope, doing various stunts that culminated in a head stand. Then the acrobat would perform on the trapeze and as this ended tickets were sold and the regular performance began.[26]

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[26]Most of the events related thus far in this chapter were told by Sid Allen. They may appear to be embellished, overly colorful, and biased, but they must be included here as they are the only record of these early seasons of the NEW SENSATION.

In the summer of this season a young man joined the company from Minersville, Ohio - Thomas W. Craggs - and his diary and log give a very good account of the day to day journey down the river in the next seasons of the NEW SENSATION. In addition to playing the Monongahela, Captain French added the Kanawha to the itinerary this season, playing a distance up river of Charleston, West Virginia. As was the case in playing the Monongahela, the showboat must have been towed to near the navigational limits of the Kanawha so as to be able to work downstream with the current. Craggs' log has no entries for ten days beginning at Cheshire, Ohio until Crownhill, West Virginia.

The NEW SENSATION played on down the river this season reaching Louisville by late November.[27] As per other seasons, there must have been a scurry to keep ahead of the ice, but it is not mentioned in Sid Allen's writings, although Tom Craggs mentions trouble with ice at Louisville in the first days of December when he left the NEW SENSATION and was returning upriver. The season ended in New Orleans in time for the company to again enjoy Mardi Gras. After seeing the city and replenishing wardrobes,[28] the showboat was again towed to

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[27]Craggs' log/diary mentions going to work for "Price & co." at New Albany, Indiana. This is a mystery as the Price of later showboat fame and sometime partner of French did not have a showboat until 1886. The small boat that he did have, as far as any record can tell, did not do live performances and would have needed no extra personel. It is feasible that this was a different Price, since in the '83 season Craggs mentions a young Mr. Price that he had encountered the year before; no one has described E. A. Price as young during this time, even though he was only thirty-five; Craggs was twenty-one.

[28]Sid Allen mentions buying clothes in New Orleans at the end of almost every season. Tom Craggs mentions this several times and Mr. Craggs' grandson has a receipt for a suit of clothes that his grandfather bought in New Orleans. Even with stops each year at other large cities, New Orleans was by far the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan city.

Pittsburgh to be repaired, gather a company, and generally prepare for another season.

The troupe assembled at Pittsburgh in the spring of 1883 was the largest to date for the NEW SENSATION. It included Mr. and Mrs. French, Mr. and Mrs. Leach, Sid Allen, Amos Papworth, Lon West, Frank Potts and Harry Funk, James Lowery and Harry Johnson, George Rodney and Clara earl, James Brown, and Jack Farrow. Sid Allen listed the company as listed here and the coupled names were most likely teams. Too, Tom Craggs' log tells us that he joined the NEW SENSATION this year at Pittsburgh, and from his log we know of other performers in the company although they may have joined up later than Pittsburgh. On May 11 Craggs notes that he met the "Mutual Three," and on May 15 he says "We have two new performers, They are the Mutual Three. There ia a small boy with them; a son of one of them." At Dravosburgh on June 5 he states "Played here to a very good house. Played without 'Cunningham and Curran.' They were discharged this morning for not obeying orders." This team had first played the NEW SENSATION during 1881. At Bellaire, Ohio on July 1 Craggs writes that Atwood and Wheeler were talking of leaving. The following day he noted that Atwood and Wheeler had gone for good.

Another interesting item from Craggs' log of this season is that the NEW SENSATION went in dry dock for the first time. It was on the docks for three days, May 23, 24, and 25, and on the second day Craggs states that the "Sensation's bottom was much better than expected."

This year the New Sensation did not play the Mississippi at all; this might seem to make for a short season. But, all in all, the season ran from April 18 to December 5. From opening to June 15, the boat was on the Monongahela, with a side trip on the Youhiogheny.

The remainder of the season was on the Ohio with no side trips up any of the tributaries.

It was during this season that Captain French again ventured into a partnership. (There is no record of how his former partnership with Muley Titzman ended.) This time it was a man named Streeter and here is Sid Allen's account.

> Captain John Streeter, or as he was better known on that part of the river - Cheap John, owned a house boat, constructed on a store idea, with shelving and counters displaying cheap china and glassware, was tied up at the same wharf in Rochester as the Showboat. Cheap John traded in old iron, rags, bones, copper and brass. His supply of glassware and china was culled from discarded and flawed pieces of pottery dumped over the river banks.
>
> Several towns in that section of the river ran pottery works of all descriptions and this was Cheap John's source from which he gathered his stock in trade. He was a very crafty business man. He and Mr. French discussed the question of partnership, and after the usual pro and cons were finished, a deal was consumated and Cheap John Streeter became part owner of the New Sensation.
>
> For a few weeks everything went along smoothly until Mr. Streeter resorted to some tactics unbecoming a showman and a gentleman. He became abusive to all on board and wanted to run the show as he thought best. This caused disagreement between the partners, Cheap John offered to buy out Mr. French's interest, which was not for sale, and more trouble began to brew. At Portsmouth, Ohio Cheap John started a fight which terminated the partnership, by Streeter selling back to Mr. French for two hundred dollars less than he had paid in, it was a wonderful finish to a bad beginning.[29]

Tom Craggs, June 20, 1993, took notice of "the largest class tumbler works in the United States" at Rochester, Pennsylvania, and then mentions having met "Cheap John" the next day at Liverpool, Ohio (East Liverpool). A month later, July 25, he says "French and Streeter in partnership and has been since we left Bellaire, Ohio." (The NEW SENSATION left Bellaire on July 12 according to Craggs' log and played Portsmouth August 30

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[29]Sid Allen mistakenly puts this event in 1882.

through September 2.) If the partnership dissolved at Portsmouth as Sid Allen says, it lasted only fifty days. This entire transaction is a mystery. Unlike Titzman's merry-go-round and blind mule, "Cheap John offered very little in the partnership. What was to be gained by a connection with a junkboat? and why risk a growing and impeccable reputation with a liason with such a person? That Mr. Streeter was a kindly man is evidenced by the fact that he took in Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Fitch and their daughter Ida of Portsmouth, Ohio in the early spring of 1883 during a flood, and allowed them to stay aboard when the Fitch's home was destroyed by the flood.[30] Because this is all that is known, the incident must remain unclear.

During this '83 season an event occurred, leading to still another partnership, that had a profound effect on showboat history from that day on. Fighting an off-shore wind in the approach to St. Mary's, West Virginia, the NEW SENSATION was finally ties up by a single line to a tree. But with only one line out, the wind caught the showboat, swinging it into a small house boat moored at St. Mary's. After fully securing the boat, Captain French went to the smaller boat to tender his apologies and to offer to pay for any harm done.

The houseboat had been turned into a floating photographic studio and named the SYLVAN STREAM.[31] Its owner was E. A. Price, who, according to Sid Allen "was a different type of man than Old Cheap

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[30]Interview with Ida McNair, idem.

[31]There is a discrepancy as to the name of this boat. Both Sid Allen and Philip Graham refer to the boat as the SYLVAN GLEN. John McNair, whose first introduction to both French and Price was during the time that Price's little boat was linked with the NEW SENSATION, called it the SYLVAN STREAM. Too, twice in Callie French's friendship book (GHWC) entries were made ending with "Sylvan Stream"; one is by C. J. (Mrs. E. A.) Price. Both are dated July 21, 1884.

John Streeter. He was a German Jew, rather unassuming, very excitable and nervous in sight of imaginary danger."[32] Price had been a showman of sorts himself. He had toured the Gauley Mountains in West Virginia with a magic lanter show, giving lectures and showing pictures in schools and meeting houses. At any rate, after settlement and conversation, French and Price became partners, each buying half of the other's operation.[33]

The NEW SENSATION and the SYLVAN STREAM were lashed together and continued down the Ohio. Price would do tintypes during the day and the regualr routine of the NEW SENSATION was performed at night. This season ended at Paducah, Kentucky in early December and the company was disbanded. Craggs states that he and Sid Allen shared a room on a steamer upstream but that Sid got off at Evansville. Sid Allen himself said that his parents had moved to Terry Haute and that he visited them there. The SYLVAN STREAM with the Prices and Frenches proceeded on down the Mississippi, the destination being the Cotton Exposition in New Orleans. When this trip began from Paducah is not known (Sid and Tom Craggs left on December 7); there is an entry in Callie French's friendship book of Christmas Day, 1883 at Paducah, and another of February 25 at Paducah.

Sid Allen states that he rejoined the NEW SENSATION at Paducah in January of 1884 and that the showboat was towed to Pittsburgh. The new

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[32]There is no substantiation for saying that Price was Jewish.

[33]Craggs entered on July 14 that he saw Mr. and Mrs. Price at Clarington, Ohio. He recorded being at St. Mary's on July 21 but there is no mention of playing there, perhaps due to the meeting of French and Price and the consequent "deal." Putting Sid Allen's and Craggs' accounts together would mean that the Streeter/French and Price/French partnerships overlapped which seems unlikely. It only adds to the fact that the enigmatic Mr. French was indeed enigmatic.

show was organized in three or four weeks with most of the same people from the previous season. The season actually began by being towed up the Monongahela to Morgantown, West Virginia. This could all have happened in this amount of time, if, on starting down the Mississippi the SYLVAN STREAM did not go very far (certainly not all the way to New Orleans) and was back in Paducah by February 25. If the organization of the show took three weeks, the playing downriver from Morgantown would have taken six to eight weeks, which was normal, for there are several entries in Callie's friendship book of May 27, 1884 at Rice's Landing, Pennsylvania.

As business the previous season had been good, Price decided to sell out his interest in the NEW SENSATION and Sid Allen states that the Prices left the showboat on the trip to Pittsburgh at New Martinsville, West Virginia. Going down the Ohio in 1884, the NEW SENSATION again encountered the Prices and the SYLVAN STREAM shortly after leaving Pittsburgh.[34] Again half-ownerships in the respective operations were exchanged and, again, before season's end the partnership was dissolved.

Little else is known about this season of 1884. Entries in the friendship book were made at Minersville, Ohio on August 11 and at Athalia on September 23. The Meigs County Herald of August 22 reported in a front page story that a warrant had been served on Mr. French for not paying a $5.00 license at Middleport, Ohio. The reported was evidently more sympathetic to the Frenches than the town officials for the article states that Mr. French "is a gentleman, and above all else

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[34]Sid Allen recorded that the meeting took place at Wellsburg, Ohio, when Wellsburg is in West Virginia. There is a Wellsville, Ohio and the discrepancy matters little since the two towns are only about twenty-five river miles apart.

we know him to be honest. He has traveled with his New Sensation along these bends [the Pomeroy Bend] for a number of years and has a large acquaintance."[35]

Captain French himself entered a note in Mrs. French's friendship book on December 1, 1884 at Lewisport, Kentucky, a dangerous place to be in early December as previous seasons show. An entry of December 11, 1884 was made at Corona Landing, Arkansas. The NEW SENSATION could not have made this distance by itself, but was perhaps towed in order to avoid the icy northern river conditions. John McNair remembered meeting the Frenches and Prices for the first time "in the late summer of 1884" at Natchez.[36] This is another discrepancy that may not be of importance and one that cannot be reconciled.

Sid Allen recorded that the NEW SENSATION arrived in New Orleans in time for Mardi Gras and was then towed north to Pittsburgh. The earliest entry of 1885 in Callie's friendship book is of March 28, Henderson County, Kentucky (Henderson and Henderson County are across the Ohio from Evansville, Indiana), by Mary E. and James Calio: "In memory of a pleasant trip up the Mississippi River."

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[35] Meigs County Herald (weekly), (Pomeroy, Ohio), August 22, 1884.

[36] Interview with the McNairs, idem.



Figure # 21

Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Price

No date is known for this photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Price but it shows the couple at a time when, it is believed, they first entered the showboat business.



Figure # 22

An older Sidney Allen

Although there is no date for the above photograph, it is believed to be one used by Mr. Allen when working in vaudeville after the many seasons he spend on the NEW SENSATION(s).

PART II, Chapter 4 - Enter the McNairs

> Well, it was like this. It was in the late summer of 1884. I was a young buck out to see and conquer the world, and at that particular time I was a tuba player and acrobat in George Richards' circus. To tell the truth I was no ordinary tuba player. At that time nobody was used to hearing more from a bass tuba than "oompah-oompah," but I could play a solo, a real tune and it sounded good. In my acrobatic turn I had a partner, a Mexican named Moncayo. I think his first name was Sebastian. His wife was with the circus too.
>
> We were playing Natchez, Mississippi that night. Anyhow, after the show as I was dressing to go up town, I was told that there was someone outside wanting to see me. I went outside and there, waiting at the entrance of the tent, were two men and two women. One of the men came forward to meet me. He was a smallish man, wiry, with a long dark beard that sort of parted in the middle. He was wearing a derby hat and a Prince Albert coat, and . . .[1]

And so John McNair met Gus French. Captain French asked John McNair to join the NEW SENSATION at Pittsburgh the following spring. When told that McNair would have to consult his partner, the Captain extended the offer to the Moncayos also.

> Captain French introduced me to the other members of his party. There was his wife, Callie French, a pretty little slip of a woman, hardly more than a girl. She looked to be about twenty and the Captain must have been well over forty. The other couple turned out to be Captain and Mrs. Price. He was a little, bandy-legged man in his late forties, with a set of mutton-chop whiskers in the making. Mrs. Price was a severe looking woman of about the same age.

John McNair must have found French's offer interesting and worthwhile for he and the Moncayos did join the NEW SENSATION at Pittsburgh in May of 1885. He was a very versatile man, for his performance duties were expanded to piano and trombone playing, blackface comedian, and,

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[1]Interview with John McNair, Columbia, ala., March 28, 1948 (GHWC).

shortly, to steamboat engineer. (John McNair had been a railroad engineer before working with the circus, working out of his home town - Overton, Texas.) Again Sid Allen listed the company that was assembled that year at Pittsburgh:

Mr. & Mrs. French	
Lowery & Johnson	Song & Dance
Mr. & Mrs. Moncayo	Cornetists & Acrobats
Duffy & Rowan	Dutch & Irish Comedians
Sidney J. Allen	Horizontal Bars, Rope Walking, Acrobat, Drummer, Contortionist, Blackface Comedian
Thomas W. Craig [sic]	Orchestra Leader, Violinist
Frank L. Potts	Cornetist
James Brown	Musician
Harry Six	Dancer
John E. McNair	Musician, End Man & Clown

Minstrel Circle . . . Free Outside Attraction . . . Band[2]

The beginning of the 1885-86 season is unknown. Sid Allen begins his narrative while the NEW SENSATION was on the Kanawha, and Tom Craggs did not join the troupe until July 4 near his home at Minersville, Ohio. It is doubtful that Captain French chose to play the Monongahela this year. If the tour started in May (or later) and was at Hartford City, West Virginia by July 4,[3] there would not have been time for a trip above Pittsburgh which in previous years had taken two months. Sid Allen just says "The Showboat arrived at Point Pleasant, W. Va. and towed up the Kanawha to the head of navigation, Montgomery, a coal mining town."

One of the last stories in Sid Allen's "history" is one that may have had quite a lasting effect on showboating, at least the showboats of Captain French. While playing Buffalo, West Virginia, the Kanawha went from pool to flood stage in less than twenty-four hours due to

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[2]Sidney J. Allen's "History" (GHWC).

[3]Despite the fact that Sid Allen listed Tom Craggs with the company at the beginning of the season, he did not join the NEW SENSATION until July 4 at Hartford City, W. Va. across the river from his home.

rains up river and in the mountains. On leaving for Point Pleasant a strong wind came up, tossing the NEW SENSATION from river bank to river bank. In an attempt to keep the showboat from losing all windows and sweeps to trees along the shores, the men went to the roof to push the boat off shore by grabbing tree braches and walking the length of the boat. In so doing Captain French misjudged the length of the boat and was left hanging on a tree limb. He managed to climb down the tree unharmed, but for a tremendous blow to his dignity. John McNair, always the engineer, reminded the Captain that such an incident would not have happened if they had had a tug.

On reaching Louisville, October 9, 1885,[4] the Captain found a small tow for sale, the MARTIN J. MURPHY.[5] It was inadequate to push the NEW SENSATION upstream but it could help to fight wind and keep off of sand bars. The MURPHY had a pointed prow and the NEW SENSATION had a large sweep or rudder in the middle of its stern. John McNair cut a V-shaped block for the front of the NEW SENSATION into which the small steamboat was nosed, and lines from the tow to corners of the showboat kept the two rigidly together. This meant that the NEW SENSATION was pushed backward, the steering oar becoming a gouger sticking out in front. Tiller lines wrapped around a rain barrel on the roof ran through pulleys back to the arm of the rudder of the MURPHY. A cross bar turned the barrel which in turn steered the boat.

The purchase of a source of propulsion meant that Gus French had to apply for a pilot's license. He did so, it was awarded and he became

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[4]Dates through 1885 are from T. W. Craggs' log/diary.

[5]The full title of the little steamboat must have been the MARTIN JAMES MURPHY as Craggs at one point mentions the JAMES MURPHY.

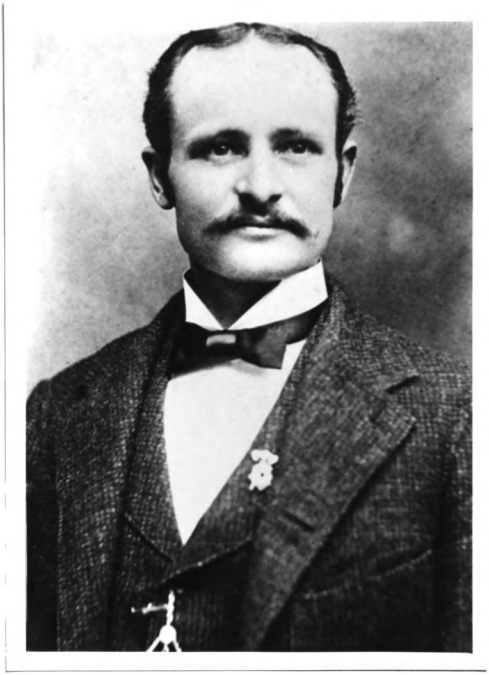


Figure # 23

John E. McNair

The date of the above photograph is unknown, but it must have been some years after he joined the Frenches.

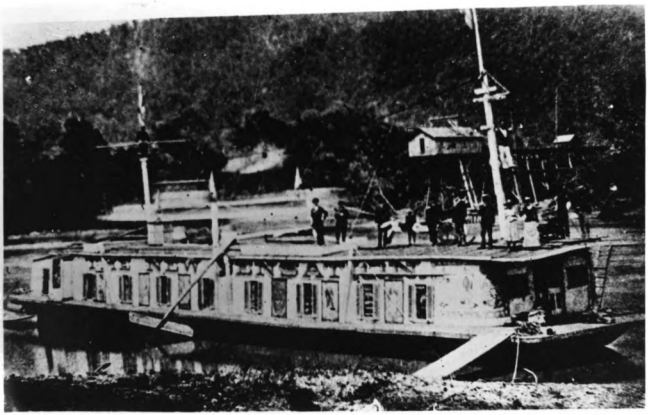


Figure # 24

The original NEW SENSATION

The McNair family believed this photograph to have been from 1885. It would have been early in the season as no tug is visible. Note people on the trapeze fore and aft and the "necessary", left.

Figure # 25

The MARTIN J. MURPHY

This photograph exists in the G. Harry Wright Collection but has no identification. The name on the side of the pictured boat leaves no doubt as to the ownership, however. Accepting Sid Allen's description of the MARTIN J. MURPHY, it is probable that this is it, Captain French having painted his own logo on it. The name was obviously never changed as Captain French himself refers to it as the "Murphy" many times, and that name could have remained on the pilot house and at the stern above the paddle wheel, which is all regulations would have required.



Figure # 25

The MARTIN J. MURPHY

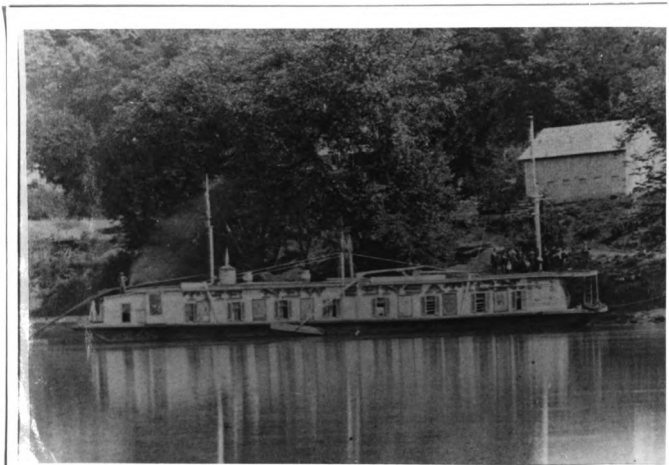


Figure # 26

The original NEW SENSATION across the river.

No date is known for this picture of the NEW SENSATION, but the number of people gathered on the roof would indicate 1884 or 1885 (before 1885 as no towboat is shown.)

in actuality "Captain" French. John McNair applied for and was granted an engineer's license . These licenses were expanded almost every year to include other parts of the Western Rivers, and John later became a pilot himself.

In 1883 Captain French had hired Hiram Fitch of Portsmouth, Ohio to go out with the NEW SENSATION as a handyman and ship's carpenter ("chips" on a slat water vessel). The Fitches had first come to Mr. French's acquaintance through Mr. Streeter, one time partner of Mr. French. Mr. Fitch had with him his twelve year old daughter, Ida. Ida soon had housekeeping duties and in a year began to help Captain French with his magic act. By the time John McNair came aboard the NEW SENSATION, Ida Fitch was a full fledged performer.

Ida remembered going into the kitchen of the NEW SENSATION one evening after a performance and after the men had all gone uptown. John had left the top off his cold cream and for some reason she wrote her name, just the letters I D A, in the cold cream. The next night the cold cream was left open again, but under her name Ida saw "I love you."[6]

Ida Fitch and John McNair were married in the French's room on the NEW SENSATION at Darrowville, Louisiana, across the river from Donaldsonville, on the evening of May 11, 1886.[7] The showboat had been tied up for four days, windbound, and John had to take the little tug across the river to get the Justice of the Peace and then take him home after the ceremony. John was twenty-two, Ida was fifteen.

The latter part of the 1885-86 season is one of the most complete, as far as records are concerned. Tom Craggs' log/diary/day book gives a day by day account at least as to location of the NEW SENSATION. This

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[6]Interview with the McNairs, idem.

[7]Idem., also Craggs' log.

season was the longest of the original NEW SENSATION - May of '85 to June 30, 1886, and Craggs covered from July 4, 1885 to season's end. There are several entries in Craggs' record that are most interesting but others are more pertinent. The winter was the worst ever in the south. At Lake Providence, Louisiana it was only eight degrees above zero in the early part of 1886 and the company played ashore at the Lake Providence Opera House on January 7 and 8. By January 9, ice was so thick on Lake Providence itself that it would withstand skating, and by the fourteenth the ice flow in the river prevented the NEW SENSATION from moving. Later that year a spring storm sank the little towboat, the MARTIN J. MURPHY, but it was raised and ready to go within three days. Either it did not sink in very deep water or the company had developed considerable expertise at riverboating.

From this season we have the only record of Mr. Price actually performing or participating in a show. (The Prices had again bought into the showboat operation at New Matamoris, Ohio during the summer of 1885.) At Darrowville, Louisiana Craggs notes that "Price lectured the Elusion," (March 15) which was obviously a magic act. It is also from Craggs that we have the exact date of Price's last "sell out." On April 4 at St. James, Louisiana, Sid Allen reported that Price decided to sell out at St. Joseph's Landing due to a run of poor business, although Allen also mentions having played to good houses. Price went to New Orleans and on returning to pick up his belongings found the NEW SENSATION packed and wanted to buy back his half interest, "but it was not for sale."

There are a number of entries in Tom Craggs' log that are forerunners of Captain French's logbook. On February 20, 1886 he says

"had a racket with Mr. French. 'He didn't get his gun.'" Comments about quarrels with personel occur with some frequency in French's log. Too, as in French's later log, Craggs makes note of the changes in the company. On February 23 he enters the following:

> Amos Papworth and James Brown, our cornet blowers went after the show last night and got, what is commonly called, drunk; and today Amost could not go out with us on parade. And this evening he received his money and also his discharge. . . . And Brown was sick from his drunk and could only play the piano part time, so the music was not as good as it might have been.

Five days later, the twenty-eighth, the following is recorded:

> It was a fine day today. And T. H. Rowan has left to go to New Orleans. He left on very short notice and with hard feelings from all the company. . . .
> Our band is reduced down to three mouth pieces and drums. . . .

April 1 saw further problems.

> James Brown fell this morning and cut his face very badly, and hurt his mouth so that we could not go out with the band. Lon West is drunk today, and while walking round the guards he fell overboard and we had a fine time getting him out. I think he gets the G. B. tomorrow early.

Mr. West was not dismissed, however, but on May 7 Craggs notes that Brown and Quillans had left at New Orleans and that a new cornet and piano player were expected. On the fifteenth the new people did arrive in the persons of C. Schultz, W. McPherson, L. Howard - wife and child, and Tony Lavely.

Although the company for the NEW SENSATION was beginning to show signs of stabilization, the length of this season perhaps caused the unrest.

This season ended at Donaldsonville, Louisiana. (This town might be visited several times during a season as it was from here that the showboats entered Bayou Lafourche. The NEW SENSATION(s) often

stopped at Donaldsonville as many as four times during a season, perhaps playing there only twice.) The showboat was towed to Vidalia. The NEW SENSATION was rapidly becoming the "old" SENSATION. In the eight years since its birth at Cincinnati, it had covered the Monongahela (with stops up the Youhiogheny), Ohio, Kanawhat, Lower Mississippi and Bayou Lafourche, and it needed repair. Vidalia had been a site of former trouble but also a place where there were many friends of the Frenches. Leaving John McNair to repair the boat(s), Mr. and Mrs. French went to Cincinnati, returning in September, having acquired a company. Ida McNair remembered those summer months to be the most uncomfortable of her life, due to the extreme heat and the fact that the McNair's first child was on the way. There is no record of who else may have stayed with the NEW SENSATION this summer. Craggs' last entry for the season simply states that the showboat "laid up at Vidalia, La. from the first of July until the middle of Sept."

The roster (company and crew) for the 1886-87 season was as follows:

J. E. McNair & Wife
F. S. Moncayo & Wife
Chas. Selles & Wife
Sidney Allen
Lon West
M. Siles
T. W. Craggs
Amos Papworth
Harry, Callie and Charles French

Show Boat "Sensation" & Steam Tug Martin J. Murphy -
All seaworthy & in good order

J. E. McNair, Engineer
A. B. French, Pilot & Master

The names "Harry, Callie, and Charles French" in this roster were explained by the McNairs. Harry was an orphan boy adopted by the



Figure # 27

Mrs. E. A. Price and Mrs. A. B. French

The date of this photograph is unknown. Most likely it was taken at sometime during the partnership(s) of French and Price, between 1882 and 1886; it is probable also that the photo was taken by Mr. Price on the SYLVAN STREAM.



Figure # 28

Ida (Fitch) McNair and Frenchie

Although no exact date can be found for this photograph, Frenchie can be no more than three or four years old, making Mrs. McNair no more than twenty.

Frenches and brought up by them. He was aboard the NEW SENSATIONS(s) for many years. His name was originally Harry Six, but was known by the name of his foster parents. Charles was Captain French himself; for some reason that even the McNairs never knew, Callie, when not addressing him as Mr. French, called her husband Charles.[8]

By this season, the daily street parade by the band was a regular feature. (According to Craggs it had been fairly regular in the past season.) Often the musicians not only paraded through whatever settlement the boat was moored at, but would travel in a rented wagon and team to the next stop or a neighboring town to advertise. Several entries in Captain French's log indicate such "advance work" and evidently it was considered an extra chore by the company for even John McNair disapproved as per the Captain's log entry of November 21, 1886: "Here John kicked about the parade - a bad thing!"[9]

Business was not good most of the way down the Mississippi from Vidalia. There was little money in the small towns, most of which were composed of fifty percent negro population, and on several occasions when the crowd was small, money was returned and no performance was given. In the sugar country, the grinding of cane begins in November and continues through late December. During this time nobody had time to attend a show except on Sunday night. There are many rueful references to this in the log: Nov. 5 - "Just opened Sugar

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[8]Interview with the McNairs, idem.

[9]The one extant log of the NEW SENSATION, written by Captain French, covers from September 29, 1886 to July 1, 1889. It was loaned by the McNair family to Mr. and Mrs. G. Harry Wright, at which time Mrs. Wright copied it as closely as possible; this volume is part of the G. Harry Wright Collection. The original log book is in the Smithsonian as a gift of Miss Clarkie McNair.

house today, everybody busy, turned out $10.75;" Nov. 6 - Only 15 col'd folks and 5 white people came in tonight, it was windy and I was sick & Callie sent them home;" Nov. 7 - "Grinding season is too busy a time for a show, a little later will be better, late in December will get on;" Nov. 8 - "all busy & only 5$ to give back;" Nov. 10 - "Everybody in the Sugar Mills & no day good but Sunday when everything goes." Too, the log shows that whereas receipts varied from seventeen to thirty-five dollars on weekdays, on Sundays the take ranged from the high forties to seventy dollars. Finally, after three months with only one week of really good business, and during most of which time the Captain was plagued by fever and chills, the NEW SENSATION arrived in New Orleans.

During these months downriver, Ida McNair had gone to John's home in Overton, Texas where Frenchie McNair was born. Lon West left the company in New Orleans ("sneaked out while I was away, the same old drunk") as evidently did the M. Silez and Chas. Selles and wife of the initial season's roster for in taking tow with Captain Clark and the OAKLAND to go upriver to Plaquemine, they are not mentioned with the rest of the company. This same entry - January 11, 1887 - lists three new people: M. P. Dolen, a regular of former seasons, and the team of Prince and O'Donnel. While in New Orleans, the Captain sent a ticket to William Quillans in Cincinnati (December 31, 1886) followed by a dispatch of January 5 to "come to New Orleans at once." Quillans had been with the NEW SENSATION the season before and had left in New Orleans.

On leaving the tow of the OAKLAND at Plaquemine, the NEW SENSATION played back down the Mississippi to Donaldsonville and entered Bayou

Lafourche. Here luck or conditions changed, for the first week in the Bayou averaged $54.00 per performance. "This is the Boss week" Captain French gloats in his log (January 29, 1887). The following day, still at the town of Labadieville, he took in $81.50 and says "The largest house of all. All went merry and well. Ten laid on top and looked through the hatch. They set on the guard, etc."

There are three events that took place during the end of 1886 and the beginning of 1887 that are noteworthy. First, on November 29, Captain French "Bought Frank a creole pony for $22.50 of Italian in fruit store." This was at a stop entered in the log as Anchor Line Store. And the next day the entry says "fooled Frank on with corn," under the heading "Welham." Evidently the pony was purchased when on an advance trip to Welham and then lured on board the NEW SENSATION the next day. Although of little importance of itself, Frank was the first (save Mr. Titzman's mule) in a long line of such animals that the Captain owned. Later in the season the log notes that "Maurice billed on the pony" (January 25) at "No place in particular;" Frank thus became a pioneer in showboat advance work. Too, there are many stories of ponies being an integral part of the daily street parade.

A second event of this time took place at Smoke Bend, Louisiana just above Donaldsonville at the head of Bayou Lafourche. The entry (January 16) simply states that "Billy Quillans came today" and the entry of two days later says "Billy Quillans went to work tonight!!!" This was of course the William Quillans the Captain had wired in Cincinnati to join the company. Quillans was a legless gymnist who performed on the bar and did a spectacular jig on his hands. He had been a railroad engineer and lost one leg in a train wreck; the other leg

was taken off when a horse fell on him. He was often called and billed as the "nary-a-leg-man."[10] His performance on the NEW SENSATION, in P. T. Barnum tradition, must have captivated audiences.

The third interesting occurance of this season on the lower Mississippi and Bayou Lafourche began the day of Mr. Quillans' first performance. Included in the day's log entry (January 18 - Valensuella) is "went up to 'D' to see Mr. Moran about the Tug 'Sentinel'. She is fine and I want her." ("D" was evidently Donaldsonville.) The next days entry states that the Captain traded the MARTIN J. MURPHY for the SENTINEL, giving Mr. Moran "boot" of $350. Sid Allen's history states that this towboat had been built by the government and was used as an inspection or quarantine boat on the Eads Jetties at the mouth of the Mississippi during a yellow fever epidemic in 1878 and 1879. He goes on to say that it was of steel construction, eight feet wide, and thirty-five feet long. It was powered with a thirty-five horsepower engine and could handle the showboat with ease. Such a source of power must have been quite a boon to Captain French and the company. In fact on one occasion (February 14 and 15) Captain French and six members of the company ventured on down Bayou Lafourche to the Gulf of Mexico. But with this newly obtained power, three horses were added to the SENTINEL to tow the NEW SENSATION from Rockport to Lockport, the day following the return from the Gulf.

The season before Tom Craggs mentioned meeting the Trone family at Lockport. Captain French visited them again this season. This family were to become prominent with the NEW SENSATION in later seasons.

The afore mentioned trip to the Gulf was a pleasure trip for the

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[10]This Description of Mr. Quillans from the McNair interview, idem., and from interview with Walter Dolen, Akron, Ohio, March 15, 1948 (GHWC).

company members but was exploratory for Captain French as he had plans of going out on the Gulf to reach Bayou Teche. He gave up the idea saying "We cannot go this route to the Teche unles one had a stout tug. Thirty miles of exposure to sea." As will be seen, he did not give up his effort to reach Bayou Teche. The return trip out of Bayou Lafourche proved unprofitable, for despite the good houses on the way down, it was now Lent and the Cajun Catholics evidently gave up showboats.

Back on the Mississippi, the NEW SENSATION started playing down toward New Orleans but as Captain Clark and the OAKLAND were at Wellham Captain French tied along side to go north to Cairo. On this date (March 14) the log carries the roster of the showboat, the only new member being Tilda, a negro cook. John McNair left at Baton Rouge, taking a train to Overton, Texas, to bring Ida and the new baby to Cairo. The McNairs did rejoin the NEW SENSATION on March 29, the boat having arrived there on March 25. As soon as the McNairs were aboard, the Captain took tow with the LIONESS for Derby, Indiana. After one performance at Derby, the showboat tied to the SMOKY CITY for the trip upriver to Pittsburgh. At Louisville Captain French acquired signatures to extend his license to Pittsburgh and succeeded in being licenses for the Monongahela as well on arrival at Pittsburgh, April 11.

After ten days of preparations and getting a company together, the showboat left to go up the Monongahela on the twenty-first. Two days out the Captain realized that the river at flood stage had too strong a current for the sentinel, so he hired a tow to take the NEW SENSATION to Rice's Landing. On April 25, less than six weeks

after he had closed the season in Louisiana, the Captain opened at Rice's Landing with the largest company he had had to date.

Business was average coming down the Monongahela, with a side trip and performance at Boston on the Youghiogheny, and the trip to Pittsburgh was accomplished with few incidents of note. On May 4 at Cookstown, the Captain and "Frank" fell in the river. (Did Captain French ride the pony on the showboat?) The following day at Webster the log entry says "only a few women, gave them chin on the subject." This is probably a most inadequate summation of the speech the Captain gave, as he always took a mostly male audience as a personal affront and an aspersion on the character of his show. On May 24 the Captain notes "Amos Papworth came in this evening after three days absence." Papworth had been with the NEW SENSATION at least part of every season since 1880. The next day's entry begins "Amos Papworth went home, poor Amos is almost gone, a wreck from whiskey." Entries such as this dealing with incorrigible company members are frequent throughout the extant log.

The shows of the NEW SENSATION had always been of a variety type to which was added an afterpiece after a few seasons. Razor Jim was the first of these, with Irish Justice following a season later. This season the Captain, or more probably Callie and Ida, added The Elephant and O'Hoolihan. These were not only popular with river audiences but were obviously favorites of the Captain as they are all that is noted in the log about day to day performances.

After a week in Pittsburgh over Decorations Day, the showboat set out on the Ohio on June 1. The roster of that day indicates that in addition to Amos Papworth, two other members of the company were gone. The log entry of April 18 had said "here Norton was ordered off the stage."

In all liklihood he was ordered off the boat as well. On May 15 at Dravosburg, the Captain notes that "here Lowry was to return from Pittsburgh." It is not known when he left but obviously he never returned. With three members of the company gone, two more were added in Pittsburgh: Frank Ashton and Billy Stanford.

Leaving Pittsburgh Captain French found something new to worry about. As his former partner, Captain E. A. Price had come out with a showboat of his own the season before, the one-time partners were now rivals. At Toronto, Ohio the Captain entered in his log that "here we found that Price had published in his program he was the sole owner of the Sensation." The next day at Captina he was told that Price's show was very poor and when the next evening's receipts at Powhattan were only $12.00, Captain French was indeed alarmed: "I must look at the position of affairs and wire Holmes & find out where Price is & see what is to be done."[11] The day following, with another embarrassing take of $12.50 at Clarington, Ohio, the Captain wrote "Price at Coal Valley, decided to try that river at once if I can get in." Coal Valley is above Charleston, West Virginia on the Kanawha and "getting in" refers to being able to obtain a license extension for this river.

The NEW SENSATION set out immediately to try to protect its reputation, making the one hundred fifty miles to Pt. Pleasant at the mouth of the Kanawha in two days. During this time a company member lettered the pilot house of the SENTINEL, obviously to state Captain French's ownership. At Pt. Pleasant, the Captain got signatures sufficient to obtain his license for the Kanawha, then took tow with the ANNIE L for Malden, a short distance above Charleston. At Malden the

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[11] W. D. Holmes was harbormaster (wharfmaster) at Pt. Pleasant and was always a good friend of the Frenches and McNairs.

log notes that Price was there also, but unfortunately the Captain does not give us anything as to what happened. Even doing good business on the Kanawha, the NEW SENSATION stayed less than two weeks, and only two things of note took place. At Winfield the Captain sold Frank, the pony, for $100 (he had paid $22.50 the previous November), and at Buffalo he dismissed Frank Ashton for drunkeness.

Back at Pt. Pleasant the NEW SENSATION was towed by the BUCKEYE BAY upriver to Little Hocking to play some of the towns missed on the previous hurried trip downriver. Price was still up the Kanawha and the NEW SENSATION was safly ahead. At Long Bottom, Ohio a Frank McQuithy joined the company, but at Minersville the log entry states "Here Paddy H. Rowen and Jimmy Duffy quit the show on short notice to the delight of all on board - No more drunkards!! done just as well." At Guyandotte, West Virginia a Wm. Gaylord joined the Company. With the Price competition seemingly behind, the log of July 8 at Raccoon Island says "Price at Buffalo - lost!" but ten days later it is noted that John (McNair) "got a letter from Price today, that shows dirt somewhere." If there was an offer from Price in the letter, John McNair did not accept for he was to remain with Captain French for the building of the second NEW SENSATION.

Evidently Captain French had had plans for a new boat for some time. Various log entries indicate that he had been hunting for a barge all the way down river from Pittsburgh. Other entries mention the poor condition of the showboat: "The rats cut a hole in the boat & almost sunk her during the show;" "Boat leaking bad;" and on July 28 at Dover, Kentucky after "here the boys pulled Tilda in the river for fun," is the rather grim comment, "Still afloat and thats all !!!" The entry

for July 29 at Augusta, Kentucky, forty-three river miles above Cincinnati warranted an entire page in the log book. Under a large heading "Last Show of old Boat" is the statement "turn out tonight for Cincinnati and a new boat - 'All's well that ends well!'", followed by a listing of the company. Included in this list is Hy Fitch, Ida's father, who had come aboard at Quincy, Kentucky, and who was respected by the Captain as a carpenter.

Within a few hours after the final curtain of the last performance at Augusta, the NEW SENSATION was enroute to Cincinnati. Arriving on Saturday morning, the Frenches spent a weekend in the country visiting friends. But on Monday morning the Captain was back in Cincinnati; he bought a barge and by Wednesday, August 3, he had Hiran Fitch and John McNair stripping it in preparation for what was to be built on it. The next day's entry states that he paid $10 for wharfage for thirty-five days at a spot, as the McNairs recall, neqr where the original NEW SENSATION was constructed, which would have been at the foot of Lawrence Street.

If Captain French expected to have the boat finished, his show organized and to be away from the rented landing in thirty-five days, he must have been sorely disappointed, for it was four months before all was in readiness for the southward trip. These were four worrisome and busy months, particularly for Captain French, John McNair, and Hiram Fitch. There were others helping, but the main responsibilities fell on these three. John McNair spent most of his time overhauling the SENTINEL while Hiram Fitch worked on the building of the showboat and supervising other hired help. The Captain spent his days around the city gathering materials, often without much success, as expressed

in various log entries: "Run all over town for everything - run until tired out;" "Got up wrong and things went wrong all day - lost in everything."

At the end of hard and weary days the Captain and Mrs. French would often go to the home of John and Annie Biller for dinner and sometimes spend the night. During the building period, the Frenches, the McNairs, Hy Fitch, Sid Allen and others of the company working on the new boat lived aboard the old showboat tied next to the new barge. As livable parts of the new boat were completed, they began to move. On October 2 the Captain wrote "East our first meal in the new boat this Sunday;" on October 14 "Put roof on Texas and finish moving and turned 'old craft' on the outside to be taken away. Good old Sensation, you have made us many $$. God bye!"

The Captain had made an arrangement with a Mr. White to trade the old boat and his piano for White's piano, and give $25 to boot. Either Mr. White owned a very find piano or Captain French had a very low opinion of the SENSATION and his paino. Whatever the case, the old boat was not yet finished, although the end was to come sooner than expected. The details of the arrangements and who made them are unclear, but, according to Sid Allen's narrative, the floor was ripped out of the old boat down to the cross stringers of the hull, making a level floor. A "Miniature City" that had been on display in Robinson's Museum on Canal Street in New Orleans was installed. This was turned over to Sid Allen to exhibit at river towns.

The first town that this new enterprise was to play was Dayton, Kentucky across the river from Cincinnati. The water was shallow and falling as the boat landed, causing the boat to settle on a snag.

Unable to dislodge it without assistance, Sid called on Captain French who brought the SENTINEL across the river. With a line on the old boat, the tug pulled it free, but in doing so, a bottom plank was ripped off and the boat sank. So to Sid Allen, who had been such a part of the success of the "old" NEW SENSATION goes the dubious honor of having sent her to final rest.[12]

At last the new showboat was finished, or at least at a point where she could begin the trip south. But the NEW SENSATION could not cast off because the river was too low. Past experience had proved that a start from Cincinnati in November could be disastrous. Too, money was low after the expenditures on a new boat. Company members contracted for the season were restless, some even left to seek other employment. With loans from Callie's father, R. W. Leach, Captain French was able to last through Thanksgiving. Finally it began to rain, then snow, so that by December 6 the "new" NEW SENSATION could push off the landing and head downstream. The log entry for this date lists the following company, largely new with only a few members of former seasons:

J. E. McNair
Ida McNair
McCoy & McEvoy
Nellie McCoy
Wm. Queen
Bart C. Norman
Sidney J. Allen
Harry Funk
? Potts [Frank from other entries]
Harry Six
J. C. Parker
Walter Dolen
Mike O'Brien

Adding the Frenches to this list and little Frenchie McNair, the total number of personel and - what was more important at the time - mouths to

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[12]Like much of Sid Allen's record, this story must suffice without other support. Captain French does not mention the incident.

feed was larger than any company before this.[13]

The new boat was quite an improvement over the original NEW SENSATION. There is no description of the boat in the log but there are pictures. In some respects she resembled the old boat externally. She was long, narrow and single decked, with ten large windows cut in each side. Between the windows were large paintings of performers in action, and amidships was a painting of Captain French himself. Above the windows, running the full length of the cabin, was the name FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, and still higher up, just under the roof, were nine ventilating transoms - an innovation for the comfort of patrons.

While the main cabin was a single story high, providing for no gallery or balcony in the theatre, there was a small "Texas" deck on top of which sat a tiny pilot house with an ornamental peaked roof, and with a sign on the front reading "20 Star Artists." The Texas occupied about a third of the length of the roof of the main cabin and was to serve as living quarters for the company.[14] No more would the men have to sleep on cots in the theatre auditorium. The ticket office, as on all showboats, was at the forward end, to one side of the main entrance to the theatre.

Inside, the new boat was far more pretentious than her predecessor. The stage was larger, and was equipped with scenery and rol curtains made up and painted by Cincinnati professionals. The old benches were

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[13]Sid Allen stated that "The new showboat made the year 1887 without my presents (sic) on board, . . .", but as Captain French mentions his name in the log several times, the latter must be right.

[14]The Texas deck on a packet was that level immediately below the pilot house. Even though it was generally much smaller than other levels below it, as a "state" room originally, it was the largest. On a packet it was subdivided into living quarters for officers and crew.

replaced by comfortable opera chairs. Most sources agree that the original seating capacity was one hundred fifty.

The day after leaving Cincinnati another company member was added, R. N. (Newt) Mowry, Callie's cousin, who came aboard from a passing steamer. Two days later, December 9, Wm. Queen left the NEW SENSATION. At Lewisport, Kentucky on December 14 and at Grandview, Indiana the following day, the company gave performances to replenish the exchequer, and still another performance was given at Uniontown, Kentucky on the nienteenth to ensure the food supply.

By Christmas Eve the NEW SENSATION was at Paducah and the Captain took the tug out to find his cousin Maurice Dolen and his "bran new wife." The following day's log entry notes that they were on the Steamer GUIDING STAR but returned with Capt. in French to the showboat. The company continued to fluxuate as Mr. Norman left on New Year's Day, 1888. Two days previous, the Captain had mentioned "Amos" in the day's entry and by January 9 Amos Papworth is again listed as a performer.

Having beaten the ice, the new NEW SENSATION opened at Cooks Landing, Louisiana on January 10, 1888 to a "nice crowd."

Figure # 29

The second FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

On the back of the picture which this was taken from appears the following caption, written there by Clarkie McNair:

> The second French's New Sensation, built in 1886 or very early in 1887. This boat was larger and with a seating of nearly 250. The texas was added as sleeping quarters for the actors and crew. The first calliope was used on this boat and steam furnished by a small steam launch that was used as a tow boat. Mrs. French was the first woman to try to paly this instrument.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> This was the 1st showboat to have a calliope and it really got results. I cannot identify anyone in this picture but Capt. and Mrs. French. He, wearing derby hat & Prince Albert coat, is leaning on calliope. She is supposedly playing it (she really did play it, 2 tunes), and Mrs. J. E. McNair standing at extreme right.

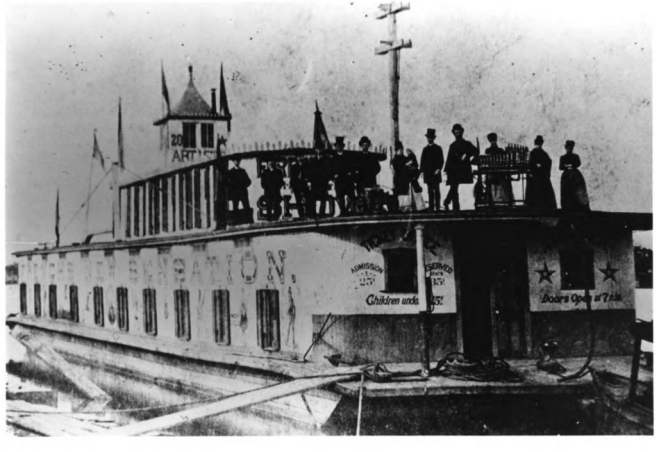


Figure # 29

The second FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

Figure # 30

Side view of the second FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This picture gives an excellent side view of the second NEW SENSATION. Note that while this boat was propelled by a tug tied in front, it was still necessary to use a steering oar on the stern. Clarkie McNair made the following notes on the original photograph:

> The band of mixed gender is the Gee family - 2 boys - Ben with cornet and Claude behind the Spanish dagger and bass drum. 3 girls - Maude with cornet, Kate with baritone and Grace with tuba. The young man with the alto and the girl with trombone were adopted children named Nobly. The firl's first name was Renee (can't remember her brother's name.) The little girl at the right of Papa French is the youngest Gee, Winnie, who had not yet graduated into the tooteling class
>
> The ladies dressed like twins are Aunt Callie and my mother and then Frenchie clinging to my Father's hand. Next Jimmy Duffy and Paddy Rowen (but which is which I don't know.) Then the Armstrongs, Harry, Mother and Harry, Sr. Gene on lower deck just outside kitchen.
>
> The two love sick swains abaft the pilot house are Sid Allen who married Maude Gee and Frank Potts who married Kate and, by the process of elimination, we have disclosed that the two in front of the pilot house are the mother and father of the Gee family. The young man with the trap drum and cymbals joined the Gee family but was not one of them.

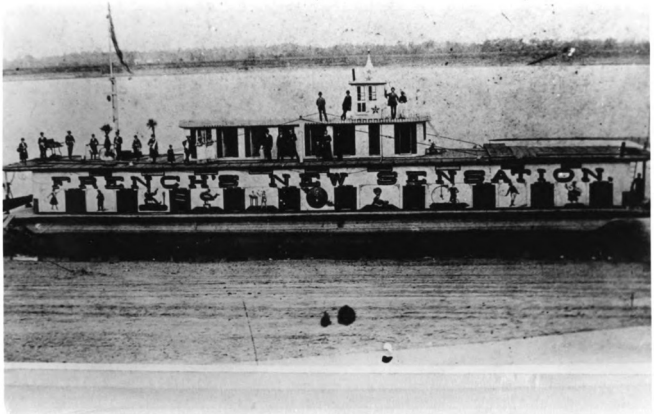


Figure # 30

Side view of the second FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

Figure # 31

The Packet GERMANIA and the second NEW SENSATION

The date of this photograph is unknown but the view gives a good comparison as to size between the NEW SENSATION and a major steamer or packet of the day.

The location of this picture cannot be pinpointed either.

Notice that between the GERMANIA and the SENSATION is a small boat inscribed "French's New Sensation Advertiser." No one can identify this boat for sure. Logic would have it that this is the SENTINEL but its size (length particularly) detracts from this. It could have been a rented boat with a banner along the side.



Figure # 31

The Packet GERMANIA and the second NEW SENSATION

PART II, Chapter 5 - The Second NEW SENSATION

The entry of January 10, 1888 in Captain French's log refers to a showboat owner's constant worry - salaries: ". . . salary list 15.50." But the next day's entry states "O'Brian drunk & discharged" and on January 12 the entry includes "one man less to feed today as O'Brian stayed at Cooks Landing where he got drunk." In addition to such personel problems the weather was cold and windy, preventing performances on several days. This continued until February 3 when the NEW SENSATION arrived at Darrowville and the mouth of Bayou Lafourche. Here the Captain turned from the Mississippi to spend a very profitable three weeks in Bayou Lafourche, then back out on the river, playing to Bonnet Carre just above New Orleans. After replenishing wardrobes on trips to New Orleans the NEW SENSATION took tow with the OAKLAND to the mouth of the Red River so as to head for Bayou Teche.

Of all the personel changes that are indicated in the log during this early part of the French's second showboat's first season, the most significant was the addition of the Trone family to the company. Captain French had met the Trones in the lower Lafourche the winter before and after losing or firing several members of his company, he contracted with the elder Trone at Thibadeaux on February 22 for them to go aboard the NEW SENSATION. This family was to be quite an enigma to Captain French as will be seen.

Captain French had wanted to play Bayou Teche for several seasons. During the previous season's trip down Bayou Lafourche he had made a trip all the way to the Gulf to see if it were possible to reach the

Teche. He gave up because of exposure to open seas, and this season a trip to the Gulf reaffirmed his prior decision. The route to Bayou Teche by inland water was also devious and difficult. On leaving the Mississippi the NEW SENSATION journeyed up the Red River to Simmesport, Louisiana and then southward on the Atchafalaya River. This one hundred mile journey was marked by accidents at every turn. The third day on the Atchafalaya the Captain write "I will NEVER come this route again with tug! in high water." But he did come this same route again, many times, for there was simply no other way for a showboat to reach Bayou Teche.

At the lower end of the Atchafalaya the NEW SENSATION felt its way through a maze of small lakes, chutes, bayous, and passes, emerging finally into Grand Lake. After crossing the lake, using landmark navigation, the showboat entered Bayou Teche at Pattersonville, Louisiana. Here was showboat country that no one had touched. Probably the receipts for the first few nights were sufficient to dispell the gloom and bad memories of the ordeal of getting into the Teche; the "take" in this area was the largest any NEW SENSATION company had ever seen. Playing up to Breaux Bridge in the heart of "Evangeline" country, the Captain turned around to play back down the bayou. Many entries in the log attest to the "friendliness" and "gentility" of the people of the area. Further indication of Captain French's happiness with receipts and with the bayou people is the fact that he did a benefit performance at New Iberia on April 29 for one Father Jaquett and the Catholic Church there. The Captain notes at the end of the log entry on May 8 while being towed up the Atchafalaya that the receipts for the Teche were $2000. Bayou Teche was to remain a favorite area as long as there

was a NEW SENSATION on the water.

At Simmesport, Louisiana at the point where the Atchafalaya joins the Red River, the Captain made the statement as part of the day's log entry "put out bills with the tug and bicycle." This brings up another innovation of this first season of the second NEW SENSATION. A member of the season's company was one Walter Dolen, a second cousin of the Captain. He had come aboard in Cincinnati during the building of the new boat in the summer of 1887. Among his possessions was a bicycle with a fifty-four inch front wheel. Consequently at least part of Walter Dolen's duties during this 1888 season was as an advance man for the NEW SENSATION. He would pedal to a town a few miles back from the river's edge to post handbills and generally advertise the evening's performance. Because the purchase of the tug meant greater regularity of schedule, this "advance man" could go to towns scheduled for succeeding days and bill the performance. Judging from a contemporary photograph young Mr. Dolen's arrival in a town must have caused a sensation bested only by the arrival of the SENSATION itself.

From Simmesport the NEW SENSATION started down the Mississippi toward New Orleans, but it was the latter part of May and long past time to close the season. At Port Allen, across the river from Baton Rouge, the Captain closed the season (May 22) and the next day took tow with the OAKLAND to go upriver. This was the first time the Frenches and the company had not ended the season with a few leisurely days in New Orleans, but most had visited the city earlier.

Perhaps the most pleasant part of a showboat performers year was the tow back upriver when the season ended. Performance duties no longer existed and crew responsibilities were minimal at most. Lashed



Figure # 32

Walter P. Dolen

A second cousin of Captain French, Walter Dolen had many duties on the NEW SENSATION. He had helped with the building of the second French showboat an worked as general handyman and as a deckhand; he was not a performer. He did do advance work on his bicycle as the above photograph indicates.

Mr. Dolen worked for the Frenches through 1891.

to a stout steamer the worries of navigation were left to the steamboat captain and crew. Only the Frenches had anything to worry about as summer was facing them with no money coming in, but despite this the Captain's log indicates many happy hours on this particular trip north.

When the OAKLAND left Port Allen she was completely surrounded by powerless or near powerless craft. In addition to the NEW SENSATION and the SENTINEL, lashed to her sides were five luggers, an ice barge, a fuel barge, six bonded barges (government barges, and the home and shop of Ertel the gunsmith. This shapeless water caravan was not unusual at the time but was slow moving and awkward to maneuver. Twelve days after leaving Port Allen, Louisiana the NEW SENSATION dropped off at Cairo as Captain Clark and the OAKLAND went up the Mississippi.

Ever mindful that hindsight may tend to romanticize, the 1887-88 season of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION is well capsulized in a discussion with John and Ida McNair.[1]

> JOHN: I remember that first cruise on the new boat. Nothing really serious happened the whole time, but I never saw so many little things go wrong. Just things that would disgust you because they wouldn't let go. As fast as we would get out of one mess, we'd find ourselves in another. Why, a thousand times I thought Gus would bust open from just sheer aggravation.
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> IDA: And Papa French's language wasn't always pretty to hear.
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> JOHN: Well, maybe so, but he had reason. Why he hadn't been out of Cincinnati two days when we broke a fluke off the new wheel that I had spent days putting on the tug. We had to lay up and take it off and put the old one back on. Then we broke the swivel on the gouger and stopped and had it welded, and broke it again - all in one day. And cold. Many's the time we rehearsed for hours in the kitchen just to keep warm. It was near zero the first few weeks of the trip, and even in Louisiana it was sometimes below freezing. Of course that was in January.

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[1] Interview with the McNairs, Calumet Plantation, Columbia, Alabama, March 28, 1948 (GHWC).

WRIGHT: But I've always read that showboating was an easy life, just floating down a lazy stream, watching the scenery go by.

JOHN: Well, there was a lot of that in later years, after they put big powerful towboats behind the showboats, and had plenty of hired help aboard to do the work - and after the rivers were tamed by locks and dams. But not in them days. Showboating was hard work then, and don't let anybody tell you different.

To get back to that '87-'88 trip - I think that we hung up on every sand bar in the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. It began before we got to Paducah, and while we were still tied to the GUIDING STAR for the tow to Natchez, we were stranded on bars as much time as we were in deep water. Seems like the bars just ran out to meet us.

We had the most wind and fog that season that I ever saw too. I hate to think how many times we lost a show by being tied up for days miles from anywhere, windbound, and scared to move. And when the fog closed in, we just had to stop, because sometimes if you held your hand out at arms length, you couldn't see it. Funny things sometimes happened when we tried to operate in a heavy fog. One night we were playing Mt. Pleasant, Louisiana and Gus and I took the tug and went up river to get a crowd of people and bring them down to the show. The fog was so thick you could cut in blocks. On the way back home it seemed to me like something was wrong. We weren't making the time we ought to have been making dowstream, and I got the idea that we were going in the wrong direction. Gus was at the wheel, and I asked him if he was sure that we were headed right. Well, he was never a man to let someone else tell him how to do something, so he said he knew what he was about and went ahead. To make a long story short, when we cane in for a landing, we found that we were right where we had started from. We had got turned around in the fog and had been going upstream instead of down. You'll probably find an account of it in the log. /It is in the log, January 14, 1888, but Captain French does not say who was at the wheel./

That was season of big rains, too. We didn't have any good showboat weather to speak of until we got into the Teche - just rain, heavy, driving rain with lots of wind. One night in March we played a little place called St. John down near New Orleans, and early the next morning a heavy rain and wind storm hit us - just about the worst of the season. The Sensation pulled and tossed at her lines, and finally we let go and were blown all the way across the Mississippi. We hit the opposite bank at Moran's Store and tied up and there we gave our next show. That was one jump that didn't use up any coal.

This is more than just another "blown across the river" story. This one is verified by Captain French's log (March 18, 1888) as is John McNair's description of the rains that season. At Bayou Paul in January the Captain wrote "This is rainy and bad weather. Almost every day it rans and at night it fogs, but our rep helps us out."

JOHN: Gus had some trouble with his actors that season too. Of course in any kind of show business you always get a few funny ones, and you're always losing actors when you can least afford to, but that season as a little worse than usual. We left Cincinnati with a crew of sixteen, over half of them new, and in that number there's bound to be a few kickers, trouble-makers and drunks. One thoroughly disagreeable fellow was sent ashore before we even reached Natchez, and at Smoke Bend a chronic drunk was let go. He tried to take his partner's paraphernalia with him but we caught him in time. Gus hurried to New Orleans to hire new actors, and brought back a two man team and a man who did an act alone. But the man turned out to be a drunkard, and lasted just three days. The team was so poor that Gus fired them after one performance. A few days later a family left - man, wife, and daughter. Good performers they were, and we missed their act, but the wife complained every day about the food and everything else, so we were glad to see them go.

You see, Gus didn't stand for a lot of foolishness on his boat. He was a kind man, and usually good humored, and he was fair and honest with his people. But he was nervous and impulsive, too, and easily upset. If people didn't behave the way he thought they ought to, he could raise an awful rumpus. Why, I was the only man aboard that he'd tolerate smoking in his presence. Most of all he hated drunkeness. Not that he wouldn't take a glass of wine himself occasionally. Sometimes our friends along the rivers or bayous would bring a jug of wine to the boat as a present and Gus would accept it and enjoy it. But his principles told him that drunkeness was wrong, and so he permitted no hard liquor aboard, and discharged any man who showed up drunk.

Of course they didn't always stay fired for the first offense. After all, Gus had to be a practical show manager, and it isn't always easy to replace a good performer, even if he does go on an occasional toot. I've seem him throw a fit when an actor came aboard drunk at night and fire the man on the spot. Then the next day he would let the man come back. It wasn't just because he didn't want to lose a good performer. If a man in the

grip of the drink habit had any good in him, Gus pitied him, and tried to help him. But it hardly ever did any good for long. In the end the drunkard had to go.

You remember me telling you about Sebastian Moncayo, the acrobat who was my partner when I first came aboard the Sensation? Well, he joined us again that season while we were on Bayou Lafourche, and just a while later he got a letter from Price offering him twenty dollars a week to perform on Price's Floating Opera. That was a lot of money in those days and that letter gave Gus plenty to worry about. Of course everything that Price did worried Gus. They had been partners, and when a man is your partner and then sets up his own business and becomes your competitor he becomes a sort of special thorn. Gus always suspected Price of doing things to injure the New Sensation but I don't know how many of the stories that found there way to us were true.

Personally, Gus and Captain Price were still friends, but they kept pretty close watch on each other. Early in the season the Sensation and the Floating Opera had met on the lower Mississippi and the two men visited together pleasantly enough, Gus even towed the Floating Opera to her next stop, since Price did not yet have a tug. But later, when the two boats began to play tag along the bayous, sometimes missing each other by only a few days, and the stories of Price's big company began to reach us - and especially when he began trying to oure our performers to his boat - well, all of that didn't make Gus very happy.

One thing more before we stop talking about that season. You remember that Gus complained about how hard it was to navigate the Atchafalaya in the log. Well, that was a mean stream in those days, and it was hard, but it wouldn't have been so bad if we had had a pilot. We tried to find one at the head of the river, but couldn't right away, so Gus with his usual impatience decided that he'd try it himself. Well, he went about handling a boat like he did everything else - fast and furious. The river was so crooked that he couldn't steer well, and we had to lay up that night for repairs. Gus was so mad that he made us all rehearse the whole evening. And so it went all the way down to Grand Lake.

IDA: Well, you could stand a little rehearsing about that time, if I remember rightly. I never knew a man that didn't brag about what a hard time he'd had, and make everything sound a lot worse than it was. I was on that trip too, and I don't remember its being so bad. We did work hard - everybody on a showboat had to work hard. But mostly we didn't mind. And we had bad weather, lots of it - but always you have to fight weather, and there was plenty of sunshine in between the rain and the cold. We had good folks aboard, too - and when we got fooled into taking someone who wasn't the right sort, we got rid of them as soon as we found out what they were.

Let me tell you some things John's forgot. When we were down near New Orleans Papa French went to the city and bought plug hats and dusters for the band. John McNair was the proudest thing on the boat when he got into that outfit. He tried to stand taller, step higher, and blow that old horn louder than anyone else in the band. And at night, when the boat would fill up with all those lovely people - especially along Bayou Lafourche and the Teche - and the curtain would open on the minstrel first part, there would be John, in blackface and a funny costume - cracking jokes and thinking himself to be about the most comical thing in creation. I thought so too, to tell the truth. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, 'cause I was in the minstrel circle too. Later in the show, after Papa French's and Aunt Callie's magic act, John would appear again, in tights this time and so impossible stunts on a bar. After the show was over and the people all gone home, we would turn out for the next town, and there would be John back on the tug playing with the machinery he loved so well. And whether it was in the midst of a storm or under a moon, he loved it. Don't let John McNair tell you that he wasn't happy in those days.

As for me I was pretty happy too. I was very young, only seventeen, and full of strength and hope. I had been married just under two years - was still on my honeymoon, really - and my baby, Frenchie, was a little less than a year old. Sometimes it was hot and uncomfortable for her, and sometimes I wished that I could have her in a nice cool home ashore, but she was awfully good, and never cried. I think that's why Papa French loved her so. I don't believe that his nerves could have stood a crying baby.

Then I had the companionship of Aunt Callie. She was only twenty-six but she had had a world of experience in her life with Papa French, and she knew more about how to live than most women learn in a lifetime. She was always cheerful and level headed, and I don't think that I ever saw her get excited and go to pieces as most people do when everything goes wrong. The men would get the boat into trouble and go into a tizzy about it, and there would be Aunt Callie with a lighthearted smile and a sensible suggestion to calm everybody down and straighten out the trouble. She could do anything that was to be done on the boat, from acting on the stage to cooking in the kitchen. She could handle the boats, too. Sometimes Papa French would be gone for several days looking for new talent, and he would leave the boat in Aunt Callie's charge. She would pilot from one town to the next, and run the show at night, and never once did Papa French find anything wrong on his return.

Why she never learned to swear from Papa French, I don't know. Plenty of times she had provocation. But I never heard her even use slang. She just seemed to be

> able to express herself without it. She and I used to sit for hours mending the men's and children's clothing, and sewing costumes - and just talking. That's one of the pleasantest things I ever did. But, well, we did have to work hard. It was a hard season.
> JOHN: Oh, it wasn't so bad.[2]

Two days after the OAKLAND left the NEW SENSATION at Cairo, Captain French contracted with a Captain Barrett for the steamer JENNY CAMPBELL to tow the showboat and the SENTINEL to Cincinnati, but at Jeffersonville, Indiana, just across from Louisville, the NEW SENSATION cut loose and "laid up" for two days.[3] Here the Captain encountered two of his show business competitors. The June 10, 1888 log entry states that "John Robinson's Circus landed here today with the BEN HUR.[4] Eugene Robinson's Bib Blow Out is here and ready to open." The latter part of this entry refers to two large "floating palaces" - one a theatre and the other a museum - being built at the Howard Ship Yards.[5] The June 11 log entry tells that from Robinson's Museum came the idea for an illusion act which the Captain was to call "black art."

At the end of the stay in Jeffersonville the NEW SENSATION was tied to the side of the HENRY DE BUS and three days later arrived in

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[2]This lengthy narrative is included here not only because of the 1887-88 season and the new showboat, but because it gives insight into both the Frenches and the McNairs; from interview with the McNairs, idem.

[3]The grammarian would say that the NEW SENSATION "lay up" at Jeffersonville. In river language the present tense is "lay up" and the past tense is "laid up." If offense is to be taken, in this study it will be taken by the academicians rather than the "men who go down to the river in boats."

[4]The John Robinson Circus played under canvas but was evidently traveling by steamboat during this season.

[5]Some sources have given 1893 as the year of these boats' construction. French's record is supported by records of the Howard Ship Yards: see Charles Preston Fishbaugh, From Paddle Wheels to Propellers, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1970), p. 203.

Cincinnati to be repaired and put in condition for another season. The past season had been hard on the new showboat. During the seven weeks in Cincinnati she was completely repainted inside and out. Many timbers were replaced and a new roof was added. On May 26, just after the trip upstream began, John McNair had taken his family to his home in Texas. Knowing that he needed a good carpenter, the Captain notes this same day that he would wire Hy Fitch, Ida McNair's father; on June 20 the log indicates that he arrived in Cincinnati.

The log for the stay in Cincinnati reveals that the Captain was busy as usual, getting supplies for boat repair and getting a company together. But the most noteworthy acquisition this summer was a calliope. A few steam packets and excursion boats had had calliopes some years before but this was a first for a regular showboat. The log entries concerning this are terse but revealing:

> (July 13) Made arrangements for Calliope with Mr. Kirkup
> (July 16) Calliope player at Cincinnati. Mr. Kirkup will put calliope on and if I have steam power enough to run it - it is mine - if not steam enough he takes it off, I am to pay for the connections keep it or not
> (July 19) put Calliope on board today
> (July 20) today we tried the calliope & found we had abundance of steam, but no one to play a perfect tune
> (July 21) paid four hundred and seventy dollars for Calliope made by Mr. Kirkup

This gave the NEW SENSATION the loudest and most effective advertising device showboats ever knew.

The summer months were always a strain for Mr. French and this summer he was particularly anxious to get a new season started; Price was already open on July 20 and the log entry of July 25 states "Price went into the Kanawha last Wednesday." Not the least of troubles this summer was the Trone family of five who had come aboard while in the bayou country the previous season; they were evidently talented but

the Captain never got along with the elder Mr. Trone. The log of June 21 included "Mr. Trone states that he didn't come on this boat to paint." On June 27 after mention of leaving to visit Callie's relatives, Captain French says ". . . left a boat full of eaters, as dooless a set as gott ever let exhist;" of course a major part of those left aboard was the Trone family. The city of Cincinnati must have been treated to some verbal fireworks on the fourth of July for the log that day states "Some nasty talk from Trones, dirty, too infamously mean for a white man to utter. I will prove it & then they leave - I'll see further." And he did.

After sending tickets to the McNairs at John's request on July 25, the Captain became impatient to start the trip south. His dejection shows most in the log entry of July 28: "I put up lamps all day & got mad as hell's blazes in the evening. All the best of life is lived when a man is 50 years old, bad gramer but terrible truth and I know it." But seemingly spirits were raised when John McNair arrived on July 30 and plans were made to leave the next day. The August 1 log entry starts "At 4 AM today the little Sentinel started from Spiller wharf Cincinnati with 'French's New Sensation' and a company of 23 people & a kid!" The payroll for the company was $21.25, slightly over one dollar per day for each hired person. By todays's standard this is a small salary but it was the largest company the Captain had ever had. Two days before leaving Cincinnati the Captain notes "This show shall win or lose! or away goes the people." If this makes Captain French seem niggardly, it must be remembered that the performers' salaries were totally unencumbered, for in addition room, board, and transportation were free. Consequently many performers ended the season with their entire salary

saved, as there was little to spend it on at the showboat stops.

Anxious to see money coming in, the Captain planned to play on the evening of their first day out at Patriot, Indiana, but after playing the calliope a thunder storm came up and there was no performance. The following day the company did perform and it was a lengthy show: (August 2) "Closed at 12 M, show too long. Several inclined to kick & shirk - will pay out first salary to all & then settle with all hands." But after receipts of forty dollars at Patriot and forty-one dollars the following night at Warsaw, Kentucky, the Captain gives a positive feeling with his August 3 log entry: "All well pleased . . . Calliope done splendid.", indicating that the season was off to a good start. In fact with the exception of Sundays (the NEW SENSATION did not play Sundays on the northern rivers) and a few rainy nights when there was no performance, the receipts were good all the way down the Ohio. By this time, however, there had been dismissals of company members and notices given to Captain French. On arrival at Cairo (September 14) the Captain went to St. Louis to replenish his cast; evidently his enthusiasm for a good show outweighed the pain of salaries to pay and mouths to feed. Too, as the log will attest, Price was only a few days ahead and competition must have been keen.

After four days at Cairo, the NEW SENSATION continued down the Mississippi. On the fourth night out at New Madrid, Missouri, Ida McNair went before an audience for the first time, and the Captain deemed it an event important enough to record in the log (September 22). If this were a happy occasion, bad news came two days later at Cotton Wood Point. The log entry of September 24 ends with "got news of yellow fever & read it to the people." At Fulton, Tennessee the next days entry included "Richards & Price Quarantined at Memphis" and concludes with

"will wait to see what is to be done." Then after playing two more nights with a third performance intended, the NEW SENSATION was tied to the steamer HENRY LOWRY to return to Cairo "on acc't of the yellow fever scare," but obviously the Captain knew it was more than the rumors of frightened river people. Gus French could not have been unaware of the epidemics of other years that had taken thousands of lives in the lower Mississippi Valley.

The LOWRY brought the NEW SENSATION to Cairo on October 1. The Captain must have intended to try the Upper Mississippi for Callie left for St. Louis the following day, but that same day's log entry states "Clark tells me not to try the upper Miss as it is very low & hard, extremely hard to navigate & says for me to come on south with him & get ahead of everybody" (probably meaning Richards' Circus and Price's showboat). The next day, October 3, the NEW SENSATION "left Cairo at 9 AM in tow with the OAKLAND." Captain Clark and "that boxx boat" had come to the rescue again.

Callie joined the showboat by train from St. Louis, and when the OAKLAND dropped the NEW SENSATION at Port Hickey, Louisiana, Captain Clark and Captain French continued to New Orleans; Callie opened the season again on October 10. All went very well with an all time high "take" of $120.00 at Cooks Landing on October 21. In the meantime the Captain was paying Price back in his own coin. While still in tow with the OAKLAND, he sent John McNair to Price's boat to try to induce Paddy Rowan and Tom Smith, both French regulars of former seasons, to joint the NEW SENSATION. John returned a week later with the news that Rowan was coming and that Smith and Sid Allen (who had left French for Price at the beginning of the season) wanted to come. Within a few

days Rowan was aboard and performing on the NEW SENSATION and a week later the Captain hired Smith and Sid Allen.

If French took a certain pride in stealing performers from Price, it was shortlived for at White Castle, Louisiana where receipts were $50.00 he wrote "18 people, yes 19 folks on the salary list. This may be business but I think not when the salaries are 24$." October ended at Cannon's Store with receipts of $18.00 "and 24 people to feed, this is somewhatly out of joint." But relief was to come soon. On October 16 the Captain noted that "Trone made a kick about grub" and on October 28 the entry includes "Trones squabbled as usual. They act more like they owned the show than performers, they will have to travel for themselves!" Finally at Donaldsonville "Trones played with us for the last time! Oh thank God, than the good God. They are all well enough but him. Trone is worse than the devil - he's a H A, S A."[6]

The month of November found the NEW SENSATION on the sugar coast in cane grinding season where business was poor except on Sunday nights. There was no prejudice against Sunday performances here and since the sugar mills were closed on Sundays there was always a good house, but this was not enough to make up for the poor houses the rest of the week. Even though on November 18 the Captain notes "Show running very nice & is good! 16 people," he hurried on to New Orleans. After five days

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[6]One may speculate what these letters mean. But as the Captain had ridded himself of a constant thorn-in-the-side and five mouths to feed, he must be forgiven the fervor of his expression.

In May of 1886, Tom Craggs had noted meeting the Trone family, described them as operatic performers, and noted they were good musicians. Seemingly Captain French thought this also, but their musicianship could not compensate for their temperament.

There had been trouble on the trip north the previous season between Captain Clark of the OAKLAND and Captain French over the attentions of Mary Alice Trone. But as the log entries are unclear and as the McNairs knew of no such trouble, the matter will be left alone here.

in the Crescent City, Captain French decided to try the sparsely settled stretch of river between New Orleans and the Gulf. This new area proved to be full of oranges, rice, and oysters, but little money. After two weeks of poor business, the NEW SENSATION was turned around and the SENTINEL returned the showboat from Buras, sixty-five miles below New Orleans, to the city in seventeen hours (December 20, 1888).

After a few days in New Orleans, the HENRY LOWRY took the NEW SENSATION in tow for the mouth of the Red River and Captain French followed the next day, thus spending Christmas Eve and Christmas on board the MABEL CONEAUX. On December 26 the showboat moved to the Atchafalaya to start the trip down to Bayou Teche. The day's entry included the following roster with a total salary list of $16.75.

John McNair & wife
J Delvecho & wife
Sidney Allen
Tom Smith
Frank Potts
Jas Duffy
Gill the Jugler
Mathews
Lizzie Biller
Two French
Pat Rowan & the Cook

One can imagine Captain French's eagerness and enthusiasm for reaching the Teche which had been so pleasant and profitable the previous season. But at Simmesport, the first town on the Atchafalaya, occurred the most tragic event in the nearly thrity years of French's showboats. The Captain reports it as follows:

> Opened to a good house and genteel people with the exception of one James Callihan who insulted my wife & snaped his pistol at me because I would not allow him to smoke in the hall & insult my patrons. He went out after trying to shoot me. Sent for his Winchester rifle & shot into the audience "Mortally" wounding a little girl eleven years old, Lillie Becker by name.

John McNair, who was there that December 27, recalled that when Callihan refused to take a cigar from his mouth, the Captain knocked it from his mouth and then ran to the front deck. Eugene Knox, the Negro cook intervened as Callihan pulled a gun on the Captain, and as they grappled some bit or edge of clothing caught behind the firing pin and the gun did not go off; Eugene Knox threw Callihan - gun and all - into the river. Two hours elapsed and it was during Captain French's final curtain speech that Callihan chose to return.[7] The next days's log has a vertical entry in the margin to the left of the main entry: "All sad today."

Some distance below Simmesport a small stream called Bayou Courtableau flows into the Atchafalaya from the northwest. Here Captain French made an interesting side trip. "This is a fine little Bayou," he wrote, "with very little current but quite crooked & but little settlement for the first 20 miles!" He went up the stream twenty-four miles to Port Barre where he reported finding two stores, a cotton gin, and a warehouse - playing to a "very quiet house." The following day - New Years Eve - he ventured fifteen miles further playing at Washington and the log entry ends with "This Ends the Year 1888 - Just five months out of Cincinnati, O."

Playing New Years Day of 1889 at Washington again, and at Port Barre on January 2 to a "genteel little crowd," the showboat returned to the Atchafalaya and the trip to the Teche. Why he made a round trip of nearly eighty miles, playing four performances in two towns, he does not tell. It would be sufficient if it were just another example of the spirit which led him to take to the river in the first place. It is

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[7]Interview with John McNair, idem.

possible also that a map of the time may have led Captain French to believe that he might be able to reach Bayou Teche from the headwaters of the Courtableau, since he had sworn not to take the Atchafalaya/ Grand Lake route to the Teche ever again.

The first stop out of Grand Lake on Bayou Teche was Pattersonville where the receipts were $105.00 and the Captain notes "if we can keep this little game up we will come out OK !" The second night at the same spot the take was $80.00 and the day's entry slyly ends with "P'ville you are a good one."

Nearly every day during this time the Captain entered something like "Fine nice crowd;" "very good people & well pleased;" "nice house and nicely behaved." In the fifty-four days beginning with the Simmesport performance and ending when the NEW SENSATION came out onto the Mississippi, thirty-seven performances had been given to an average door receipt of $61.86. This was profitable show business - a good beginning to 1889.

There were always problems and the Teche log has some worthy of mention. On January 21 at Breaux Bridge the entry reads "arrived after a hard days work at 5 PM. Towed the Sensation with hundred feet of line - tug ahead. John engineer, Sid pilot, only broke 2 lights of glass & grounded Tug once below town about one mile - came up stern down." A few days later at "½way place" (between Breaux Bridge and St. Martinsville) still another new showboating technique was employed: "rained all day & at night Callie, Gene, and I dropped the boat down a square & showed to a decidedly French house. Terrible dark and muddy - putted the boat across the Bayou & let people on at each end." Evidently this reference to a French audience was what had made the Captain take

on the services of the Trone family, who were bi-lingual, for another entry while on the Teche says of the audience, "nice people & lots of them. They are entirely French, very Entirely."[8]

There were reasons other than rain for cancellations and poor houses. At Clarington "they all had the measles and we moved on to Sorell," and at New Iberia on the return trip "murders & hangings give us a poor house." But rain did prevent a performance at Centerville, and rain on the second day there caused Callie to sell the house to Paddy Rowan for $25.00, the only gambling venture of her career. When the receipts for the performance were over thirty dollars the Captain was sorely irked: "do your own business!"

After playing two very successful performances at Morgan City, the NEW SENSATION took tow with the NEW MATTIE to get back across Grand Lake because the weather was bad and the current strong. Even in the tow of a steamer, it took four days to get to Red River Landing, arriving on February 18.[9] After laying up for a day because of wind, the tour continued on down the Mississippi. There were the usual

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[8]On January 31, 1889 the Captain bought another pony, Boxie, from a Mr. Breauseau, which, like "Frank", was sold in the north.

[9]Between log entries for January 4 and 5, 1889, the Captain gives his routing down the Atchafalaya to get to Bayou Teche:

> Old River up by Turnbulls Island 8ms - 5 down to Simsport (sic) to the Bridge West Millville 25 miles to the head of Alabama Island 14 ms to Blakes 15 ms or lms below the head, from Blakes to Cortableau 7 ms Port Barre 24 - Washington 40 ms Bayou Cortableau to the foot of Island 10 ms, Bute La Rose 12 miles Bayou LaRomp 6 ms Turn Square to the left into Little Devil Shoot across into Bayou Tensas, 5 ms to Lake Munglewa 4 ms to Chene PO then 4 miles down Chene turn to the right and into Chico or Stumpy lake bear to the left in continuous circle through Chico & 4 to 6 feet of water into the pass thence to or through Grand Lake due SSE to Cypress pass & thence SE 3 ms to point or light into LeGrand River down to Teche or Pattersonville.

personnel problems which necessitated a trip to New Orleans. The log entry of February 23 says "Gill & Mathews drunk, will let them go soon" and then the next day, "will go to the city on the Cleveland Tomorrow!" The February 25 entry included "went to N O for performers in place of Mathews and Gill, got Gleason & Daily & Beers, a contorter." The Company Rosters can be compared for this entire season but the payroll rosters for the latter part of the season give a good idea of continuance and variance of the performers.

New Iberia, Feb. 1 (Teche)	Port Allen, Mar. 3 (near New Orleans)
James Duffy	Eugene Knox
Alfred Gill	P. H. Rowan
Chris Mathews	Lizzie Biller
Sidney J. Allen	Ida McNair
T. C. Smith	Sidney Allen
P. H. Rowan	J. E. McNair
J. E. McNair	F. L. Potts
E. Knox	T. C. Smith
Callie Leach	James Duffy
J. DelVecho and Wife	John Beers
	J. DelVecho and Wife
	Fred Daly
	H. Gleason
Lockport, Apr. 1 (Lafourche)	**New Orleans, May 1**
Eugene Knox	Lizzie Belding Biller
Lizzie Belding Biller	Eugene Knox
J. E. McNair and Wife	James Duffy
F. L. Potts	Sidney J. Allen
James Duffy	T. C. Smith
H. Gleason	Walter & Burdette
P. H. Rowan	P. H. Rowan
S. J. Allen	J. DelVecho and Wife
T. C. Smith	Frank Sicolte and Wife
	J. E. McNair and Wife
	Wash Phillips

On reaching Donaldsonville and performing there two nights, the NEW SENSATION started down Bayou Lafourche. Despite the coming of Lent the showboat drew well but when rain or any cause prevented a good house, the Captain never failed to give Lent a part of the blame. The NEW

SENSATION played its first performance on Lafourche on March 20 and by the twenty-sixth at Labadieville the log entry for the day concluded "Keep out of here in Lent." Playing down the Bayou was seemingly pleasant enough and as usual the NEW SENSATION was brought about at Lockport to play back upstream. At Jamestown, the third day back out on the Mississippi, the log entry reads "Frost! last week of Lent, Thank God for these priest ridden Superstitious fanatics. We will lay up here until Sunday & try and commence again - try to get some place in Lent where they are not all Catholics." The Captain was not unfriendly toward the Catholic Church, and he had given a benefit for a priest and church the previous season. The priests were helpful and, knowing of the French's reputation, encouraged parishioners to attend performances on the showboat. But Lent, like anything that prevented a full house, was taken as a personal affront by Gus French.

The show closed that year on May 2 at LaPlace, a settlement about twenty-five miles above New Orleans. The NEW SENSATION had been out nine months to the day and had given one hundred ninety performances. Receipts, as given in the log on the page following the May 2 entry, were $9035, and averaged $47.55 per performance. Expenditures for state, parish, and town licenses were $241.50. This does not sound like big show business, but the difference is the changing value of money: quarters do not add up as fast as five dollar bills.

Before leaving this 1888-89 season there are some interesting log entries to be noted. On March 28 at St. John on Bayou Lafourche the total log entry, after the receipt of $75.00, is "good for Lent. Tronie makes a kick." Did the NEW SENSATION encounter the Trones here, for they left the showboat on November 2? Captain French himself was

in New Orleans; did he run into Mr. Trone in the city? Easier to explain are some other entries. John McNair went to New Orleans from Gayou Goula as the OAKLAND passed down and returned two days later on the OAKLAND with his engineer's license complete for the area the showboat played. At Plattenville, the third day on Bayou Lafourche, March 22, the log entry includes "pilot drunk all day." (It was necessary to hire a pilot as Captain French's license did not include Bayou Lafourche.) Evidently this upset the Captain considerably for four days later, March 26, he left for New Orleans, returning on April 7 at Napoleonville to write in the log "I got my license for Lafourche on my good conduct! pilot drunk as usual."

On the day when Captain French left Labadieville for New Orleans he wrote that "Callie was running the boat." Following entries give a similar indication: March 30 - "Callie the Boss!"; April 4 - "Capt. Callie;" and April 8 - "Capt. Callie." But on April 17 the log states "went to Orleans on train with Callie . . . got Callie's license as pilot, the first ever issued to a female."[10] That she knew the rivers was unquestionable and people from above Pittsburgh to below New Orleans could attest to her good character. As for signatures of recommendation, she had her choice of many more than necessary from packet and steamer captains who knew her and had observed her work. This license, originally for the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers between Cincinnati and New Orleans, was extended again and again until it encompassed all the Western Rivers. In 1895 she was granted a Master's license covering

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[10]This license of Callie's, it must be remembered, was as a pilot. Most sources admit that this was a first. Her Captain's, or Master's license could not claim to be a first, but is widely recognized as being second only to a Mrs. Mary Miller, wife of a famous Captain.

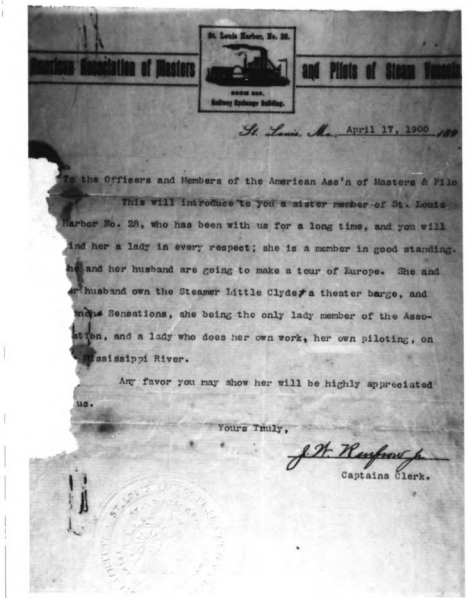
the entire inland waterways. If Callie Leach French became Captain French officially, she remained "Aunt Callie" to those who knew her until the day she died.

Following the closing at LaPlace on May 2, the NEW SENSATION went to New Orleans for four days. Then on May 7 it took tow with the JOE B. WILLIAMS for Cincinnati. With log entries mentioning "fine weather & nice moonlight nights," "beautiful days & moonlight nights," the journey north with the "Big Joe" was pleasant, despite some grumbling of a personal sort from the Captain. At any rate in the largely bracketed entry of May 22, the Captain could boast:

> Arrived this morning at 6 AM, in tow with Big Joe
> from New Orleans; landed at "Rail Road Wharf" with
> a crew of 8 people and three licensed officers
> J. E. McNair - Engineer
> Mrs. Callie L. French - Pilot!
> A. B. French - Master & Pilot

Then the Captain listed the eight on board - Sid Allen, Tom Smith, Frank Potts, Lizzie B. Biller, Mrs. Ida McNair & child & the kid "Lillie", Eugene Knox Steward and Cook.

With the usual busy days of boat refurbishing and getting a show together during the summer, Captain French ends the log book with "Must open on tomorrow July first 1889 - See. Thus ends a faithful record of a very unhappy year!" Many things should have made the Captain very happy, but failing health and age caused him to be disgusted. The truly unhappy thing about this final entry is that despite the inclusion of "Bought New Log Book at 1.80" on June 15, there is no record of it or even what happened to it.



St. Louis Harbor, No. 28.

American Association of Masters and Pilots of Steam Vessels

Railway Exchange Building.

St. Louis, Mo., April 17, 1900 189

To the Officers and Members of the American Ass'n of Masters & Pilo

This will introduce to you a sister member of St. Louis Harbor No. 28, who has been with us for a long time, and you will find her a lady in every respect; she is a member in good standing. She and her husband are going to make a tour of Europe. She and her husband own the Steamer Little Clyde, a theater barge, and Vaudeville Sensations, she being the only lady member of the Association, and a lady who does her own work, her own piloting, on the Mississippi River.

Any favor you may show her will be highly appreciated by us.

Yours Truly,

J. W. Rumford Jr.

Captains Clerk.

Figure # 33

Testimonial Letter for Captain Callie French

This letter is an example of the respect that Callie French elicitted from associates. (Original letter, GHWC)

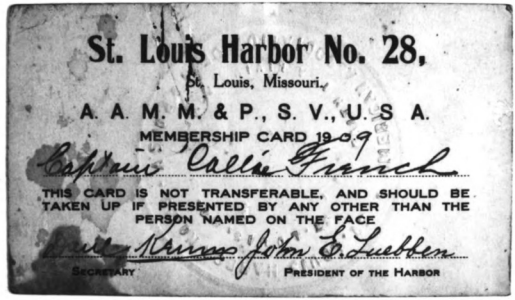


Figure # 34

Captain Callie French's Membership Card

The date of this card, 1909, would indicate that Callie French kept her membership (and probably her license) up to date even after she was no longer piloting or in command of a boat. (Original card, GHWC)

PART II, Chapter 6 - The Captains French

There are many log entries of the summer of 1889 (the last entries in the extant log) that are interesting but some are of greater consequence. On June 11 Captain French wrote "got up the first talk about the C. O., John came home from the country & we went to look at the C. O." Each of the next two days entries had similar statements: "went up to see the C. O. in the tug" and "Seen Mr. Longworth's agent about the C. O., call Monday." Six days after this last entry, the Captain entered "I went to see Mr. Duber the owner of the Olivette. He told me to set my price - She is too large for me. Seen Mr. Ellard & he will give me an answer about the C. O. on Monday."

The C. O. was a trim steam stern-wheeler which had been built by Judge Longworth of Cincinnati.[1] It is reasonable to assume that Captain French was seeking a new towboat, as the little SENTINEL, although it had given good service, was capable of little more than maneuvering the NEW SENSATION at a landing. On seeing the C. O. the Captain must have fallen in love with it as he went to see it three days in a row, twice on the same day. According to John McNair's description it was indeed a striking craft:

> Her pilot house roof was decorated with carved wood of fancy and intricate design, with a huge pair of antlers in front. From the center stood a pole with a large globe on top, on which a bronze eagle perched. Inside, the helm was made of the finest hardwood, hand carved and inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl. Behind the pilot house was a single feathered smokestack. Her

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[1]Judge Longworth was the father of Nicolas Longworth who became Speaker of the House of Representatives and married Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice.

> bell had been specially made of an alloy containing eighty melted-down silver dollars. By comparison with this boat, the NEW SENSATION looked plain.[2]

Judge Longworth had been present when the ship's bell was cast and he intended to add one hundred silver dollars. The foundry workers stopped him from putting more silver into the molten metal, saying that it would affect the tone of the bell.

The most intriguing thing about this boat (the dealing and actual purchase date of the C. O. is not known) was the name itself. Since it had been constantly in Judge Longworth's ownership, the letters of the name could not mean Chesapeake and Ohio, nor Cincinnati, Ohio, as many thought, including the McNairs. The true story was told to Callie, along with the story about the bell, by Judge Longworth himself and became a favorite story of the McNair family.

When a school boy, Mr. Longworth was very enamoured of a classmate named Sue. On trying to write a note to her, he realized he didn't know how to spell her name, but knowing that "D" and "O" spelled "do" he began his verbal assignation with dear c o. (Small wonder he became a judge with such a logical mind.) On growing to adulthood these two former classmates were married and the note had been saved all these years. As Mr. Longworth achieved the means and decided to build a pleasure craft for his wife, C O became her registered name.

If, as John McNair said, the C O made the NEW SENSATION look plain, it was soon to tow a larger and more beautiful showboat. At least this new tow made for an uplifting beginning to the 1889-90 season.[3]

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[2]Interview with John McNair, Calumet Plantation, Columbia, Alabama, March 28, 1948.

[3]The disposition of the SENTINEL is unknown.

In the showboat season of 1889-90 a family showboat began operation on the Ohio River. Little is known of the operation but it performed as the "Ford Family Shows" and there was evidently several such showboats.[4] During this season the NEW SENSATION encountered a family show traveling by shantyboat. The Gee family was large - father, mother, four daughters, two sons, and an adopted boy and an adopted girl. This group floated from town to town playing ashore in halls or theatres. Captain French liked this musical family act and took the entire family into the NEW SENSATION company. The houseboat was tied to the NEW SENSATION and Gees continued to live aboard it. Sid Allen states that the Gee's music was so well liked that the NEW SENSATION played to capacity houses every night and that the season was the French's most prosperous. Sid Allen may have been prejudiced, for just as company member Frank Potts married Kate Gee, Sid married Maude Gee on June 10, 1890.[5]

In the spring of 1890, at Hawesville, Kentucky, Captain C. F. Breidenbach built the largest and most decorated showboat that had been seen on the rivers to that time.[6] Breidenbach was owner, in partnership with James J. Hennen, of a shingle mill at Hawesville. He bought a track of standing timber to be used in making shingles. Some of the lumber was unsuitable for shingles so the Captain decided to build a showboat.[6] This is a strange reason for building a showboat

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[4]Re "Ford Family Shows", see Forrest L. Crutchfield, "Lower Ohio," Waterways Journal, LXI, 42, (January 17, 1948), p. 14.

[5]Sid Allen's "History", (GHWC).

[6]From a letter from Mrs. C. F. Breidenbach, June 28, 1949, it is known that Charles Ford Breidenbach was born at Hawesville, Kentucky on June 20, 1857 and died at Evansville, Indiana on November 20, 1932. (GHWC)



Figure # 35

Maude Gee Allen

Whether this picture was taken before or after Miss Gee married Sid Allen cannot be discerned. As Maude Gee she was with the NEW SENSATION, as was the rest of her family, for the 1889-90 season, and she and her husband, Sidney John Allen, were with the Frenches for many more seasons.

although other stagestruck men entered showboating with tangible reasons not much greater, i. g., A. B. French. Too, if lumber were unfit for shingles, could it have made a very water-worthy boat? In all probability Captain Breidenbach had seen the NEW SENSATION and the excess lumber became an excuse, not the deep seated reason, for the building of the handsome showboat. Estimates of her size vary - seating from five hundred to seven hundred, but any such figure would have made it a giant alongside the NEW SENSATION.

Breidenbach named his new boat the NEW FLOATING THEATORIUM. It was doubledecked throughout with a guard all the way around both decks. It was plain relative to what it would later look like, but quite an advancement from the NEW SENSATION or any other showboat of the day. Inside the auditorium had good seating, a highly decorated proscenium and stage, and an orchestra pit.

Captain Breidenbach organized a company and started down the Ohio and Mississippi. But as business was not good he decided that showboating was not for him, so he closed the season at Donaldsonville, Louisiana and put the THEATORIUM up for sale.[7] Captain French bought it and, in so doing, effectively eliminated a competitor and acquired a new boat large enough to deal with his expanding patronage and decorative enough to match the C O. Changing the name to FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, adding an ornamental pilot house, and putting more cut-out woodwork between the posts of the upper guard, the new showboat resembled one of the more expensive lace Valentines of the nineties. When all of this

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[7]Information on C. F. Breidenbach and the THEATORIUM given here from interview with a brother of this showboat owner, Sam Breidenbach, Hawesville, Kentucky, June 17, 1949. (GHWC)

Figure # 36

The NEW FLOATING THEATORIUM

There is no date on the original photograph from which this picture was taken. It would have to be from the year 1890 as this was the only year that Captain Breidenbach had the boat, and after French bought it, the name was changed.

On a first look, it does not resemble later pictures as FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, but many changes were made after the change of ownership.

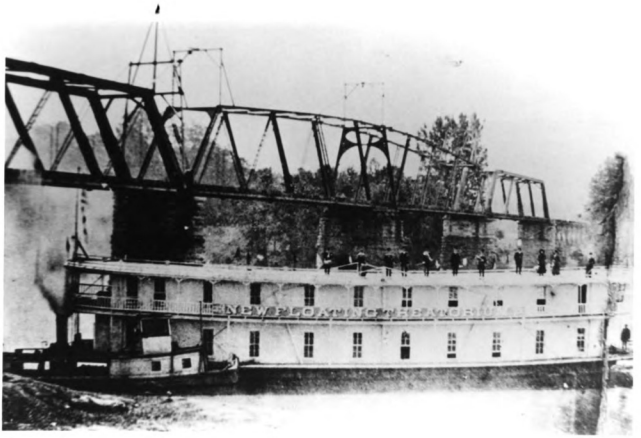


Figure # 36

The NEW FLOATING THEATORIUM

refurbishing took place is not known, for most pictures of this boat are from a time when the Frenches had two boats (after 1895) or when this boat was owned by Captain Price.

With this new NEW SENSATION, which combined with the C O to be the pride of the rivers, Captain French no longer had any use for the old showboat. It was sold to John McNair, who took as partners W. B. Orke and Harry Armstrong, who had both been performers/crew on the NEW SENSATION. They remodeled the boat, extending her Texas deck to make it double-decked throughout, putting a railing around the upper guard and removing the pilot house. It was renamed the VOYAGEUR. The refurbishing of this boat was done at Cincinnati and the boat worked its way to Paducah. There John McNair and some of the company returned to the new NEW SENSATION to work for a while to make sufficient money to do additional work to the boat. This venture lasted less than two years, only one real season, at which time the boat was sold to be used as an excursion or pleasure boat on the bayous; the towboat, the BESSIE SILER, that had been used for the VOYAGEUR was sold with the showboat.

This was the only real separation between the Frenches and the McNairs, but when the families were back together again there were four McNairs instead of three: Clarkie Ann McNair was born in January of 1891.[8]

Captain French was not long in acquiring still another NEW SENSATION. As noted previously, Eugene Robinson, a showman and museum operator in New Orleans, had had two very pretentious boats built by the Howard Ship Yards in 1888. The two boats, one a theatre and the other a museum, traveled with their tow as a fleet. The story of the Robinson

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[8]Interview with the McNairs, idem., and letter from Clarkie McNair, August 9, 1947 (GHWC).



Figure # 37

The VOYAGEUR

This boat was the completely rebuilt and refurbished FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, the second of Captain French's showboats. Under Orke, McNair and Armstrong it had a brief career, finally being sold to be used as an excursion boat.

boat is best told by the McNairs as they remember it being told by Callie French. In the June 10, 1888 entry of his log Captain French had written "Eugene Robinson's Big Blow Out is here and about ready to open." Callie's story is as follows:

> We were coming down the Ohio and saw two large boats at Jeffersonville, Indiana and knew that they were the ones built by the Eugene Robinson syndicate in New Orleans. /According to the log the NEW SENSATION was being towed up river./ So we decided to land and look them over. We went up the stage plank and there was a big negro dressed in white, with brass buttons and all, and he never moved. Mr. French said "Howdy, Boss. We are from the showboat below, and we came to look over your outfit." The negro didn't move but said "No admission."
>
> It flew all over Captain French, I could see, . . .
>
> In 1895, in the spring, we were at Jeanerette, Louisiana, and the Captain got a telegram from a friend of his in Louisville. It read "Robinson's boat will sell at auction Friday afternoon. Come." In half an hour he was dressed and had his grip and on the way to New Orleans to catch the night train. We had no time to talk it over, whether it was advisable or not, but he acted - that was the way he did things.
>
> Friday evening - the next evening - I received a telegram, "Have bought the Robinson boat. Now what? A. B. French"[9]

Now Captain French found himself with two fine large boats. The Robinson boat was not as decorative on the outside as the NEW SENSATION (the Breidenbach THEATORIUM.) It had no upper guards, except for an upper deck front porch and the only really decorative feature was a large octagonal pilot house with a bridge and observation roof. The seating was seven hundred, the largest know at that time and the auditorium was little short of magnificent. There were box seats above and below on either side of the proscenium, enclosed by decorative railings and drapery and surmounted by Greek pediments.

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[9]The substance of this is taken from a letter from Callie French to Ida McNair shortly before her death in 1935, now the possession of Clarkie McNair, obtained through interview with the McNairs, idem.



Figure # 38

The Band of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION (No. 1)

Like most of the extant photographs of the French's showboats, no date can be ascertained for this one. Because John McNair can be identified, standing center, it is believed to be before 1895, before the acquisition of the Robinson boat.

Figure # 39

Group picture from FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

What may appear to be a photographic portrait of a large nautical family is really a cast picture from FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, but which NEW SENSATION is a mystery. It is known for sure that Ida McNair is the first "sailor" on the left in the second row and that Clarkie is in the lower right with the large hat and ribbons. The McNair family believe this to be from late in 1893, which would mean that it was taken aboard the Breidenbach boat.



Figure # 39

Grou p picture from FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

Figure # 40

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION and the RITH

This photograph of the NEW SENSATION being towed by the RUTH is believed to be from around 1897. This was the Breidenbach boat and logic would have it that this picture is later than 1896 since up until that time, when the C O was lost, the RUTH towed the Robinson boat.

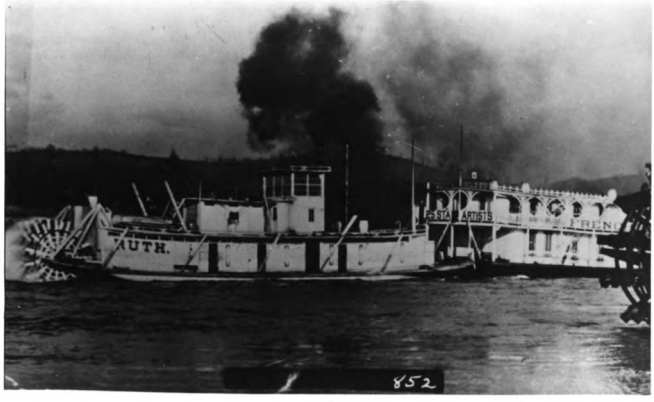


Figure # 40

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION and the RUTH

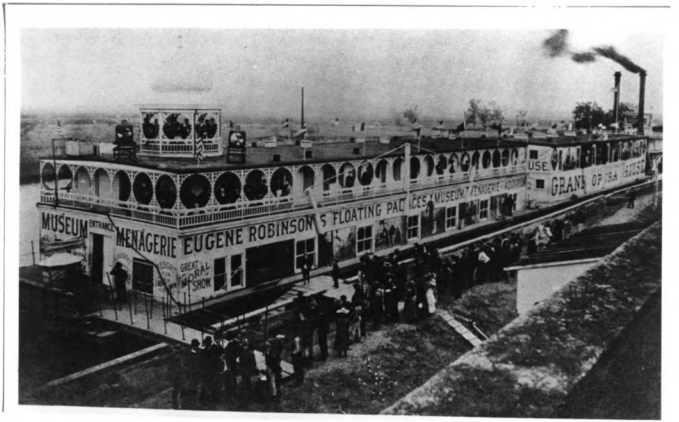


Figure # 41

Eugene Robinson's Floating Palaces

These boats were built in 1888. Captain French bought the theatre boat, the one on the right in the picture; he redecorated it and operated it as the NEW SENSATION No. 2.

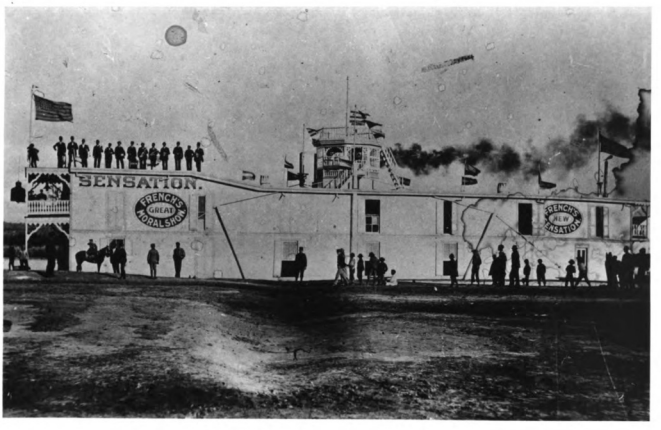


Figure # 42

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2 in 1896

This is the earliest extant photograph of the Robinson boat under French ownership. When the pilot house was added, the front roof raised, etc. is not known.

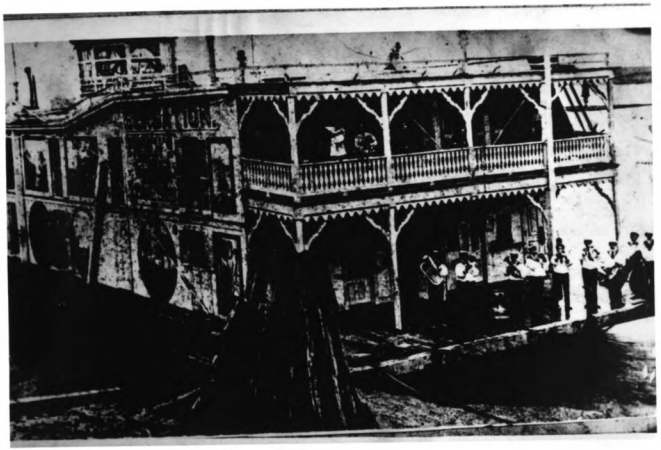


Figure # 43

Front view of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2

No date can be ascertained for this photograph but the painting would place it in the latter 1890's since it operated earlier, as in Figure #42, with only the name on the side.



Figure # 44

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 1

Although it was the third boat to bear the name, this boat (originally Breidenbach's THEATORIUM) operated as "No. 1." It was to have one of the longest careers in showboat history, but not always under the French banner.

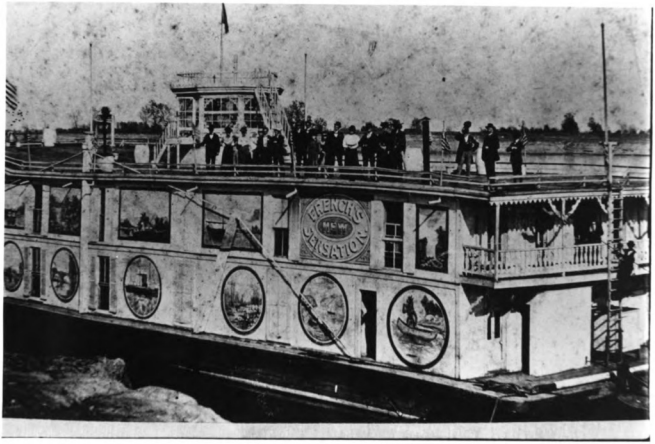


Figure # 45

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2

Although it was the fourth boat to bear the name, this boat, (originally built by Eugene Robinson) operated as "No. 2." This is actually a rear view of the boat, but a view that was often used in advertising. This boat operated simultaneously with the "No. 1" until it burned.

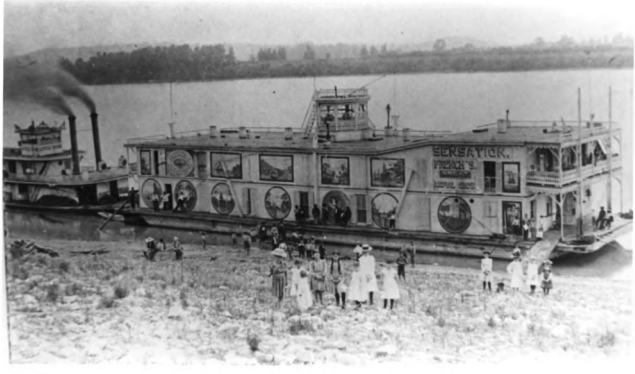


Figure # 46

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2 towed by the LITTLE CLYDE

Because of the presence of the LITTLE CLYDE this photograph most likely dates from the latter 1890's, after the loss of the C O.

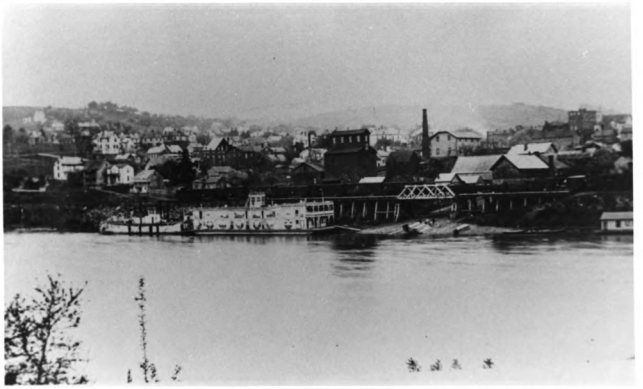


Figure # 47

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2 across the river

Even though no great detail can be discerned in this ph otograph because of the distance, it still shows that this showboat was quite imposing. (Compare with the second NEW SENSATION, Figure # 31.)

The orchestra pit was large, and high above it and out over the audience were suspended trapeze and other apparatus for aerial acts. The stage was spacious and equipped with sets of stock wings and drops. Here was a boat that could accommodate any kind of show that Captain French might wish to present.

The Captain could operate both of his showboats now because Callie was not only a licensed pilot but a master as well. He hired an artist to paint large pictures on the side of the cabin above and below, much like the first two showboats he had owned, and also in huge letters under the name of the boat was "French's Great Moral Show."

With two showboats, and unwilling to have any other name but SENSATION, the older boat (according to French ownership) became the NEW SENSATION No. 1 and the Robinson boat became the NEW SENSATION No. 2. The NEW SENSATION No. 1 went out with Callie as Captain and John McNair as engineer, while Gus French took the NEW SENSATION No. 2, with Ida McNair as stage manager. This splitting of families had a certain logic: Captain French would not likely have let anyone else take out the largest showboat on the rivers, and because Ida had always stage managed, organized, and rehearsed shows, she was the obvious person to go with the boat capable of the most elaborate production. Wiley P. McNair, John's younger brother who had begun his career on the VOYAGEUR, was on the "No. 2" as engineer, since the steamboat RUTH was purchased as the extra towboat.

Whatever the initial relegation of the families, separate companies were hired for each of the NEW SENSATIONS. Evidently the McNairs and Frenches switched as Captains and managers a great deal. The matter of the families on the two different boats was expressed thusly by

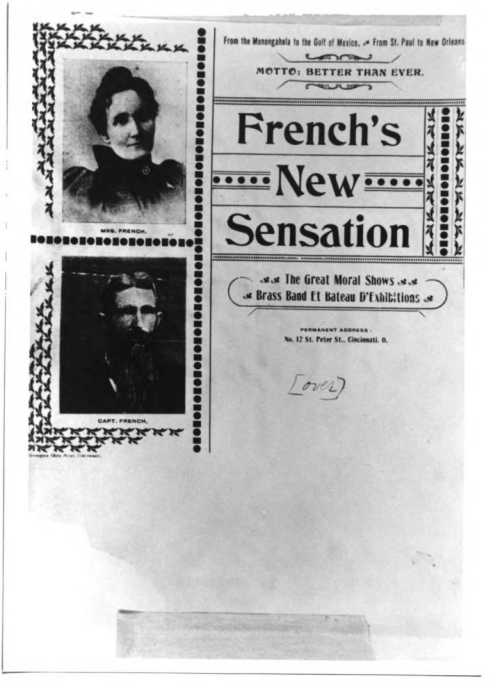


Figure # 48

Flyer for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This flyer is believed to be from the early 1890's before the acquisition of two showboats and before French and McNair were in partnership. Too, the permanent address is Cincinnati.



Figure # 49

Flyer for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

The above flyer is obviously from the latter 1890's since the interior of the "No. 2" is pictured and because of the joint listing of proprietorship. "Hall House" was the French's home in Columbia, Alabama.

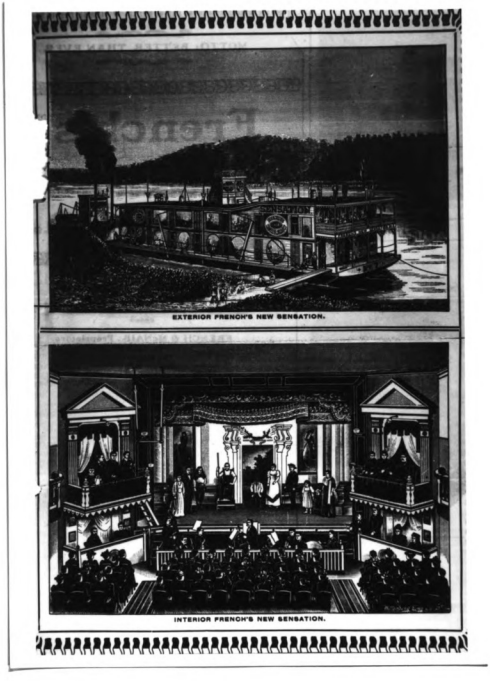


Figure # 50

Flyer for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This is one side of a flyer for the NEW SENSATION No. 2, depicting both exterior and interior. The reverse side of the flyer is of the same format as that in Figure # 48 except that the upper picture is Captain French and the lower picture of Ida McNair.



Figure # 51

Ida Fitch McNair

This picture of Ida McNair is the one most used for publicity during the 1890's when the McNairs were co-proprietors of the NEW SENSATIONS.

Clarkie McNair:

> . . . but as for the rest of us, we were shifted back and forth to suit the fancy of Captain French. . . saving the season of Uncle Tom when we had to stay put, we were changing constantly. Sometimes Aunt Callie, my mother, Frenchie and myself would have a few months together and then we would swap partners. I can remember once that Captain and Mrs. French had one boat while my father and family ran the other boat. It is all very confusing but you will have to admit that life with Papa French was never monotonous.[10]

Here it is necessary to backtrack some years in order to put the Frenches' showboating operations into perspective and to grasp the full scope of it. The final entry in the extant log of Captain French's includes "Must open the New Boat on tomorrow July first 1889 - See." (The "new boat" refers to the second NEW SENSATION.) But also according to the log Callie had left Cincinnati by train on June 26 to visit relatives in Jackson, Ohio. Callie's friendship book has notes written to her from friends on July 5 and 12 from Richmondale and Springer. There is a note as late as August 28 inscribed at Coalton, Ohio. Obviously the Captain did not get the season underway till much later than he intended.

As mentioned, the new log book that Captain French spoke of buying is lost but in the G. Harry Wright Collection is an old ledger from the McNairs which was payrool and receipt book for the Frenches in the nineties. The pages are yellow and brittle with age, and to add to the difficulty of deciphering, Callie turned the ledger into a recipe book. On top of payroll lists and dates are written, or pasted, recipes for drop cakes, date roll, Queen pudding, and even "brass polish a la Dodsworth." The entries that can be made out are not in chronological

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[10]Letter from Clarkie McNair, August 9, 1947 (GHWC).

order, plus pages 39 through 48 and 60 through 80 are missing. Many entries of payroll are dated but do not state where the showboat was. The first entry to be decoded in this book is dated December 3, 1889 and the payroll includes many names that are well known from other seasons. From this book it is possible to plot out a general idea of the tours of the NEW SENSATION from 1889 through the latter part of 1894.[11]

Regardless when Captain French left Cincinnati in 1889 the NEW SENSATION was at Vidalia, Louisiana on March 11, 1890. On April 12 the showboat was "en route" on the Ohio River but was at Natchez by November 9 and in New Orleans on December 28. As the next payroll of the ledger was made in New Orleans on February 11, 1891, the showboat evidently went from New Orleans to Bayou Lafourche and then back to the city which had been developing as standard procedure. By June 1 of 1891 the NEW SENSATION was in Cincinnati and on the Monongahela in July and August; by September 6 it was at Coalburgh, West Virginia above Charleston on the Kanawha. From this point there is a gap of over a year for which no true itinerary can be pieced together.

In December of 1892 the NEW SENSATION was at Germainia, Louisiana between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and played Bayou Lafourche in January and early February. A March 24, 1893 payroll was entered aboard the Steamer C O on the Mississippi and what appears to be a final seasonal payoff at Cincinnati on April 10. During June an entry was made at Brownsville, Pennsylvania on the Monongahela and by September 10 the showboat was at Tell City, Indiana. Here follows what must have been a simple mistake in the recording of the dates, for the dates are

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[11]Clarkie McNair and Mr. Wright attempted to steam loose the pasted on recipes with little success.

the clearest in the ledger. From Tell City the NEW SENSATION went to Rosiclare, Illinois, a quite logical succession of stops, but there is a payment recorded at Morgantown, West Virginia on October 11. It is doubtful that the C O could have made 890 miles up the Ohio to Pittsburgh and then 100 miles up the Monongahela in five days, particularly since the NEW SENSATION was at Bayou Sara in Louisiana by November 2. The new years of 1894 saw the NEW SENSATION at White Castle and in New Orleans by February 6.

The spring months of 1894 are a blank but the next decipherable payrolls in the ledger are on July 8 and 11 at Montrose and Fort Madison, Iowa, both between Keokuk and Burlington on the Upper Mississippi. This is the first record of the NEW SENSATION playing that far up the Mississippi, although Captain McNair remembered playing as far north as Prairie du Chien, Wisconson.[12] It is very possible that the showboat played that far north this summer for the next entry is at Dallas, Illinois on August 4, which would have given time enough to go much farther up the Mississippi and back. The curious things about the entries at Dalla, Illinois, St. Louis on August 23, and Grand Tower, Illinois is that the payrolls are listed under John McNair's name.

Unfortunately there is no record of exactly where and when the NEW SENSATIONS played after 1895-96 and the running of two showboats. With new showboats and more powerful tugs, the Frenches and McNairs expanded their territory more and more. The Monongahela had been regular territory since 1882 as far as Rices Landing, Pennsylvania and the Kanawha was first played in 1885. By playing to Morgantown, West

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[12]Letter from Clarkie McNair, quoting her father, August 9, 1947, ibid.

Virginia (the Monongahela is navigable to Fairmont) in the nineties, NEW SENSATIONS would have played West Virginia on two rivers, three counting the considerable West Virginia frontage on the Ohio River. An entry in the payroll ledger was made at Pekin, Illinois, which is just below Peoria on the Illinois River. That the Illinois was played regularly is witnessed by the fact that the last NEW SENSATION gave its last performance there before being sold. Many veterans of the rivers speak of the NEW SENSATION(s) playing the Kentucky, Muskingum, and Green Rivers, but the Frenches and McNairs left no record, just as there is none for the Tennessee and Cumberland. The bayou country of Louisiana was always favorite playing territory.

The letterheads/flyers of the nineties for the NEW SENSATION(s) begin "From the Monongahela to the Gulf of Mexico - From St. Paul to New Orleans." This would mean that the NEW SENSATION(s) played in fourteen states beginning on the Monongahela just after snow was off and ice was out, catching the miners after a winter's work and having had no place to spend their money; this was in large part true also of the Upper Ohio and Kanawha. The lower Ohio and Mississippi could then be played as crops were in and/or as crops were harvested. A season so planned would put the showboats in cotton and sugar cane country at a time when there was harvest money in the populace's pocket. This became the standard itinerary for the majority of showboats.

The nineties were the peak years for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION(s). The pioneering days were over. There were no more cramped quarters; the company members, now far more numerous than in former days, had comfortable lodging. With the steamboats properly manned, most performers rarely had to help with the actual operation of the boats.

This gave more time for socializing with friends who visited the boats and for the Frenches, McNairs, and company members to go ashore for visits, lunches, and other social occasions. A picture from the nineties, labeled "Coffee Time," shows Callie French and Ida McNair sitting in comfortable chairs beside a table on which sits a china coffee service. Callie has her sewing and Ida has a book in her lap. Except that one can see that the walls are of wood, it could be a scene from a middle-class home of the time. Indeed it was home to the Frenches and McNairs, as spacious and well-ordered as those occupied by land-lovers in the cities the NEW SENSATION visited. For the children on board life was exciting but comfortable, rising each morning to look out on a different, but not necessarily unfamiliar, front yard.

Clarkie McNair remembers pony rides on shore, playing in the kitchen, or even in the engine room, and working on lessons. Usually in September the McNair children went back to Columbia, Alabama for the winter to attend school. But if no one could be spared to take the children home, Ida and/or Callie added the tasks of schoolma'am to their daily schedules. Clarkie admits to not having liked the NEW SENSATION No. 2 as well as No. 1 or the last NEW SENSATION because there was no guard on which she could run and play.[13]

At night with the lights on and the auditorium filled with anxious people, Frenchie and Clarkie really came alive. Ida began teaching Frenchie to dance as soon as she was strong enough to walk. By the age of four she had her own act, a skirt dance. She continued this act until she was too big to be billed "Little Frenchie." Clarkie made

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[13]Personal interview with Clarkie McNair, Calumet Plantation, Columbia,Alabama, August 17, 1975.



Figure # 51

Coffee Time on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

Callie French and Ida McNair tried to enjoy a few moments of quiet each day in the living room. The McNair family identified the room as aboard the NEW SENSATION No. 1 but no date is known.



Figure # 52

"Little Frenchie" and her skirt dance (Age 4)



Figure # 53

"Little Frenchie" and her skirt dance (Age 10)



Figure # 54

"Little Clarkie" and "Little Frenchie"



Figure # 55

Clarkie McNair as "Little Eva"

Clarkie McNair played "Little Eva" in Uncle Tom's Cabin during the summer of 1898. This was the only time the French showboats played straight drama; after this summer they returned to variety.

her stage debut at the age of eighteen months. This act was called "Black Art" and was an illusion act, the idea for which had come from a magician who worked for Robinson's Museum in New Orleans and on the Robinson FLOATING PALACE. The act was first tried on the VOYAGEUR.

According to the McNairs the curtain opened on a black velour void. Suddenly there appeared at center stage a man dressed in a white satin costume of the eighteenth century, complete with powdered wig. This was Ida. Then white globes appeared in the air and floated into the hands of the performer. He (Ida) juggled them expertly and then tossed them into the air where they vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. White tables appeared at each side of the stage with tall white vases on them. White rabbits appeared in the air and jumped into the vases, but when the magician turned the vases upside down, there were no rabbits. At the height of the act an enormous white egg floated in from one side, hovered a moment in the air, then settled to the floor center stage. When the magician tapped the egg with a wand, out scrambled a tiny Cupid carrying a doll. This was Clarkie McNair, who, after executing a deep curtsey, walked professionally into the wings. Later in the nineties Clarkie joined her sister, singing and dancing as "Little Frenchie" and "Little Clarkie," an act that was famous up and down the rivers.[14] The juvenile stars were rarely out of bed when the show ended. They performed early in the show and then were hustled off to bed, so as to replenish energy for the next exciting day. No wonder Clarkie once wrote "I still don't like houses."[15]

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[14]Interview with the McNairs, idem.

[15]Letter from Clarkie McNair, August 14, 1950 (GHWC).

Only once in all the years on the rivers did the Frenches turn from their policy of variety and sketches. This was during the summer of 1898 and the play was Uncle Tom's Cabin. Clarkie McNair played Little Eva as the NEW SENSATION played the Ohio, Upper Mississippi and the Illinois. Eventually the show had to be struck from the repertory as the showboat neared Cairo: Uncle Tom's Cabin did not do well on the Lower Mississippi.

Of all the remarkable people that Clarkie can recall from her showboat days, Eugene Knox is one of her most pleasant memories. According to Clarkie, Eugene came to the NEW SENSATION when Frenchie was eight months old, as cook.[16] As Frenchie was born in 1887, this would mean that Gene came to the Frenches early in 1888 when the showboat was in Bayou Lafourche.[17] He had grown up near Thibodeaux, where his mother was a lady's maid to a Madame LeBlanc, and he could speak French, both pure and Cajun. Consequently he was a valuable

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[16]Letters from Clarkie McNair, April 24 & June 4, 1950 (GHWC).

Eugene Knox was not the first cook on the NEW SENSATION. The log entry for March 14, 1887 lists as the last name on the payroll: "cook - Tilda." This was while Ida McNair was in Texas with the newborn Frenchie, and Tilda was evidently hired to relieve Callie of some housekeeping duties. Tilda's last name was Burke according to the roster of June 1, 1887. On the day before the last performance of the first NEW SENSATION, Captain French entered "here the boys pulled Tilda in the river for fun," and the final entry still lists her. In starting south from Cincinnati with the new boat, she is not listed.

[17]Eugene is first mentioned in the log on March 19, 1888 as a name among others who helped with a difficult landing. He is first listed on a payroll on April 2. On February 15, in traveling the length of Bayou Lafourche to the Gulf of Mexico, the Captain mentioned stopping for the night "below Mr. Leblanc's." On returning from the Gulf there is no mention of hiring anyone; but four pages (fifteen days) are missing from the log. It is likely he was taken on during this time (February 27 to March 13) which would account for his name being mentioned on March 19.

The connection between the Captain's reference to stopping at Leblanc's and the lady for whom Eugene worked is conjecture.

translator. It was Gene who settled many fights and seating arguments, particularly in the bayous where dark complected people could easily be confused with light negros and seated "improperly." And it was Gene, completely encased in black velour, who floated Ida's white objects in the "Black Art" illusion and who levitated Little Eva heavenward.

It was with the children perhaps that Gene was most useful. He loved children and became a natural nurse to Frenchie and Clarkie. He watched over them at play, took them for walks and pony rides ashore, repaired toys, and, by Clarkie's own admission, completely spoiled the McNair children. He was playmate, confidant, and the only nurse the two girls ever had. Eugene Knox remained with the Frenches and McNairs until the last NEW SENSATION was sold.[18]

In March of 1897 a fleet of boats was working its way up the Mississippi. The steamer OAKLAND was at the center under full power. Tied to one side was the NEW SENSATION No. 1 with the C O behind, and on the other side was the NEW SENSATION No. 2 with the towboat RUTH at its stern. The Frenches and McNairs were on their annual trip northward, bound for Pittsburgh. Both the towboats had steam up in order to make better time. Although each of the French towboats could have made the upstream trip, it was easier and saved some wear on the smaller boats to tie to a large steamer. At Hickman, Kentucky, an eddy of swirling waters caught the C O. When her lines parted she capsized and sank; no one was hurt but the boat was a total loss. This was the only accident to marr the decade of the nineties, and the C O was the first boat that Captain French had lost. She was not to be the last.

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[18]Letters from Clarkie McNair, April 24 & June 4, 1950, ibid.



Figure # 56

Eugene Knox

Eugene Knox was cook, nurse, handyman, strongman, and general factotum on the NEW SENSATION(s). As helpful as he was to the Frenches and the McNairs, he was "best friend" to the McNair children.

The following month, at Leavenworth, Indiana, the Captain bought the steamer MARY STEWART to replace the C O.[19]

With the beginning of the new century the star of the Frenches' was at its zenith. There position of leadership on the river was still unchallenged: the NEW SENSATION(s) were the monarchs of the showboat waters. Only two others had ventured any real competition - Captain Price and Captain E. E. Eisenbarth of Marietta - and it must be admitted, in all fairness, that they were doing well. But the careers of these men were to peak later; at the time the French name was supreme.

But Gus French was not a well man. Ailments that had bothered him for years were growing more and more serious, more painful and debilitating. He decided that he and Callie should take a rest and make a tour of Europe. The Exposition was in progress in Paris and that was to be the focal point of the trip. In the spring of 1900 Captain French sold the NEW SENSATION No. 1 to his old rival Captain Price, along with the towboat MARY STEWART. The NEW SENSATION No. 2 and the tug LITTLE CLYDE were leased to John and Ida McNair.[20] They were to pay the Frenches twenty dollars per performance for the use of the boats. John McNair took the NEW SENSATION up the river, and Captain French, after settling affairs at Cincinnati, joined the McNairs at Pittsburgh, where they organized a show for the season. Then he and Callie took the train for Washington for a short visit before going to New York. They sailed for Europe on May 26, 1900.[21]

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[19]Interview with the McNairs, idem.

[20]When and why the LITTLE CLYDE replaced the RUTH is unknown.

[21]Interview with the McNairs, idem.

Captain French kept a diary of their European jaunt and it is full of enthusiastic descriptions of castles and landmarks.[22] In Edinburgh he wrote "Fine depot, or booking station as they call it here - but if you want a locked box in the lavoratory it takes a penny to open the door, a kind of nickle in the slot affair." Many papers and periodicals carried stories stating that Captain and Mrs. French were touring Europe to find new acts and novelties for the showboat, but seemingly they thought little of such things. Not once during the trip does the diary mention the NEW SENSATION or the McNairs, or any correspondence between them. On August 20, as they were leaving Europe the Captain wrote: "Left Gibralter at 5:30. Had dinner at six and stood on deck at seven looking at the last of Spain and Africa, taking our last look at the Old Country! Farewell to lands of Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Spain, ten of the old countries in three months. Who can do better or see more in that time?"

Upon arrival back in the United States the Frenches tarried a few days in New York, visited friends in and around Pittsburgh, then went to the home of relatives near Cincinnati. It was while visiting Walter Dolen in the village of Hamlet that a telegram arrived with the news that the NEW SENSATION had burned to the water line at Elmwood Landing in Louisiana on the Atchafalaya River.

A new act had joined the company that day, a two man comedy team. Ida McNair, as stage manager, remembered auditioning the act. At one point in the act one of the men ran on stage wearing a fireman's helmet and carrying a small ladder and a bucket of water, as the other man entered wearing a large hat which was on fire. The "Fireman" placed

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[22] The diary is the property of Clarkie McNair.

the ladder against his burning friend, climbed it, and dowsed the fiery hat. As John was not feeling well, he was in bed and Ida was watching the evening show from their stateroom door at the rear of the balcony. As the fiery hat entered, the whole stage seemed to explode and burst into flame.

The audience which was not large that evening left quickly and without panic. John McNair realizing that the NEW SENSATION was doomed hurried to the LITTLE CLY DE, freed it from the showboat and moved it a safe distance away.[23] A boat whose superstructure is of wood with many coats of paint is highly combustible, and the fire on the NEW SENSATION was out of control the moment it started. Fortunately, the McNair children had left for Alabama just a day or so before to enter school; no lives were lost.

Because it was impossible to bank everyday, especially in the bayou country, money was kept in a safe in the McNair's room. This safe ended up in the bottom of the charred barge. When it was salvaged and opened the money was burned beyond use and some of the coins were melted together. However, the paper money was bundled and sent to the U. S. Treasury in Washington along with a report of the fire. On the word of the McNairs, backed by the Frenches' reputation, the government replaced a considerable portion of the burned currency.[24]

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[23]The logic of this maneuver, with a reversed situation, is the reason that no such showboat as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's ever existed. With the reasoning that the chances of fire starting in the engine room or with the boilers were greater than the showboat proper, the burning tow could be moved safely from the showboat to save the audience.

[24]Interview with the McNairs, idem., and letter from Clarkie McNair, June 4, 1950, loc. cit.
The amount was believed to be around $6000.

The coin was spendable and provided a means of survival for the McNairs for the days immediately following the fire. The company members lost no money for everyone wore moneybelts, but their only clothing was whatever costume they had been wearing for the evening's performance. The next day, after spending the night in various homes in the area, the women pieced together a respectable outfit for Ida, so that she could go to Baton Rouge to buy clothing.

Ida assumed that the live fire on the stage had made contact with a piece of scenery or drapery. But according to John McNair it was even more instantaneous. As the lighting aboard the NEW SENSATION was by gas, made aboard from gasolene, a leaking pipe or connection had filled the stage with fumes and the performer's hat caused the explosion. Ida stated that after the first flash she never saw the two performers again; evidently they realized they had set off the explosion and fire that in one blow took home, possessions and source of livlihood away from a whole theatre company.

Father Cartesier, a priest of Smoke Bend, Louisiana, who had been a friend of the Frenches and McNairs for years, came to the rescue. For some reason he owned an old showboat and he offered it to the McNairs, reinstalling seats that had been removed. The McNairs remembered doing very good business despite spending a lot of time pumping the bilge. The identity of this boat is unclear. Ida McNair remembered it having been purchased from the preist who had bought it from Captain Price. If this is true it could have been PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA, disposed of when Price bought the NEW SENSATION No. 1. The boat may have been leased from the priest and returned to him. Whatever its origins, while the McNairs operated it, it was called the

DAVID GARRICK. The important thing is the friendship and trust shown by the people of the area through the entire problem and that the DAVID GARRICK, inspite of gaping seams and a rickety cabin, carried the NEW SENSATION company from disaster to prosperity.[25]

In the meantime Captain French was searching for a new showboat, but after joining the McNairs on the DAVID GARRICK at White Castle, Louisiana for a few days, both Frenches went to their home, Hall House, in Columbia, Alabama. Late in January of 1901 the McNairs returned to Columbia to settle with Captain French; they had given one hundred twenty seven performances on the NEW SENSATION and forty-nine on the DAVID GARRICK. This settlement meant that the French-McNair showboat enterprise had come to an end. For the first time in twenty-two years there was not a NEW SENSATION on the rivers, and moreover, both families were several hundred miles from the rivers they loved so much.[26]

Gus French had every reason to retire. He was past sixty-eight and his health was growing worse daily; he did not need the money. Evidently an intense pride in the name and prestige he had built and maintained dictated the decision to build a new showboat. If Captain A. B. French could not run it, the Captain Callie French or Captain John McNair could.[27]

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[25]Interview with the McNairs, idem., and letter from Clarkie McNair, June 4, 1950, loc. cit.

[26]It must be remembered that Columbia, Alabama is located on the Chatahoochee River; Calumet Plantation overlooks this river, the land does, not the buildings.

[27]John McNair had received his pilot's license in 1892 when he took over the second NEW SENSATION, renamed the VOYAGEUR. An entry in Callie French's friendship book, dated January 11, 1892, extends good wishes from "J. E. McNair". It was written at Donaldsonville, Louisiana, and has a small clipping pasted on the page, probably from a New Orleans newspaper telling of the license.

Figure # 57

Production picture on the NEW SENSATION No. 1

The people in the photograph have been identified by Clarkie McNair as follows:

> On stage L to R - Dick Coleman, his wife Nellie Haydon (Team of Coleman & Haydon), Charles Olan, Ida McNair, Olan's partner (we think his name is Morrisey or something like that but cannot be sure), Marion & William Henry Whyte - man & wife. The child wonder is Frenchie

In the foreground is Gene, Callie French in the center, and Clarkie posing at the right.

Note the orchestra, the scenery, and the proscenium arch with boxes.



Figure # 57

Production picture on the NEW SENSATION No. 1

Figure # 58

Minstrel Circle on the NEW SENSATION No. 1

This picture is from the season of 1896-97 and shows the Minstrel Opening of the show. At the center is J. A. Coburn as the interlocutor. Mr. Coburn later toured the country with his own troupe - J. A. Coburn's Minstrels - to considerable acclaim.



Figure # 58

Minstrel Circle on the NEW SENSATION No. 1

Figure # 59

Auditorium and Stage of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2

This picture shows very well the elaborate stage and interior of the NEW SENSATION No. 2. Despite the fact that Captain French liked the fancy exterior of the NEW SENSATION No. 1, this boat was his favorite because it could handle almost any kind of elaborate production number.

Captain and Mrs. French are seated in the lower box, house left.

This photograph was used extensively for advertising, and not just for the NEW SENSATION No. 2, but for the whole name and aura of the Frenches and their position in river theatricals.

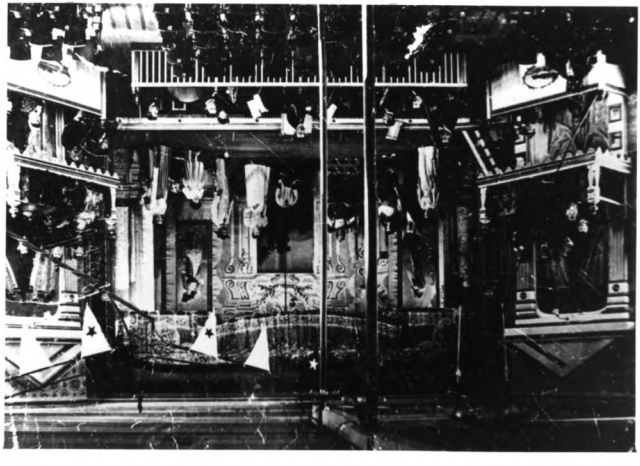


Figure # 59

Auditorium and Stage of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 2

Months of correspondence was carried on with shipbuilders and finally the Taylor Ship Yards at Higginsport, Ohio was chosen. On May 9, 1901 Captain French signed a contract with Mr. Taylor for the construction of a barge for $2800 and another with a Mr. Jones for the construction of the cabin for $3250. All stage equipment, seating, and accessories were to be purchased and installed by French and McNair.[27]

John McNair brought the LITTLE CLYDE up from the south and met Captain French at Madison, Indiana, where the towboat spent several days on the ways being made ready for the task of towing the new showboat. But the old Captain's physical condition was growing worse. On the day he arrived in Higginsport he wrote in his diary "I am just able to walk" and a few days later, "I am very sick and I know it." Finally, late in July, both Frenches took the train from Cincinnati to Alabama. They evidently kept in close touch with John McNair for on September 16, Captain French included the following in a letter to John at Higginsport:

> What have you done to the pilot house? Remember that the wheel at the Marine Ways, Eastern Avenue is ten feet from out to out, price $ 25 - two there, take your choice. The pilot house will have to be large enough to let you around both sides, with ease - and be sure the wheel stands well out that you can stand behind it to steer when backing - as you may have much of that to do, the boat being high. We do hope that you will have good luck in every way, and that the boat will suit you and the business still better than any we have had. Kindly remember that every person, white or black, in reserves or gallery, is entitled to a seat where he can see all parts of the stage without moving. There was a time! But now there are so many shows, that we must study the comfort of our patrons in order to keep in the lead - <u>first</u>, <u>best</u>.[29]

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[28] Interview with C. B. Williams and Foley Turner, Higginsport, Ohio, Sept. 5, 1947 (GHWC). The latter worked on the last NEW SENSATION.

[29] Letter to John McNair from A. B. French in possession of Clarkie McNair, copied March 24, 1948 (GHWC).

Figure # 60

A NEW SENSATION company

Where and when this picture was taken is a mystery. Callie's dress (Callie is just right of center leaning on the upturned tree roots) seems to be of the mid to latter nineties, but Captain French is not in the photograph. Ida McNair is seated forward on the log at the left, and John McNair is standing directly behind her. Eugene Knox is kneeling in the lower right.



Figure # 60

A NEW SENSATION company

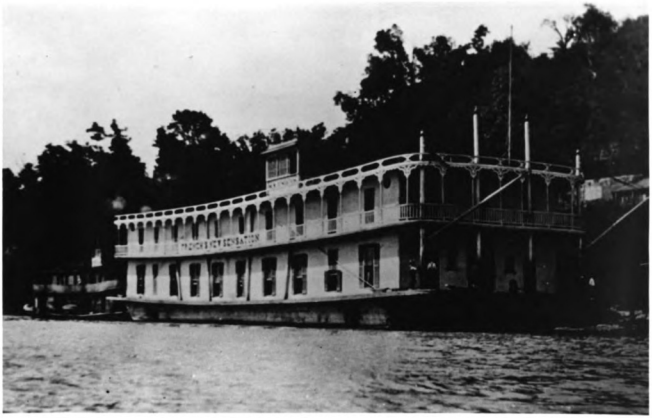


Figure # 61

The fifth and last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This picture is from the very first years that this boat was on the rivers. Even after the Frenches were gone from the rivers, this boat was to continue for nearly a quarter of a century.



Figure # 62

The last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION and the LITTLE CLYDE

Figure # 63

Interior of the last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

The view of the interior of the fifty NEW SENSATION above was taken from the rear of the front orchestra section of seating. The balcony would begin directly over the camera.

The more streamlined decor seems simpler than the other French showboats but equipment was superior. The setting on the stage is a stock "box" set, but actually made up of wings and a drop.

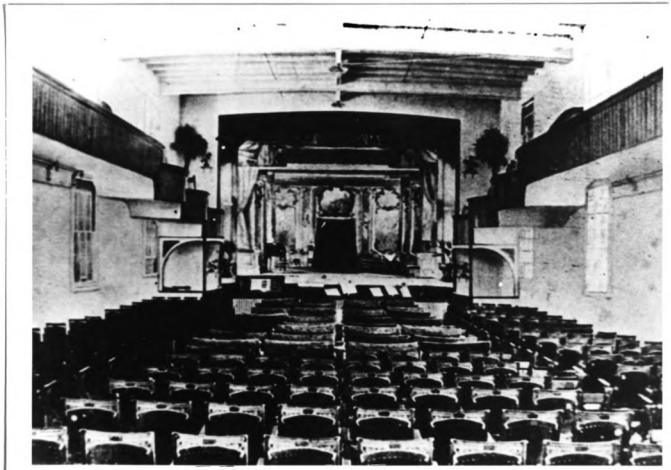


Figure # 63

Interior of the last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

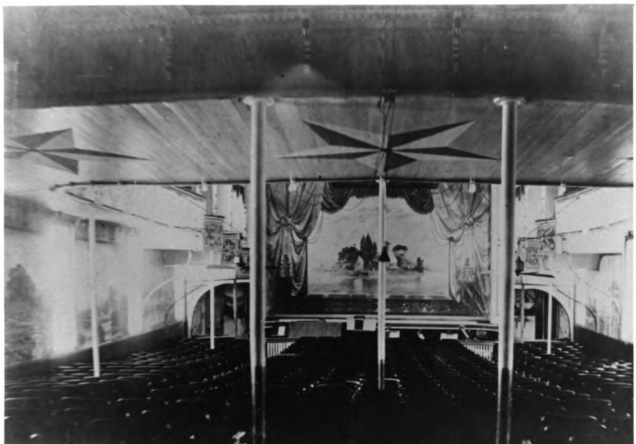


Figure # 64

Interior of the last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This view of the interior of the final NEW SENSATION was taken from under the balcony, near the rear of the auditorium.

The drop visible was one of a set of stock vaudeville drops.



Figure # 65

"Sailor Number"

This picture, and the pictures following, are all production pictures from the last FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION. It is believed that these pictures are from the 1905-06 season.



Figure # 66

"Swing Number"

Notice that the costumes in this picture are the same as those in Figure # 67.

Figure # 67

"Gypsy Number"

The costumes in this picture are the same as those in Figure # 66; either this is a later part of the same number or more likely another number using the same costumes. In the later case, the two numbers would never be played on the same night. If the numbers were even played at the same stop it would have been "going" and "coming" as on the Monongahela or Kanawha Rivers, or Bayous Lafourche and Teche.



Figure # 67

"Gypsy Number"



Figure # 68

"Dutch Girl Number"



Figure # 69

"I was strolling through the park, one day"



Figure # 70

Chorus Girls

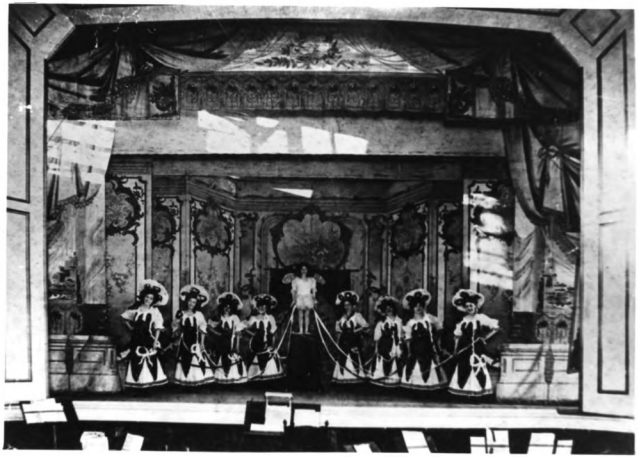


Figure # 71

Beginning of the Finale

This picture shows the same costumes as in Figure # 70, but the scenery is different. It is thought that his is the beginning of a final number, just before the men came back on.

John McNair stayed with the new showboat until she was completed. She was larger, better looking, and more luxuriously appointed than any NEW SENSATION before her. Seating nearly a thousand, she was 140 feet in length, with a beam of 42 feet, and double decked throughout. It was the first French boat to have electric lights and fans. The McNairs got the boat out ahead of the ice in the fall and played the remainder of the season in the south. Then in the spring of 1902 they took tow for Pittsburgh, organized a new show, then went up the Monongahela to open the season.

But here was a FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, having played one season and opening a second without either of the Captains French on board. Anxious to see the new boat, the Captain and Callie started north, despite his critical health. At Cincinnati he took a turn for the worse and he died there at the home of a cousin on May 8, 1902.

The telegram announcing the Captain's death reached the McNairs just before show time on the day that the NEW SENSATION was to give its first performance of the season at Charleroi, Pennsylvania. The news was kept from the actors and the audience until after the performance, when all joined to mourn the passing of a man known throughout the inland waters. Writing about him more than thirty years later, Callie said, "He was a self-made man. No schooling, but the best read man you would meet, one out of a thousand - could converse on any subject intelligently - quote page after page of Shakespeare - was a real cultured southern gentleman - did not countenance anything low or common. . . He was kind and tender hearted, fond of children, and I doubt if any man on the river had as many friends as Captain French."[30]

---

[30]Letter from Callie French to Ida McNair, loc. cit.

Doing what she felt the Captain would want, Callie joined the McNairs and continued to operate the NEW SENSATION in partnership for five years. But things were not the same. Captain French was a man loved even for his faults and his presence on the showboat was sorely missed. Even though showboating had never been easier, with luxurious accommodations for living and performing, with adequate power, and with three licensed pilots aboard to share duties, something was wrong.[31] If conditions had improved considerably since the earlier NEW SENSATION(s), the personal element and friendly spirit was on the wane. This and a variety of other reasons to be dealt with later made Callie French and the McNairs decide to retire from showboating.

In the spring of 1907, FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION pulled in to the bank and tied up alongside PRICE'S WATER QUEEN (formerly the NEW SENSATION No. 1). This was on the Illinois River. The McNair ladies were not on board but all in school in Cincinnati.[32] Both John McNair and Callie French were aboard the NEW SENSATION and they paid a visit to the WATER QUEEN. There the bargain was concluded and the papers signed which transferred ownership of the NEW SENSATION to Captain E. A. Price, name and all. One story has it that Captain Price cancelled the performance scheduled on the WATER QUEEN, allowing that community to witness the last performance of the NEW SENSATION under French and McNair management, as well as the end of the showboating careers of the McNairs and Callie French.

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[31] Ida McNair had a masters license as well as John and Callie French. Waterways Journal, Jan. 30, 1904, carried an item, stating "the New Orleans inspectors issued a master's license to Ida F. (Mrs. John E.) McNair, said to be the fourth woman to be captain of a river steamer."

[32] Frenchie was at the Conservatory of Music, Clarkie at Woodward High School, and Ida was at the Art Academy.

Clarkie McNair, several years later, told a different story:

> The negotiations for selling the boat were made in the spring of 1907. My Mother, Frenchie and I had been in school all that winter and it was the first thing we heard when we got back to the boat. Mr. Price made my father promise to take the boat up the upper Mississippi and back to St. Louis. To be sure that Cappy kept his promise Capt. Price would never stay on the boat with us longer than a day or a day and a half at any time. Quite often he would be standing on theriver bank when we landed at some river town and the next morning about 2 or 3 o'clock we would hear him stirring about and soon see him slipping down the stage plank and up town. He seemed to think that if he stayed on board that Cappy would gather his family together and leave him before we finished the trip.[33]

Even at the end of that season, the name French did not leave the rivers. The name was purchased by Captain Price along with the showboat, a name of such excellent reputation through the years - associated with good shows and fair friendly dealing - that its value far surpassed the value of the boat. Again Clarkie tells a story of leaving the NEW SENSATION:

> We came home from St. Louis in September 1907. My last act before going off was to take the compass from the pilot house (it was the one that we had had on the Voyageur and all the boats that I had seen) and the flag from the jack staff and pack them in my trunk. I knew better than to ask Captain Price for them because he didn't believe in giving anything. I still have the compass but the flag has long ago whipped to shreds.
>
> Leaving the boat was the hardest thing I ever had to do and after all these years I still don't like houses. I didn't know that our train would run along the river bank and when it did and we passed the boat there was Gene standing in the kitchen door waving a white table cloth and wiping his eyes on the end of it. That did it. I crawled into a seat all by myself and wept big and bitter tears and though I didn't fuss, I was silently wailing in agony.[34]

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[33] Letter from Clarkie McNair under overall date of August 14, 1950, but as the letter was written in sections, the above was dated August 16 (GHWC).

[34] Op. cit., installment under date August 18.

The bell that originally adorned the C O was the only souvenir that Callie French took from the NEW SENSATION. It is now in the Smithsonian.

When FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION was destroyed by storm in 1930 the name was still on her sides, although the man who had put it there had been in his grave for more than a quarter of a century. Augustus Byron French is buried in a small church cemetary in Lindale, Ohio. Callie French retired to Columbia, Alabama where in 1914 she married. C. H. Tomlinson. She died in 1935 at the age of 74 and is buried near Columbia. John and Ida McNair, with Frenchie and Clarkie, retired to Calumet Plantation near Columbia.

Captain John McNair worked for a while for the state (Alabama) Department of Agriculture as a cotton gin inspector. Completely retired, he fell and broke his hip on December 14, 1950. After some time in the hospital and improvement to the degree of mobility in a wheelchair, he celebrated his eighty-nineth birthday on May 24, 1951. He had a stroke on June 5, leaving him in a coma with his left side paralyzed and he died nine days later. Clarkie wrote to G. Harry Wright as follows:

> Cappy left us yesterday afternoon (5:15) on his last voyage. He never regained consciousness after having the stroke. His going was so easy, just a lessening of his breath that it was almost imperceptible. We are so thankful for that. There isn't anything more that I can say except this.
>
> I thought and asked my Mother and she said she would like for you to write a short article for the Waterways Journal. When uncle Wiley died they had everything wrong that could be. We know that you have all the data and you will say what we want because you love us.[35]

Mr. Wright did write an article, sent a copy to the McNair family, and

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[35]Letter from Clarkie McNair, June 15, 1951 (GHWC).

it was, slightly shortened, the official obituary of Captain McNair for the Waterways Journal. Ida McNair remained at Calumet until she died. Frenchie, as Mrs. E. E. Hammon, lived at Dothan, Alabama, until she passed away, leaving children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The only survivor of the French and McNair showboat days is Clarkie Ann McNair, who shares the house of Calumet Plantation with a nephew and his family, and still enjoys childhood memories of a wonderful part of Americana.

So ends the saga of the Frenches and the McNairs, who gave showboating to the world, and by long and arduous labor, added a precious chapter to the annals of American theatre history.



Figure # 72

Captain A. B. French

This photograph is thought to be from the late nineties, before the Frenches went to Europe.



Figure # 73

Captain French and the McNair girls

This photograph shows the Captain with his favorite children, although not his own, and with horses, of which he was also very fond. This pictures was taken around 1900.



Figure # 74

Callie Leach French

Mrs. French in the latter part of the 1880's. She almost always dressed darkly. A heavy responsibility at an early age brought with it a sobriety and sense of propriety, but never severity.



Figure # 75

Captain Callie French

This photograph of Mrs. French was taken after she was a licensed steamboat captain, circa 1895.



Figure # 76

Captain Callie French

This photograph of Mrs. French was taken after Captain A. B. French had passed away, but while the last NEW SENSATION was still operating under French and McNair management.

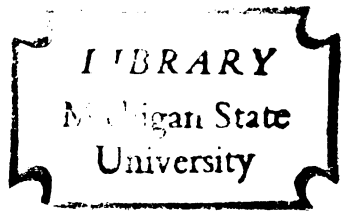


Figure # 77

Aunt Callie

This photograph of Mrs. French is believed to have been taken after retirement from the rivers, circa 1912.

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A HISTORY OF SHOWBOATS ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

Volume II

By

Duane Eldon Reed

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Theatre

1977

PART III

PART III, Chapter 7 - Cautious Captain Price

When on that windy day in 1883, the NEW SENSATION bumped the floating photograph gallery SYLVAN STREAM at St. Mary's, West Virginia, no one, not even Captain French himself, could have realized that a new and very important figure was being introduced to the showboat world. But Edwin A. Price was to become French's partner, then his competitor, and finally his successor as the principal man in river theatricals. The brief partnership, ending in 1886, between French and Price was the last business transaction they had for nearly fifteen years. They were to meet many times, at least their boats did, and were to be acutely conscious of each other's activities.

Edwin A. Price was born near Utica, New York in 1847. He was one of nine children and received little education. After his mother died, when he was twelve, he left home, doing various jobs; he worked for a while as a painter and paper hanger, then as a daguerrotypist. Showing a flair for performance early in life, he organized small shows that played in small town schoolhouses or townhalls. His first wife died shortly after their marriage, and he later married Clarissa J. Daugherty of New Martinsville, West Virginia. This is all that is known of Mr. Price's early career until his meeting with Captain French and their consequent partnership(s), as dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4.

The year following the dissolution of the French-Price partnership Captain Price came out with his own showboat which he called PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA. Little is known about this boat and no picture of her exists. John McNair, who was aboard this boat as a performer, said it

was a single-decked boat patterned after the original NEW SENSATION with no power source but sweeps. Eventually Price replaced it with another boat, but the time interval for the first boat is unknown.[1]

A photograph of the second FLOATING OPERA has survived. It is a single-decked boat with a small Texas deck. Large pictures on the sides between windows and the large letters proclaiming title and ownership would testify to Price's wanting to emulate French's enterprise. Since no sweeps or oars show in the picture, it can be assumed that it was pushed by a tug. It is this boat that Captain Price owned during the period of French's extant log, and after.

There is another picture in existence of a PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA. It shows a much larger boat, double-decked throughout, but without a pilot house. Again her sides are adorned with pictures and she is in tow of a large steamboat, the TROUBADOR. The McNair family believed that between 1886 and 1900 Captain Price owned three showboats, all named PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA, and all built in imitation of French's boats. The photographs support this contention.

All of this means that Captain Price's early years in showboat business are extremely vague. There is a reason. He was a shy man, cagey and cautious, always courting anonymity, preferring to remain in the background, and his aversion to publicity amounted to a phobia.

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[1]The brief biographical material on Captain Price was gleaned from letters from the following:

Miss Dot Lazear (neice of Mrs. Price), New Martinsville, West Virginia, September 25, 1947 (GHWC)

Charles Price (nephew of Captain Price), Rapid City, South Dakota, August 19, 1947 (GHWC)

Mark Thomas (married a sister of Mrs. Price), Wheeling, West Virginia, August 4, 1947 (GHWC)

Elmer Thomas (brother of Mark Thomas), Clarington, Ohio, July 17, 1947 (GHWC).



Figure # 78

Captain Edwin A. Price

Although no date exists for this photograph of Captain Price, it was the one used for publicity for the majority of Price's career.



Figure # 79

Mrs. Edwin A. Price

If Captain Price often sought anonymity, Mrs. Price remained almost entirely unheard of throughout the long career of Price showboats.



Figure # 80

The second FLOATING OPERA

There is no photographic record of Captain Price's first showboat, most likely built in 1887. This boat was probably built in the early 1890's in imitation of French's second NEW SENSATION.

Figure # 81

The third PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA

This boat was probably built in the mid-nineties. It was this boat that Captain Price owned and disposed of at the time he purchased the NEW SENSATION No. 1 from Captain French. It is believed also that this was the boat that the McNairs leased from Father Cartesier when the "No. 2" burned; they operated it as the DAVID GARRICK.

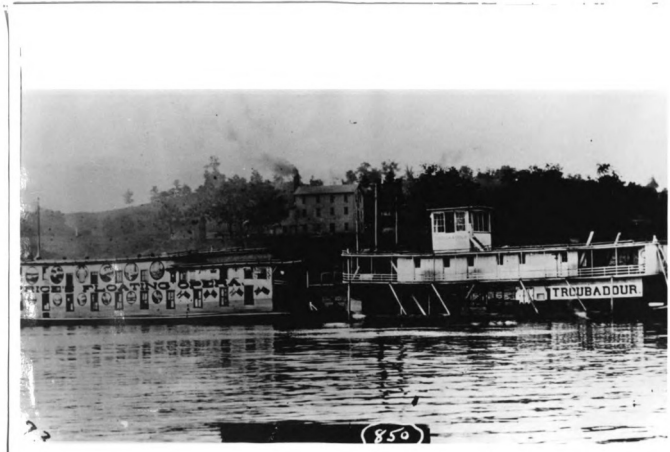


Figure # 81

The third PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA

Even those close to him, that knew him well, after telling stories for hours, admit to knowing little about his business affairs. Years later the Captain's daughter-in-law summed this up with "Papa didn't like publicity. He never talked to newspaper people, and he told the rest of us not to tell anyone our business."[2] How much of this was shyness and how much of it was simple prudence is open to question. He could have been close-mouthed because he feared that knowledge of his dealings would be used against him by competitors or officials. But what actually went on board the FLOATING OPERA(s), where and what kinds of shows, we know very little.

French's log is the only documentary evidence that exists of Price's activities for the first six years. Evidently both men covered the same territory, and because actors worked back and forth between the NEW SENSATION and the FLOATING OPERA, the performances must have been similar. Naturally Captain French's occasional reference to Price are unfavorable. He felt, apparently, that Price was engaging in unfair competition and circulating untrue rumors which he heard in the river towns where the FLOATING OPERA had played. But it must be remembered that many of Captain French's log entries about his own company and friends were rash, and often there was a countermanding entry a day or two later. Too, in two different letters to Tom Craggs in 1888, Captain French speaks very kindly of Captain Price:

> Price is also in the Bayou. . . .They seem to be doing well & I am glad of it for Price is deserving.
>
> Price is doing very well with his Showboat - and I am glad of it. For they are nice, good people & he is hard worker, & a hustler & is bound to succeed.

---

[2]Interview with Mrs. Al Swope (formerly Mrs. Steve Price), Newport, Kentucky, September 3, 1947 (GHWC).

Like Captain French, Captain Price left behind a myriad of yarns at his own expense that are still told by veteran river men and older residents of river towns.[3]

Beginning in 1892 and continuing until 1897, there is a definite, if meagre, record of Captain Price's activities. In the public library of Cairo, Illinois is a log book containing an entry for every day from September 5, 1892 to January 1, 1897. It tells where the boat played each day, how much money was taken in, and hos much license or wharfage was paid out. Occasionally there is a remark about how to avoid a license and whether or not the particular community liked the show. Beyond this there is nothing: in all one hundred ninety pages there is not a mention of a single person's name, and with customary caution, neither the Captain's name nor the name of the showboat is included.[4]

September 1892 found the Captain and the FLOATING OPERA at Uniontown, Kentucky on the Ohio. The point in the season is unknown because the first log entry begins "continued from old day book." The showboat played on down the Ohio, darted twenty miles up the

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[3]Letters from French to Craggs from Thibodeaux and Centerville, Louisiana, dated February 20 and April 4, 1888. The letters are the property of T. W. Craggs grandson, Michael McDaniel, Columbus, Ohio.

[4]Of three ledgers in the Cairo Public Library, those covering the seasons of 1915 and 1922 can easily be identified as being for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, after French/McNair ownership. The third, also assumed to be for the NEW SENSATION has such cryptic remarks as "French don't stop here" and French played here last Tuesday." On searching through the files of the Gallipolis Tribune, the Wrights found an announcement in the Wednesday, June 7, 1893 issue, stating: "Price's Floating Opera will be here Thursday night. The show is reported to be a good one." Thursday, June 8, 1893 was the date of performance recorded in this log. Other such corresponding dates at Gallipolis as well as meshing dates in the log for Marietta and announcements in the Marietta Register prove this log to be for PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA.

Cumberland for one performance, then on down and out onto the Mississippi. After playing to New Orleans and below, the Captain headed upstream again to Donaldsonville (a hundred miles without playing) and entered Bayou Lafourche. He played both directions on this stream to good receipts. Back on the Mississippi and playing down to New Orleans again, the season was closed on February 8, 1893 at White Church, Louisiana.

The next season of the FLOATING OPERA began at Utica, Indiana, on the Ohio above Louisville heading upstream. It played the Ohio, Kanawha, Kentucky, Green, and Lower Mississippi Rivers, and Bayou Lafourche. The season closed on January 3, 1894 on the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Captain Price opened his 1894 season on March 20 at Hawesville, Kentucky. After playing upstream on the Ohio to Powhattan, Ohio he came about and started downriver. He played the Muskingum, Kanawha, Kentucky, and Green Rivers on his way to the Mississippi. After playing the latter to New Orleans, he played Bayou Lafourche, closing the season there at Thibodeaux on January 27, 1895.

The next season was the shortest and poorest recorded in the log. It began at Carrsville, Kentucky on the Ohio River on April 9. After skipping about spasmodically on parts of the Ohio and her tributaries, he closed the season at Rockport, Indiana on October 10. In a season only half as long as usual, the FLOATING OPERA had missed the Mississippi and the bayous altogether, and had not covered the Ohio and tributaries well. From the record it would seem that bad business early in the season caused the Captain to become panicky and to spend remainder of the season skipping here and there in frenzied pursuit of business which was not to be found that year. A very good reason for

Captain Price's nervous season was that this was the first year of Captain French's double operation. With two magnificent boats in competition with his own, Captain Price may have been trying to keep a jump ahead of both but instead gained on neither.

However, he was on the job early the following season, opening his show on March 15, 1896 at Spottsville, Kentucky on the Green River. He gave only one performance on that stream, and headed up the Ohio in a hurry. Bad weather - rain, sleet, snow, and wind - together with a series of minor accidents pursued the FLOATING OPERA relentlessly, so that she took three weeks to make the 461 miles from the mouth of the Green River to Ashland, Kentucky, giving only four shows in that time. Yet the season turned out well. In addition to playing the Ohio, Kanawha, Mississippi and Bayou Lafourche, Captain Price added the Monongahela River and Bayou Teche to his itinerary. These latter streams ranked one and two in average door receipts, and the overall season was the best Captain Price had recorded. The season closed on January 1, 1897 at Kennerville, Louisiana a short distance above New Orleans.

Showboating was not "big" business in the nineties for Captain Price. It seems impossible that a manager, however astute, could operate a showboat and steamboat over several thousand miles of territory, with a company and crew of twenty to twenty-five persons, on receipts that averaged $40 per performance in bad seasons and $60 in good years. Yet Captain Price did manage, as did the Frenches and McNairs. "He used to say that he was going to make ten barrels of money," Josie Hyatt, a former Price employee once remarked; "And he did."[5]

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[5]Interviews with Josie Hyatt (Mrs. Roy Hyatt), Lowell, Ohio, September 10, 1947 and March 13, 1948 (GHWC).

The number of barrels may be held in question but Captain Price did come through the nineties with sufficient money to greet the new century ready for expansion. He was frugal and cautious, from the beginning to the end of his career. Mrs. Wiley P. McNair summed up the careful Mr. Price in saying "He didn't mind spending a dollar but he sure hated to spend a dime."[6]

Captain Price's shows of the nineties, modeled after French's, were on a less expensive scale, but such as might be seen in small vaudeville houses ashore. In four seasons of log book, the only reference Captain Price made to his show was an entry made at Bayou Paul on the lower Mississippi in 1892: "didn't like the Show at Granada & Bayou Paul." The newspapers along the Ohio River announced the Price showboat regularly, saying favorable things about the show. The only press notice that really concerns the nature and quality of performance during the nineties comes from the Gallipolis Tribune of April 3, 1896:

> The performance rendered by Price's Floating Opera Company at Shepard's Landing, last evening, was enjoyed by all present. The DeCarlos, society sketch artists, also Zanta and West received unlimited applause. Mr. Joe Robinson, the celebrated cornetists, received several encores on his rendition of Sewanne River. The show, taken as a whole, is a good one, and all who attended were more than satisfied.[7]

If this was PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA of the nineties, the turn of

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[6]Interview with Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, New Orleans, June 1947 (GHWC).

[7]Page 151 of the log now established as Price's for the FLOATING OPERA shows that the showboat played at Gallipolis on March 30, leaving a discrepancy with the "last evening" of this April 3 notice. The review was most likely written and submitted the day after the performance but not printed until three days later; it is probable that the Gallipolis Tribune was at this time a tri-weekly publication.

the century saw Price enter into a period of growth that would establish him by the first half decade of the twentieth century as the leading entrepreneur of showboating. By the summer of 1900, Captain Price was owner of the WATER QUEEN, the fanciest boat on the rivers, and one that was to traverse the waters longer than any other.

The details of Price's acquisition of the WATER QUEEN are not clear. The McNairs said that the NEW SENSATION No. 1 was sold to Captain Price just before the Frenches left for Europe and that before the summer was over, the boat was involved in an accident and sank. On raising her and repairing it at Leavenworth, Indiana, the boat was rechristened the WATER QUEEN.[8] Captain R. W. Emerson spoke of a Price showboat of 1900 called the NEW OLYMPIA FLOATING PALACE,[9] but there is no record of such a boat being built. In the papers of Captain Wiley P. McNair, John McNair's brother, it is stated that when Price first bought the NEW SENSATION No. 1, he renamed it the OLYMPIA.[10] There is credence to this latter version of the story in that Captain French would not have sold the name of the boat, since he still had another boat of the name on the rivers under McNair management. Wiley McNair's account continues to say that later in the summer the OLYMPIA

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[8]Interview with the McNairs, Calumet Plantation, Columbia, Alabama, March 28, 1948 (GHWC). (This lengthy story about Price's acquisition, loss, rebuilding, etc. of the WATER QUEEN is included here as an example of the kind of extensive, if sometimes futile, exploration done for this study.)

[9]The OLYMPIA was mentioned in interviews with Captain Emerson, Chicago, December 31 and January 1, 1946-47 (GHWC).

[10]Many papers and a scrap book of Wiley P. McNair's were lent to the Wrights by Mrs. McNair for perusal. They were received by the Wrights on May 26 and returned to Mrs. McNair on July 21, 1947.

was washed onto a stump by the CITY OF LOUISVILLE at North Bend, Ohio and sunk; it was after raising the boat and rebuilding it at Leavenworth that it became the WATER QUEEN.

On visiting Harry High, a former showboat musician, at Evansville, Indiana (August 29, 1947), Mr. High took Mr. and Mrs. Wright to visit Mr. and Mrs. Frank Weirz, a couple who had worked on several showboats and several seasons on the WATER QUEEN. Mrs. Weirz was sure that the WATER QUEEN was not the rebuilt NEW SENSATION No. 1 but that Captain Price had built it entirely new at Leavenworth, which had been Mrs. Weirz' hometown. The hull was built new at Leavenworth, then towed to Higginsport, Ohio to have the cabin built on it.[11]

When the Wrights visited Mrs. Al Swope[12] they were assured that the WATER QUEEN was a new boat, and that the similiarity to the NEW SENSATION No. 1 was due to Price's patterning it after French's boat.

On one of several visits that the Wrights made to Captain Bill Menke on the GOLDENROD in St. Louis, he told them to see one Monk Houser at Leavenworth, that he had been there and worked on the boat in 1900. On trying to find Monk Houser, the Wrights did find a Zib Houser, who informed them that Monk Houser was dead but that he (Zibbie) was the one they were looking for anyway, that he had been there when the WATER QUEEN was built.[13] Mr. Houser's story was that the NEW SENSATION No. 1, under whatever name, did sink during the

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[11]Interview with Mrs. Frank Weirz (formerly Eva Morgan), rural address near Evansville, Indiana, August 29, 1947 (GHWC).

[12]Interview with Mrs. Al Swope, idem.

[13]Interview with Zib Houser (Clyde E.) on shantyboat at Schooner's Point near Leavenworth, Indiana, June 17, 1949 (GHWC).

summer of 1900. It was not raised but after building a completely new hull, Captain Price had the superstructure of the partially submerged boat slid onto it. But Zib Houser was supposedly at Leavenworth, Indiana - 150 miles from North Bend, Ohio where the accident reportedly occurred - just as Higginsport, Ohio is 60 miles upriver from North Bend. How, then, did what part of this "new boat" get from "here" to "there"?

It then seemingly is reduced to a matter of what constitutes a new boat - hull or superstructure? How many timbers must remain to preserve a boat's identity? Showboats, not being power vessels, were not required to register as were steamboats. The WATER QUEEN, however, does appear in Merchant Vessels of the United States, a federal government publication, as having been built in 1900 at Leavenworth, Indiana.[14] The one common thread running through all these stories is that all of this happened in the spring and summer of 1900, from Price's purchase of the French boat to the sinking of a Price boat. In fact the New York Clipper of that summer carried the following story:

> Price's New Olympia Floating Palace sank in fifteen foot of water, seven miles below Cincinnati, and will be a total loss. /This would establish the accident site at North Bend./ This makes the second boat Mr. Price has lost within the last year. About thirty performers and musicians were thrown out of work. Mr. Price will now build one of the handsomest opera boats on the river and will have it completed for the next season.[15]

There are still further irregularities to this incident. The

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[14]These publications are best perused in the U. S. Archives, Washington, D. C.

[15]New York Clipper, August 11, 1900, p. 543.

New York Clipper of the previous year displayed the following notice:

> Novelties and people wanted for Price's Floating Palace No. 2. Give full particulars and if you double in brass and lowest salary.[16]

This would mean that Price had such a boat one year earlier than just propounded. The "No. 2" indicates that Price had another showboat and certainly the FLOATING OPERA was still in operation, for just three weeks before the Clipper ran this advertisement:

> Wanted - Novelties and performers. Give full particulars and lowest salary. Address Mgr., Price's Floating Opera, New Martinsville, W. Va.[17]

What then was the second boat that Mr. Price had lost within the year? As can be seen from all the above, many facts about showboating are obscured from even the most persistant research, particularly the ventures and adventures of Captain Price.

Captain Price did make good on the statement that he would have one of the "handsomest opera boats on the river . . . completed for the next season." The Clipper of early 1901 announced it as follows:

> Notes from Price's New Water Queen Theatre.
> This floating theatre is 136 ft. long and 34 ft. wide, having two galleries and four private boxes, with a seating capacity of 1,000. The boat is now being decorated by George W. Grabborn of Tell City, who has been especially engaged and has already got the boat looking like a palace. Robert E. Lively, the human crocodile; the Pickett Family, Swift and Zola, Max Seer and John Murphy have been booked for the coming season, which will open about the 1st of April, carrying a band of fifteen pieces. Mr. Price has built this boat to take the place of the OLYMPIA, which sank at Cincinnati last August.[18]

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[16] New York Clipper, April 29, 1899, p. 178.

[17] Ibid., April 8, 1899, p. 115.

[18] Ibid., February 16, 1901, p. 1125.

If specific data on Captain Price and his operation at the turn of the century are meagre and vague, one fact stands out clearly. He entered upon the new century with his finest boat and best prospects to date, and subsequent events prove that he was just at the beginning.

(The photographs on the following pages present some of the differences between the NEW SENSATION No. 1 and PRICE'S WATER QUEEN.)

Figure # 82

PRICE'S NEW WATER QUEEN

This photograph must be compared to the NEW SENSATION No. 1, Figure # 44. On the NEW SENSATION No. 1 nine windows can be seen on the lower level. In this photograph of the WATER QUEEN ten windows can be seen, plus a space in the center with no window. The WATER QUEEN appears to be larger.

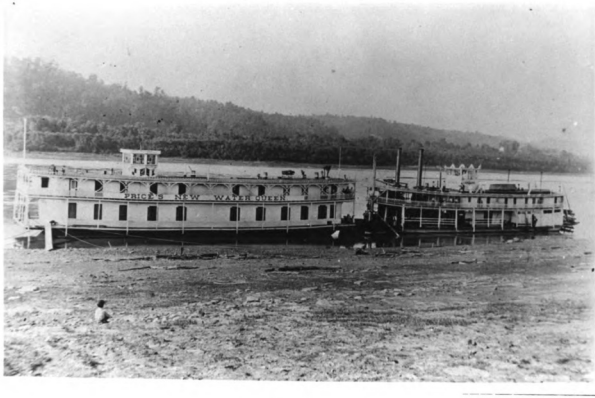


Figure # 82

PRICE'S NEW WATER QUEEN

Figure # 83

PRICE'S NEW WATER QUEEN

In comparing this photograph to that of the NEW SENSATION No. 1, Figure # 44, notice that the "hogchains" rise considerably higher above the roof of the WATER QUEEN than they do on the NEW SENSATION. The hogchains are actually iron rods going from the barge, fore and aft, over vertical or angled posts at the center of the boat, to hold the ends up and the center down. This difference would support the contention that the WATER QUEEN was longer than the NEW SENSATION, and certainly that would have meant considerable rebuilding.

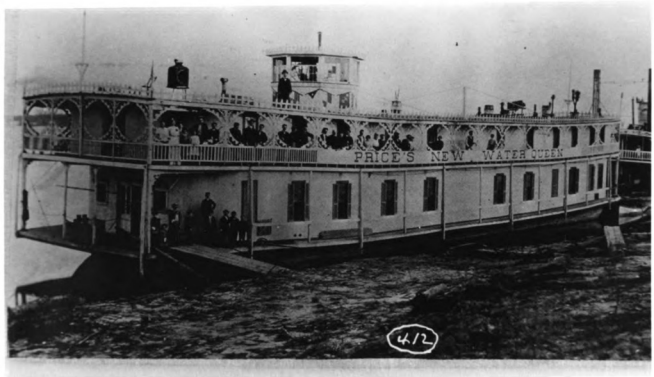


Figure # 83

PRICE'S NEW WATER QUEEN

Figure # 84

PRICE'S WATER QUEEN

Notice that on the NEW SENSATION No. 1, Figure # 44, there are nineteen "gingerbread/gazebo" units down the side of the boat. On the WATER QUEEN there are only sixteen, and the first two units on the NEW SENSATION have been opened into one on the WATER QUEEN



Figure # 84

PRICE'S WATER QUEEN

Figure # 85

PRICE'S WATER QUEEN

On the NEW SENSATION No. 1, Figure # 44, the "gingerbread/gazebo" units on the front of the boat are divided into three unequal sections; on the WATER QUEEN these units number four and are equal.

Note too that in Figure # 40, the "gingerbread/gazebo" units of the upper guard extend around the stern. On the picture of the final destruction of the WATER QUEEN no such woodwork exists at all; see Figure # 171, p. 420.



Figure # 85

PRICE'S WATER QUEEN

PART III, Chapter 8 - Hail the New Century

At this juncture in this study it becomes too complicated to follow the life and showboats of a single owner/manager to the end of his career. After the turn of the century co-ownership and buying and selling were to frequent to make that type of account comprehensible. An attempt will be made here simply to put the various showboats in chronological order and to show their varying relationships. In doing so it is necessary to backtrack a year or two. First, mention must be made of three showboats about which very little is known.

The Waterways Journal of December 2, 1893 mentioned that the IDA BLANCHE was cruising the upper Missouri River with a variety show.[1] This is interesting in that this is the earliest record of showboat activity on the Missouri. Too, since the "upper" Missouri generally meant above the Platte River and Omaha, it seems unlikely that a showboat could be operating at this time of year. But, unfortunately, this is all that is known about the IDA BLANCHE.

At the very end of the last century another showboat appeared. The New York Clipper of April 1, 1899 carried the following:

> The Floating Star Theatre, a theatrical boat owned by Capt. Melvin Melvin, sank in the Ohio River below Elizabethtown, Illinois, Mar. 20. She was fitted up in the form of a theatre, carried an orchestra and fifteen actors and actresses. She gave exhibitions, at points on the Ohio, Mississippi and tributary waters.[2]

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[1] Waterways Journal, Column "Forty Years Ago" (issue of December 2, 1893), December 2, 1933.

[2] New York Clipper, April 1, 1899, p. 86.

That Elizabethtown, Illinois was a popular showboat stop is well known and documented. What is curious is that no one at Elizabethtown, although recalling many other boats and incidents, can recall the FLOATING STAR or its sinking.

The new century begins with another enigma. The Clipper of September 1901 carried this notice:

> WANTED FOR THE GREAT SOUTHERN SHOW, Good novelty acts of all kinds. Also Three Brother Act, Singing and Talking Clown and Lady Artists, Good Troupe of Dogs, Musicians for Band and Orchestra. Artists doing two or more acts and Musicians doubling in concert given preference. State lowest salary in first letter. Silence a polite negative. Address Robt. Stickney Jr. Director General, Sherwood House, Cincinnati, Ohio. Prof. Silvers, Ed Burk, Wm. Sloaman, and Denny Lynch write to Dave Dedrick, 30 W. Court St., Cin. O.[3]

The McNairs, Captain Menke, nor anyone else remembers this showboat. The last lines are typical of owners/managers trying to get in touch with former employees, just as the specifications for performers indicate an already working show. But the GREAT SOUTHERN remains a mystery.

In backtracking from the last chapter, Captain Ellsworth E. Eisenbarth must be dealt with. Eisenbarth was a child of the rivers, born in Ironton, Ohio in 1864, and he lived both at New Martinsville, West Virginia and at Marietta, Ohio. His father owned a grocery store but wanted his son to become a minister; Eisenbarth attended Waynesburg College in such a pursuit. Not finishing college, he returned to help run his father's grocery store, but throughout his life he remained a devoutly religious man. The exact time of Eisenbarth's beginning in show business is unclear. There are stories about his once owning a "Wild West" show. A sentence in his obituary states that he was a

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[3] New York Clipper, September 9, 1901, p. 605.

friend of Buffalo Bill, which lends credence to this story.[4]

An article written by Captain Eisenbarth is Billboard in 1907 introduced him thusly:

> Twenty years ago next summer the writer came upon the scene, remaining for three years and then disposing of his boat to Mr. Price, returned to the tented and other amusement projects on land until eight years ago, when the showboat field was re-entered, and he has remained there continually since.[5]

If the Captain's statement is true, he would have taken out his first boat in 1887, putting him close on the heels of French and Price. In fact if Price bought Eisenbarth's boat in 1890, it could have been Price's second FLOATING OPERA. The above statement would then place the date of the opening of the second boat as 1889. Bert Banks in a quite authoritative article described the second boat as "a double deck boat built of a big queensware boat."[6] Unfortunately no photographs exist of either the first or second boat.

But Captain Eisenbarth was certainly on the rivers in 1900 with a "Tom Show." His advertisements in the New York Clipper are interesting and revealing.

> WANTED. Tom People that double in brass; woman with child for Eva; colored quartette; ladies' drum corps.[7] Address E. E. Eisenbarth, New Martinsville, W. Va.

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[4]Biographical information on E. E. Eisenbarth from obituary in the Marietta Register, July 17, 1925, p. 2, and from interview with a Mrs. McCurdy, Marietta, Ohio, September 11, 1947 (GHWC). Mrs. McCurdy's father had worked for Eisenbarth on his showboats.

[5]Billboard, March 16, 1907

[6]Bert Banks, "Original Cotton Blossom," in Waterways Journal, (St. Louis), LVII (April 10, 1943).

[7]New York Clipper, March 24, 1900, p. 88.

> WANTED, TOM PEOPLE, (Must double in brass) for the Eisenbarth-Henderson Co. Long season to strictly temperate, reliable people. Now touring the Ohio River and tributaries on the largest, most thoroughly equipped floating theatre (show boat) in America. Address E. E. Eisenbarth, Zanesville, Ohio. Can place a few strong novelty acts doubling brass.[8]

> Notes from Eisenbarth-Henderson's "U.T.C.! Co." We have the largest floating theatre ever upon the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and have continued the production of "Uncle Tom's Cabin into the far South with remarkable success. We have played through Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana - an unprecedented venture upon or near the water course through these states. Although some planters speak against the nature of the play, yet all are pleased with the production, scenic effects, dogs, etc., which are new to them. The company now numbers thirty-six. Lew Gleason joined at Angloa, La. The band and stage production remain the same as upon the upper Ohio and northern tributaries. Strong specialties are introduced between the acts. Our parade does certainly stir them up. The show will return north in March.[9]

In November of 1900 when Captain French was searching for another showboat to replace the NEW SENSATION No. 2 which burned some weeks before, he made a trip to Memphis to meet Captain Eisenbarth with the possibility of buying the latter's boat. French's personal diary of November 11, 1900 includes: "Met Eisenbarth at foot of 40 . . . Eisenbarth asked 8500 for his outfit at Memphis." Captain French did not buy the boat, but the fact that he considered doing so, even summoning Callie from Cincinnati to Memphis to look at it, is indicative that Eisenbarth had a most respectable and well equipped outfit.[10]

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[8] New York Clipper, June 16, 1900, p. 366.

[9] Ibid., December 22, 1900, p. 948.

[10] Captain French's personal diary is the property of Miss Clarkie McNair, Columbia, Alabama.

Notes in the Clipper of early 1901 on the past season mention that Mr. and Mrs. Eisenbarth had rejoined the company at Memphis for a visit, the date being November 11, the same date Captain French mentions visiting Memphis and Mr. Eisenbarth.[11] The notes open with the announcement that the Eisenbarth-Henderson Company had just finished the most successful season in its history, a season which opened at New Martinsville on April 17, 1900 and closed at New Orleans on February 2, 1901. This would mean that the company had little rest between seasons, for in March Mr. Eisenbarth was advertising in the Clipper for a calliope player to open the new season.[12]

In looking back, the year 1901 was a very important year in showboat history. Since A. B. French and E. A. Price had started with small struggling operations, showboating had continually grown - in size, in structure, and reputation. But 1901 marked the entrance of showboats into "Big Time." The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE, or MODERN TEMPLE OF AMUSEMENT, was already operating, perhaps the largest on the rivers at the beginning of 1901. The WATER QUEEN, regardless of the facts of its origin, was to open in the spring. By summer the SWALLOW & MARKLE NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE was completed and opened at Parkersburg, West Virginia. In the fall FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION was completed at Higginsport, Ohio and Captain McNair got it started southward before ice starting forming in the Ohio.

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[11] In 1886 Mr. Henderson married Julia Henderson of Sisterville, West Virginia. Miss Henderson was a lady of culture and letters who encouraged Eisenbarth's production of good legitimate drama. For this reason, and possibly because of family money invested in the operation, the hyphenated use of both names was standard. When his first wife died in 1906, Mr. Eisenbarth married Jennie Brown of Hartford City, West Virginia on December 10, 1908.

[12] New York Clipper, March 23, 1901, p. 85.



Figure # 86

Captain Ellsworth E. Eisenbarth

Although no date can be established for this photograph of Mr. Eisenbarth, this picture was used widely for publicity on his showboats.

These boats were all superior to any other boats that had been used on the rivers for theatrical purposes. They were larger, had greater seating capacity, were more finely appointed. They were lighted by electricity, cooled by electric fans, and heated by steam. Their auditoriums were comfortable and attractively decorated, and their stages were equipped with professional scenery and lighting. The quarters for performers and crew were pleasant and uncrowded.[13] In short, the showboats of 1901 were comparable to many theatres on land insofar as production facilities and audience comfort were concerned, and accomodations for performers were better than the quarters to be had in boarding houses in small towns.

As already stated, Captain French did not live into this lush period. His was the fate of all pioneers, leaving the fruit of his efforts to be used and built upon by those that followed. Captain Price did live into and through this new period, becomeing a dominating part of it. He stood up to younger managers, meeting competition wherever it show itself, and for a decade his holdings grew. Just as Captain French had introduced E. A. Price and John McNair to showboating in the eighties, so, in this first year of the twentieth century, did Captain Price bring forth a new personality to showboating.

At Hannibal, Ohio, headed downstream, Captain Price needed a pilot since the late summer river was low. Ralph Waldo Emerson Gaches, then

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[13]Billy Bryant spoke of the comfort of accomodations on the showboats of the time. After years of vaudeville, the facilities were fine on WATER QUEEN when his family joined it under Captain Price. "The rooms were bare as well as small, but clean and tidy. Mother stood in the middle of the room and beamed."

Billy Bryant, Children of Ol' Man River, (New York: Lee Furman, Inc., 1936), pp. 47-48.

twenty-one, applied for the job. The Captain employed him and the young pilot took the fleet to Cincinnati, the extent of his license. But instead of leaving the WATER QUEEN, as Captain Price had taken a liking to the young pilot, Emerson remained on board as advance man. In the years following, this young pilot was to become a key figure in the showboat world.[14] It was approximately at this time that the Four Bryants joined the WATER QUEEN, but as they were never involved in management of this boat, it is best to leave Captain Price and Mr. Emerson to look at other new ventures of 1901.

The building of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE by the Pope Dock Company at Parkersburg in 1901 had an importance beyond the addition of another "new grand floating palace." It marked the entrance of a new kind of manager, and as a consequence a new kind of showboat activity. To this point showboat operators had been showmen and rivermen - men who came to showboating from tent shows and the like, men who were pilots or who soon became pilots due to economic necessity. A. B. French had had a tent show before his first showboat and had worked on steamboats (the BANJO) before that. John McNair was a circus performer and railroad engineer before working with Captain French; his brother, Wiley P. McNair, was an engineer before working on the river. Later, Mr. and Mrs. French and Mr. and Mrs. McNair had pilots and masters licenses. E. A. Price was a pilot with a boat on the river before he

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[14] Information concerning Emerson and Price's meeting from letter from R. W. Emerson, January 24, 1947 (GHWC).

Pilots were often hired even by experienced and full licensed Captains when certain specific or regional river conditions presented themselves. Whereas a showboat captain might be familiar with a problem of a particular section of the river, he might not be able to deal with it; a regional pilot might deal with the same problem every day.

became a showboat man, just as Eisenbarth came to the river, eventually obtaining a full license, from a tent show. What each of these men (and woman) had, they contributed immediately. What they did not have they learned quickly. They developed their skills, and, in so doing developed showboating as an institution.

Swallow and Markle, who built the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, were managers of a different type. They were business men, promoters, attracted by the possibilities of success in a business already developed by French, Price, and Eisenbarth. They were neither river men or showmen. W. R. Markle was a business man from Steubenville, Ohio, and Matt. O. Swallow was an oil man from St. Marys, West Virginia, and one-time sheriff of Pleasants County. They were not exploiting any skill or talent of their own, but setting up an enterprise for the employment of capitol.[15]

Nevertheless, W. R. Markle (Double R, as he was known along the river) did make some important contributions to the growth and development of river shows. He was the active member of the partnership, doing most of the planning, organizing, and actual managing. Matt Swallow, with many other "irons in the fire," was content to contribute money and occasional advice, and share in the profits. He rarely traveled with the boat; big, jovial, "hail-fellow-well-met," he had little patience with the day to day details of showboat operation. In fact after a few seasons he left the partnership and Markle continued alone. Markle, although he lacked experience in river theatricals, had all

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[15]Background information on W. R. Markle and Matt. O. Swallow from Ray Markle (cousin of W. R. Markle), Steubenville, Ohio, October 6, 1946 (GHWC).



Figure # 87

W. R. Markle

Although not an innovator, W. R. Markle built three of the largest and most luxurious showboats ever to appear. Also, he spent considerable money on productions aboard his showboats.

the instincts of a showman. (Such instincts always come to the fore more readily, and flower, in the presence of adequate finances.) He liked the bizarre, the spectacular, and did everything in a big way. If it cost money, so be it; Markle was willing to make the necessary expenditure as he proved from the very start.

The NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE was the largest and most expensive showboat of its time. She was 150 feet long, 40 feet wide and seated 850 (although often advertised as seating 1200.)[16] It was the first boat planned with electric lights and fans and steam heat. Inside and out it was covered with fancy and expensive ornamentation. All in all the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE was everything the name implied, symbolic of the new estate to which showboats had come.

The show which Markle organized for his opening, and the musical organization accompanying it, were in keeping with the splendor of the boat itself. In the New York Clipper Markle made a proud statement about the showboat:

> This show opened at Parkersburg, W. Va. May 6, for two days, to packed audiences, and we have been turning them away daily. Our boat is 150 x 45 over all, sealed with pressed steel, seated entirely with opera chairs throughout, lighted by electricity, and towed by the Steamer Cricket. Seating capacity 1200. We carry a steam piano, marine band of sixteen pieces, and an orchestra of nine pieces. Our show consists of refined vaudeville acts. The following is a partial list of people: Swallow and Markle, sole owners; Wm. R. Markle, mgr. general; Charles F. Cross, business manager; Joe K. Kelly, amusement director; Joe W. Robinson, leader band and orchestra; M. O. Swallow, treasurer; John G. Seigrist, electrician and stage manager; Geo. Haines, props; Col. Abe Cheeks, advance; Miller Sisters, singers and dancers; Owen and Sunlin, Dutch sketch performers; Kelly and St. Clair, in "Plantation

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[16] The size and correct seating capacity of this showboat given by R. W. Emerson in letter of March 13, 1947 (GHWC). Emerson's figures must supercede Markle's advertising: Emerson later owned the boat.

> Pastimes"; Mack's dog comedians; Dale and Mack, musical comedians; Zinn children, singers, dancers, and cake walkers; Frank Adams, gun spinner; Fred Rook, stilt walker and fire slide. We are headed south, and expect to close in New Orleans about Feb. 1, 1902. The boat is handsomely painted and decorated, and it is a dream of beauty, carrying our own laundry, hot and cold baths, etc.[17]

Adding this performing company to crew would take the entire company to at least fifty. The Markle band was reknowned as the best on the river at the time; with adequate deck hands, musicians performed only in the street parade and in the pit during performance. Markle was an epicurean and his table was always set with the very best available (although Markle had no corner on good food.)[18] Here was showboating as it is presented in fiction and romance, although such writings place it a decade or two earlier.

Of the other boats on the rivers in the early years of the twentieth century little need be said. French's last showboat had already been dealt with to the end of French ownership. The The Great American Water Circus was not a showboat in the sense of presenting theatrical and/or dramatic entertainment. Of LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE little is known at this time, other than it operated on a small scale and brought minstrelsy to the bayou country. It is more properly dealt with under Emerson and Price, and, later, Price and McNair ownership.

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[17] New York Clipper, May 25, 1901, p. 281.

[18] Horace Murphy, company member on the WATER QUEEN at this time, spoke of the amount of leasure time the company had and how much of this time was put to hunting and fishing. Consequently there was always fish, duck, goose, squirrel and rabbit on the table. As the men hunted or fished, the ladies might go off to seek wild fruit and berries.

Charles Hornstein, a musician and singer on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, commented on the fine food and mentioned that during the first season Mr. Swallow, when aboard, would go hunting, returning with game for the table that "to a bunch of hungry actors and musicians was not hard to take."

Murphy and Hornstein letters, May 25 and 31, 1947 (GHWC).

No new showboats appeared in the 1902 season but showboating was to suffer two major losses. Already mentioned herein, Captain A. B. French died on May 8 of this year, saddening not only showboat owners and performers, but the myriad of river folk that the Captain numbered among his friends. The second loss of this year was not of humankind, but nonetheless sad, if considerably more spectacular.

September 3, 1902 was a big day for the populace of Grand Tower, Illinois and the surrounding countryside. First, the EISENBARTH - HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE, or MODERN TEMPLE OF AMUSEMENT was docked at the municipal landing. Secondly, the SPRAGUE, the largest stern-wheel steamer ever built, just off the ways at Dubuque, was to pass Grand Tower on her maiden voyage from St. Louis to Cairo. The entire population gathered on the riverbank at sundown as the showboat band was giving the evening pre-show concert on the roof of the boat. The concert was interrupted by the roar of the crowd as the SPRAGUE appeared a short distance upstream, thrilling the crowd with her size and speed. But as the SPRAGUE was not making the turn in the channel and seemed instead to be heading directly for the showboat, the roar quieted to a murmur of misgiving. Everyone eas expecting the giant steamer to quickly swing around, but it did not. Before the horrified gaze of hundreds, the SPRAGUE struck the showboat midships. With a deafening crash of splitting timbers, the TEMPLE OF AMUSEMENT sank, literally cut in two.

The details of this happening vary, but are colorful, when told many years later. Mrs. Anna Sullivan was a young girl at the time.

> My father was Mayor of our little city at that time and as was customary he was presented with complimentary passes which were for box seats.

> Ordinarily passes were only for reserved seats.
>
> My, but this was really going to be a big event in my young life. Then just before time for the performance and just before going on, I was horrified to see a boat coming down the river at a terrific speed and headed right for the showboat. . . .

Mrs. Sullivan remembers that the town police were so incensed that they emptied their revolvers at the SPRAGUE pilot house, but their anger spoiled their aim and no one was hit.[19] Another eyewitness, Charles W. Jenkins, told this rueful, if somewhat droll, story:

> That wreck set me back a year in becoming a man. I had just got a new suit - my first suit of long pants. I went down to the river bank, showing off in my man's clothes, and I couldn't wait to go on the showboat. I was almost the first person inside, and suddenly I heard shouts from outside. I ran to a window on the river side and looked out and there was this big steamer coming right for us. I was sure she was going to hit, and I ran for a window on the other side, the shore side. Just as I reached it the crash came, and I was thrown right through the window into the river. The showboat was knocked toward the shore, and the bottom of the barge caught my foot, mashing it. I was dragged out, and then was in bed for three weeks with a sore foot. The wetting shrank my new suit so much that my mother had to cut the pants off, so when I got out of bed there I was - back in short pants, a kid again.[20]

Perhaps the most interesting story in connection with this accident was told by Frank Griffith, who was band leader on the showboat.

> I was there on the hurricane deck of the showboat with my band when it went down. I can tell you a strange

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[19] In the late forties, G. Harry Wright wrote to many Post Masters in towns that were reknowned as good showboat stops. The response from Grand Tower, Illinois was from a Post Mistress, Mrs. Anna Sullivan, dated August 9, 1947 (GHWC).

The Wrights then visited Grand Tower but the exact date is not known. Mr. Wright's thank you letter to Mrs. Sullivan is dated August 23, 1947.

[20] Mr. Jenkins was a friend of Mrs. Sullivans and a life-long resident of Grand Tower, Illinois. He was interviewed when the Wrights visited Grand Tower.

> story about the sinking of the Eisenbarth boat. About the latter part of July Eisenbarth engaged a man and a woman team who did a bag punching act and finished with a 4-round boxing contest. Both were big huskies and put on a good act. The male was a heavyweight type, but his "Bowery talk" was too rugged for the pious Mr. Eisenbarth, so he closed them. The morning they left the boat I was on the stage running over some cornet exercises. The woman interrupted to tell me good bye and added "Joe has put a curse on this boat for it to sink within three weeks and mark my words it will sink, for I have never known him to fail. But he doesn't want any of you to be hurt or lose anything."
>
> I told the bunch about the "curse" and there were a lot of wise cracks and laughs - no one took it seriously. And you may call it coincidence or whatever you like, but Joe's curse worked just like he planned it. The boat sank within the three week period, no one was hurt nor did any of us lose any of our personal property.[21]

And so a showboat with the unusual practice of presenting straight drama, often classics, was gone from the river circuit.[22] The loss of the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON MODERN TEMPLE OF AMUSEMENT was the second showboat to be totally lost, following the burning of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION in 1900.

The 1903 showboat season opened with Callie French back on the NEW SENSATION in partnership with John McNair, as capable a pair as ever operated a showboat. Captain Price, with his new assistant - R. W. Emerson Gaches, was on the way to his zenith. The NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE had prospered to the point that this year Markle bought

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[21]Letter from Frank Griffith to George Bundy (Huntington, West Virginia to New York City), September 16, 1947 (GHWC).

[22]There are many accounts of an emphasis on drama on the Eisenbarth showboats. Norman Hanley, an English born actor, spoke of it in a letter of December 10, 1950 and it is confirmed by Harry High, band leader, in a letter of January 11, 1951. In a letter of January 22, 1948, Frank Griffith wrote to George Bundy, stating that the lack of vaudeville and dancing girls caused many to refer to the Eisenbarth shows as "the old folks show." According to Hanley there was minimal vaudeville on the later Eisenbarth boat. (GHWC)

out Swallow's interest to become sole owner, utilizing the services of band member Norman Thom to organize and direct the program.[23] And Captain Eisenbarth, after recovering much of his loss of the year before, came out with an even finer boat.

When the Pope Dock Company of Parkersburg, West Virginia turned out the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE in 1901, it unwittingly set itself up as "the place" to have a showboat built. It was there that Captain Eisenbarth went to have his new craft constructed; the new craft floated on to the Ohio River to open in this season of 1903. The boat was 150 feet long, 30 feet wide, and capable of seating 700 customers.[24] In design she was thoroughly conventional - a long rectangular barge, with a double-decked cabin throughout. She was, in view of what the boat was to become in later years, plain almost to the point of severity. As before, Captain Eisenbarth continued to present straight dramatic bills with some vaudeville turns between the acts. Always refined and dignified, this operation became one of the best known on the rivers.

In many ways Captain Eisenbarth was a true follower of Captain French. Thrifty, like the latter, he never appeared flamboyant like Markle or miserly like Captain Price. Unlike Emerson and Markle, he did little advertising, but like French relied heavily (and successfully) on his reputation. And reminiscent of the French billing on the boats

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[23]This information from George Bundy, bandsman on the boat, in letter of April 28, 1947. If these dates are correct, the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE continued under the double ownership banner for Billboard of June 24, 1905, p. 16, carried a routing for the boat as Swallow and Markle's Floating Palace.

[24]Date of launching from J. W. Menke, letter of January 20, 1947; dimensions from R. W. Emerson, letter of March 13, 1947 (GHMC).

themselves, Eisenbarth's occasional posters for his shows generally were topped by some slogan guaranteeing the high moral quality of the show.

Eisenbarth found Shakespeare acceptable to river audiences (it has been reported that he did the lighter comedies as well as The Merchant of Venice although we do not know in what altered way they may have been presented). In the 1904 season he attempted what must have seemed totally absurd to managers such as Callie French, John McNair, and Captain Price who purveyed vaudeville. This season Eisenbarth played Goethe's Faust, a play that has not really been able to hold an audience anywhere in the world, save in the opera house in Gounod's version. (Dare one ponder Faust with vaudeville between the acts?) But Captain Eisenbarth did prosper, always selling the play, and his name, not the spectacular qualities of the showboat. In fact, the poster advertising Faust was simplicity itself, with Eisenbarth's own picture and the name of the play as the drawing features.

If the large showboats were prospering through the 1904 season, it was the beginning of a near monopoly for Captain Price. The young Ralph Emerson, whom he had hired as a pilot a few seasons earlier, had become a boon to Captain Price. Prior to Emerson, Price's advance work consisted of sending a few posters ahead to a postmaster, along with a couple of complimentary tickets to encourage the postmaster to put the posters up. Emerson changed this, traveling ahead of the WATER QUEEN by at least a week, posting novel signs and announcements on the back roads as well as the major highways and streets of the town. So important did Emerson become to Price (so goes a much told story) that he was able to buy half interest in the WATER QUEEN just so Price would not have to pay him the salary he deserved.

Figure # 88

Flyer for SMALLOW & MARKIE'S NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

From the early years of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE (1902), this flyer when folded measured slightly less than a tabloid newspaper. It shows all the claims that were made for this showboat.

This particular picture is of a reproduction (8 x 10) that was used by the Selmer company as a greeting card fifty years later in order of George Bundy who was then holding a high position with this company. Ordinarily the space below "At the River" was blank when printed and the appropriate town was stamped in just before the flyers were distributed in the area.



Figure # 88

Flyer for SWALLOW & MARKLE'S NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE



Figure # 89

Flyer for SWALLOW & MARKLE'S NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

This shows the two inside pages of the folded flyer, the outside of which is shown in Figure # 88.

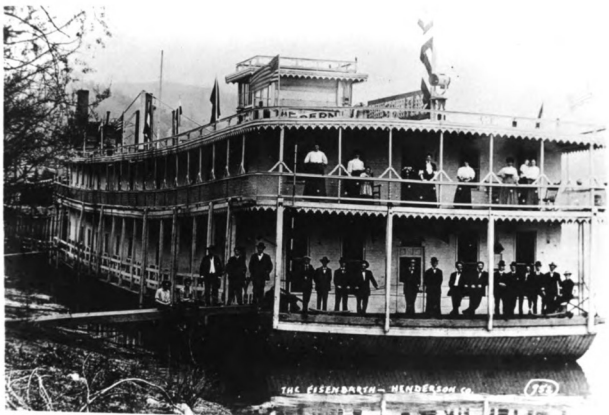


Figure # 90

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE

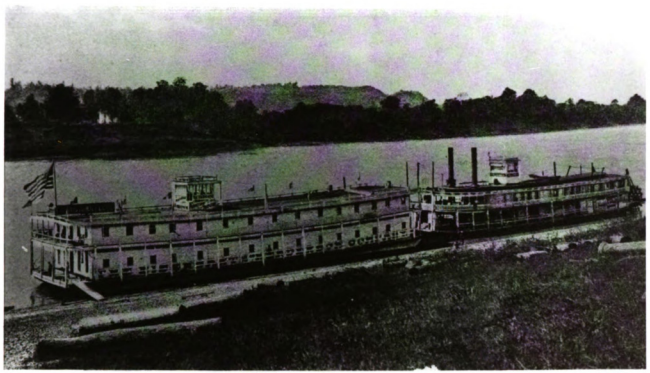


Figure # 91

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE

Notice the sign on the forward end of the roof advertising the "Johnstown Flood." Note too the size of the steamer COLUMBIA, large enough to house a majority of the performers and crew; because of this, a great number of the company nearly lost their lives when the COLUMBIA sank.

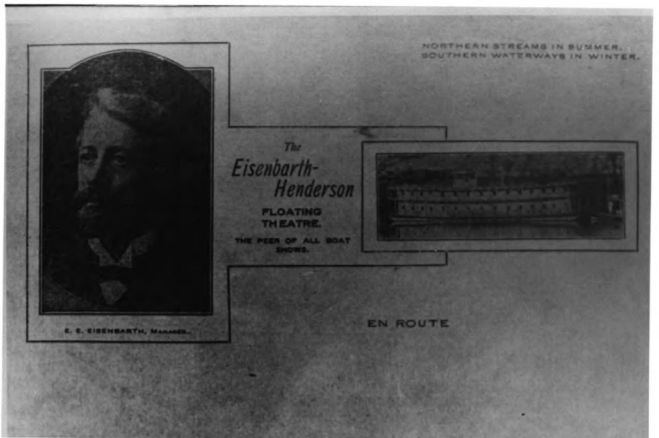


Figure # 92

Correspondence card for the Eisenbarth-Henderson showboat

This was used like a postcard for quick correspondence. Below "En route" would be written the location of the showboat or perhaps the location of where returning correspondence should be mailed. It was also excellent publicity.

Issues of Billboard in 1904 carry ads for musicians for the TWENTIETH CENTURY FLOATING THEATRE and interested people were to write to the manager at Stockport, Ohio which is about forty miles up the Muskingum. Little else is known about the boat but its existence is supported by two photographs. Where the boat was built is not known but Mrs. Josie Hyatt stated that it was built by a man named Armstrong. John McNair's partner on the VOYAGEUR would have been "at liberty" at this time as the VOYAGEUR had been sold, but certainly the McNairs would have remembered if he had built a showboat. Mrs. Hyatt also stated that Captain Price, for unknown reasons, wanted the TWENTIETH CENTURY off the rivers, so he bought it and took it up the Allegheny and wrecked it. This seems an unlikely move for the frugal Captain Price.[25]

Brief mention must be made here of another showboat of the time, not because a great deal is known, but because the one account is so specific. The source is not even known for sure but exists only as a newspaper clipping probably from a Warren, Pennsylvania paper of February or March of 1904. The article described the boat, a boat much like either of the French boats of the nineties, that would start down the Allegheny River on April 3, 1904. It was being built by the Norris-Blamphin Company and was to be dubbed the "Governor of the Ohio." Captains Menke and Reynolds, over twenty years later, made stops a short distance above Pittsburgh on the Allegheny, but Warren is two hundred miles from Pittsburgh, nearly to the New York state line. This is a curious birthplace for the "Governor of the Ohio" and whether it did start its season on April 3 is unknown.

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[25]Interview with Josie Hyatt, Lowell, Ohio, September 10, 1947 (GHWC).

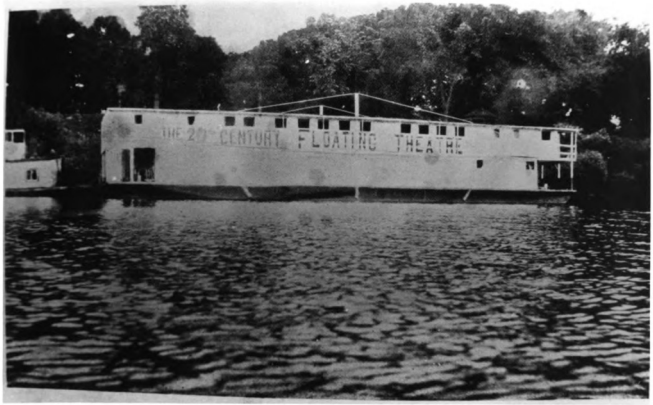


Figure # 93

The 20th CENTURY FLOATING THEATRE

Little is known of this showboat other than what can be ascertained from this photograph.



Figure # 94

Interior of the 20th CENTURY FLOATING THEATRE

Although this showboat was supped to have existed in 1904, the stage looks smaller than other boats of the time.

The only boat of consequence to change hands during the 1904 season was LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE. Who Lightner was is not known, but the boat was built around 1901, for the lower Mississippi and the bayous, on a small scale (as to actual size) so as to maneuver easily in the curvy southern streams. When the WATER QUEEN was playing the bayous that season Captain Price first saw this small boat. It had a small minstrel company aboard of only five or six members, but the show was popular as the jokes were simple and told in the patois of the bayou. (The French speaking, or Cajun, people of the bayou were more likely to attend such a show, just as Captain French had found years before that his show in English was not always understood.) On seeing a boat that was popular and small enough to maneuver easily where the WATER QUEEN could not, Captain Price decided he must have it. Together with Emerson, Price bought the Lightner boat and Emerson went aboard as manager. The two men also bought the MARY STEWART as a tow (which Price had owned before, purchased with the NEW SENSATION No. 1). After reconditioning the boat, she was renamed the NEW ERA FLOATING PALACE.[26]

Captain Emerson related a story about Captain Price that, since it concerns the NEW ERA, must be included here. For whatever reason, shyness or modesty, Captain Price had told Emerson not to tell anybody that he (Price) had an interest in the NEW ERA. But one night on the bayou, a short time after taking over the boat, a customer began to wildly praise the show. Captain Price stood at the back, clawing at his whiskers as long as he could stand it, then scampered forward and blurted out "I own half this boat!"[27]

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[26]Letter from R. W. Emerson, January 22, 1947 (GHWC).

[27]Interview with R. W. Emerson, Chicago, June 1, 1947 (GHWC).



Figure # 95

LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE

Despite its rather pretentious title, this showboat was not really of the "floating palace" type and was never intended to be. It was small to navigate the smaller streams of the south.

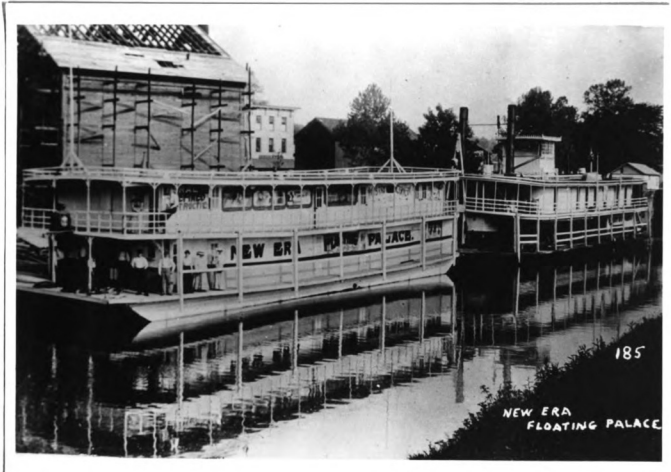


Figure # 96

The NEW ERA FLOATING PALACE

Originally LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE, this boat became the NEW ERA after being purchased by Price and Emerson.

Emerson and Price, with Emerson as actual manager, operated the NEW ERA through the 1904 season. Then, as one of the first changes in the showboat world of 1905, Emerson sold his interest in the small boat to Captain Wiley P. McNair. Emerson returned to the WATER QUEEN as manager.[28]

Wiley P. McNair was John McNair's younger borther, also from Overton, Texas. In 1890 when John, with Orke and Armstrong bought the second NEW SENSATION from Captain French, Wiley began his showboat career. He helped rebuild the boat and was aboard with engineer duties on the first season of that boat as the VOYAGEUR. After this short lived venture, Wiley went to work for Captain French on the NEW SENSATION No. 2. Consequently he was well prepared to manage a showboat in 1904.[29]

The NEW ERA was 100 feet long by 20 feet wide with a stage 12 feet wide. When operating under Lightner management it did not have electricity but was lighted with acetylene and oil. Under Price and Emerson electricity was supplied from a generator on the MARY STEWART.[30]

In its early years this boat did not play the northern waters to any extent since it had an audience in the small southern streams where the larger boats could not go; it did not have to compete with bigger

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[28]The exact date of the transaction is not known, but Billboard of June 24, 1905 lists a partial routing for the NEW ERA with W. P. McNair given as manager. See Bryant, op. cit., pp. 57-59 about Emerson's advertising on the WATER QUEEN and Mrs. Emerson as schoolteacher.

[29]Biographical material on Wiley P. McNair from interview with John McNair family, Columbia, Alabama, March 28, 1948, and with Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, New Orleans, idem; also letter from Clarkie McNair, August 9, 1947 (GHWC).

[30]Specifics on NEW ERA in letter from R. W. Emerson, January 22, 1947, loc cit (GHWC).

operations in larger cities or in the north. Too, this boat traveled an area that most boats did not ply at all, the Yazoo and Tallahatchie Rivers in Mississippi.[31]

During the 1904 and 1905 seasons the NEW ERA played more and more on the Ohio but mainly while it was going between the smaller tributaries such as the Kentucky and the Green Rivers. During the summer of 1905 a West Virginia girl of fourteen, Leo May Dowd, joined the boat to do office work. Since she was an orphan the company referred to her as Annie, a name by which she was to be known all her life. A short time later she became Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, and remained with the NEW ERA as long as it was under McNair management.[32]

As can be seen, each of the four major showboats on the Western Rivers at this time had a certain uniqueness. If the showboats themselves varied, even slightly, the owners and managers varied more. Of them all, Markle was the most different, not only in background as previously stated but in personality as well. He liked chocolate candy, cards, horse racing, and beautiful women. He was a bachelor until fairly late in life but did not exactly ignore the "fairer sex." George Bundy, who had started playing in the Markle band as a young man of seventeen in 1903, related the following anecdote concerning "Double R" Markle:

> . . . I used to type personal letters (very) for W. R. Markle to his lady (?) friends up and down the Ohio, even sign them in type, was sort of a secretary. . . . All the extra I got for this was a dip into a box of chocolates he usually had on his desk, no extra cash . . .[33]

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[31]Letter from J. W. Menke, January 20, 1947 and interview with Mrs. Frank Weirz, idem (GHWC).

[32]Interview with Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, idem, and letter from Clarkie McNair, July 4, 1947 (GHWC).

[33]Letter from George Bundy, March 28, 1947 (GHWC).



Figure # 97

Captain Wiley P. McNair



Figure # 98

Mrs. Wiley P. McNair

As Leo May Dowd this lady came to work on the NEW ERA. Because she was an orphan, she became "Miss Annie" to her friends and relatives for the remainder of her life. She was twenty years younger than Captain McNair.

Just as Markle was well liked along the rivers, his flashy vaudeville shows on the splendid NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE were deservedly well received. It would be, however, unfair to say that he put other showboats in the shade. A bayou newspaper of December 1902 compated the Markle show with that on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION. Under the small headline "Those Bayou Shows," the story goes as follows:

> Those who think that Napoleonville is not a good show town should have been here last Saturday to see the battle royal between Swallow and Markle and French's New Sensation.
>
> These two boat-shows tied-up on our bayou bank and made the little folks wild with delight as both filled the air with thundering notes of music. As the rivalry continued through the day the older people began to take an interest. As the hour for the performance drew near both shows put up their strongest fight, but the people had already made their pick . . .[34]

The fragmented article goes on to say that because the Swallow and Markle boat was new (so was the NEW SENSATION) and because the Frenches had been stopping their for years, the crowd went to the Markle boat. They did not like the show and the next day contracted John McNair who had moved a few miles down the bayou, asking the NEW SENSATION to come back. Evidently the NEW SENSATION was able to oblige for the above quoted article ends with the statement that the "French show had the other beat a mile."

The company of the NEW SENSATION was by this time quite permanent in nature, as good at the end of the season as at the outset. This was not always true of other companies. As autumn wore on and the boats were headed for the deep south, actors began to worry about the coming winter and the fact that they were daily getting farther from theatres

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[34]Assumption Eagle, Napoleonville, Louisiana, December 11, 1902, p. 2.

in the cities of the east. Often actors gave notice as the boat got below Cairo, leaving skeletal shows for the sugar coast and the bayous. Mr. Markle might have ignored such a situation because of his happy-go-lucky nature or because he always seemed to have sufficient financial backing; it is also possible that he was not traveling with the showboat at this particular time of the season.

In the spring of 1905, the Pope Dock Company turned out another of its specialties, a new showboat, again with Markle financing. It was originally called A. M. CHEEKS' SUNNY SOUTH. When Mr. Markle wrote the article for the New York Clipper during the first season of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, he listed Col. Abe Cheeks as advance man. Mr. Cheeks was Markle's uncle and had put up most of the backing for this boat.[35] During the first season this new boat was heralded with a flyer on the same format as that of the first season of the FLOATING PALACE.[36] Under Mr. Cheeks name, the SUNNY SOUTH claimed a number of biggests, bests, and newests, all at a cost of $50,000. Advertised as the biggest floating theatre in the world, the notices stated that it seated 1200, a favorite number of Mr. Markle's, but Emerson reported her dimensions as 150 by 40 and seating 800.[37] By this time there was a general plan for showboats, adoped from the proved plans of French and Price. Externally the SUNNY SOUTH presented a slightly plainer appearance

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[35]This information concerning the beginnings of the SUNNY SOUTH in letters from George Bundy, April 15 and 18, 1947, and from Gus Slover in letter of July 20, 1947 (GHWC). Both men were employees of Markle at this time.

[36]There is a copy of this flyer in the G. Harry Wright Collection but its condition does not warrant copying. Except for the name and certain details, it is ver similar to that for the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, see Figures # 88 and 89.

[37]Specifics on SUNNY SOUTH from Emerson, March 13, 1947 (GHWC).

with cleaner lines but more dignified than the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE. The auditorium was the same highly decorated hall, gleaming white enamel with gold leaf, opera seats, and plushly upholstered boxes. The fancy proscenium arch was backed with a large stage and the newest equipment. In addition to electric fans and lights, like the FLOATING PALACE, she boasted steam heat and hot and cold running water.

The SUNNY SOUTH emphasized full length plays and musical comedy, both having been proved successful on the rivers by the Eisenbarth-Henderson operation. With both the SUNNY SOUTH and the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE operating the two enterprises covered the rivers as well during the 1905 season as had the Frenches with two NEW SENSATIONS, playing the entire showboat territory from the upper Monongahela to the Louisiana bayous. From its beginning the SUNNY SOUTH was popular, both with audiences and with players. Billboard, in October of this first season, gives the following report:

> Notes from the Swallow & Markle Floating Theatre: The New Sunny South, our new floating theatre, is now on her way up the Mississippi toward the Illinois River. This boat is truly the "Barnum of the Waters", and from the press notices we have been receiving and the large business, we think that the New Sunny South has established a reputation for itself on its first season. Our band and orchestra, under the direction of Merle Baker and George C. Davidson, are receiving many compliments up this way. Marsh DeVaro and wife, the Quillans, and the Martyn Sisters are big favorites.[38]

It is interesting that the double names of Swallow and Markle are used in this article. It is a natural inclusion since the FLOATING PALACE was still operating under that banner, but pictures show either Cheeks' name or Markle's. (It is unlikely that "the Quillans" of this article

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[38] Billboard, October 28, 1905, p. 8.

is the "nary-a-leg-man" of the NEW SENSATION since this was twenty years later and the article used the plural.)

At the end of the 1905 season (which if true to form would have been early in 1906) The NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE was sold to Emerson. The fact that Mr. Markle had the SUNNY SOUTH is one reason why he might have parted with the FLOATING PALACE. Another reason might be Swallow's leaving the business; at least two sources mention that Mr. Swallow went to Oklahoma and made considerable money in the oil business.[39] At the end of this season Emerson sold his half interest in the WATER QUEEN back to Captain Price. In addition, Captain Price put up part of the money for the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE. But this time Price was indeed a silent partner; he had nothing to do with the operation. Emerson was sole manager and the boat went out under the name of the EMERSON FLOATING PALACE, often referred to (along with the tow) as the "Emerson."[40]

Even though it was not to last long, the first half decade of the twentieth century saw showboating as a major entertainment industry.

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[39]Letters from George Bundy and Charles Hornstein, March 28 and May 21, respectively, 1947 (GHWC).

[40]Interview with R. W. Emerson, January 1, 1947 (GHWC).

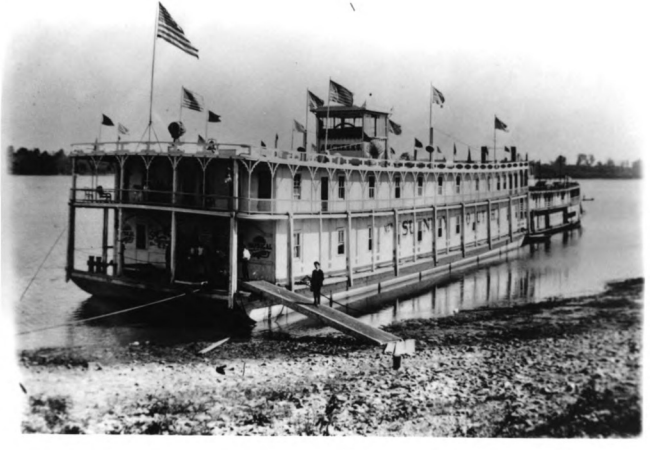


Figure # 99

The SUNNY SOUTH (1905)

This picture of the SUNNY SOUTH is from the first season; the name on the pilot house is Cheeks.



Figure # 100

The SUNNY SOUTH band (1905)

This photograph is obviously from the first season of the SUNNY SOUTH because the name on the placard on the right is A. M. Cheeks. Street parades by the band were regular features of showboat promotion. If the town was small, a concert like this one, could thoroughly excite the populace.

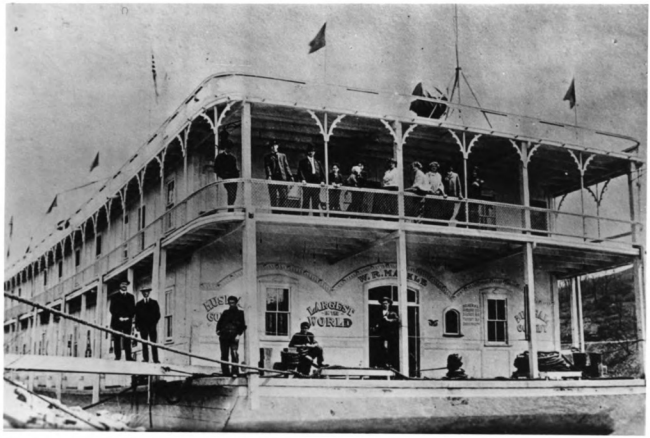


Figure # 101

The SUNNY SOUTH

This photograph gives some idea of the sleek but dignified appearance of the SUNNY SOUTH. Note that the name over the main entrance is now W. R. Markle.



Figure # 102

The SUNNY SOUTH

Note that in this picture the name of the showboat appears along the upper guard, and that along the roof rail is Mr. Markle's name.

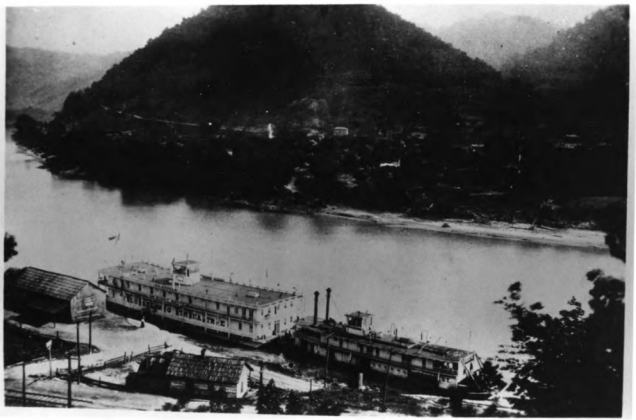


Figure # 103

The SUNNY SOUTH

A scene like this could be photographed a great many places in showboat territory, except on the sugar coast and the bayou country. The picture was actually taken on the Monongahela, not too distant from the spot where the SUNNY SOUTH would eventually be lost.

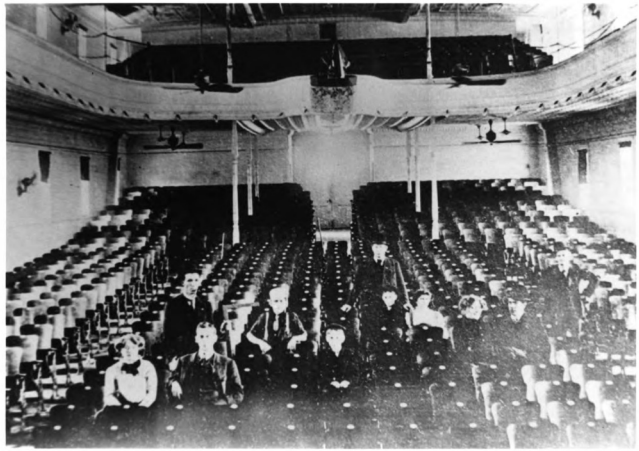


Figure # 104

Interior of the SUNNY SOUTH

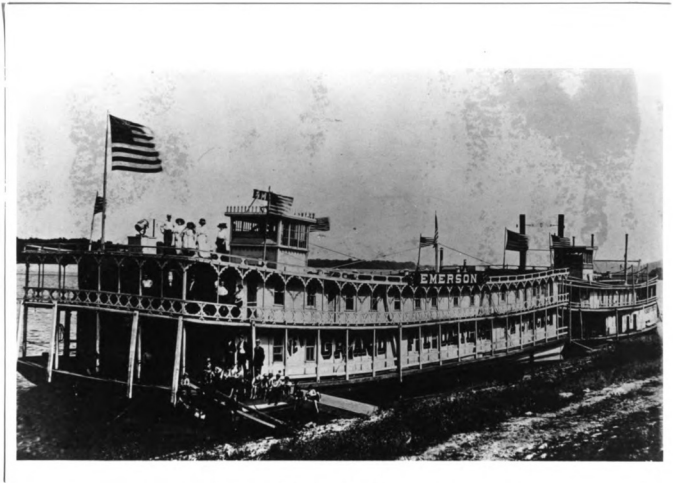


Figure # 105

The NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

This shows the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE when Emerson was manager and half owner. (This photo is a good example of the condition of much showboat photographic material; pictures were often on a very porous paper and mounted into scrapbooks with glues and rubber cements which bled through.)

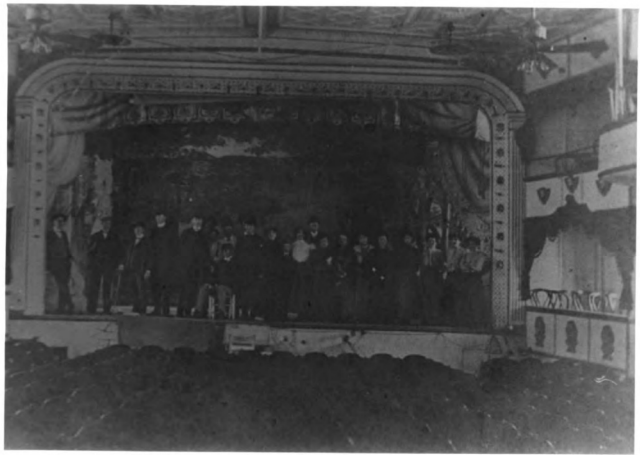


Figure # 106

Interior of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

Probably no other showboat ever surpassed the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE in looking like a theatre that might be found in a city at the time. Others were more unique or more gaudy. Note that twenty-one people can be seen on the stage.

Figure # 107

Production picture on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

This photograph is an enigma as no one can be identified in the cast and consequently it was not known from where the picture came. The border at the top of the picture of repeated cartouche designs seems to be the same as that show in Figure # 106 on the former page of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE. It is possible that this was taken in later years when it was operated as the GREATER NEW YORK under Captain Price.



Figure # 107

Production picture on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

Figure # 108

The fleet of the GREAT AMERICAN WATER SHOWS

Because this operation was not really a form of theatre, it will not be dealt with in this study. It is included here because this picture gives an indication of the size that various river craft were reaching. According to Philip Graham, Showboats, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 36n., this show ceased operation when it was discovered that a troupe of "diving" horses were not voluntarily jumping into the water, but rather fell from a high platform when the flooring beneath them was released as a trap door.

When this show started and what happened to it eventually is not known; it was running however in the early years of this century.

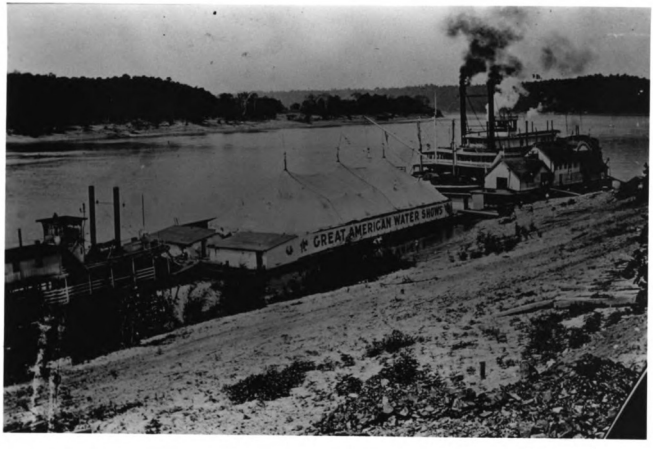


Figure # 108

The fleet of the GREAT AMERICAN WATER SHOWS

PART III, Chapter 9 - Many, Many Showboats: The Heyday!

Captain Menke once mentioned a showboat owned by a Mr. Gent but he said that it had a short career of a few months, then laid up until it sank at Mound City, Illinois. He gave the dates as 1905 or 1906.[1] Perhaps this is the reason for the following from the New York Clipper of two seasons later:

> One showboat for sale, or one half-interest. Address F. Gent, Marion, Ill.[2]

No other mentions of Mr. Gent's enterprise has been uncovered in the trade publications.

Dealing with showboats about which more is known, the 1906 season opened with five of the grandest fleets ever on the rivers, as well as the small but most serviceable NEW ERA. Unlike previous years, the six showboats - regardless of actual ownership - were under six different managers: the French/McNair combination, Captain Price, Captain Eisenbarth, W. R. Markle, Captain Wiley P. McNair, and Captain R. W. Emerson.

By this point the origins of all these men is known except the last - Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson Gaches was born in Pittsburgh in 1880. When he was ten years old his mother died. His father then married a girl from Letart Falls, Ohio, and in a short time the family moved to this river village. A glance at the map will show why this young man was drawn to the river, for Letart Falls lies at the extreme southern tip of the

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[1] Letter from J. W. Menke, March 3, 1947 (GHWC).

[2] New York Clipper, March 14, 1908, p. 108.

Pomeroy Bend in the Ohio River. As the crow flies it is about twelve miles to the town of Pomeroy but nearer twenty miles, either by river or the country road which follows the river. No railroad touches the town and the highways bypass it as it lies so far down in the bend. Consequently there was little landward attraction, but in the other direction, stately steamers bound for Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, or even New Orleans were most attractive.

At the age of twelve or thirteen young Ralph ran away to be a dishwasher and flunky on a small packet, not a particularly auspicious beginning for the man who was to become the "Showboat King" Following three years on the rivers he returned to land to go to Business School in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania as a concession to his father. But determined to become a man of authority and responsibility on the river, he seized every opportunity to learn everything he could about steamboat operation. He left Business School to become second clerk on the Steamer C. W. BATCHELOR in the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati trade. Then he became head clerk on the LIZZIE BAY running from Pittsburgh to Charleston, the youngest head clerk on the river; he was eighteen. At twenty-one he was the youngest licensed master and as the years went on he added continuously to the districts covered by his license.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson Gaches went aboard Captain Price's showboat as pilot he was still in his early twenties but with a decade of steamboat experience behind him. Moreover, he was a striking speciman of manhood: tall - well over six feet in height, around two hundred pounds in weight, and as handsome as any leading man who ever upheld virtue on a showboat stage. All of this combined, in sharp contrast to the personality of Captain Price, to make for a fail-safe showman and

riverman. Although he had considerable responsibility with Captain Price on the WATER QUEEN, his first true managerial capacity was on the NEW ERA.[3]

On buying the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, the young Captain dropped the troublesome name Gaches. As he himself stated, those he encountered who heard it pronounced didn't know how to spell it and those who read it didn't know how to say it.[4] Besides in a profession where a name was so very important, he was still left with Ralph Waldo Emerson. And so with EMERSON'S FLOATING PALACE, he took his first giant step on his way to the title of "Showboat King." The first show on his new acquisition was the musical pantomime Humpty Dumpty with Jim Bonnelli.[5] This production had enjoyed much success in New York and consequently EMERSON'S FLOATING PALACE was a success from the very beginning.

The 1906 season was to see the launching of still another new showboat. Again the Pope Dock Company was the builder and the boat was called the WONDERLAND. The original idea for this new showboat came from Norman Thom who had been general factotum for Markle on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE and on the SUNNY SOUTH after that. He interested other men on the SUNNY SOUTH in the project, namely James Hagans (formerly of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus) who was head of the large band Markle always carried; others in on the planning were Joe Robinson and Walter Pell. As Hagans was the only one with any capitol at all,

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[3]Biographical information on Emerson from interview in Chicago, January 1, 1947, and letter, December 6, 1947 (GHWC).

[4]Interview with R. W. Emerson, Chicago, June 1, 1947 (GHWC).

[5]Letter from Emerson, January 1, 1948, and interview with Charles Ledbetter, Elizabethtown, Illinois, August 28, 1947 (GHWC).

he enlisted the assistance of a friend, John W. Cooley, a hotel manager at Newcomerstown, Ohio.

Mr. Cooley was born in Coshocton County, Ohio in 1867. He married in 1896 and went into the hotel business. By his own admission he knew nothing about showboating at the time he put up money for the WONDERLAND, save having seen a performance on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE in 1905. In fact Mr. Cooley once made the following statement: "I owned the showboat, as well as the towboat VERNIE-MACK, but Norman Thom was my stage manager. He booked all the shows and directed them."[6] Norman Thom was from Ironton, Ohio but little is know of him before his association with W. R. Markle.

With Hagans as one quarter owner, the WONDERLAND left the ways at Parkersburg under the names of Cooley & Hagans.[7] With Cooley as business manager, Hagans in charge of the band (the most experienced bandmaster on the rivers,) and Norman Thom as stage manager and director (a very experienced stage manager after his years with Markle's elaborate shows,)[8] the WONDERLAND was immediately successful. In addition to this very competent staff, a young man by the name of Bill Menke, a name that was to become prominent a decade later, was advance man. The WONDERLAND like all the other showboats on the water made a complete tour of the navigable showboat territory during this season.

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[6]Biographical information on John W. Cooley from Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 10, 1950, and interview with Mr. Cooley, Newcomerstown, Ohio, December 13, 1946 (GHWC).

[7]Interview with Mr. Cooley, idem. An undated letter from Mr. Hagans to George Bundy states that any material on showboats that he once had had long been lost.(GHWC).

[8]Only Ida McNair had more stage managing experinece on showboats, which was three-fold that of Mr. Thom.

Whether or not any of the showboat owners/managers realized it at the time, the winter between the seasons of 1906 and 1907 was a turning point for the showboat theatre. There were more showboats on the water than ever before. Each of them was bigger and better equipped than any ever before and each had competent managers and experienced running crews aboard. Because of living conditions aboard the boats themselves and the leisure between performances, the boats could attract top name performers, and, in turn, these performers had space, equipment and musical accompaniment that did not limit their abilities and talents. All of these things the managers were aware of, and, with increasing expenditure, met the competition. But the seven boats now were vying for the same audience that three boats had sought only six years before and, in addition, the new boats needed two or three time as big an audience at each performance in order to pay for the increased cost of operation.

The showboats were also competing against forces other than themselves. As shipping by rail increased yearly in geometric proportion, steamboating was decreasing, and the small river towns ceased to grow and some even decreased in size. The small town had always been the best showboat stop and even the Frenches in the early days had never found good business in the larger cities. (The Frenches stopped often at Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Cincinnati, Louisville, Evansville, Cairo, St. Louis, Memphis, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans, but rarely played in these cities.) Even medium size towns had their own vaudeville houses and a hall capable of housing a fairly elaborate road company, which in turn had become more accessible from New York via the railroad. Motion pictures effected the live theatre, but effected showboats no

more (at this time) than other types of theatre; just as landed vaudeville houses were devoting part of their programs to movies, many showboats were using them as part of their fare as early as 1904.[9]

The automobile was, and with an incredible rate, creating a mobility for small town citizens that was here-to-fore unthought of. With this automotive mobility came improved roads. Topping all of this was the loss of person to person contact that had made the French and Price names everyday words in the eighties and nineties; the increased technology and mobility was in large part responsible for this loss of close contact and small town spirit along the rivers.

As already mentioned, Callie French and John McNair were the first to recognize this change. In all fairness to the other owners, this recognition came easier to the Frenches and McNairs because they had reached a point where they could afford to retire, an alternative most of the others did not have. Nevertheless, FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION did open the 1907 season as did all six other showboats. But this season was to see still another showboat on the water. The Bryant family launched their showboat, the PRINCESS, at Point Pleasant, West Virginia in the spring of 1907, although after the opening, which was successful, it was greeted with varying reactions, still it was seeking its own share of the showboat trade.[10]

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[9]Reports of motion pictures at these early dates from both R. W. Emerson and George Bundy, letters of January 22 and April 18, respectively, 1947 (GHWC). Ads for the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE announced "Bold Bank Robbery" in its early seasons.

[10]Billy Bryant's own chronicle of his family and showboats, written in the style of narrative fiction, best tells of this operation; it will not be dealt with in detail here: Children of Ol' Man River, (New York: Lee Furman Company, 1936).

Not a showboat of the Western Rivers, the JAMES ADAMS FLOATING THEATRE was launched off North Carolina in 1906.



Figure # 109

John W. Cooley

Like W. R. Markle, Mr. Cooley was not a showboat "captain." Not only did he have no river experience before coming to showboats, he had no theatre experience. He did have a prime requisite to be involved with showboats (at the time he built the WONDERLAND) - money.



Figure # 110

Cooley & Hagans' WONDERLAND

Because of the names of Cooley and Hagans, this picture would have to be from the first seasons of the WONDERLAND.

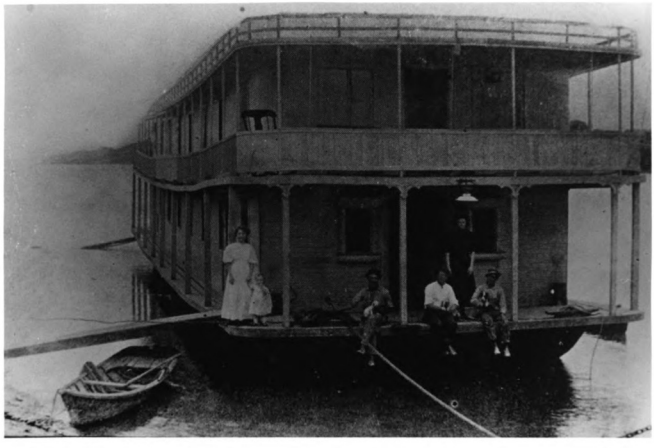


Figure # 111

The Bryants' PRINCESS

As a smaller boat, the PRINCESS could travel on streams, or greater distances up streams, than the large showboats of 1907.



Figure # 112

The Bryants' PRINCESS

This is a later view of the PRINCESS, decorated differently and with the addition of a pilot house. Notice the towboat FLORENCE, named after Billy Bryant's sister.

Figure # 113

The ORIGINAL FLOATING THEATRE

The above photograph shows an outstanding showboat, one that was to have a long career, but one that will not be dealt with in this study. It was better known as the JAMES ADAMS and played the Chesapeake Bay and the tidewater areas of the Carolinas and the southern Atlantic coast. This showboat was original and unique in that it was the only one of its kind: there was no other showboat to play the Chesapeake Bay and southward.

It was this showboat on which Edna Ferber spent considerable time when preparing Showboat for publication.

That it is not dealt with in this study of showboats on the Western Rivers is in no way meant to depricate the long and distinguished career of this operation.

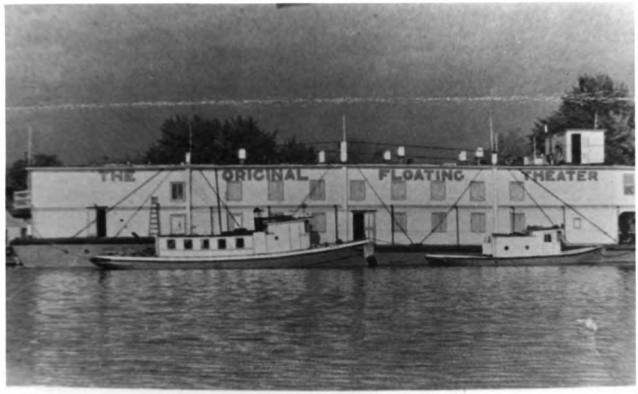


Figure # 113

The ORIGINAL FLOATING THEATRE

Figure # 114

The JAMES ADAMS

This photograph provides a good view of the JAMES ADAMS. This boat had a unique appearance, quite like showboats on the Western Rivers. It had the solid appearance of a building on a barge. Oldtimers of the Western Rivers scoffed at its appearance: "If its gonna be a showboat, then it oughta look like a showboat."

This boat was not in playing competition with the other showboats in this study. The only competition may have been for vaudeville talent from eastern cities and booking agents.



Figure # 114

The JAMES ADAMS

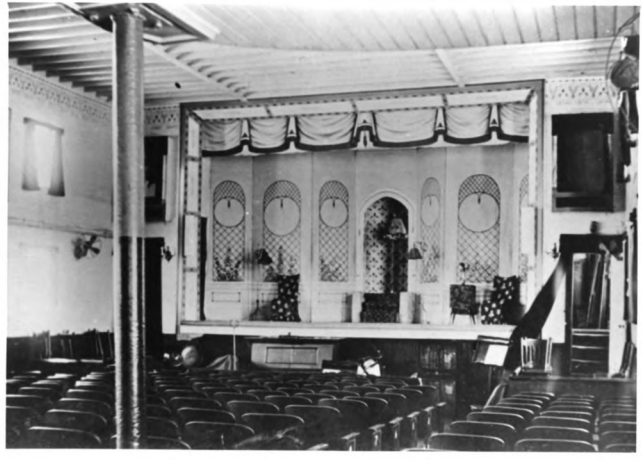


Figure # 115

Interior of the JAMES ADAMS

Captain Price's reaction to this competition was to increase his holdings. He already owned the oldest and outwardly fanciest boat, the WATER QUEEN, along with a half interest in EMERSON'S FLOATING PALACE and Wiley McNair's NEW ERA. In the 1907 season he purchased the NEW SENSATION, name and all from Callie French and John McNair. At this season's end, four of the eight existing showboats were under Price's ownership, two fully and two on half ownership. Because Captain Price did not advertise extensively we do not know specifically what he was offering in performance to counteract the competition. Photographs that exist would indicate that Price emphasized the band on the WATER QUEEN, just as he did on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION later.

There is a contemporary review of Price's show on the WATER QUEEN that gives an indication of the nature of his shows.

> E. A. Price's "Water Queen" floating theatre showed at our landing last Monday evening to a full house, giving our people one of the best entertainments produced by a boat show in this city, but presents the Irish comedy drama "Little Nell" which was well played and was funny from start to finish. The vaudeville specialities between acts is made up of first-class ladies and gentlemen in every respect. The "Water Queen" will play a return date at our landing Monday, October 5th, giving a new 3-act drama entitled "Family Troubles" with new specialities between acts and will certainly be greeted by a large audience.[11]

From Bryant's book we know that the PRINCESS' program around 1908 was largely the Bryant family.

If Price emphasized his band on the WATER QUEEN, music was an outstanding feature of the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON. A concert program of 1908 would indicate considerable virtuosity. (See Figures # 119 & 120.) At this time the Eisenbarth band was under the direction of Harry High

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[11] Meredosia Budget, Meredosia, Illinois, September 24, 1908.

who had been band director for the WATER QUEEN in 1905 and for the EMERSON FLOATING PALACE in 1906. Mr. High recalled that the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE "supplied me with the best musicians I ever had."[12] Obviously the band was indeed fine to warrant such a fine review for a July 4th concert in 1908:

> Nation's Anniversary quiet day in Havana. High's band gave fine concert in courtyard. The feature of the afternoon was the grand open air concert given by Harry High and his excellent band which travels with the Eisenbarth-Henderson Floating Theatre. The fine program which had been announced previously, was given in its entirety and many of the numbers were heartily encored, three of the leading soloists, Mr. Howard D. Tozier, Dick Mitchell, and Mr. Norman Hanley each responding three times to encores. More than 500 persons gathered to hear the concert and never a more respectful and appreciative audience has gathered nor a more excellent program has been heard here than that given by the E-H company under Mr. High's skillful leadership. Mr. High is a prime favorite among Havana's music loving people and his connection with the concert company was in itself a guarantee of excellence. The Eisenbarth show played to a crowded house in the evening, many being attracted by the fine performance heard in the afternoon at the Court House square where the open air concert was given.[13]

Pictures of the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE show an advertisement on the top of the boat for the "Johnstown Flood." (See Figure # 91). A showbill of the time says that this was alternated with the "Eruption of Mount Vesuvius; or, The Last Days of Pompeii," and describes them as "the greatest scenographic, electrical and mechanical" productions ever attempted. Harry High, however, said that these productions were actually motion pictures. That these were motion

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[12]Letter from Harry High, May 28, 1947 (GHWC).

[13]Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, July 10, 1908.

Figure # 116

Band of the WATER QUEEN

The bandsmen are Auttie Sykes, Steve Price, Tommy Morris, Frank Bailey, Gene Henninger, C. M. Treadway, Bill Robinson, Walter Falkenstein, Carl Walraven, George Busholz, and Harry High, director. Mr. High made these identifications and stated that the picture was taken at California, Pennsylvania in 1905.



Figure # 116

Band of the WATER QUEEN



Figure # 117

Band of the WATER QUEEN

This picture was taken in 1909 but the place and the time in the season is not known. Steve Price is standing at right behind his father.



Figure # 118

Band of the WATER QUEEN

The above is a posed picture of the WATER QUEEN band, most likely taken after a street parade or after a downtown concert.

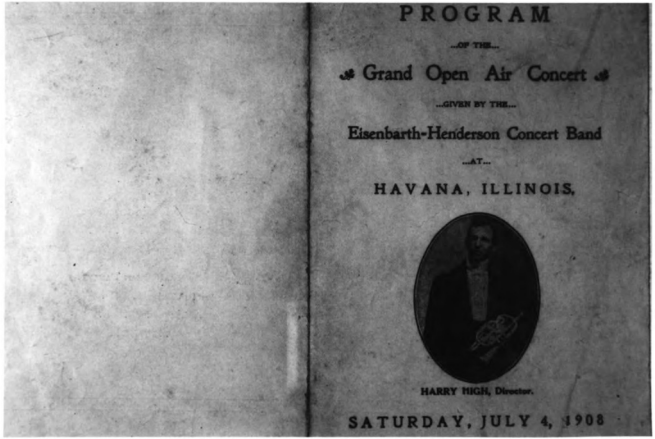
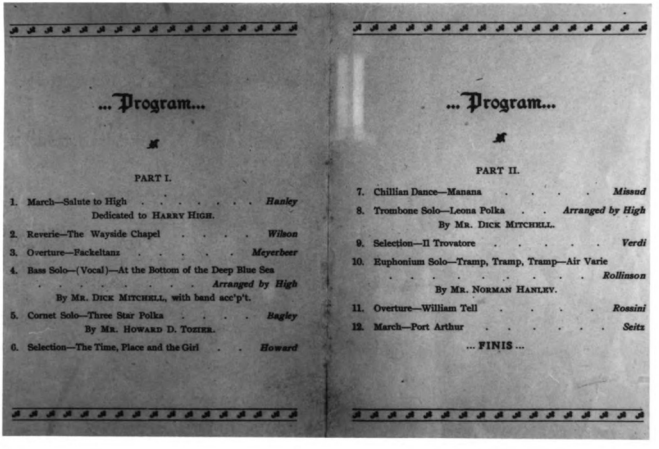


Figure # 119

Concert Program, Eisenbarth-Henderson Band



... Program...

PART I.

1. March—Salute to High . . . . . *Hanley*
   Dedicated to HARRY HIGH.
2. Reverie—The Wayside Chapel . . . . *Wilson*
3. Overture—Packeltanz . . . . . *Meyerbeer*
4. Bass Solo—(Vocal)—At the Bottom of the Deep Blue Sea
   . . . . . *Arranged by High*
   By MR. DICK MITCHELL, with band acc'p't.
5. Cornet Solo—Three Star Polka . . . . *Bagley*
   By MR. HOWARD D. TOZIER.
6. Selection—The Time, Place and the Girl . . *Howard*

... Program...

PART II.

7. Chillian Dance—Manana . . . . . *Missud*
8. Trombone Solo—Leona Polka . . . *Arranged by High*
   By MR. DICK MITCHELL.
9. Selection—Il Trovatore . . . . . *Verdi*
10. Euphonium Solo—Tramp, Tramp, Tramp—Air Varie
    . . . . . *Rollinson*
    By MR. NORMAN HANLEY.
11. Overture—William Tell . . . . . *Rossini*
12. March—Port Arthur . . . . . *Seitz*

... FINIS ...

Figure # 120

Concert Program, Eisenbarth-Henderson Band



Figure # 121

Harry High

Mr. High worked on several showboats as musicians and band leader. He was highly respected and his services were greatly sought.

A great deal of information for this study came from Mr. High, as well as information on other sources.



Figure # 122

George Bundy

Mr. Bundy was fifteen when he joined the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE under Swallow and Markle. He then worked on the SUNNY SOUTH and the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE, returning to the FLOATING PALACE under Emerson. He was clarinetist in the band of these boats.

Mr. Bundy was a major source of information for this study and was very helpful in leading to other sources.



Figure # 123

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE Band

According to Harry High who was director of this band, it did not parade but rather gave concerts at a prominent place in the town. This photograph was identified by Raymond Sillito, who had been with this showboat; it was taken at Elizabethtown, Illinois in 1908.



Figure # 124

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE Band

This photograph was taken May 8, 1907 at St. Marys, West Virginia on the steps of a bank in the town.



Figure # 125

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE Band

This photograph was taken from the roof of the towboat (the band on the towboat also) with the stern of the showboat in the background.



Figure # 126

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE Band

Because of the same uniforms, without hats, it is assumed that this photograph was taken in 1908: compare with Figure # 125.

pictures, with some elaboration, is supported by the advertisement for company and crew in Billboard of February of 1907. Among the people being soucht was "M.P. Operator" who "must be competent electrician."[14]

After seeing the nature of two of the large showboats in 1908, it is appropriate to look at others. An unidentified clipping of Captain Emerson's, believed to be on the Illinois River since that was the playing territory during July and August, gives the following:

> Emerson's Floating Palace at the river Saturday, July 11. Presenting a Big Musical Comedy, Supported by 40 people. Also 8 Big Acts of Vaudeville, Moving Pictures and Illustrated Songs. Added Attraction - Victorina Hindu Troup of Simla, India. See Prof. Vanoran swallow a loaded gun barrel and discharge it while it is two feet down his throat. See Miss Victorina swallow a 110-volt electric light that will shine through the breast and show the beating of the heart. Prices 25, 35, 50¢.

The SUNNY SOUTH was much heralded this summer on the Illinois.

> Coming! W. R. Markle's New Sunny South Floating Theatre, Saturday, August 15. The Greatest of All Boat Shows presenting the spectacular musical comedy success, The American Hustler, augmented by the living Doll Chorus of pretty girls, under the personal direction of Mrs. Bill Elwood, a noted Paree comedy producer; also an all-star vaudeville feature show of ten big new novel acts. Good music assured. Our own band and orchestra. Popular Prices - 25, 35, & 50.[15]

A news article accompanying this add in the same issue of this paper says "The Sunny South is the largest and finest of all the showboats and never fails to present a performance of superior excellence. . . It promises to be the greatest show ever seen in Havana." The former notices were printed when the SUNNY SOUTH was going up river, and on August 21 the same paper was again enthusiastic:

> On Thursday, August 27, W. R. Markle's New Sunny South Floating Theatre will play a return engagement at

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[15]Mason Caounty Democrat, Havana, Illinois, August 7, 1908.

> Havana with an entire new show. The management spares no expense to secure the best artists in the profession and have secured new acts with up to date specialities, bright comedy and good singing for the return trip and no doubt will be greeted with a crowded house, as the Markle boat never fails to give a first class show, one which the people always enjoy. Don't forget the day and date.[16]

The same issue of this newspaper carried an advertisement for this return trip of the SUNNY SOUTH.

> Back again, W. R. Markle's New Sunny South Floating Theatre. Return date Havana, Thursday, August 27th. Entire change, New Show, New Faces, Presenting the funniest musical comedy ever seen on the river, The Arrival of the Mechanical Cow, augmented by a large chorus of pretty girls. Late specialities. Moving pictures and illustrated songs. Popular Prices . . .

After the 1907 season, the first season for the WONDERLAND, Mr. Hagans sold his interest in this show to Mr. Cooley and it operated during the next two seasons under Mr. Cooley's name alone. When exactly this transaction took place is not known but Billboard of December 15, 1906 carried a notice under Miscellaneous Routes that Cooley & Hagan's Floating Theatre would be at Rosedale, Mississippi on the 14th. But the New York Clipper of February 8, 1908 has an ad for "versatile vaudeville people" for J. W. Cooley's Floating Theatre. At any rate there is an idea of what the WONDERLAND was presenting during the summer of 1908, and again, for the sake of good comparison, it is the fare presented along the Illinois River.

> Coming! J. W. Cooley's Floating Theatre, Wonderland, at the river landing, Havana, Illinois, May 4. The only modern theatre on the river, built for the convenience and comfort of our patrons. You are cordially invited to visit during the day.[17]

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[16] Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, August 21, 1908.

[17] Ibid., May 1, 1908.

The same paper, issue of May 15, carried a review of this announced engagement:

> J. W. Cooley's Wonderland, the first floating theatre of this season arrived Sunday morning and gave a performance to a well-filled house Monday night. The aggregation of talent carried by this company is far above the average, and the show given Monday night was highly appreciated by our people. A number of fine selections by the orchestra introduced the musical comedy entitled "A Manager's Troubles." The singing was excellent and the program of splendid specialities included the Faulkner family in hazardous and intricate bicycling and other equally attractive features.

Competition was rugged. The 1908 season with all its spectacular showboat entertainment was marred by three accidents to three different boats. The first of these happened to the Eisenbarth operation early in the season, before the glowing reports of performances in this 1908 season. Captain Eisenbarth had organized his show at Marietta, Ohio early in March and his showboat, in tow of the Steamer COLUMBIA, was scheduled to leave on Sunday, March 22 for downstream points to open the season. High water delayed departure, however, and it was not until Wednesday March 25 that the fleet got underway. At four o'clock in the morning steam was raised, lines hauled in and the boats began their trip downstream. The river was high and the current swift; in addition a wind was blowing, making navigation very difficult in the semi-darkness.

As the showboat approached Lock No. 18, eight miles below Marietta, the towboat HENRY F. LOWRLY appeared, headed upstream with a tow of barges. The steamboats exchanged whistle signals, and the COLUMBIA veered to the right. The water was high enough to cover the dam, making locking through unnecessary, but the COLUMBIA got too close to the

lock wall. The showboat passed over safely, since she was of extremely shallow draft, but the tow struck the wall with great force, tearing a hole in the hull. The lines snapped and the showboat floated on downstream, but the towboat sank with water within six inches of her hurricane deck. Most of the company were not awakened by departure and were asleep in the cabin of the towboat. Some swam ashore but most climbed to safety on the roof of the towboat. It was eventually discovered that no lives were lost.[18]

The LOWREY steamed down the river to retrieve the runaway showboat. On returning to the scene of the accident, all were taken to Marietta. Here wardrobes were replenished and by hooking into electric power from the city, in lieu of power from the generators of the COLUMBIA, a performance was given a few days later. A Marietta newspaper carried this notice of this unscheduled performance, under the heading "The Messenger Boy":

> The members of the Eisenbarth-Henderson Company, who so narrowly escaped death in the recent destruction of the steamer "Columbia", will be seen in the production of the above mentioned four-act comedy drama on the evening of Monday, March 30th. Wires for the lighting of the theatre and to supply the electricity for the reproductions of the Eruption of Mr. Vesuvious will be connected to the lines of the local company and the performance will be given in its entirety. On account of the loss of the calliope, there will be no music by the steam piano, as is customary with these shows. The performance will commence at 8 o'clock. Don't forget the date.[19]

This same Marietta newspaper had carried an article the day following the accident (March 26) concerning the superstitious river-men and this accident. The paper stated that J. W. Lane of Marietta,

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[18] Marietta Register-Leader and Marietta Weekly Journal, both of March 25, 1908.

[19] Marietta Register-Leader, March 27, 1908.

who had just been engaged by Captain Eisenbarth as engineer, saw rats leaving the COLUMBIA the evening before and consequently did not leave with the fleet the next morning, thus saving himself from near death.

The second and third accidents of this 1908 season both happened in the month of October. In the review of the WATER QUEEN in the Meredosia Budget, already quoted, the showboat was announced to return on October 5. Unfortunately the WATER QUEEN did not make that promised return engagement. The boat sank the Sunday before this announced performance on the Illinois River.

> On Sunday morning about 8 o'clock just after passing through the locks at La Grange, Price's showboat in attempting to land struck a piling, punching a hole in the bow of the barge, when in less than ten minutes she went down in seven or eight feet of water. Mr. Price was billed for this city Monday evening. It will be several days before the barge, "Water Queen", can be raised, and it will be equally long before the interior of the boat will dry out, as the water on the inside is up over the reserved seats. Mr. Price was here Sunday morning to interview Mr. Wells to see if he could get him to assist in raising the barge, but Mr. Wells could not help him. We understand that he secured assistance from Beardstown.[20]

The indomitable WATER QUEEN was raised and was to continue operation for another twenty-eight years.

Captain Emerson was to come in for his share of trouble this season. At Osceola, Arkansas the Mississippi was wearing away the banks and destroying valuable farm land. The government was building huge willow mattresses of hundreds of saplings. These were lashed together, secrued to the shore, then the off-shore end was sunk, thus strengthening the river bank. One October day as the EMERSON FLOATING PALACE was approaching this area of the Mississippi, it was blown into one of these mattresses, not yet sunk. The current began to draw the steamer EMERSON

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[20] Meredosia Budget, October 8, 1908.

under the mattress, and the crew cut the lines freeing the showboat, but as the EMERSON was loaded with coal, it sank. A bandsman and actor named Joe Baird was caught under the steamer and the willow mattress but was finally pulled aboard the showboat by his hair. Another musician aboard was not as fortunate as Mr. Baird. Thomas Berg was drowned when the EMERSON capsized - one of the very few fatalities that occurred in the long history of showboating. Price and Emerson bought the Steamer ROBERT DODDS in New Orleans to replace the EMERSON and complete the season.[21]

At the end of the 1908 season (early 1909) Captain Emerson sold his interest in the FLOATING PALACE to Captain Price. Thus Price owned three of the largest showboats as well as half interest in the small NEW ERA. Besides the showboats, he owned the steamers that pushed them. No other man before or since owned as many showboat fleets at one time.[22]

1908 was Captain E. E. Eisenbarth's last season on the river. Early in 1909 he sold his fleet and retired. His was the second great name to retire from showboating, considering the names of French and McNair as one. He spent the remainder of his days at Marietta, Ohio where he died in July of 1925.[23]

The MODERN TEMPLE OF AMUSEMENT was sold to two gentlemen new to the showboat business. These men were not new to the river for they owned a baseball team, called the Cowboys, that toured on a river

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[21]Letter from Horace Murphy (performer on this showboat), May 25, 1947 (GHWC).

[22]Letter from R. W. Emerson, December 6, 1947 (GHWC).

[23]From obituary of Captain Eisenbarth in Marietta Register, July 17, 1925, and from interview with Mrs. E. E. Eisenbarth at Marietta, January 18, 1947 (GHWC).

steamer; they also owned The Bloomer Girls, a female baseball team that traveled by railway. These two men were Walter Needham and Harry F. Steiner, about whom little is known. The new owners remodeled and redecorated their new acquisition, making her the most spectacular showboat (at least in external appearance) ever to grace the rivers. The bow was redone with a concave marquee in the shape of a quarter sphere, painted in the colors of the spectrum and studded with hundreds of electric lights. Beneath this was a fancy ticket office flanked by imposing doors, all very like the fronts of large city theatres. The program changed from classics to vaudeville and melodrama, and, although still one of eight showboats on the Western Rivers, under the name of COTTON BLOSSOM, this boat began a second career with the appearance of a new boat.[24]

The season of 1909 saw the last "big" showboat to come into existence. Again the builder was the Pope Dock Company of Parkersburg, and again the owner was W. R. Markle. Here must follow a statement that may seem monotonous by now but it is true (the last such statement herein): this new boat was the largest and finest floating theatre ever seen in America. She was 160 feet in length and 40 feet wide, seating 1400 persons. On the outside she was uncluttered of fancy ornamentation,

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[24]In a letter from Captain Emerson, August 3, 1947, he mentions that he and Captain Menke had spent New Years together three years prior and that Steiner was present, but nothing else is said. In a terse reply to Mr. Wright of August 1947, Mr. Steiner, then living in Indianapolis, stated that he remembered nothing of his showboat days.

The dates of the purchase of the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE and the reworking of it into the COTTON BLOSSOM from Horace Murphy in letter of June 24, 1947 (GHWC).

being even plainer than the SUNNY SOUTH. The inside was again a wonder of decoration, and equipment and facilities were everything that could possibly be put on a waterborn theatre in 1909.

In addition to regular seating in the orchestra and balcony, she boasted twenty-one boxes, four of them clustered on each side of the stage at two levels, and the rest of them in front of and slightly below the balcony rail. Hundreds of electric lights gleamed from the ceiling and from scounces on the walls and box rails. Walls and ceiling were of pressed steel of ornamental design painted with white enamel. There was not a post to obstruct the patrons' view of the stage, which was enclosed by a heavy proscenium arch richly decorated with gold relief work. Captain Emerson who was later to own this boat described it thusly: "Just a real city theatre, only on water. . . This was one boat that complied with the city ordinances regarding fire and other things."[25]

This new boat slipped of the ways simply titled W. R. MARKLE'S NEW SHOWBOAT. At some time near the end of the first season this boat was renamed the GOLDENROD. And so, in 1909, there were nine.

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[25]Letter from Captain Emerson, March 13, 1947 (GHWC).



Figure # 127

Captain Ralph W. Emerson

Born Ralph Waldo Emerson Gaches, Captain Emerson dropped the troublesome last name early in the century. To his friends he was Ralph, sometimes R. W., but when written about, he was always referred to as the "Showboat King."



Figure # 128

Company of Emerson's NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE

The man in the second row in white with the straw skimmer is Horace Murphy, who was a great source of information for this study.

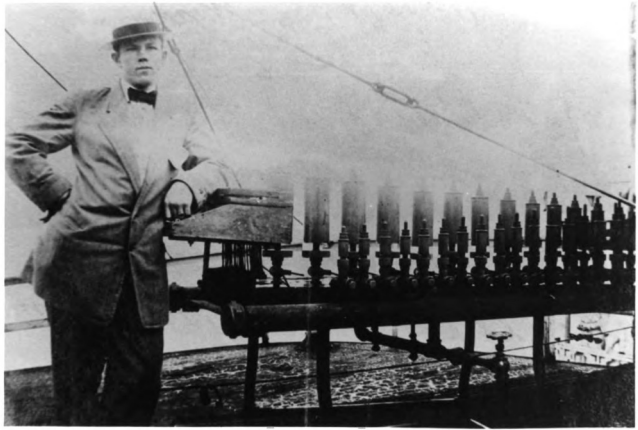


Figure # 129

Joe Baird on the EMERSON

This photograph shows Joe (Doc) Baird on board the Steamer EMERSON, which towed Emerson's NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE. He nearly lost his life when this steamer capsized and sank. Whether Mr. Baird played the calliope is not know; that he was a fine musician is well documented.



Figure # 130

The EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE

This photograph of the Eisenbarth boat fronts an ink blotter given away as advertising. The boat appears as it did just before it was sold to Needham and Steiner. (Despite the boldness of the rubber stamp, it is assumed the mispelled location is "Vanceburg," Kentucky.)



Figure # 131

The Original COTTON BLOSSOM

This boat began its career as the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE. Under Needham and Steiner it was rebuilt as above to become the COTTON BLOSSOM. Although not built as such, this was the first boat to bear the name COTTON BLOSSOM; there were several others to follow.



Figure # 132

The Band of W. R. MARKLE'S NEW SHOWBOAT

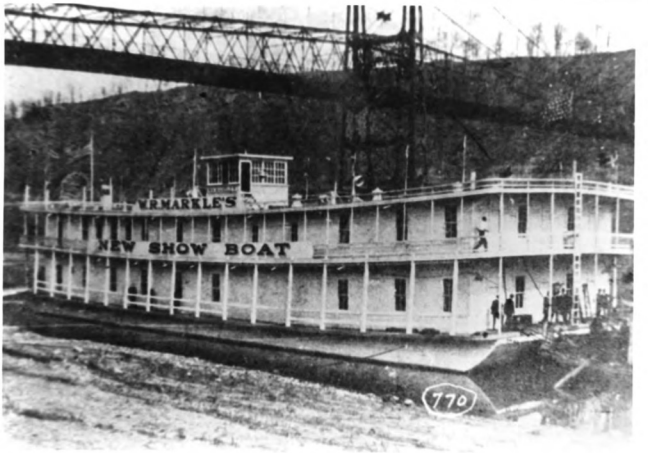


Figure # 133

W. R. MARKIE'S NEW SHOW BOAT

This view of Markle's new boat is taken from the rear, a rare angle for showboats. Shortly after this picture was taken, within a year, the showboat was renamed the GOLDENROD.

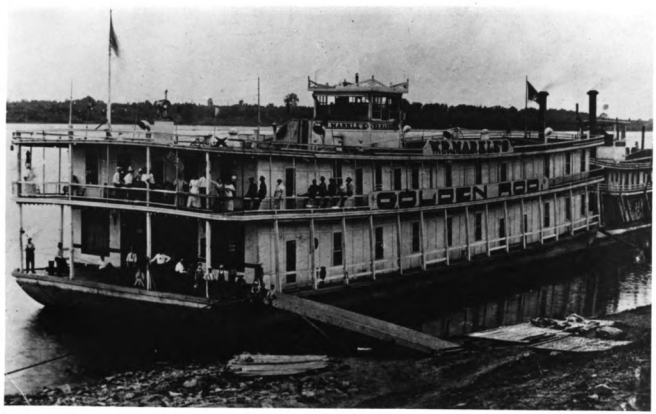


Figure # 134

W. R. Markle's GOLDENROD

LIBRARY
Michigan State
University



OVERDUE FINES:
25¢ per day per item

RETURNING LIBRARY MATERIALS
Place in book return to rem
charge from circulation rec

A HISTORY OF SHOWBOATS ON THE WESTERN RIVERS

Volume III

By

Duane Eldon Reed

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Theatre

1977

PART IV

PART IV, Chapter 10 - Halcyon Days, but Troubled Waters

Captain Emerson often used the slogan "after the minnows come the whales." A better analogy might have been made with dinosaurs or mastadons, which in multiplicity destroyed themselves by starvation.

During an interview with John W. Cooley, he responded to the question "when did showboat activity reach its peak?" The reply was "1907 to 1915."[1] For the purpose of these last chapters of showboat history the dates will be extended to include the next two seasons so as to include the years of 1917 and 1918. Not only does this give a full decade to work in, but it also includes several incidents that were important as turning points.

As already pointed out, the opening of the 1907 season was auspicious, and the additions of the next two seasons have been presented, culminating in the launching of the last !big! showboat - the GOLDENROD. With no additions, the 1910 season opened with many changes. When Emerson sold his interest in the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE to Captain Price, the latter renamed her the GREATER NEW YORK. According to Horace Murphy, who had begun working for Price in 1907, this happened in 1909;[2] the Waterways Journal announced the GREATER NEW YORK in July of 1910.[3] In turn Price sold his interest in the

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[1]Interview with J. W. Cooley, Newcomerstown, Ohio, December 13, 1947 (GHWC).

[2]Letter from Horace Murphy, June 24, 1947 (GHWC).

[3]Waterways Journal in column "20 Years Ago," (issue of July 2, 1910), June 28, 1930.

NEW ERA to Captain Wiley P. McNair,[4] and this same year Price sold the WATER QUEEN to Roy Hyatt. According to Mrs. Hyatt there was some overlapping of ownership, with Price owning FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, the WATER QUEEN, and the GREATER NEW YORK all at the same time, but that they (Hyatts) took over the WATER QUEEN in February of 1910.[5] Because of some mismanagement or financial failure, Needham and Steiner sold their newly acquired and renovated Eisenbarth boat, the COTTON BLOSSOM, to Captain Emerson.[6] Sometime in 1909 J. W. Cooley took his stage manager, Norman Thom, as partner. A fragment of stationery for the WONDERLAND, with an en route date of October 30, 1909, headed by the names Cooley and Thom. By July of 1910 this showboat was being advertised under both names in newspapers:

> ILLINOIS RIVER - COOLEY & THOM FLOATING THEATRE, Presenting the big, merry musical comedy "A Gay Whirl", the singiest, the danciest, and the girliest show of them all. Sat. July 2nd.[7]

Consequently, a roster of showboats on the Western Rivers at the outset of the 1910 season would read thusly:

WATER QUEEN	Roy Hyatt
NEW ERA	Wiley P. McNair
FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION	E. A. Price
GREATER NEW YORK	E. A. Price
COTTON BLOSSOM	R. W. Emerson
SUNNY SOUTH	W. R. Markle
GOLDENROD	W. R. Markle
WONDERLAND	J. W. Cooley & Norman Thom
PRINCESS	Bryant Family

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[4]From material loaned by Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, returned July 21, 1947 (GHWC).

[5]Interview with Josie Hyatt, Lowell, Ohio, March 13, 1948 (GHWC).

[6]Letter from Horace Murphy, loc. cit., and Waterways Journal, June 28, 1930, loc. cit.

[7]Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, July 1, 1910.

Looking at the fare of other showboats this season, after seeing that of the WONDERLAND, the PRINCESS, according to Bryant's book, would have been playing such dramatic fare as East Lynne and Ten Nights in a Barroom with a smattering of vaudeville. The unique thing about the Bryant enterprise was the playing territory. Billy Bryant mentions playing Boomer, nearly the end of navigation on the Kanawha, territory that had not been played since the small boats of French and Price. Similarly the Big Sandy, dividing West Virginia and Kentucky, was territory for the PRINCESS as it had been for Price's early boats.[8] Too, Bryant speaks of playing Beattyville, over 250 miles up the Kentucky River, and into Breathitt County - territory that the larger boats could not traverse. Furthermore, he speaks of playing Florence, Alabama, again 250 miles from the Ohio (on the Tennessee River), which is rather remarkable for a small boat before the T. V. A. and other Tennessee River improvements.[9]

At some time after Wiley McNair bought out Captain Price to become full owner of the NEW ERA, he enlarged it considerably and redecorated it both inside and out, adding 20 feet to the length and increasing the seating to 300.[10] But because it was still very narrow, it, like the PRINCESS, could play rivers that the larger boats could not. Still,

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[8]The point at which the Big Sandy River joins the Ohio is known as Kenova, a contraction of Kentucky, Ohio, and (West) Virginia. It is probable that this was the inspiration for Edna Ferber naming Magnolia and Gaylord's child in Showboat Kim; the little girl tells her father late in the novel that she was born on the showboat at the point where the Ohio joins the Mississippi, in the water touching Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri.

[9]Billy Bryant, Children of Ol' Man River, (New York: Lee Furman Company, 1936).

[10]Letter from Captain Emerson, January 22, 1947 (GHWC).

because of the larger seating capacity, it began to play more northern towns along the Ohio and tributaries. With the exceptional dramatic offerings in the north, the NEW ERA purveyed vaudeville. While the Bryants chose to winter somewhere near their adopted home - Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia, Captain McNair and his wife chose the south, and specifically New Orleans, as their home. Consequently the NEW ERA played most of the year without wintering. An advertisement for musical performers expresses this:

> WANTED FOR THE NEW ERA SHOW, Vaudeville performers, Novelty Acts, Singing and Dancing Sketch Teams. A good Trap Drummer, Leader & Piano Player. This show never closes. Add. W. P. McNair, Mgr. Paincourtville, La.[11]

To never close was more feasible for the NEW ERA for it was newly renovated and, by playing in the south (the north only in the best of weather and river conditions) it did not need the yearly painting and renovation of the other boats.

There can be little doubt that FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION continued to play a variety bill. This would have included sketches or even the "one act" of today's vernacular. There is nothing to indicate that Captain Price with this boat and oldest name of river theatricals would have changed the format of presentation. Too, the NEW SENSATION was equipped with trapeze and equipment more conducive to variety. The band of the NEW SENSATION was probably emphasized more under Price as witnessed by photographs of the band in a stage concert. Except for an occasional route listing in the Waterways Journal, nothing specific has been uncovered pertaining either of Price's boats - the NEW SENSATION and the GREATER NEW YORK - during these years. A post card

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[11] New York Clipper, February 3, 1912, p. 20.

of the latter boat under Price's ownership gives no clue as to the type of show it carried but rather includes facts about the boat itself and pictures of the showboat and of the Captain. A piece of stationery of a few years later advertises the NEW SENSATION with again no indication of the nature of the show, other than mention of brass band and calliope. By this time it seems that Captain Price knew, like the Frenches and McNairs, that a good name and a fine boat were the best advertisement.

According to Josie Hyatt, who had worked briefly for Price on the GREATER NEW YORK before Roy Hyatt bought the WATER QUEEN, a single week's revenue on this boat would be as high as $2700. Mrs. Hyatt went on to says that the Kanawha was the best territory for the WATER QUEEN and that if the boat didn't make $2000 in a week it was considered bad business. The Hyatts continued offering the same variety fare that Price had offered on the WATER QUEEN; regualr plays were kept to a minimum.[12]

Except for Mrs. Hyatt's comment about the Kanawha being prime territory for the WATER QUEEN, most veteran showboaters speak of the Illinois River as being the most failsafe showboat territory. After having seen what the WONDERLAND offered in this area during July of 1910, it is proper to look at three of the other large boats during this same time and in the same area.

Unlike the other showboats, Captain Emerson in this first season of his ownership of the COTTON BLOSSOM, was offering straight drama. On the trip up the Illinois River this was his offering:

> Havana, Saturday June 11, the most up-to-date Floating Theatre, The Cotton Blossom, Presenting the great four-act drama The Human Slave. A complete dramatic production. Special scenery and electrical effects.[13]

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[12]Interviews with Josie Hyatt, Lowell, Ohio, September 10, 1947 and March 13, 1948 (GHWC).

[13]Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, June 10, 1910.

Returning to the same town in July, Emerson advertised again:

> Havana, Saturday July 30, RETURN ENGAGEMENT, The Cotton Blossom Show Boat, Presenting the great four-act drama The Tide of Life. A complete dramatic production. New play - New scenery and electrical effects.[14]

The other two large showboats - the SUNNY SOUTH and the GOLDENROD - were under Markle's ownership. In 1909 the SUNNY SOUTH advertised extensively going up the Illinois River:

> Coming - The Sunny South Floating Theatre, Merodosia, Tuesday, July 13, Presenting the big Musical Theatre A Grass Widow. Also 10 Big Vaudeville Acts. Don't Miss It. A laugh from start to finish. Bigger and Better than ever. Band Concert Morning and Evening. Popular Prices 25¢, 35¢, and 50¢.[15]

On the following day the SUNNY SOUTH was advertised for Havana:

> Coming - The Sunny South Floating Theatre, Havana, Illinois, Thursday, July 15, Presenting a Brisk Musical Comedy and 10 Big Vaudeville Acts. Catchy tuneful music and a host of pretty girls, also a grand array of vaudeville artists in the best and most expensive bill ever shown here. A show that is a show. Wait for it! Grand open air concert by the best band on the river. Don't miss it! Popular Prices.[16]

Returning down the river two weeks later, Markle again advertised in the Havana newspaper:

> Look, Coming, The Sunny South Floating Theatre with an ENTIRE NEW SHOW. Monday, July 26. DON'T MISS IT! Prices 25, 35, and 50¢.[17]

There has been no advertising uncovered for the SUNNY SOUTH on the Illinois River in 1910. In all probability Mr. Markle chose not

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[14] Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, July 29, 1910.

[15] Meredosia Budget, Meredosia, Illinois, July 8, 1909.

[16] Mason County Democrat, Havana, Illinois, July 9, 1909.

[17] Ibid., July 23, 1909.

to compete with himself, for Markle's newest boat was highly touted:

> Coming, W. R. Markle's NEW SHOW BOAT, Havana, Thursday, July 14, at Bath, Wednesday July 13. The largest, finest, and most complete floating theatre in the world. Mr. Markle takes great pleasure in presenting the semi-opera production The Toymakers Dream and a large and carefully selected company of performers, including the BIG BEAUTY CHORUS, produced and arranged under the personal direction of the eminent character singing comedian, W. C. Cushman, a comedian of real merit. Street parade at 10 a.m. by Markle's Challenge Band, Prof. G. Hines Givens, Leader. Augmented orchestra, Prof. Dox Ebaugh, Leader. Admission 25¢, Reserved Seats Extra.[18]

The same issue that carried the above ad also carried excerpts from a favorable review of the Wellsburg (West Virginia) Herald, theatrical advertising not at all unlike today's.

With the nine major showboats on the Western Rivers during the 1910 season, many people were offered theatrical entertainment. The seating of these boats has been reported as follows:

PRINCESS	140 (later 300)
NEW ERA	300 (after McNair's renovation)
WATER QUEEN	624
FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION	960
GREATER NEW YORK	850
COTTON BLOSSOM	700
SUNNY SOUTH	800
WONDERLAND	900
GOLDENROD	1300 (originally advertised as 1400, later only 980.[19]

This gives a total capacity of over 6500. Assuming from former seasons that all of these boats were playing by March 15 and that they closed their seasons by early January, this makes for approximately 290 playing days. Even if these boats played to only 3/4 capacity, a total

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[18]Ibid., July 8, 1910.

[19]Letter from Captain Emerson, March 13, 1947 (GHWC).

audience of a million and a half could have been exposed to theatre of varying types via showboats during this 1910 season. (Even where the same boat played a town twice, up river and down, a second bill was played.)

The 1911 season was to see still another showboat on the Western Rivers. Whether it was financial problems or not that caused Walter Needham to sell the COTTON BLOSSOM to Emerson, he was back into showboating this season, having built a new showboat at Cincinnati. According to Captain Emerson this boat was called the AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE; it was 120 feet long and 38 feet wide, seating 600.[20] (Other sources, including Captain Menke, have the seating at 650, but this may be due to later alterations, renovation, and rebuilding). After two years of operation Needham sold the AMERICAN to his former partner, Harry Steiner, and in turn it passed into the hands of the Thompson Brothers of Bonnett Mills, Missouri.[21] As already mention, Needham and Steiner have been most enigmatic with regard to this study. According to Bert Potter who had been on the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON when these gentlemen bought it and worked for them for a few months, "I knew more about showboating than they." He goes on to say that "Needham was quiet, non-committal" and that Steiner was "suspicious of everyone and always trying to outguess you."[22] At any rate, neither of these men ever seemed to be able to make it at showboating, and consequently, the AMERICAN did not have a particularly auspicious beginning.

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[20] Loc. cit.

[21] Letter from Captain Menke, January 20, 1947 (GHWC).

[22] Letter from Bert Potter, April 14, 1951 (GHWC).



Figure # 135

Flyer/Stationery for the WONDERLAND

This document is letter size with the botton part of the page blank. The original appears as if somewhat had begun a letter to Mr. Cooley from the showboat; there is no message, it is incomplete.



Figure # 136

The NEW ERA FLOATING PALACE

Despite the name the NEW ERA FLOATING PALACE was not of the size of the other "floating palaces." Even as shown here, after Wiley McNair's rebuilding, it seated only 300. It was, however, one of the most successful showboats, playing small streams where there was still an audience until it was sold.

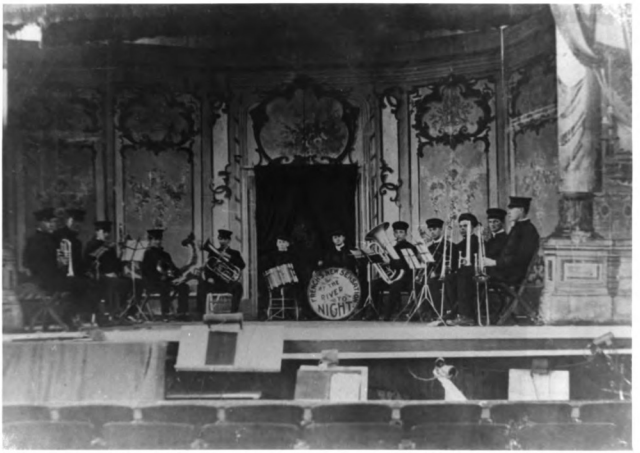


Figure # 137

Band Concert on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This band concert on the stage of the NEW SENSATION was at a time when Captain Price owned this boat.





Figure # 138

Band of the NEW SENSATION

Even with the huge signs saying FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, this is the band of this boat under Captain Price. Steve Price is at the extrme right.



Figure # 139

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION under Price

Two things mark this as the NEW SENSATION at a time later than when owned by Callie French and John McNair. A railing is in evidence along the lower guard which was not in earlier days. Too, note the extra decoration over the doors and box office window on the front rake.

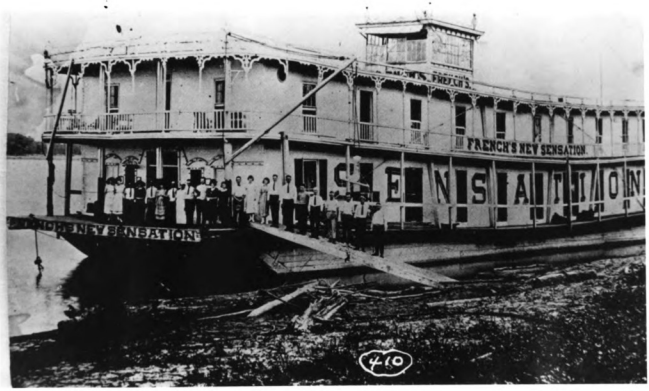


Figure # 140

Price's FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

Even though Captain Price put his name in evidence on the other boats that he owned around 1910, his name never appeared on the NEW SENSATION. With his own name as one of the oldest and most respected in the field, the French name was the oldest and the most respected.

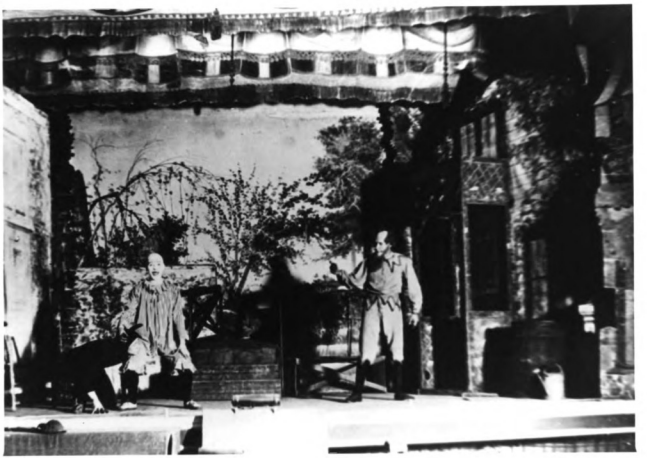


Figure # 141

Performance on the NEW SENSATION

This photograph has been identified by Mrs. Steve Price as being aboard the NEW SENSATION when owned by Captain Price.



Figure # 142

Performance on the NEW SENSATION

This was an Indiana number done aboard the NEW SENSATION while owned by Captain Price. The number was accompanied by "Redwing." In the tepee on the left is Mabel Knight (Mrs. Steve Price).



Figure # 143

Production number on the NEW SENSATION

The "Can-can" girl at the right is Mabel Knight (Mrs. Steve Price). The paneled set visible in this photograph was original equipment when the NEW SENSATION was built; it was still in use when the NEW SENSATION was purchased by the Menkes.

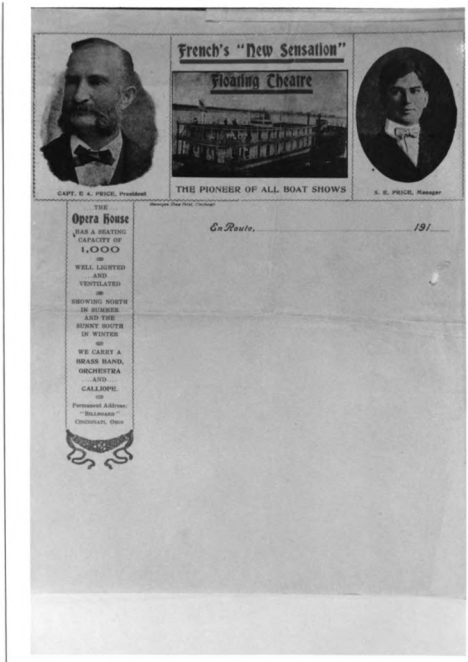


Figure # 144

Flyer/stationery for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This document was letter size. It was from a time close to that when Captain Price sold this famous showboat.

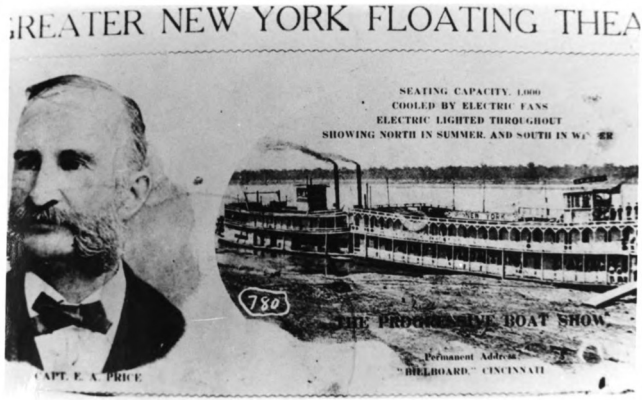


Figure # 145

Correspondence card for the GREATER NEW YORK

Although giving the specifics of the showboat itself, Price's advertising rarely told anything of the performances themselves.

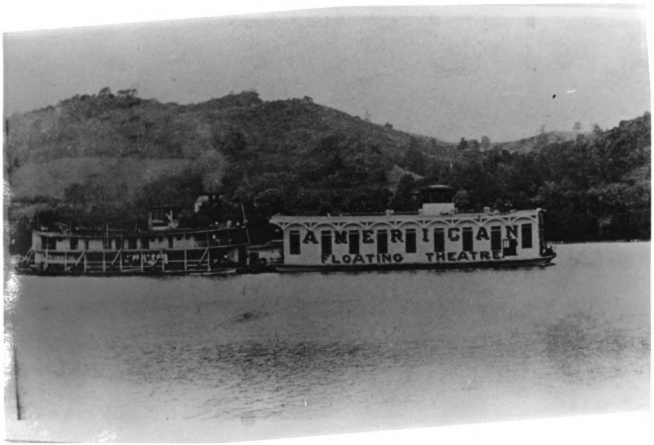


Figure # 146

The AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE

Built at Cincinnati, the AMERICAN was one of the first showboats to play the Missouri to any extent.

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Perhaps the most important event of 1911 relative to showboating was the introduction of J. W. "Bill" Menke, for during this year he was to become a showboat owner. John William Menke was born in Cincinnati in 1880, the second of six children of a man who was superintendent of the Dulane Watch Case Company. Since the elder Mr. Menke also owned a grocery store, young Bill's first job was as a meatcutter. At seventeen he was a blacksmith's helper, then a spiker laying rails for the B & O Railway. At twenty he opened a saloon and the following year was elected aldermand for the thirty-first ward of Cincinnati. Wanderlust took hold the next spring and he sold the saloon to go to Jersey City, joining his brother B. F. "Ben", working in a watch factory. Observing tug boats at the docks of Hoboken, the two young men decided to build themselves a small boat. "It took nine months working at nights and on holidays. It was 38½ by 10 foot, a twin screw gasoline engine yacht and we name it the 'Cincy' after our home town."[23] The craft was shipped by rail to Pittsburgh and relaunched on the Allegheny River where it started for Cincinnati. After some excursion work around the Queen City, the brothers began to tour with motion picture equipment, showing not on the boat but in schools and churches. Forced to remain at Uniontown, Kentucky because of ice until March of the year 1905, the Menkes met the NEW SENSATION there and obtained jobs as advance men, using the CINCY for transportation. Bill Menke was twenty-five at the time of this, his first showboat assignment, with the oldest and finest operation on the rivers.

After the 1905 season with Callie French and John McNair, the brothers signed on with Captain Emerson (Emerson and Bill Menke were

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[23]Menke background in letter from J. W. Menke, loc. cit.

quite nearly the same age) as he took over the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE from Markle. On finishing the season with Emerson, they spent the winter of 1906-07 doing advance work for Wiley McNair and the NEW ERA on the Yazoo River. In 1908 the Menkes spent a lengthy season with Cooley and Hagans' new WONDERLAND, selling their CINCY in Louisiana at the season's end. This trip was particularly important to the Menkes for it was a complete tour of all navigable waters of the Ohio-Mississippi system (not the Missouri), going as far north as Wabasha, Minnesota.

The 1909 season saw both Menkes still doing advance work, both by rail: Ben for Markle's SUNNY SOUTH and Bill for the WONDERLAND. Bill continued to work for Cooley during the next season while Ben worked for Emerson on his newly acquired COTTON BLOSSOM. Here then were two men who came to showboat ownership/management with greater first hand experience in the specific field than many other men had before them. But since the showboat that Bill Menke was to acquire went out under the names of Menke and Coleman, it is necessary now to deal with Mr. Coleman.

Brad Coleman was from West Virginia and had run away at the age of sixteen with a small wagon show that was to tour the south. On reading in Billboard of a show in New Jersey that needed a lithographer, Coleman traveled to New Jersey from Louisiana. When the management of the show discovered that the young man knew nothing about printing, they made him their "poster-puter-upper." Later Coleman was promoted to selling tickets and other box office duties. When this show eventually failed, Coleman returned to Pratt, West Virginia, which is about twenty miles above Charleston on the Kanawha River. Here he met

Bill Menke when he worked on the WONDERLAND, and in discussing show business experience they agreed that they would like to have a showboat of their own. This was early in the WONDERLAND's 1911 season. A short time later Coleman was contacted by Menke; the message was that Markle's SUNNY SOUTH was for sale at a price of $26,000 and that Coleman could buy in for $6000.[24] Where this amount of money came from is not known, but Mr. Coleman stated that they took over the SUNNY SOUTH at Maysville, Kentucky, some sixty river miles above Cincinnati on the Ohio.

Why Mr. Markle chose to sell the SUNNY SOUTH is open to conjecture. Certainly there is reason enough in the fact that he now had the GOLDENROD - the largest and finest equipped showboat. It is known, however, that he had tried to sell the SUNNY SOUTH the season before the GOLDENROD was launched. According to Ray Markle, "Double R" sold the SUNNY SOUTH to Clyde Quimby and William McKay (neither name has been encountered otherwise in this study) in the summer of 1908. Later during that season it was involved in an accident on the southern Mississippi and ownership reverted back to Markle, who brought it back north for the necessary repairs.[25]

1912 was to see still another new boat, but not one that was in actual competition with the existing ones. More important is the introduction of still another showboat personality. Thomas J. Reynolds was born at Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia in 1888 and was drawn to the river early as a fisherman. At the age of twenty he operated a junk

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[24]Interview with Brad Coleman, Gallagher Theatre, Pratt, West Virginia, March 11, 1948. Mr. Coleman owned this theatre and another in a neighboring town. (GHWC).

[25]Interview with Ray Markle (cousin of W. R. Markle), Steubenville, Ohio, October 6, 1946 (GHWC).

boat and continued until 1912. In this year he built a larger boat, named it the ILLINOIS and continued in the same line with certain expansions. The front part of the boat was a store with "a complete line of dishware of every kind." Reynolds carried a horse and wagon and would load the wagon with his wares at a convenient boat landing, then drive through the country selling them. On the return to the boat he would buy iron and other scrap. Through the store was a small theatre, seating 200 people, in which he would show motion pictures. Because there was no need for employees other than the Reynolds family, who lived aboard, the small enterprise led Tom Reynolds from perhaps the humblest beginning of anyone dealt with herein to a long career of showboating.[26]

There were world wide rumblings in 1913 that forecast major changes: empires were to fall, large areas of the world were to change hands, and well known figures were to pass into oblivion. In microcosm, such rumblings were felt in showboating and they were a portent of events to happen in the next few years. (1913 also saw the largest flood on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.) From his introduction to showboating with the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, W. R. Markle's shows and showboats were little short of spectacular. Even after selling the SUNNY SOUTH, Markle was having financial difficulties. The GOLDENROD had been expensive to build and operating expenses were increasing. By the 1913 season, Markle's creditors met to see what could be done.[27] They decided to let the GOLDENROD open, providing all money

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[26]Letter from Tom Reynolds, May 23, 1947 (GHWC).

[27]Interview with Dewey Windsor (telephone), Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia, January 17, 1947 (GHWC). Mr. Windsor had acted as a representative for Markle's creditors and as mediator in these dealings concerning the GOLDENROD.

above operating costs was sent back to them. This was done but the season was not sufficiently successful to overcome Markle's debts. At season's end the creditors foreclosed and the GOLDENROD was put up for sale. Before the 1914 season opened it was purchased by Captain Emerson.

Although there are conflicting dates, another event occurred at this time that must be noted. Menke and Coleman had begun to realize that competition was very strong, while operating costs were growing: something had to be done. First, they renamed their showboat. As the SUNNY SOUTH, their boat had played under the Markle banner for six years and under their own names - Menke and Coleman - for three seasons. They chose a name long associated with enormity, grandeur and spectacle, the HIPPODROME.[28]

In addition to a new name, Menke and Coleman decided to try new territory - the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers up into Alabama cotton country from Mobile. Thirty years before, Captain French gave up on a gulf route to the bayou country east of the Mississippi because of exposure to the open sea. On trying to get to the gulf via the mouth of the Mississippi, Menke and Coleman were thwarted by rough water. The canal from New Orleans to Lake Borgne proved to be a calmer route to the gulf, but conditions were still not fitting a river craft. At Pearl River, which divides Louisiana from Mississippi along the gulf, they tried playing a few towns with little success. On reaching the Alabama, they found that economic conditions were so poor that they could not make expenses, so returned to the Mississippi as best they could.

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[28]There had been a Hippodrome Theatre in New York as early as 1853. The London Hippodrome (1900) and the New York Hippodrome (1904) were both known for expensive extravaganza, from equestrian shows to water ballets.

After journeying back up the Mississippi and Ohio to Parkersburg, there was no money to pay debts, so banks foreclosed, leaving Coleman, Ben and Bill Menke with out either a showboat or employment. The HIPPODROME was purchased by John Foltz of Millwood, West Virginia, and her original name restored - the SUNNY SOUTH.[29]

During his ownership of the COTTON BLOSSOM Captain Emerson always presented good shows, often foregoing non-royalty plays so typical of showboat fare for plays that, despite the expense of royalty, were fresh from professional runs in New York. In the words of Billy Bryant, this caused a certain resentment: "We hated him because he went to New York every season and picked out a good show for his boat while we tried to slip over East Lynne and Jessie James against his East is East and Peg o' my Heart."[30] But the most unique public relations gimmick of Emerson's was his baseball team. He had been a rabid Cardinal fam (a Cubs fan when he moved to Chicago) and baseball was a love second only to the rivers; he was no mean first-baseman himself. The COTTON BLOSSOM team would challenge local teams, making sure to lose in the most congenial way. This was publicity and goodwill unsurpassed in these times of stiff competition.

On purchasing the GOLDENROD in 1914, Emerson had not only the greatest of all showboats but he still owned the most uniquely appearing COTTON BLOSSOM. When Emerson first bought the latter boat in 1911

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[29]Interview with Brad Coleman, idem., and letter from J. W. Menke, loc. cit. Mr. Coleman stated the trip to the gulf started in December of 1914. Mr. Menke said the banks foreclosed in 1914, which probably meant at the end of the 1914 season, or early in 1915.

[30]Letter from Billy Bryant to Paul Gilbert (GHWC). Bryant was writing to Mr. Gilbert concerning an article written by the latter which appeared in the Chicago Daily Sun on Sunday, May 13, 1946.

he had hired an actor named Otto Hitner and he had remained each season. Taking Hitner as a partner in 1914, Emerson managed the GOLDENROD while Hitner ran the COTTON BLOSSOM.[31]

At various times mention has been made of expansion of the showboat playing area. Captain French had opened up the bayou country and found to be one of the most profitable of all the areas that the NEW SENSATION(s) ever played. Menke and Coleman had tried the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers, but with little success because of access to them and because the time was wrong. Wiley McNair with the NEW ERA found the Yazoo and Tallahatchee profitable, but few of the larger showboats could navigate these rivers.

In some forty years of showboating no one (save the afore mentioned but unknown IDA BLANCHE of 1893) had tried the "wide Missouri." In fact none of the three major western tributaries of the Mississippi - the Missouri, the Arkansas, and the Red Rivers - were ever considered showboat territory. This, at first is curious since the Red River (1300 miles long) and the Arkansas (1400) offer much greater travel distance than the Ohio's 980 miles. Although both of these western tributaries were major water highways for cotton even before the Civil War, the small tows of showboats could not risk combating the quick flooding of these rivers due to unpredictable southern rains. The Missouri to its mouth is of as great a length as the total river mileage from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. However, because of its many feeding tributaries, as well as its source in the Rocky Mountains in Montana, its current much of the years was too strong for even large packets. Too a steamship company might be willing to risk the Missouri

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[31]Interview with R. W. Emerson, Chicago, December 31, 1946 (GHWC).

for freight with a towboat crew of only four or five. These companies could not risk the lives of passengers on a large packet and showboat owners could not risk their company and crew.

J. W. Cooley claimed that the WONDERLAND, towed by the VERNIE MACK, was the first showboat ever to try the Missouri. A great many sources (letters and interview material in the Wright Collection) state that the WONDERLAND first ventured into the Missouri during the 1914 season. It is probable that this was the first season that this showboat penetrated to any great distance west of St. Louis. However, the Waterways Journal reported that the VERNIE MACK was towing the showboat WONDERLAND from the Missouri to Point Pleasant, West Virginia in the fall of 1913.[32]

The Missouri could not, however, become good showing area in comparison to the Ohio and its tributaries and the much more placid Illinois. The AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE did play the Misourri. Its launching has already been dealt with to the sale to the Thompson Brothers by Steiner, following Walter Needham. The dates of these changes are not known. A quite reliable source, Mrs. Frank Weirz, stated that Steiner owned the AMERICAN in july of 1915. While at Guttenburg, Iowa on the Mississippi above Dubuque, a cyclone hit and Mr. and Mrs. Steiner left the boat, leaving all personnel stranded. The WONDERLAND helped the stranded company as it was tied up at the same landing.[33] Mrs. Weirz was Eva Morgan of the showbills of the WONDERLAND included later on, which were copied from her scrapbook.

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[32] Waterways Journal, in Column "20 Years Ago" (issue of November 1, 1913), November 4, 1933.

[33] Interview with Mrs. Weirz, Evansville, Indiana, August 29, 1947 (GHWC).

During this season, at the time Mrs. Weirz was speaking of, J. W. Cooley took still another partner, Captain Walter Pell.

When Markle first launched the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, he engaged a lady who had three very talented children. The oldest daughter was widely known for her rendition of "Hello, Centra, Give Me Heaven"; she went by the name of Eva LeMoine. The two younger children did a brother and sister dancing and acrobatic act as the "Leisenring Children." After two season, the family took to land to play vaudeville on the Orpheum circuit. While playing Omaha, Captain Pell, who was Markle's pilot, visited the trouping family and married the mother at Council Bluffs across the Missouri River.[34] The following season all were back with the Markle show and, with the building of the SUNNY SOUTH, the newly formed Pell family became part of the company. As mentioned earlier Captain Pell was very much part of the planning of the WONDERLAND, along with James Hagans and Norman Thom. There can be little doubt that it was Captain Pell's piloting expertise that enabled the WONDERLAND first to enter the Missouri.

Walter Scott Pell had known little but river life. His father had grown up along the southern rivers and became a colonel in the Confederate army. After the war Colonel James Pell returned to the rivers to become a licensed pilot. His first major assignment was as pilot for Captain John Cannon on the ROBERT E. LEE, managing to win the famous race with Captain Leathers' NATCHEZ in 1870. Always seeking the best, or most noteworthy, Markle engaged the son of the most

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[34]It is known that the mother of the Leisenring Children and of Eva LeMoine was married to Norman Thom before Mr. Pell. These matters cannot and need not enter in at this point.

famous pilot of all times for the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE in 1901. Like James Hagans who chose band directing over showboat ownership, Norman Thom chose to devote his time to acting at the end of the 1914 season. Both Hagans and Thom remained with the WONDERLAND but Captain Pell bought Mr. Thom's interest, leaving the WONDERLAND under the banner of Cooley & Pell in 1915.[35]

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[35]Background and biographical information on Walter Pell from letters of Mrs. Pell, June 5, July 7, July 10, and July 17, 1947 (GHWC). Mrs. Pell lived in Cheyenne, Wyoming at the time, the Pell home since 1921. Captain Pell died May 7, 1947, just a few weeks before Mr. Wright first contacted Mrs. Pell.

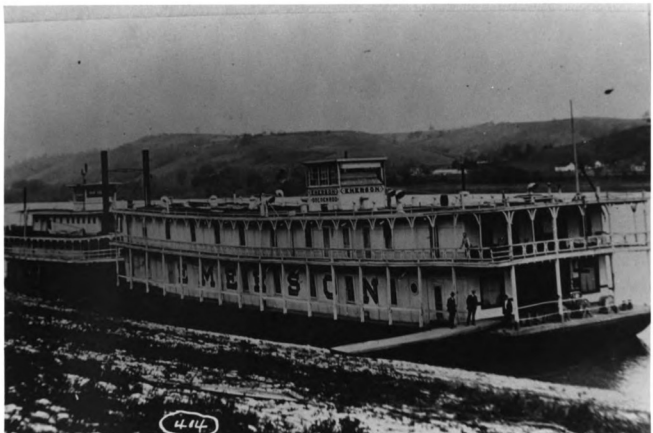


Figure # 147

The GOLDENROD under Emerson

Showboat owners generally advertised that attraction that would most likely draw an audience. Notice that in this photograph of the GOLDENROD, the showboat 's name appears on the pilot house, but the name that is largest on the side of the boat is Emerson.

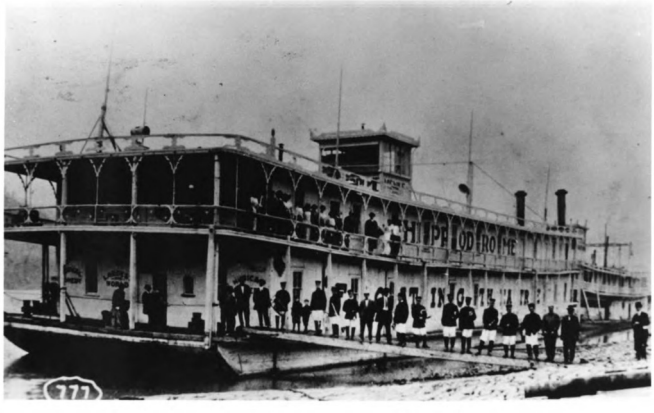


Figure # 148

The HIPPODROME

For the season that Menke and Coleman tried new territory - the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers - the SUNNY SOUTH was renamed the HIPPODROME.

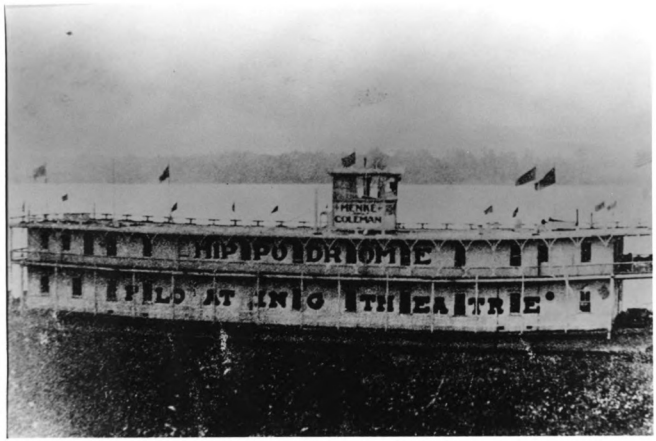


Figure # 149

Menke and Coleman's HIPPODROME

The HIPPODROME was so named for only one season. When the boat was sold the former name was restored - the SUNNY SOUTH.



Figure # 150

The Baseball Team of the COTTON BLOSSOM

One of Captain Emerson's most successful public relations ploys was his baseball team. Not only did it work well, Captain Emerson enjoyed playing; he is behind the penciled number "3".

UNDERLAND

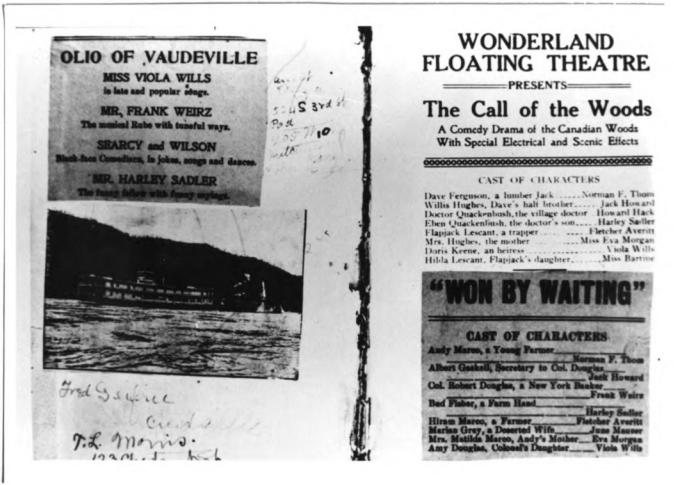


Figure # 151

Memos of the WONDERLAND

The above is a photograph of two pages of the diary/scrapbook of Mrs. Frank Weirz. Mr. Weirz was a performer on the WONDERLAND and Mrs. Weirz was the Eva Morgan listed in the above cast lists.

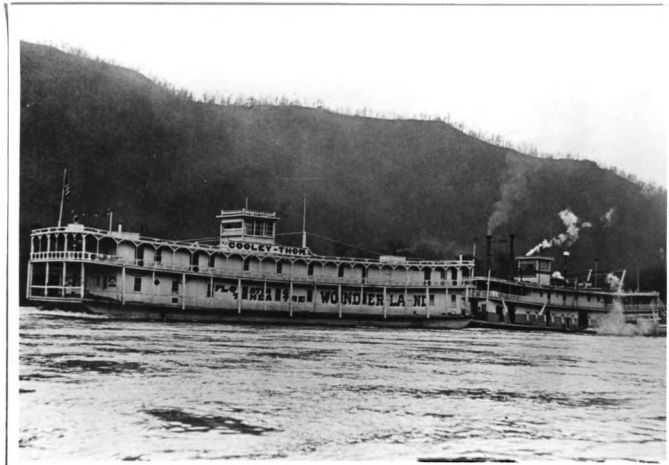


Figure # 152

The WONDERLAND under Cooley and Thom



Figure # 153

The Leisenring Children

These children had played on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE and the SUNNY SOUTH before touring on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit. After Captain Walter Pell married these performers' mother, they returned to showboats, playing on the WONDERLAND.

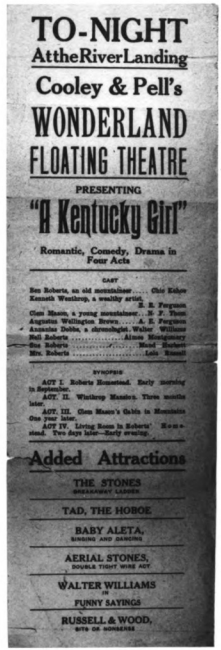


Figure # 154

Flyer for the WONDERLAND

Captain Walter Pell, whose father won the famous 1870 race by piloting the ROBERT E. LEE to victory over the NATCHEZ, became part owner of the WONDERLAND in 1915; he had been pilot of the boat since it was built.

PART IV, Chapter 11 - R. I. P. You Wonders of the Waterways

Mr. Cooley's dates of 1907 to 1915 as the height of showboating have been covered, but the next few seasons, rounding out a full decade, were most eventful. It is interesting to note the roster of showboats and owners in starting into the fourth pentad of the twentieth century, as compared to that of 1910.

WATER QUEEN	Roy Hyatt
NEW ERA	Wiley P. McNair
FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION	E. A. Price
GREATER NEW YORK	E. A. Price
COTTON BLOSSOM	Emerson & Hitner
SUNNY SOUTH	John Foltz
WONDERLAND	Cooley & Pell
PRINCESS	Billy Bryant
GOLDENROD	R. W. Emerson
AMERICAN	Thompson Brothers
ILLINOIS	T. J. Reynolds

There are two new boats although one, Reynolds' ILLINOIS, was not really in competition with the others. Five showboats remained under the same ownership - WATER QUEEN, NEW ERA, FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, GREATER NEW YORK, and the PRINCESS. The SUNNY SOUTH and GOLDENROD had changed ownership completely and both the WONDERLAND and the COTTON BLOSSOM had changed ownership by half. Although the latter two changes were for quite rational and practical reasons, the two complete changes in ownership were caused by financial failure. The amount of change in the next five years was to be even greater.

When the HIPPODROME failed, Ben Menke contracted with Captain Price to do advance work for the GREATER NEW YORK. Bill Menke was hired as advance agent by Cooley and Thom for the WONDERLAND, but when the actual work began Captain Pell was the new half owner. This was the

Menkes' contribution for the 1915 and 1916 seasons.[1]

The Thompson Brothers who had purchased the AMERICAN were from Bonnots Mills, Missouri, a short distance below Jefferson City. Evidently the Thompsons started for their home with the AMERICAN for Captain Emerson stated that he bought the boat on the Missouri River in 1915 for $40.00. According to Emerson the interior of the AMERICAN was quite similar, if on a smaller scale, to the other showboats of the time, with a well equipped stage and seating that included a balcony. Outwardly it was a freak: it had very small front and rear decks and three foot side guards but there was no second level on the guards.[2] Emerson gave this boat a very different appearance by adding a second level to the exterior and removing some of the decoration. Exactly when and where the work was done is not known. Mrs. Al Swope maintains that Captain Price bought the boat in 1915.[3]

For the AMERICAN to be on the upper Mississippi in July of 1915 (as Mrs. Weirz said), bought by Captain Emerson on the Missouri, renovated and redecorated, and in the hands of Captain Price still in 1915 seems improbable, but it is known that Captain Price did buy it. Price had a son, Steven, born in 1886. He was brought up on the FLOATING OPERA and the WATER QUEEN. At 19 he was a snare drummer for the WATER QUEEN band. He graduated to managerial positions on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, and when Captain Price bought the AMERICAN, it was for

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[1]Letter from Bill Menke, January 20, 1947 (GHWC).

[2]Interview with R. W. Emerson, Chicago, December 31, 1946 and January 1, 1947 (GHWC).

[3]Interview with Mrs. Al Swope (formerly Mrs. Steve Price, formerly Mabel Knight), Newport, Kentucky, September 3, 1947 (GHWC).

Steve to manage on his own. Steve Price married the actress Mabel Knight who was to remain with her husband as long as he was on the river. When the renovated showboat started under the Price banner it was re-christened the COLUMBIA

The season of 1916 saw no changes in showboat ownership but there was a loss. T. J. Reynolds and his ILLINOIS were at Foster, Kentucky, about thirty miles above Cincinnati on the Ohio. Here his boat burned, a total loss, and also caused the death of the second Reynolds boy. At this time motion picture film was extremely flammable, to the point of being explosive. Too, most projectors of the time did not have take-up reels; film ran off loosely into a basket to be rewound later. The fire started in the loose film and could not be stopped.

During the winter of 1916-1917 Tom Reynolds busied himself building a new boat. It was 20 feet wide by 100 feet long, had 3 foot guards and seated 300. This was a family operation, playing vaudeville in the small hamlets of the upper Ohio and tributaries.[4] A review of a show several years later gives some details of the boat:

> There are seven living rooms on the boat and below is the theatre, 80 x 20, with a fair-sized stage equipped with good-looking scenery and the best in "props". The theatre seats 300. The boat itself is 100 x 20 feet.[5]

The boat was on the river by May 17, 1917; Mack Gamble, correspondent for the Waterways Journal from Clarington, Ohio reported that the gasboat LIBERTY passed Clarington going upriver on this date towing a new showboat. The LIBERTY had formerly towed the ILLINOIS. The exact

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[4]Letter from T. J. Reynolds, May 23, 1947 (GHWC).

[5]Billboard, September 6, 1924, p. 28. This was from a review of a show on this Reynolds showboat at Constance, Kentucky on August 25, 1924.

date is not known but Reynolds' new showboat was dubbed the AMERICA.[6]

Without any way attempting to depricate Mr. Reynolds' showboat, it was a small addition in light of the tremendous losses of the 1917 and 1918 seasons. In fact just at the time the AMERICA was being launched at Pt. Pleasant, disaster occurred father down the Ohio. On April 25, 1917 Captain Price sold the GREATER NEW YORK to the Menke Brothers. (In addition to Bill and Ben, Harry and Charlie had joined in the enterprise.) According to Charles Ledbetter this transaction took place at Evansville; there the show was organized and the boat moved to Newburgh, Indiana to open.[7] In all probability the GREATER NEW YORK had wintered in the Green River which penetrates Kentucky about half way between Newburgh and Evansville, since both of Price's large boats were in this area. The story of the GREATER NEW YORK comes most accurately from a Newburgh newspaper, April 30, 1917.

> A high wind storm on the Ohio River at Newburgh sunk most all boats docked here including the Greater New York Showboat and Robert Dodds, the towing steamer of the water theatre. The Sensation was one of those which survived the storm.[8]

The flooding this particular spring must have been severe and lasting for the same paper of May 25 stated:

> The Sensation leaves after a month's delay. The showboat which survived the wind storm of April 30 left yesterday for up the river ports to begin the season's theatrical performances. A steamer was

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[6]Letter from Mack Gamble, September 6, 1949 (GHWC) This letter from Mr. Gamble included lengthy information concerning a great many showboats. In fact, it was the skeletal information from which his Waterways Journal reports were written over many years.

[7]Interview with Charles Ledbetter, Elizabethtown, Illinois, August 28, 1947 (GHWC).

[8]Newburgh Register, April 30, 1917.

> procurred from Herman, Missouri to tow the Sensation which was damaged by the wind. The show troop is scattered but will join the boat later.
>
> The sunken boats Greater New York and Robert Dodds the towing steamer will be repaired when the river recedes.

This article intimates that the towboat of the NEW SENSATION was sunk in the storm also. Mack Gamble reported the NEW SENSATION in tow with the FAIRMOUNT passing Clarington going upriver on July 13. With the FAIRMOUNT having to come from Herman, Missouri - over one hundred miles west of the Mississippi - and reorganizing the company, the NEW SENSATION was getting a very late start. It did not dally long in the upper Ohio for Gamble reports it leaving Clarington going back down river on July 22.

Nearly two months after the GREATER NEW YORK sank, the Newburgh Register gives the following two short news items in different parts of the same issue:

> A pump boat is at work pumping and raising the sunken tow boat Robert Dodds this week which was sunk with the Greater New York showboat April 30 near the Red Shaft Coal Mine above Newburgh.
>
> Work began this week on the wrecking and dismantling of the showboat Greater New York which was sunk here April 30 by a high wind storm on the Ohio River. The hull will be replaced with a new hull for a new boat which will arrive here in a few days.[9]

Evidently the ROBERT DODDS was not purchased with the GREATER NEW YORK.

> The Steamer Robert Dodds was sunk in the same storm but was not totally destroyed so I bought her of Capt. E. A. Price while she was still under water with only the pilot wheel visible. Water 30 feet deep over her when we bought her. We, my three brothers and I put our belongings in a tent on the bank at Newburgh and waited for the high water to fall so the Robert Dodds would come into view and we could

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[9]Newburgh Register, July 29, 1917.

> go to work on her. We spent the entire summer on the bank in a tent till October getting Dodds in commission. In October we left with the steamer under her own power for Paducah. Got frozen in the ice, the worst ice in history of the Ohio River Valley. . . After ice cleared we towed corn with the Dodds out of the Cumberland River to Paducah and Brookport, Illinois. Completed contract towing 200,000 bushels of corn.[10]

The further ventures of the Menkes will be taken up later.

The destruction of the GREATER NEW YORK was the first of a series of showboat disasters that marked and were a part of the decline of showboating. This was a showboat that had given good service for sixteen years under three different and most prominent owners - Markle, Emerson, and Price. Beginning as the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, it set a standard both for the grandeur of showboats themselves and for production. It had plyed and played all the standard showboat territory and was well known and well received. The aura it had initiated was beginning to wane.

At the end of the 1917 season another showboat ended its career. Perhaps Wiley McNair sensed what was to come for at the end of this, his twenty-seventh year on showboats (twelve with the NEW ERA), he sold the NEW ERA. This boat ended its career of offering live performance and was docked permanently at Houma, Louisiana. At least it was to end its career in the bayou country for which it had been built originally as LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE. (Captain McNair noted that it may have been used later as a cane barge.) The NEW ERA had had a long career, as long as the GREATER NEW YORK and had also traveled under Emerson and Price banners. Captain McNair and his wife retired to their home in New Orleans. The McNair name was now completely gone

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[10]Letter from Bill Menke, loc. cit.



Figure # 155

Steven Price

Steven Price was born in 1886, launched, evidently, at about the same time as Captain E. A. Price's first FLOATING OPERA.



Figure # 156

Mabel Knight

Mabel Knight was a performer in a vaudeville company. On seeing Miss Knight perform, Steven Price asked her to join his father's showboat company. Not only did she perform on the showboat, she became Mrs. Steven Price and remained with her husband until his death in 1928. As Mrs. Al Swope she gave much valuable information to this study.



Figure # 157

The end of the GREATER NEW YORK

As the first big showboat of this century - the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE - this boat was owned by three of the great showboaters, Markle, Emerson and Price. It was wrecked in a storm five days after it was sold to the Menke Brothers.



Figure # 158

The AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE

The AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE was one of the most unusual showboats at its launching. It had no real front or rear rakes and no upper guard. It gave the impression at first look of a one deck boat.



Figure # 159

The AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE

This very poor photograph is the only close-up that has been found of the AMERICAN. It is difficult to believe that this is the same boat as that on the next page in Figure # 160.

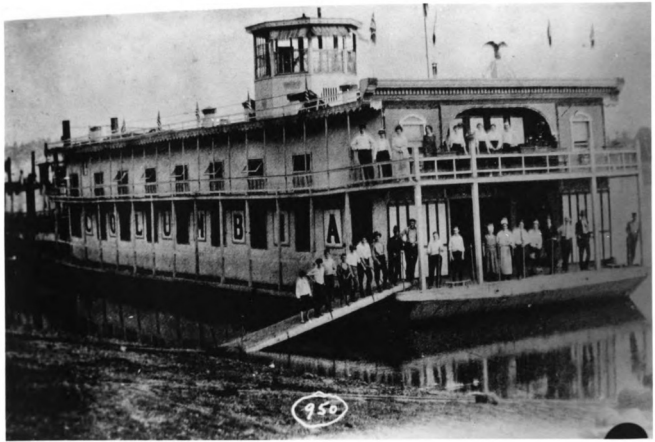


Figure # 160

The COLUMBIA

At some time after the AMERICAN FLOATING THEATRE was sold to Captain Emerson, it was completely rebuilt on the outside, giving it the appearance as pictured here. Front and rear rakes were added as well as an upper guard. It was named the COLUMBIA and managed by Steve Price after being purchased by Captain Price.



Figure # 161

The COLUMBIA

This pictures offers a rare view of a showboat, a view from the stern. Doors and windows off the stern open into the backstage area on the first level and into living quarters of company members on the second level.

from the Western Rivers. Captain Wiley P. McNair died in New Orleans on April 3, 1944.[11]

While the Menke Brothers were frozen in at Paducah during the winter of 1917-1918, a showboat was destroyed upriver at Mt. Vernon, Indiana. Otto Hitner had obviously wintered the COTTON BLOSSOM at Mt. Vernon or it would not have been at this place in January. On January 5, 1918 the moving ice in the Ohio tore both the COTTON BLOSSOM and the towboat JEWEL from the landing, destroying both. A contemporary Mt. Vernon newspaper gave the following account:

> The Steamer Jewel and floating theatre Cotton Blossom, the former used in towing the latter, and both owned by Captain Otto Hitner of Parkersburg, West Virginia, were torn loose from their moorings by the moving ice Saturday night at 7:00 o'clock, and sank on the reef just west of the water works plant. The Cotton Blossom, which is broken in two, has her nose touching the bank, and the Jewel is lying lengthwise at the stern of the former, water covering her lower deck. Both these boats have been lying at our wharf for the past three months, and the freeze up in the river was so sudden that Captain Hitner was unable to remove them to safe harbor. These two boats cost when new about $25,000, and both will be wrecked when the ice again begins to move. The loss is partly covered by insurance.[12]

(If Hitner was owner of these boats without Emerson, it is not known when Emerson sold out to him.)

Beginning under the Eisenbarth-Henderson shingle, this was the second "palace" produced by the Pope Dock Company of Parkersburg. It is ironic that its destruction should come so close after that of the GREATER NEW YORK. And so the showboat with the most unique outward

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[11]Interview with Mrs. Wiley P. McNair, June 1947 and from material loaned by Mrs. McNair, received May 26 and returned July 21, 1947 (GHWC).

[12]The Western Star, Mt. Vernon, Indiana, January 10, 1918.

appearance and the most romantic name was no longer. The name, however, was to be used on several other boats.

This freeze of the 1917-1918 winter was to destroy still another showboat. Captain Folz, owner at the time of the SUNNY SOUTH had chosen to winter in the Monongahela. This had an advantage, for it meant not having to fight high water and currents to get up the Ohio in the spring if an owner intended to open the season on the Monongahela, which was the custom for many showboats. There were also risks because the Monongahela could flood rapidly in the spring, being fed from fast melting snow of the Pennsylvania and West Virginia mountains. This year it was ice. The SUNNY SOUTH was tied up at a place called Gates, the landing for a mine about two miles above the settlement of Palmer. The river had frozen over in December of 1917 and in late February the ice began to break up fast and move with the swift current. It crushed the SUNNY SOUTH and carried its debris down the river.[13]

In less than a year the second of W. R. Markle's wonders, the third "palace" of the Pope Dock Company, was lost. Although the SUNNY SOUTH had not enjoyed any great success since the disastrous season as the HIPPODROME, it was well known on all the showboat streams and had been where others had not. Without even the dubious honor of being dismantled, this boat with the second most romantic name was gone. (The name, like that of the COTTON BLOSSOM, was revived later.)[14]

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[13]Information on the sinking of the SUNNY SOUTH from Earl Sharpneck, interviewed at government dam near Rices Landing, Pennsylvania, April 13, 1947. Mr. Sharpneck, and elderly gentleman in 1947, claimed to have been in the locality at the time of the SUNNY SOUTH's destruction.

[14]Captain Foltz, who had been a minor figure in showboating, does not appear in any other showboat information that has been uncovered for this study.

Figure # 162

The COTTON BLOSSOM in trouble

This picture is unidentified as to place, time, and actual situation. Various ornamentation and the mesh part of the railing on the upper guard definitely identify the showboat as the original COTTON BLOSSOM (the identifying features were original with this boat as the EISENBARTH-HENDERSON FLOATING THEATRE). Reports of the sinking of the COTTON BLOSSOM at Mt. Vernon, Indiana have the showboat being torn in two; it is possible that this is a photograph before the calamity took place.

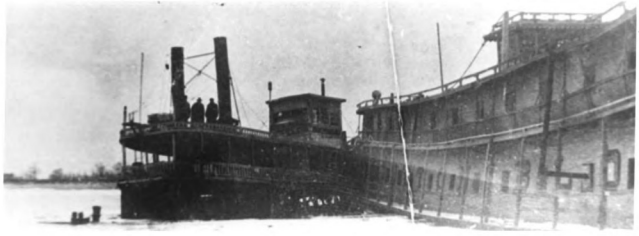


Figure # 162

The COTTON BLOSSOM in trouble

The chronology provided by the Menkes help to keep events together during the years of 1918 and 1919.

> Captain E. A. Price returned from the south with French's New Sensation, his steamer Fairmount towing. Bought Sensation and Fairmount from Price in spring of 1918.[14]

If Price was returning from the south in the spring of 1918, he may have wintered in the south or simply extended the season in the south until he was sure that ice was out of the northern rivers. (Paducah, where the Menkes were frozen in, was a favorite wintering spot for Price, however.) When this transaction took place cannot be pinpointed, but the NEW SENSATION in tow with the FAIRMOUNT passed Clarington, Ohio on June 5, 1918 according to Waterways Journal correspondent Mack Gamble. Evidently it did not go any farther than Pittsburgh for it passed down past Clarington on June 14.[15] After two unsuccessful attmepts as showboat owners, the purchase of the NEW SENSATION (complete with the French name) launched the Menke Brothers on a long and successful, at times lucrative, showboating career.

If the Menke name was rising, Captain Price had chosen to retire. He was past seventy and had spent forty strenuous years on the rivers. The Price name was still on the waters with the COLUMBIA, but Steve Price was in charge of her. Captain E. A. Price no longer needed to be making money - if, indeed, there was money to be made in showboats; he and Mrs. Price retired to their home in Newport, Kentucky. Edwin A. Price died in 1931 and Mrs. Price followed in 1937.

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[14]Letter from Bill Menke, loc. cit.

[15]Material from Mack Gamble, loc. cit.

Along with A. B. French, Price was the co-founder of the true American showboat. If these men were sometimes in stiff competition and wary of one another, it grew out of a respect for what each was capable of doing. It seems appropriate to list a few of the Price accomplishments:

A. He was on the rivers as showboat owner and manager longer than any other person - forty years
B. He owned more showboats during his career than anyone else
   1. PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA (small, one deck)
   2. PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA (one deck with a Texas)
   3. PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA (full double-decked)
   4. WATER QUEEN
   5. NEW ERA
   6. FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION
   7. GREATER NEW YORK
   8. COLUMBIA
C. His shows were often small but clean, honest, and he offered what he felt the majority of his audience wanted
D. Where some felt him to be stingy, he was frugal and his shows never approached the opulance of Markle or Emerson productions; relatives said that early in his career he wanted "to make ten barrels of money": many showboat men went broke, but regardless of the number of barrels, Captain Price was one who made and kept a fortune.

Not consciously a humorous man, he furnished laughter for thousands, either personally or through his shows. Even those who quarreled with him as associates, remembered him (as many did Captain French) as a person loved inspite of and because of his faults, but truly loved.

The newspaper account of the sinking of the COTTON BLOSSOM (the Mt. Vernon, Indiana Western Star) continued to include "Both boats are being dismantled, and a big crew of men are working to get everything off the boats . . ." One account has it that Otto Hitner saved some of the seating, got a grain barge from Evansville, put a cabin on it, and using salvaged seats called the new craft the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION.

This source does not tell what became of this boat.[16] It is really not significant what happened to the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION, for, on one hand, it did not have sufficient impact during the season to warrant newspaper, Billboard or Clipper comment; on the other hand it might have been a "clutching at straws" typical of the declining showboat business.[17]

In June of 1918 Captain Emerson sold the GOLDENROD to a Mr. White of Charleston, West Virginia and a J. W. Dingess of Huntington. Because of the final throes of World War I, the owners conceived the idea of tying the GOLDENROD up for the summer at Nitro, West Virginia on the Kanawha a few miles below Charleston. Their plan was to book traveling shows for the employees of the government powder plant there. The effort was not successful and Captain Emerson soon was owner again of the GOLDENROD.[18] Perhaps Emerson saw what was happening to showboats.

In the spring of this season the Bryants launched another showboat that they had been building during the previous winter. This new boat was a two-decker with a balcony and overall hull of 135 by 24 feet; it seated 450. The Steamer E. F. JACKSON was purchased as a tow. The showboat was honestly and modestly called BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT, and it opened at Pt. Pleasant. The exact itinerary for the first season is not known but Billy Bryant stated in his book that they played the Kanawha

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[16]Bert Banks, "Original Cotton Blossom," in Waterways Journal, (St. Louis), LVII (April 10, 1943).

[17]The stories of the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION are myriad; all the versions are contradictory to one another and little support can be gathered for any.

[18]Interview with Captain Emerson, idem.

for two weeks, then headed up the Ohio for Pittsburgh.[19] Mack Gamble noted that it was at Clarington on August 6.[20] With this boat the Bryants were truly in the showboat business, able to better deal with the competition. The PRINCESS was sold to L. E. Kinzer of Parkersburg, but there is no record of his operating it for the next three seasons.

The summer of 1918 saw the passing of still another of the giants of the overall showboat fleet. The exact date and details are uncertain but Cooley and Pell's WONDERLAND was no longer in service. This loss is one of the most obscure in the history of the large showboats. In June of 1917 the Waterways Journal carried this short article:

> The large showboat Wonderland and the steamer Louise sank in the Ohio River when they collided near Portland Tuesday night. The crew and the show people reached the shore safely.[21]

The same publication of July 14 offers: "The showboat Wonderland, in tow of the Vernie Mack, sank at Portland, Ohio." The List of Merchant Vessels of the United States, published in 1918, states that the "Bge. Wonderland, 259 gross tons, built 1906, foundered on July 8, 1917, Bellville, W. Va. On board, 28 persons. Lives lost, none." The discrepancy between the Waterways Journal and the latter publication is that Belleville, West Virginia and Portland, Ohio are thirteen river miles apart. Further confusion arises out of material Mack Gamble uncovered in the Waterways Journal offices. Varying reports state that the WONDERLAND "sank at Portland July 14, 1917" and striking

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[19] Billy Bryant, Children of Ol' Man River, (New York: Lee Furman Company, 1936).

[20] Material from Mack Gamble, loc. cit.

[21] Waterways Journal, June 12, 1917.

"a rock when just below the locks at Dame 20 near Bellville," and "the packet Louise, also in tow of the Vernie Mack, sank with the showboat." Other reports to the Waterways Journal office through August include:

> The steamer Louise did not sink with the showboat Wonderland. The Louise was left high and dry on the bank, it is said, by the watchman going to sleep with the river falling fast.
>
> The showboat Wonderland . . . is expected to be floated in a day or two. The lowest stage in the Ohio is said to be at Bellville.

In the G. Harry Wright Collection is a small daybook/cashbook of J. W. Cooley's. From this book it can be assumed that something unusual happened in mid-July, for expenses are entered on each day from July 12 through July 17 under "message." But by August 7 and 10, the entries again include such items as "groceries," "Bacon," and "bread." The August 17 entry lists a "trip home" for $4.70. August 25, 29, and September 2 again show expenditures for food and general supplies, just as do entries on through November. None of the entries in this book give location.[22] Just as there is sufficient evidence that the WONDERLAND may have had some sort of accident in 1917, there is evidence also that the boat was not destroyed and continued to play.

In an interview, Cooley stated that the WONDERLAND was lost in 1918. Corroborating this is a lengthy article in the Cleveland Plain Dealer which quotes Mr. Cooley extensively:

> I had to come back to Newcomerstown for a while in 1918 to take care of the Fountain Hotel, which my wife was operating while I was on the river.
>
> The pilot ran the boat on the rocks near one of the Ohio River towns. I came down and we had the boat patched up but we left it tied up to the bank.

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[22]There are two such daybooks/cashbooks, given to G. Harry Wright by Mr. Cooley in interview at Newcomerstown, Ohio, December 13, 1946 (GHWC).

On hearing that the showboat had torn loose and was floating down the river, Mr. Cooley is quoted in the Plain Dealer article thusly:

> I told them to let her go and go she did. I never saw the boat after that and never found out what happened to her.[23]

Even with details foggy, the loss of the WONDERLAND will be assigned to Mr. Cooley's date of 1918.

The loss of the WONDERLAND made the fourth loss in the line of the five grand showboats turned out by the Pope Dock Company. But the WONDERLAND was unique in many ways. From its beginning it had the most experienced bandmaster on the water - James Hagans. Norman Thom, with the boat from the beginning, and part owner for a season or two, was the most experienced showman and actor on the boats of the time. Captain Walter Pell, in charge of operations from launching to demise and also sometime owner, was the most intrepid pilot to ever navigate a showboat fleet. Too, though often referred to as Captain Cooley, Mr. Cooley never had a pilot's license; with such an accomplished staff/crew, Cooley was owner only.

If the WONDERLAND was one of the first showboats to venture onto the Missouri River, because a cashbook covering 1907 through 1911 shows that it covered all other Western Rivers, it probably covered more area in its career than any other. The Plain Dealer article already cited stated that this boat played along the Gulf of Mexico. In the notes of the interview with Mr. Cooley it is stated that the WONDERLAND made two trips up the Tennessee River but "didn't care for it." The notes also say that the WONDERLAND regularly played the upper Mississippi to Red Wing, Minnesota. Of the trips up the Missouri, two went as far as

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23 Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 10, 1950.

St. Joseph and one went even farther to Nodaway. John Cooley stated that the WONDERLAND gave its first performance at Middleport, Ohio in the summer of 1906 and, after the most extensive travel of any showboat, gave its last performance at Letart Falls, Ohio, just seventeen miles from Middleport. Gone from the rivers, surely, was a wonder.

Mention must be made here of other boats reported on the rivers in 1918 but about which very little is known. Mack Gamble's notes report that the showboat WASHINGTON passed up past Clarington on April 11, 1918 and back down on April 23. Another set of dates are given as "up" and "down" dates, June 21 and July 18, and a final upriver passing on July 24. Although Mr. Gamble's notes from/for the Waterways Journal are complete for 1917, the WASHINGTON is not mentioned; 1918, then, was the first year for the WASHINGTON. Even though the building site is not known, it is recorded in Mr. Gamble's notes that the Reynolds family owned the WASHINGTON and, as they always built their own boats, it can be assumed that it was built on the upper Ohio at or around Pt. Pleasant. Mr. Gamble attributes ownership of this boat to F. M. and W. M. Reynolds (father and brother of Tom Reynolds). This is very logical as T. J. "Tom" Reynolds had only recently brought out the AMERICA.

Philip Graham has made mention of the RIVERMAID under Captain Hi as being on the rivers during 1918, but as little is known, its existence can but be acknowledged.[24]

So as to not be too grim at the closing of the 1918 season, it must be remembered that three venerable showboats were still afloat.

Philip Graham, Showboats, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1951), pp. 139-40.

These were the WATER QUEEN - the oldest and most highly ornamented; FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION - the most respected name in showboat history; and the GOLDENROD - the largest floating theatre ever to exist offering true theatrical fare.

Because it is convenient, the date of November 11, 1918 will be used as a point of comparison for the latter end of this season. In three years five of the best known showboats disappeared. The five new boats seated less than 500 each which was true of the PRINCESS also. Even though the four remaining boats of recognition and long-standing reputations were to last from twelve to fifty years longer, showboating was on the decline; in fact these past few seasons had seen the demise of showboating as being economically and perhaps artistically feasible. The following roster can be compared with that of 1915 at the beginning of this chapter:

WATER QUEEN	Roy Hyatt
FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION	Menke Brothers
GOLDENROD	Emerson (White & Dingess)
COLUMBIA	E. A. Price with Steve Price
PRINCESS	L. E. Kinzer (not producing)
AMERICA	T. J. Reynolds
COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION	Otto Hitner
BRYANT'S	Bryant Family
WASHINGTON	F. M. and W. M. Reynolds
RIVERMAID	Captain Hi

The reasons for the decline of showboating are many and certainly there is no one cause. Perhaps the most often used explanation is that with railroads becoming more and more important as transportation, steamboating fell off to the point that showboats were no longer viable. It is true that travel by rail was faster because of both speed and distance: water distance from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati is nearly one and one-half times that by rail and the same comparison extended to

New Orleans shows the water distance almost twice that of the railways. But the railroads mainly connected the larger cities where showboats had never played, and the small river towns where showboat popularity lay still did not have rail service in 1918 and would never have.

This does not mean that railroads did not have an effect, but it was oblique rather than direct. Whereas before rail transportation became so widespread, the river towns thrived and grew as terminal points for loading and unloading mail, passengers, and freight, with the rise in track mileage, the inland railroad town grew. Except for the older and larger river cities where manufacturing had become established (and provided material impetus for artistic growth), the river towns diminished in size to the degree that the entire population could not fill by one-fifth one of the large showboats. (Consequently showboats built after 1910 had small seating capacities, meaning also much small outlay of initial capital than the "palaces.")

Bernheim in The Business of Show Business gives several reasons for the decline of traveling companies in the second decade of this century.[25] Several of them are applicable to showboats. Motion pictures most certainly affected the live theatre but it affected all live theatre. Productions of road companies were often shoddy and second rate, but here the showboat held on, presenting shows as good as ever. But the movie, shot on location, gave the audience a "live" quality that scenery could not, no matter where the theatre was located. Of course the showboats could show movies as well as any theatre on land and most showboats did. Like the effect of the railroads, the effect

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[25]Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of Show Business, (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), pp. 75 ff.

of motion pictures was not direct. By 1916 there were over 21,000 theatres throughout the United States devoted to motion pictures.[26] Even the town of a few hundred might have motion pictures, even if shown in town halls, and with greater regularity than the stops of a showboat. In towns of a thousand people or more, the citizens could walk a few blocks to the movie theatre without having to go to the river front, which was not always the most savory part of the town; (this was becoming increasingly true as fewer and fewer steamers stopped at the landing).

The automobile had its effect on showboat attendance. For many in the small town, an outing in the car was as great a form of recreation and entertainment as could be afforded to them. This mobility meant that two forms of recreation could be combined: a trip in the automobile to a neighboring town with a motion picture intervening before the return trip.

From 1914 and the outset of World War I, all theatrical expenses rose considerably, and competition among the large showboats meant no lessening of expenditure. All of this combines to give the more tangible reasons for the situation that was such an ominous portent for showboats at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century.

The overriding reason for the state of showboating in 1918 is even more difficult to express. In the late seventies when A. B. French and E. A. Price brought out their first showboats, theirs was the only theatrical entertainment that a given town might be offered in an entire year. They were adventurous enough to endure hardships but were rewarded by hundreds of riverfolk coming to see the performances,

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[26]A. Nicholas Vardac, Stage to Screen, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 215.

however meagre they might seem by today's standards and expectations. This is all very romantic in retrospect but very real to those involved one hundred years ago. E. E. Eisenbarth can be placed along side French and Price as attempting to bring theatre to places that did not have any form of outside amusement (outside the family or plantation community). With Markle, Needham and Steiner, Cooley, and to some extent Emerson, showboating was a business, a way to make money on an initial investment while enjoying their "work." With this group there arose a competition that was to be a disservice to all involved. (Here an analogy might be drawn with the Schuberts, the Syndicate, et al.)

The Menke Brothers, the Bryant and Reynolds families had to deal with their showboats in a very different way. Going from an initial service responding to a nneed in the eighties and nineties, through a "bigger and better" type of showmanship in the early part of the twentieth century, the showboats of the nineteen-teens and twenties had to rely on a new "gimmick," even if it were an unconscious one. In this new attitude a parallel can be drawn with American dramatic literature and its acceptance over the years: looking back has been popular. Playwrights in 1800 found a great audience for drama about the American Revolution and revolutionary heroes (and traitors). At mid-century there were popular plays about the French Revolution and all the experiences connected with the world situation in 1812 - from Barbary pirates to the natural inhabitants of the Western hemisphere. The great Civil War plays came a few decades after hostilities had ended, and Uncle Tom's Cabin had its greatest popularity (as a play) in the 1890's through the turn of the century. Despite the realism and naturalism in American literature in the early years of the twentieth century,

and in the drama of Europe that came to eastern shores, the showboat after the peak years had to rely on a romantic approach. Looking back to the nineties as glorious, if trying, years of river theatre, the showboat owners of the twenties and thirties had to sell themselves as remnants or vestiges of the past.

As we know all too well in the 1970's, nostalgia, however popular for a short time, is fleeting and faddish, soon turning into ridicule of a former time.



Figure # 163

Ice in the Ohio at Cincinnati - 1918

The ice of January of 1918 that was so destructive to showboats can be seen in this photograph. At the right in this picture is the CITY OF CINCINNATI (one of the large packets of the Louisville - Cincinnati trade) frozen in. It was to be destroyed by the ice as show in Figure # 164.



Figure # 164

The CITY OF CINCINNATI lost in the ice

The worst ice freeze on the Ohio was during the winter of 1917-1918. When the ice finally broke, it destroyed almost everything in its path, including the large packet, the CITY OF CINCINNATI, pictured above. Several showboats were lost elsewhere on the Ohio during this ice gorge.

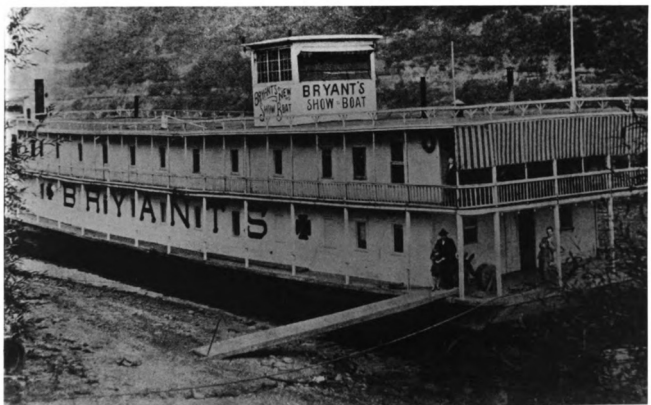


Figure # 165

BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT

After plying the rivers with the little PRINCESS for several seasons, the Bryant family launched a larger showboat in the spring of 1918. It was to play largely the Ohio and tributaries.

PART IV, Chapter 12 - The Declining Years

If after World War I the people and industry could look to a period of peace developing into prosperity in the mid-twenties, such was not the case with showboats. Except for surges of popularity, the majority of showboat owners fought constantly to keep their boats afloat and themselves afloat financially.

After 1918 there is no record of the PRINCESS or the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION for the next two seasons, but all the other showboats had seasons of varying lengths in 1919. The Waterways Journal reports show that the seasons were not starting as early as in former years, at least the Monongahela was not played as early. Only the GOLDENROD and the WATER QUEEN were in the Pittsburgh area in April with FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION and the COLUMBIA following in May and June respectively. The smaller boats chose to play the lower Ohio and the Green and Cumberland before going to the upper reaches of navigation. Only the three larger boats ventured into the deep south in these seasons of the late teens and early twenties.

By 1921 the PRINCESS was advertising in May and the trades announced the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION's laying up at season's end; both must have been active during this year. The 1921 season saw two smaller showboats come to the rivers. Billboard of May 14, 1921 reported the following:

> NEW SHOWBOAT - E. B. Potts, proprietor of the Wheeling Hotel and owner of the Grand Central and otherwise largely interested in that city and vicinity, is having a modern showboat constructed at the Mozena Shipyards at Clarington, W. Va. [sic]. A stern wheel

> towboat is also being built there to be electrically driven to move the show from point to point. The floating theatre will be devoted to moving pictures and will play the upper Ohio and its tributaries.

An item in Billboard of July 2 of the same year indicated that work on the new river "movie" boat was being rushed to completion, and went on to say

> The vessel will consist of a tug and a theatre capable of seating 600 persons. It will cost $20,000, it is said, and will operate on the Ohio River during the summer period and visit the lower Mississippi in the winter.

Whether this boat was active in 1921 cannot be ascertained but the following season it played Clarington according to Mack Gamble's report to the Waterways Journal of June 2, 1922:

> This boat spent two nights at Clarington with a moving picture show. It was under the management of F. B. Potts and was being towed by the gasboat Betsy Ann, owned by J. A. Creap, Moundsville, W. Va. The REX had been built new at Mozena's boatyard, Clarington in 1921.

The idea of playing motion pictures at the very small towns was a good one. However the entire operation was mismanaged and the REX was advertised for sale in the December 6, 1922 edition of Billboard.

According to Mack Gamble the boat was built badly in the first place, being 120 by 18 feet, a very narrow boat. When it did not prosper as a showboat it was equipped with a seventy horse-power Muncie oil engine and converted to a packet. This venture proved no more successful than the first, so it began a third career in its short life as the towboat BETTY WRIGHT. Eventually some 40 feet were cut off the hull, putting it in proportions more conducive to safe operation. Still another renovation and rebuilding included changing the name to the

VERONA.[1] The REX had not lived up to its Latin name.

When a showboat has been written about in newspapers or magazines, several years after its supposed existence, and when Captains Menke, Emerson, Bryant, and Reynolds did not remember it, the boat has been dismissed from this study. However, mention must be made of the MODERN, even though the last statement is true. Billboard of May 7, 1921 carried the following:

> MODERN Showboat wants dramatic people, all lines. Specialty people who double parts. Dancing team, prefer married teams. Single acts, aerial and novelty, doing two or more acts. Offer long, pleasant season. Salries paid regular. State your lowest. I pay all. No tickets. Must be able to join on short notice.

This is the only record of the MODERN showboat but the fact that such a boat existed is supported by a picture of such a boat. It can but be hoped that some future revelation can tell more about it.

The following year saw the birth of several new, if mostly small, water borne theatres. When the HIPPODROME returned from the disastrous trip to the Gulf of Mexico and the Alabama rivers, Jim Bonnelli was the brief owner of it before it was sold to John Foltz and the original name (SUNNY SOUTH) returned to it. In 1922 he chose to build a new showboat and resurrected the name SUNNY SOUTH. Under this headline, "'Sunny South' to pull anchor this week - New Showboat will head for southern waters," the August 19, 1922 Billboard carried this lengthy account of this new showboat:

> The Sunny South is about complete, and the new floating theatre, which has been undergoing construction across the Ohio River from Cincinnati since June, is scheduled to start on its way by the end of the current week for its opening stand. A tour of inspection of the craft was made August 12 by a BILLBOARD representative, who found the appearance of the new craft in keeping

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[1]Letter from Mack Gamble, December 7, 1947. Mr. Gamble was correspondent for the Waterways Journal and a thorough historian.

> with the standard of other boats afloat, with some exceptions. The showboat proper appears to be an exceptionally light craft and with an audience of 700 people aboard will take about eight inches of water.
>
> The projecting front of the cabin is divided into two living quarters for the owners, James Bonnelli and Roy L. Price. The part that projects over the front platform or deck will be left open to provide a comfortable loafing porch during the day and after the performance at night. Living rooms are also built at the other upper end of the showboat, with an interior entrance leading to the kitchen and dining room, which are separate and located directly behind the stage. On other boats we have seen the kitchen and dining room located on the tow boat. On the left front of the boat will be the ticket office, opposite which is a ladies' rest room and toilet, an innovation in showboat construction. There will be two flights of stairs leading to the balcony. Unlike other boats, doors take the place of windows in the theatre. This will permit of more air and hurried exit, the patrons being able to pass thru the doors to the guard rail. There are seven doors on each side, upper and lower. There will be no box seats. The owners have invested in upholstered opera chairs, which will make the patrons feel as though they were seated in a big city theatre.

The article continued at great length with information about electrical appointments and steam heat. The September 2 issue of the Waterways Journal announced the new SUNNY SOUTH's completion. Despite such glowing reports, Captain Reynolds stated that this SUNNY SOUTH was built on an old barge out of scrap lumber making for a dim reflection of its namesake.[2]

Billboard of April 8, 1922 announced another showboat with the following headline: "Drake's Floating Movie Opens to Capacity Crowd," then:

> Drake's Floating Movie, opened at Wildersville, Tennessee, March 10 to a reported capacity audience. The company is playing 1, 2, and 3 night stands and offering pictures of the better class. The outfit was formerly owned by Capt. W. R. Russell, of Warren's Bluff, Tenn., Mr. Drake having purchased it only recently. He has added several late release

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[2]Interview with T. J. Reynolds, January 1947 (GHWC).

> pictures and a truck. . . The show's winter quarters is located in Lexington, Tenn.

This is the only information on this boat. It is not known what it was called before DRAKE'S FLOATING MOVIE or whether this Captain Russell built it or if it was converted from another boat. It could not have been very large if it played Wildersville. This town is on the Big Sandy River, not the Ohio tributary, but a small tributary of the Tennessee. At Lexington, the county seat of Henderson County, the Big Sandy is a very small stream. DRAKE'S FLOATING MOVIE most likely never played on the Ohio, if even on the Tennessee.

Early in 1922 begins the story of one of the most elusive showboats in this study. Billboard of February 18 announced a new showboat: "Billy Hart's Showboat will open the season at Utica, Ind., March 21, offering dramatic bills and vaudeville. A band will be carried." No specific name was given for this boat and there is no record of itinerary during this season. But by the April 14, 1923 issue of Waterways Journal, Mack Gamble was reporting a Monongahela tour of the "Hart Showboat GAYETY," and similar reports appear in the July 16 and October 7 issues of this magazine. Billboard of August 9, 1924 reported that the Showboat GAYETY had been destroyed by fire at Pittsburgh on July 28; the Waterways Journal of August 2 carried a similar story but gives the date as July 29. Both sources agree that the showboat burned to the water's edge, but Mack Gamble, through the Journal of March 30, 1925 announced that Captain Hart had completely rebuilt his showboat, but no name is given for the rebuilt boat and no reference is again given for the GAYETY. The entire 1926 season is void of any announcement of Captain Hart or a showboat belonging to him.

On May 7, 1927 Mack Gamble reported that the Showboat PEERLESS, owned by Captain Hart, and towed by the gasboat EDNA M. had stopped at Clarington. Because of no evidence to the contrary, it can be assumed that the PEERLESS was the rebuilt GAYETY. During the summer of 1928 Mr. Gamble through the Journal reports on both a Hart Showboat called the VALLEY and a showboat being towed by the EDNA M. In all liklihood Captain Hart had once again changed the name of his showboat. Mr. Gamble's notes report that the VALLEY sank at Newport in 1932 and further states that at off-season periods this boat operated as the AIRO. Because there is little else of record to attribute to Captain Hart's enterprise(s), the HART SHOWBOAT/GAYETY/PEERLESS/AIRO/VALLEY had the dubious distinction of going through five different names in a single decade.

Mack Gamble's notes for the Waterways Journal of August 12, 1922 indicate that the WATER LILY showboat had appeared at Clarington under tow of the gasboat MARGARET R. Each season since 1919 Mr. Gamble had reported a trading boat in tow with the MARGARET R. and it was his belief that the WATER LILY was the converted trading boat. This showboat shows up in Gamble's notes every season during the twenties, showing either motion pictures or vaudeville. Although a small operation, it was evidently respectable and successful enough to last through the financial crisis of the late twenties, but there is no record as to what eventually became of it. Billboard of October 17, 1925 gives some idea of the nature of the WATER LILY's operation:

> Palmer, Pa., October 9 - This is the 14th week for the Water Lily Showboat here and business is continuing strong. It is also the 208th week without closing and Farnsworth and Luzell, owners, plan to continue at Palmer until next April or May. At the present time motion pictures are being shown.

Still another small showboat came into existence during these early years of the 1920's. It was owned and operated by a Dr. Bart, was called the TEMPLE OF HEALTH, and purveyed a "medicine show." This boat was towed by the BETTY WRIGHT (herself the former showboat REX), was a two-decker, and was painted yellow, according to Mack Gamble.[3] Later in its career the name was changed to the ARK and a fuller show was performed. This boat Captain Menke had heard of:

> . . .He operated one season, then lost her in the Kentucky River. I bought the calliope off the Ark after she sank. . . I sold the calliope off the Goldenrod to Universal which was used in that showboat movie.[4]

This incident would have been in 1928 or at least after the 1928 showboat season. The "one season" referred to by Captain Menke was evidently after renaming the boat.

The 1922 season was to be Captain Emerson's last season of showboating on the Western Rivers. He had been unrelenting in his attempts at bringing the best possible entertainment to the rivers. This season was no exception and the GOLDENROD advertisements for Hardin, Illinois, generally the first stop on the Illinois River after leaving the Ohio and going northward on the Mississippi, attest to this:

> Emerson Showboat Goldenrod on July 4. "Her Social Value" &4 acts of new vaudeville, "Sawing a Woman in Two."[5]

Six weeks later the boat was again advertised at Hardin:

> Emerson Showboat Goldenrod presenting the Big Musical Show "New York Roof Garden Revue", 14 big musical numbers, 6 big vaudeville acts, Added attraction -

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[3]Letter from Mack Gamble, loc. cit.

[4]Letter from J. W. Menke, March 3, 1947 (GHWC).

[5]Calhoun Herald, Hardin, Illinois, June 29, 1922.

> Princess Yvonne, the Woman of Mystery Who Knows All, Sees All, Tells All. $25.00 Reward will be paid if she fails to tell your name. Showing Saturday, August 12.[6]

The same issue of this newspaper carried another short item that sheds light on Captain Emerson's character:

> You will find elsewhere in this paper an ad for the Emerson Showboat Goldenrod which was to show at Hardin, Saturday August 12th, but since printing the page that carries the ad, Mr. Emerson has learned that that date is also one of the nights of the Hardin Chautauqua and as he does not wish to hinder the Chautauqua in any way, he postponed his trip to Hardin to some future date which will be announced later.

Captain Emerson's reasons for getting out of showboating at this juncture are not known, and, in fact, the exact date of his selling the GOLDENROD is uncertain. Bill Menke stated that they, the Menke Brothers, bought the GOLDENROD in 1922.[7] However, various newspapers and the Waterways Journal announced the GOLDENROD under Emerson for the early part of the 1923 season. The Journal however reported the sale of the GOLDENROD to the Menkes in the July 9, 1923 issue but no date for the transaction is given. Even though he was to remain along the rivers for a time, Captain Emerson was gone from the world of showboating along the Ohio and Mississippi.

During the later years that he was involved with showboats, when Captain Emerson stopped at the office of the Waterways Journal, he was always referred to and written about as "the Showboat King." It seemed to be a title reserved for him alone. What did this man do to deserve such an honor? He could hardly be called a pioneer, for A. B. French had been operating showboats for two decades before Emerson first walked

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[6]Ibid., August 10, 1922.

[7]Letter from J. W. Menke, January 20, 1947 (GHWC).

up the stage plank of a floating theatre; and both Price and Eisenbarth preceded him by several years in the business. Nor was he a builder of boats. He did not build a single river showboat, but obtained all of his boats by purchase. His claim to pre-eminence cannot be based upon longevity in the business for both Captain Price and Captain Menke operated as managers for longer periods than he did, and both Captain French and Captain Hyatt equalled his time. It is true that at one time or another he owned, either outright or in partnership, six river showboats, and three of them were among the largest and finest; but the Menkes came within one boat of equalling this record, and Captain Price definitely surpassed it. Nor did Emerson make any profound changes in the showboat business.

The explanation of Emerson's being "Showboat King" is threefold: first, his background - Ralph Emerson was a competent and respected riverman before he entered showboat business. When he became associated with Captain Price he was already a steamboat pilot of some experience. Second, his personality - he was aggressive, friendly, expansive. He always took the lead in forming and cementing friendships. He liked people, and as a consequence, people liked him. Third, his enthusiasm, open-handedness, and daring in the conduct of his business put him ahead of others. What others did well, Ralph Emerson did with a bit of extra flair. He became not only the most spectacular producer, but also the best public relations man in the business. Never for a moment were the people along the rivers allowed to forget that Emerson's boat was there with the finest show possible to procure (and this was true of other boats when he was the advance man), and that making his friends happy was Ralph Emerson's self-imposed mission in life, a mission which he rejoiced in accomplishing.

As has just been done with Captain Emerson, in ending this chronicle, it is best to take each showboat and owner to their respective ends. The oldest living name on the river was Price, even though in the second generation. Steve Price managed the COLUMBIA from the time Captain Price bought it and renamed it (formerly the AMERICAN). Billboard records attest to the COLUMBIA going out each season as it announced openings for performers each spring. At least twice it was offered for sale but there seemed to be no takers. In 1924 Billboard reported that the COLUMBIA played Louisiana, Missouri for the first time on July 25 (first time as the COLUMBIA, the AMERICAN played the upper Mississippi extensively). But in March 1928, Steve Price died at Evansville, Indiana; he was buried in the family plot in Highland Cemetary at Covington, Kentucky on March 16.[8]

Waterways Journal of May 14, 1928 reported that the Menkes had recently purchased Price's COLUMBIA and the towboat J. M. GRUBBS. This same periodical, issue of June 16, reported that the COLUMBIA and the GRUBBS had been sold by StevePrice's widow to W. C. Sanderson of Evansville as speculation. Captain Menke himself wrote that he bought the showboat in 1928 but no details are known.[9] With the acquisition of this second showboat by the Menkes, the name of Price completely disappeared from the rivers.

The oldest showboat in the early twenties was the venerable WATER QUEEN. With its fourth owner, Roy Hyatt (following Breidenbach, French, and Price) and its third name (originally the THEATORIUM, then FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION No. 1) it was to have a very long career.

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[8]Interview with Mrs. Al Swope (formerly Mrs. Steve Price, formerly Mabel Knight), Newport, Kentucky, September 3, 1948 (GHWC).

[9]Letter from J. W. Menke, loc. cit.

Like many boats, the WATER QUEEN was advertised for sale in 1922 but was not sold. In 1923 the Waterways Journal announced a renovation of the WATER QUEEN:

> . . . Fine leather chairs with spring cushions have been installed, while new scenery and attractive lighting effects add much to the interest in the show.[10]

Although Mrs. Hyatt stated that the WATER QUEEN under Hyatt ownership worked all the showboat waters - up as far as St. Paul in August and up the Allegheny and Youghiogheny as far as bridge height would permit, Billboard and Waterways Journal reports of the twenties indicate that it did not venture onto the Mississippi during these seasons. It played the Ohio, Kanawha, and Green Rivers extensively, as well as the Muskingum up to the Hyatt's home at Lowell, Ohio.[11]

One of the highlights of the twenties for the WATER QUEEN and the Hyatts was the making of the film "Stage Struck" with Gloria Swanson; the WATER QUEEN was used in the film and Mrs. (Josie) Hyatt was also in the film. This particular segment of the film was shot at New Martinsville, West Virginia.[12]

During the seasons of 1928, '29, and '30, Otto Hitner leased the WATER QUEEN and the Hyatts worked aboard her. These years will be dealt with in connection with the further exploits of Mr. Hitner.

Just as Emerson sought the good will of the river communities so did Captain Hyatt as witnessed by this story in the Waterways Journal:

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[10] Waterways Journal, April 14, 1923.

[11] Interview with Josie Hyatt, Lowell, Ohio, March 13, 1948 (GHWC).

[12] Letter from Josie Hyatt, March 11, 1947 (GHWC).

> . . .The Water Queen played Clarington Saturday night. There was an Old Fiddler's contest on the wharf corner that evening and a crowd of 1500 to 2000 people were on hand to hear it. Captain Hyatt co-operated by furnishing light for the occasion. The curtain was held until the fiddler's contest was over, and the courtesy and co-operation of the showboat people was repaid when an almost capacity crowd boarded the boat for the performance, starting at 9:20 p.m. Capt. Williams Reynolds, former owner of the America showboat, is towing the Water Queen with his double-deck gasboat the Ida Mae. . .[13]

During the 1935-36 off-season, the WATER QUEEN wintered at Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia. On January 23, 1936 a storm caught the showboat, pushing it onto the bank with ice gouging holes in the hull. Mrs. Hyatt was alone on the boat but managed to get help, eventually saving most of the personal property and valuable before it sank.[14] With this event the most lavishly decorated of all showboats ended its forty-six year career, and the Hyatts retired to their Lowell, Ohio home on the Muskingum River.

The PRINCESS, launched originally by the Bryants, was being operated during 1921 by L. E. Kinzer, who had purchased it from the Bryants three years earlier. Norman Thom had gone with the PRINCESS after he left the WONDERLAND after its sinking, with a season on the AMERICAN intervening. Billboard in 1922 announced that Kinzer had sold the PRINCESS to Thom at Charleston, West Virginia on September 7.[15] During the hard years of the twenties Thom and the PRINCESS were as successful as any showboat. Thom was first and foremost a theatre man and brought good plays to the rivers. Because the PRINCESS was small

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[13]Waterways Journal, September 23, 1933.

[14]Interview with Josie Hyatt, Lowell, Ohio, September 10, 1947 (GHWC).

[15]Billboard, September 16, 1922.

and because Thom operated it as a family boat, regardless of the actual personnel, he did not have the overhead of the larger boats.

Norman Thom was born in Kentucky but grew up at Ironton, Ohio. He joined Markle on the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, and later the SUNNY SOUTH. During this time he married the mother of Toots and Warren Leisenring, but at some time this marriage was dissolved, as the lady became Mrs. Walter Pell. His second wife, Grace, became leading lady of the PRINCESS, just as he was the principal actor.[16] Because the PRINCESS had not been built well in the first place, by Billy Bryant's own admission, and because it had played almost year round,[17] Thom considered it unsafe in the latter twenties. The PRINCESS was dismantled at Beverly, Ohio (a few miles up the Muskingum from Lowell) in 1928. The following Billboard article gives the end of Mr. Thom's career, as far as concerns this study:

> Norman F. Thom, former owner and manager of the Princess Showboat, and who last year took his show intact to Broadway to publicize Universal's Showboat film, is being featured on the West Coast in a one-act play, Oh, written by Wallace Start. . .[18]

Mrs. Thom worked for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer after the Thoms moved to California.

Mention has been made of the WASHINGTON, owned by F. M. and W. M. Reynolds during the 1918 season. In 1919 Mack Gamble's notes state that the gasboat J. M. ROBERTS passed Clarington on May 23 going upriver

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[16]Background and biographical information on Norman Thom from interview with Josie Hyatt, September 10, 1947, idem., and letters from Mrs. Walter Pell, July 7, 10, & 17, 1947 (GHWC).

[17]The Waterways Journal of April 14, 1923 stated that the PRINCESS showed movies twice a week during the winter.

[18]Billboard, March 29, 1930.

towing the SUPERIOR Showboat. Since the J. M. ROBERTS had towed the WASHINGTON the year before, and since advertisements for the SUPERIOR list the Reynolds as owners, it is assumed that the SUPERIOR was the renamed WASHINGTON. The ads in Billboard for the 1921 season, and there are many, would indicate that the SUPERIOR had trouble getting and keeping a company. There was evidently no band aboard since ads repeatedly sought a piano player who could double on the steam calliope and asked for no other instrumentalists. These ads in close succession also help to establish the itinerary which was largely the upper Ohio and the Monongahela. From what can be gleaned from Billboard and Waterways Journal notices, the SUPERIOR played mostly straight plays with some vaudeville. According to Tom Reynolds the SUPERIOR was sold by his father and brother during the 1922-23 winter to Charles Zubick of Pittsburgh and used for a clubhouse by a boatclub.[19]

The reason for the sale of the SUPERIOR is that the owners wanted to buy another boat. Tom Reynolds had built the AMERICA several seasons earlier but wanted a larger and sturdier boat. He had had as a partner in the AMERICA his brother-in-law Thomas Nicol, and in building a new showboat, the AMERICA was sold to his father and brother. Tom Reynolds also stated that the family did not do drama on the AMERICA. Whether or not the family did it, according to Billboard many plays were done on this boat during its 1921 and 1922 seasons. At any rate the AMERICA played many more seasons under the Reynolds banner. The elder Reynolds (F. M.) died in 1930;[20] advertisements during the 1930 and 1931

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[19]Letter from Mack Gamble, January 5, 1950, quoting information written to him from Captain T. J. Reynolds the preceding November. (GHWC).

[20]Letter from T. J. Reynolds, May 23, 1947 (GHWC).

seasons list Wm. Reynolds as owner of the AMERICA. These same ads would indicate that this boat played mostly on the lower Ohio and tributaries - the Green, Cumberland, and Tennessee Rivers.

As early as 1923 Wm. Reynolds had plans to build a new towboat for the AMERICA. It was finally launched in April of 1925 and named the IDA MAE after Bill and Tom Reynolds' sister (Mrs. Tom Nicol).[21] This tow was to outlive the AMERICA and is show in the photograph of the wrecked WATER QUEEN in 1936. The AMERICA was wrecked on the Green River in 1931 and Bill Reynolds made a summer home of it near Owensboro.[22] Mack Gamble's notes of 1932 indicate that Bill Reynolds dismantled the AMERICA. Putting these two reports together it seems that Mr. Reynolds used lumber from the destroyed AMERICA for his summer home.

The COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION that had been put together on a barge partially from salvage of the original boat of that name was active during the 1921, '22, and '23 seasons. This boat was sold to become a bathing beach boat at Paducah.[23] In announcing the end of the 1923 season Billboard reported that "The new Cotton Blossom is now under construction and will be launched next spring."[24] The same publication carried other such announcements in the December 1 and 22 issues:

> Otto Hitner building new Cotton Blossom at Mound City. Largest and most modern in operation according to Frank Smart, who had the boat under construction.

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[21]Interview with T. J. Reynolds, Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia, January 1947, idem.

[22]Idem.

[23]Bert Banks, "Original Cotton Blossom," in Waterways Journal, April 10, 1943.

[24]Billboard, September 29, 1923.

> Hitner's Cotton Blossom, under construction, is 45 x 180, seating capacity 1200. Will open at Evansville about May 1.

Mr. Hitner had obtained an excursion barge in the summer of 1923. According to Captain Menke this barge started as a pontoon bridge at Red Wing, Minnesota.[25] It operated as an excursion boat under the name of MISSISSIPPI and later the PRINCESS (not to be confused with the original Bryant showboat). It was a storehouse boat at Cairo when Hitner purchased it.[26]

Billboard of May 17, 1924 carried a lengthy article about the opening of Hitner's new COTTON BLOSSOM.

> New Cotton Blossom opened at Newburgh, Ind. May 5. Rockport, May 6. Evansville, 3 days beginning May 7 under auspices of local B.P.O.E. Hull and main work of boat done at Mound City, finshed at Evansville. 180 x 45 feet and weighs 378 tons, sides open to good air, electric fans in audience. Down either side are the winged seats on raised platforms. There is an aisle down either side and twenty-six rows of regulation theatre chairs with the well known and accredited pitch to the floor of the auditorium that allows for excellent view for everyone.

This article continued with a great many details about the theatre and living facilities aboard the new showboat, the most interesting being that the stage was 38 x 24 feet which would have made for lavish production possibilities. The exterior of the boat was for the most part undistinguished from its predecessors, except for an enormous electric sign emblazened with the showboat's name.

This COTTON BLOSSOM operated with some success for several years, often playing long runs under the auspices of the local Elks Clubs.

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[25]Letter from J. W. Menke, March 3, 1947 (GHWC).

[26]Banks, loc. cit.

In 1928 the ARGAND which towed Hyatt's WATER QUEEN burned at Lowell, Ohio. Hitner leased the WATER QUEEN, called it the COTTON BLOSSOM No. 2 while the large boat was billed as the COTTON BLOSSOM No. 1. Billboard for the years 1930 and 1931 indicates that the two COTTON BLOSSOMS covered the rivers well - the Ohio, upper and lower Mississippi, the Yazoo and even a short distance up the Red River.

Hitner was skillful enough to manage the seasonal playing so that during these seasons he did not have to close either boat. Evidently he was not so skillful in financial management. Mrs. Hyatt reported that Hitner did not pay for the use of the WATER QUEEN. Both Mr. and Mrs. Hyatt worked on the COTTON BLOSSOM No. 2 but were never paid a salary. Finally at St. Louis Hitner simply walked away from the boat. Eventually the Hyatts received some salary payment but never received anything for the use of the boat.[27] At the end of the 1931 season, the towboat of the larger COTTON BLOSSOM sank in the Ouachita River.[28] Further misfortune came to the COTTON BLOSSOM at this time as reported by Billboard.

> Alexandria, Louisiana, Oct. 3 - Cotton Blossom Showboat tied up at the river bank here and recently transformed into a night club, was raided by Sheriff Downs and deputies early Sunday, and Neal Andrews, alleged operator of the boat, was charged with operating a banking game.[29]

The following June and July issues of Billboard carried several stories about the COTTON BLOSSOM, mostly about long stands at larger cities

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[27]Interviews with Josie Hyatt, idem.

[28]Letter from J. W. Menke, loc. cit.

[30]Billboard, October 10, 1931.

and that she planned to remain in the south. But the Billboard story of August 12, 1933 ends the story of Hitner's "new" COTTON BLOSSOM:

> New Orleans, La., Aug. 9. The famous showboat Cotton Blossom was knocked down under the auctioneer's hammer Tuesday for $20 to Clarence Stanley, of Baton Rouge, who said he would renovate the vessel for a theatrical comeback. The auction was under a Federal Court judgement to satisfy a towing claim of more than $100 filed against the operator, Capt. D. Otto Hitner.
>
> Capt. W. E. Prather, who brought the suit to recover a towing claim of $301.75, had to put up a $250.00 bond to cover the costs of the sale. Since the boat was seized the custody costs alone have amounted to $700. Sale price $20.00!!!

At the close of the 1933 season there had been four boats on the rivers that had gone under the name of COTTON BLOSSOM, but the one that had operated for a short while as "No. 2" again became the WATER QUEEN to continue and end it long career as already recounted.

All through the twenties BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT was able to keep playing with only winter interruptions. The itinerary was much the same each season, opening on the Monongahela, then playing the upper Ohio, the Kanawha, the lower Ohio, the Green and Tennessee, then back up the Ohio, often playing the Kentucky River in late summer. Even though the Bryants called Pt. Pleasant their home, they often wintered the boat on the Monongahela to facilitate an early spring opening on that river. The Waterways Journal of July 27, 1929 reported the BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT up past St. Louis bound for the Illinois and upper Mississippi. This is the only record of the Bryant's playing beyond the mouth of the Ohio at Cairo.

1930 was the season that marked the beginning of large city runs for showboats. BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT played ten days in Charleston and twelve weeks in Cincinnati. In 1931 this showboat tied up in Cincinnati

in early June and did not close there until October 27, nearly five months later. At the end of this season, the Bryant company played in Chicago to mixed reaction; later a similar venture was tried in New York. The trips gave impetus to river engagements at the larger cities during the next summers, but Billy Bryant always scheduled some one night stands before and after tying up at Cincinnati in order to maintain the idea of a traveling showboat. Through the thirties the Bryant operation continued with varying success. By 1940 it was still doing good business if the reports of the Waterways Journal are any indication.

> Capt. Billy Bryant's showboat has been one of the most crowded entertainments in Charleston since he opened here. The boat has been filled to capacity, and most of the time the seats are bought in advance so that a sign "Standing Room Only" has to be displayed at the ticket window.[30]

Unfortunately it is from BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT and the kind of treatment that Billy Bryant gave to his shows that the common conception of showboat fare comes. In choosing plays from the nineteenth century or the turn of the century, he did not let them play as written but laughed at them within production. (Later on Menke and theGOLDENROD company at St. Louis were guilty of the same thing.) Too, Bryant did a version of Hamlet with such additional characters as "Shylock," "Three Witches," and "Desdemona." There can be no doubt that this kind of production had a certain audience, but it was very negative to the overall appeal and stature of showboats.

In 1943 BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT was laid up at Pt. Pleasant, no longer in operation. It was then sold to be used as a wharf boat at

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[30] Waterways Journal, April 10, 1940.

Huntington, West Virginia. Both the elder Bryants died in the latter forties while Billy spent his time traveling and lecturing on showboats after his retirement from actual showboat operation.[31]

Through the mid-twenties the Menkes operated two grand showboats. Ben and Charley operated FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION while Harry and Bill ran the GOLDENROD. Both boats played all the standard territory, opening on the upper Ohio and Monongahela, playing the upper Mississippi, and ending in the bayou country or New Orleans. Hard luck hit the Menkes in the summer of 1925. At some time during this summer the NEW SENSATION sank at New Madrid, Missouri and was taken to Mound City, Illinois for repair. In the fall further disaster occurred. The following notice in a Hardin, Illinois newspaper tells the story:

> The sinking of the Goldenrod at Hardin is hard luck for the Menke Bros., the owners, as their other floating theatre, French's New Sensation, is now on the ways at Mound City undergoing repairs caused by the boat sinking at New Madrid, Mo. on the Mississippi River.[32]

There are other accounts of the GOLDENROD being at Hardin through the month of October in this same paper. How long the GOLDENROD was out of commission is not known. No record of the 1926 and 1927 seasons for it have been uncovered in Billboard, the Waterways Journal, or the small town newspapers in which it was generally advertised. It was back on the rivers in 1928 according to an ad in a Hardin newspaper of September that year.

> Goldenrod Showboat at East Hardin - Sept. 14th. a four-act comedy drama "Driftwood" & 5 acts of vaudeville.[33]

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[31] See Billy Bryant, Children of Ol' Man River, (New York: Lee Furman Company, 1936) for other aspects of the Bryant's operation.

[32] Calhoun Herald, Hardin, Illinois, October 1, 1925.

[33] Ibid., September 13, 1928.

Judging from other earlier seasons, playing the Illinois in September would have meant summer playing on the Ohio with a spring opening on the Monongahela, but it is not known when the GOLDENROD was repaired at Hardin.

The 1929 season for the GOLDENROD is again a blank and the NEW SENSATION had not been announced since late 1925. Billboard early in 1931 carried this story, dateline January 3, Mound City, Illinois:

> French's sensation, famous old showboat, built by Captain French nearly a half century ago, (sic) and of late years operated by Capt. J. W. Menke, has housed its last showboat troupe. The floating theatre which has been tied up here since 1927, was sold recently for $1500 by court order to pay storage costs, and early in the spring is destined to leave here for the "graveyard". The craft will be dismantled and junked, thus to pass from the picture forever.[34]

The same publication ran another quite different story in April:

> J. W. Menke, showboat impresario, is reconditioning the French's New Sensation, oldest of the floating theatres, and will this season have out three boat shows. A nationally circulated press story of a few months back had the French's Sensation being scraped and on its way to the boneyard. Menke brands the story as a huge mistake on the part of the newspaper boys. . .[35]

This story ends by saying that it was Captain Menke's intention to take the boat to the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933. Whether or not this was indeed the Captain's intention, the NEW SENSATION was put on the ways at Mound City. Although no exact date is known, a storn hit Mound City and completely demolished the NEW SENSATION. Here, thirty years after the man who put it there was dead, the name FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION - a fifty year old tradition - was gone from the rivers.

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[34]Billboard, January 10, 1931. (The NEW SENSATION in the twenties and up until demolished was often written of as the oldest on the rivers, perhaps even at Captain Menke's instigation for publicity.)

[35]Ibid., April 25, 1931.

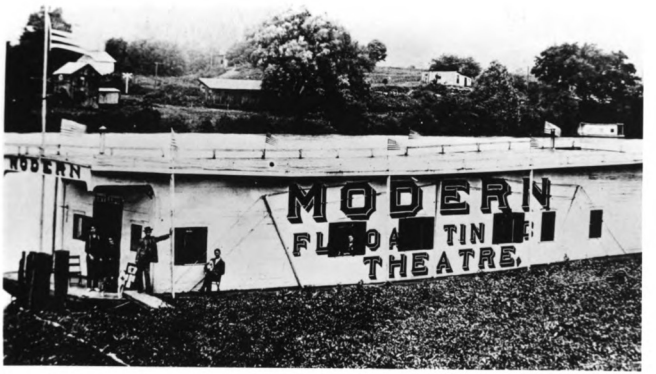


Figure # 166

The MODERN FLOATING THEATRE

Except for a single advertisement in 1921 for performers, this picture is the only support for this boat's existence.



Figure # 167

The second SUNNY SOUTH

This showboat was built in 1922 and operated by Roy L. Price and James Bonnelli. Part of the salvage of the original SUNNY SOUTH was used in the construction, making for a dim reflection of its namesake.



Figure # 168

The COLUMBIA

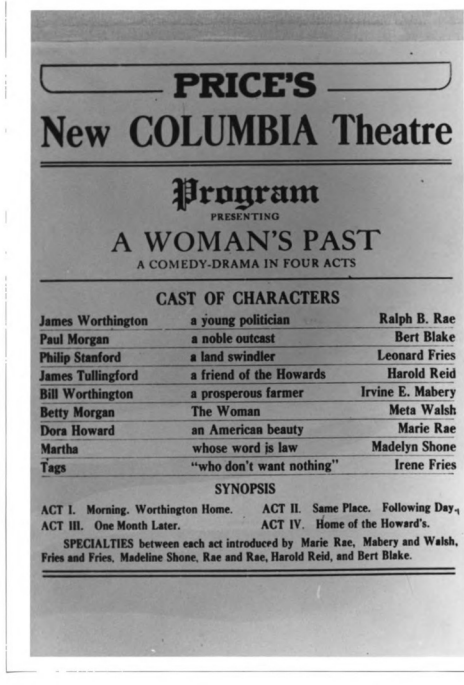
This showboat was launched as the AMERICAN, but was renamed the COLUMBIA when purchased by E. A. Price and managed by Steve Price. This photograph obviously dates from 1924.



Figure # 169

Interior of the COLUMBIA

This photograph of the interior of the COLUMBIA was used with that of the exterior of this boat (Figure # 168) for publicity.



PRICE'S

New COLUMBIA Theatre

Program

PRESENTING

A WOMAN'S PAST

A COMEDY-DRAMA IN FOUR ACTS

CAST OF CHARACTERS

James Worthington	a young politician	Ralph B. Rae
Paul Morgan	a noble outcast	Bert Blake
Philip Stanford	a land swindler	Leonard Fries
James Tullingford	a friend of the Howards	Harold Reid
Bill Worthington	a prosperous farmer	Irvine E. Mabery
Betty Morgan	The Woman	Meta Walsh
Dora Howard	an American beauty	Marie Rae
Martha	whose word is law	Madelyn Shone
Tags	"who don't want nothing"	Irene Fries

SYNOPSIS

ACT I. Morning. Worthington Home. ACT II. Same Place. Following Day.
ACT III. One Month Later. ACT IV. Home of the Howard's.

SPECIALTIES between each act introduced by Marie Rae, Mabery and Walsh, Fries and Fries, Madeline Shone, Rae and Rae, Harold Reid, and Bert Blake.

Figure # 170

Program for the COLUMBIA

Figure # 171

The Destruction of the WATER QUEEN

In 1936 the WATER QUEEN was hit by a storm and sunk when ice punched a hole in the hull. At the time it was being towed by the IDA MAE which had been built by and was owned by W. J. Reynolds and named after his sister, Mrs. Thomas Nicol.

Note that this rear view of the WATER QUEEN has none of the "gingerbread/gazebo" woodwork that adorned the upper side guards. When new it had such decoration on the stern for pictures exist of it when under French ownership and it operated as the NEW SENSATION No. 1. Perhaps this was part of the rebuilding, or lack of it, when it sank as the OLYMPIA when Price first owned it.



Figure # 171

The Destruction of the WATER QUEEN



Figure # 172

Otto Hitner's COTTON BLOSSOM

Although it appears somewhat less stable than many of the other large showboats that preceded her, this pictures shows that it was a most imposing structure. It was advertised as seating 1200.

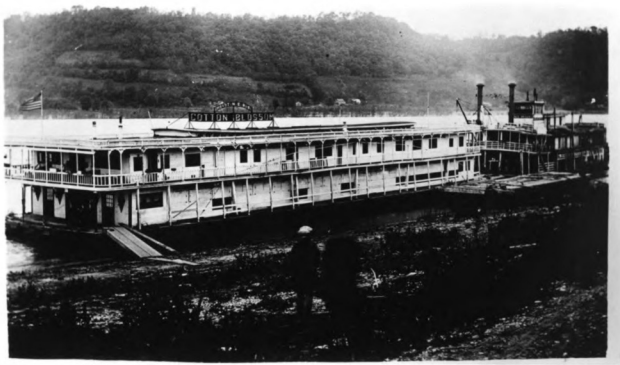


Figure # 173

Otto Hitner's COTTON BLOSSOM

This showboat, as to actual physical size, was the largest showboat ever constructed for regular theatrical performances. It was converted to a nightclub of sorts for a while in Louisiana and eventually sold for a pittance.

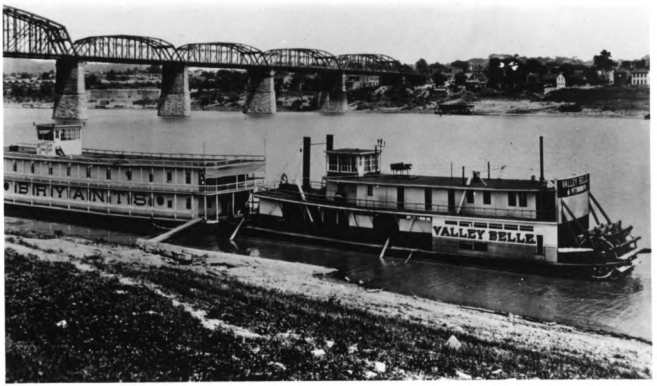


Figure # 174

BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT

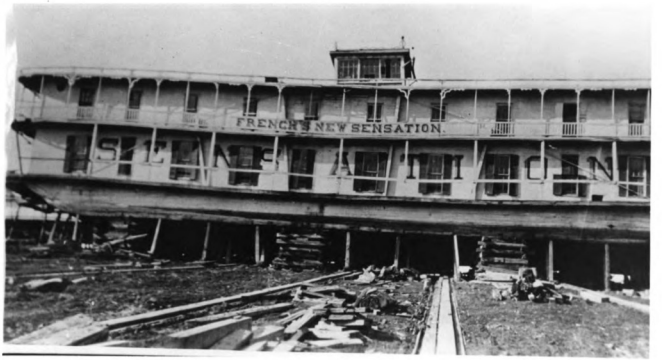


Figure # 175

FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION on the ways



Figure # 176

The Remains of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

In the early thirties Captain Menke had FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION put on the ways at Mound City, Illinois for repairs. A storm hit the Mound City area,destroying the showboat.

When Steve Price died at Evansville in March of 1928, the COLUMBIA was sold to the Menke Brothers. Immediately the boat was refurbished and repainted. Under this new ownership it was dubbed the HOLLY WOOD. (What name could be more glamorous and synomous with big time show business in 1928?) The Menkes wasted little time getting the boat out for by August they were already on the Illinois River. The Calhoun Herald wrote of the HOLLYWOOD in such a way as to show that the Menkes were presenting a good show.

> The new showboat "Hollywood" coming up the river will be at Hardin Friday night, Aug. 24, and at Kampsville, Aug. 25 and will put on the big success of the season, "The Vulture" with some good vaudeville between acts. This is another of the Menke Brothers showboats and it is said to be the niftiest one of the entire fleet.[36]

The same newspaper of September 13 announced the downriver return of the HOLLYWOOD to Hardin for September 17. The newspaper review of this performance was most favorable:

> The Hollywood showboat gave us a real good four act drama, "Tildy Ann" with some splendid vaudeville acts, Monday evening, which seemed to please everybody. The Menke boys are real showmen and always give you your money's worth . The Hollywood will be at Hamburg, Friday night and if the people want to see a good show, they ought to see "Tildy Ann."[37]

Attempts to find an itinerary for either the HOLYWOOD or the GOLDENROD in 1929 have been futile. Billboard of May 24, 1930 stated that the HOLLYWOOD had spent the winter in the southern states, which probably included much of the summer of 1929, resulting in no reports being made to the northern headquartered Waterways Journal and Billboard.

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[36]Calhoun Herald, Hardin, Illinois, August 23, 1928.

[37]Ibid., September 20, 1928.



Figure # 177

The HOLLYWOOD

This showboat was launched as the AMERICAN, called the COLUMBIA under the Price banner, but was dubbed the HOLLYWOOD when purchased by the Menkes after Steve Price's death in the late twenties.

The Billboard of July 5, 1930 mentioned that the GOLDENROD was left high and dry for several weeks the previous summer at Covington, Kentucky due to a sudden drop in the river - reason enough why it was not announced in the trade publications.

Despite the depression, 1930 was a bumper year for showboats. The success of BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT in Cincinnati this summer had already been mentioned. The same success greeted the Menkes in the larger cities. A long series of reports in Billboard best tells the story of the Menke showboats during the next seasons, as excerpted below:

> MENKE BROTHERS IN LOUISVILLE /HOLLYWOOD/ Stopped there after a winter season in southern waters. The 750-seat boat wasn't enough for the Derby-crowned mob that swarmed down the bank. (May 26, 1930, p. 30)
>
> Hollywood still playing in Louisville. Goldenrod slated to open in Pittsburgh soon for indefinite stay. (July 12, 1930, p. 31)
>
> Menke's Hollywood Showboat finished its third week here tonight and has plenty reservations for next week. This is thought to be a long-run record for an inland showboat in a big city. The Hollywood originally came in here for a two-day stand. . .
> The "400" of the city are attending. Formal evening gowns are much in evidence and there is a sprinkling of stove-pipe hats. On the wharf the patrons park their Packards, Cadillacs, and Lincolns and there have been two Rolls-Royces to date. (July 14, 1930, p. 30)
>
> Hollywood opens 9th week in Louisville. (July 19, 1930, p. 30)
>
> Goldenrod at Pittsburgh. Getting much publicity. Same true of Bryant's at Cincy. (August 2, 1930, p. 30)
>
> Hollywood announced Amateur Night as regular feature as she goes into 13th week at Louisville. Telephone installed on boat. Exhaust fans, etc. Bryant's in 6th week at Cincy. (August 16, 1930, p. 31)
>
> Goldenrod in 4th week at Pittsburgh. 1.50 top. Doing big biz. (August 23, 1930, p. 26)

Goldenrod now in 8th week at Pittsburgh. East Lynne last week, Sweetest Girl in Dixie this week. (September 13, 1930, p. 27)

Goldenrod concluded a 15-week stay at Aspinwall. (November 8, 1930, p. 28)

[Aspinwall is a suburb of Pittsburgh approximately seven river miles up the Allegheny from its confluence with the Monongahela at the Golden Triangle.]

The opening of Capt. J. W. Menke's Goldenrod Showboat for a winter's run at the foot of Stanwix St. here, scheduled for Wed. night, was called off at the last minute by the Director of Public Works.

The floating theatre has been equipped with steam heat, and the entrance deck has been enclosed with glass. (December 27, 1930, p. 26)

Nashville saw its first showboat since Civil War days when Capt. J. W. Menke's Hollywood tied up here Sunday morning at the foot of Broad Street for an indefinite stay. (April 18, 1931, p. 24)

Capt. Menke's Goldenrod showboat opened its summer run Thursday night at Montrose on the Allegheny River above Aspinwall, hear here. (June 20, 1931, p. 22)

Hollywood ends third month at the foot of Broad St., Nashville. Good biz, no end in sight. (July 4, 1931, p. 20)

Hollywood ends highly successful run at Nashville. There since April 6. Moves to Old Hickory, Tenn. for at least 4 weeks if biz warrants. Cumberland River. (July 18, 1931)

Peoria, Illinois, September 18. Hollywood Showboat last Thursday broadcast part of Lena Rivers over local station direct from boat stage. It was the first time that such a broadcast has been made direct from the stage of a showboat. (September 19, 1931, p. 22)

Capt. J. W. Menke's Hollywood Showboat pulled into Nashville harbor Sunday morning and on Monday night began an indefinite engagement here. If business warrants, Capt. Menke plans to keep the floating theatre here all winter. . . .

The Hollywood played an extended engagement in Nashville. . . Since that time the boat has cruised along the Illinois, Ohio and Mississippi rivers to good results. The showboat returns here after an extended run in Peoria, Illinois, where the troupe created unusual interest and played to good business. (November 21, 1931, p. 22)

After two fruitful seasons in the large cities, the Menkes found that even that ploy had begun to wear thin. New ventures were tried with limited success. Like Bryant, the Menkes tried playing in theatres of the larger cities as witnessed by these two Waterways Journal reports:

> Captain J. W. Menke's Hollywood Showboat troupe opened Thursday night in the Gayety Theater, St. Louis offering Tildy Ann, a comedy hit of years ago. (December 3, 1932, p. 10)

> The troupe of the Showboat Hollywood, which did a flourishing business at Musick's Ferry Landing, Missouri River, last summer, ventured on dry land with results far from satisfactory. Presenting a tried and true "floating op'ry house" success, Tildy Ann, it opened at the Gayety Theater, Fourteenth and Locust Street for an indefinite stay. The run consisted of two performances, opening night and Saturday night, and the cast returned to the boat prepared to sail for Memphis. (December 10, 1932, p. 10)

The HOLLYWOOD went on for several seasons playing in larger cities, generally extended runs - two or three weeks - but nothing like the all-summer or all-winter runs of 1930, '31, and early 1932.

The following summer Captain Menke tried still another angle to get a good show together and still be unique enough to warrant free publicity. Two Waterways Journal articles report this venture:

> The Goldenrod showboat was at Gallipolis Aug. 3 with the best show seen here on a river boat in many years. The company, some 30 people, were Tech College students of Pittsburgh, who put on a clever and snappy performance which was enjoyed by a fairly good house. (August 12, 1933, p. 8)

> Capt. J. W. Menke's Showboat Goldenrod arrived at New Martinsville Saturday morning on its up-stream trip. The show on the Goldenrod is attracting much attention and receiving a great deal of publicity along the river, being different from anything ever before attempted on a showboat. (August 19, 1933, p. 9)

During the next few seasons the two Menke enterprises played with some success along the rivers, mostly the Ohio and its more northern tributaries. In 1936 Captain Menke tried to commercialize on the popularity of the Major Bowes Amateur Show. With a contingent of the Major Bowes Radio Show aboard, the Goldenrod played the Ohio and tributaries, which did get good publicity for both the showboat and the radio show. In summarizing river events fro the 1936 year, the Waterways Journal of December 29, 1936 mentioned this venture but ended with a rather sad note:

> The Goldenrod Showboat, Capt. J. W. Menke, was recommissioned and attracted much attention along the Ohio and tributary rivers with a party of Major Bowes Amateurs on board. The Bryant Showboat and the Reynolds Majestic were in operation. Add to these the Hollywood and it appears that but four showboats are left on the rivers.

In 1939 the HOLLYWOOD sank in the Clark River near Paducah. From this time on all four of the Menkes remained on the GOLDENROD.[38] The details of the sinking of the HOLLYWOOD are unknown, and the date was not even remembered by Captain Menke, but the situation must have been calamitous since this boat had been built to withstand the rigors of the Missouri. This showboat, under six owners - Needham, Steiner, the Thompson Brothers, Emerson, Price, and the Menkes - and three names - the AMERICAN, the COLUMBIA, and the HOLLYWOOD - had been in service for over a quarter of a century. With the possible exception of the WONDERLAND, this showboat was the most widely traveled, having played the Missouri as well as all the other showboat streams, including extensive travel on the Cumberland which many boats did not play.

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[38]Letters from J. W. Menke, January 20 and March 3, 1947 (GHWC).

The GOLDENROD had been most serviceable under its three owners for over thirty years. As the lower Mississippi was no longer profitable (various projects had made the bayous un-navigable especially for a large showboat and tow), and the Ohio and tributaries were viable only at large cities which often proved fickle, the GOLDENROD tied up at St. Louis in 1937. Initially the stop was for repairs and supplies, but it was to remain there. As late as 1945 Captain Menke was still advertising in a traditional showboat way, with blotters, flyers, etc. The GOLDENROD most certainly showed signs of its age, but was still an impressive sight at the Mississippi river front in St. Louis. The shows presented were billed as "Old Time Melodrama" and were burlesqued, and often the most popular shows were burlesques of classics, particularly Shakespeare. In the late forties Captain Menke resurrected Billy Bryant's Hamlet: "Hamlet and Yeggs."

In 1947 the GOLDENROD achieved some degree of publicity and the following Waterways Journal article is an example:

> The St. Louis Shipbuilding and Steel Company this week placed the Menke Brothers' showboat Goldenrod in a steel hull, performing the work so speedily that only one performance was missed by the popular Menkes. On Wednesday, at 10:45 a.m. the Goldenrod reached the yard in tow of one of the Fabick boats. On Thursday at 10:15 a.m. the first steel hull showboat on Western Rivers left the yard in tow of the Massman Construction Company's mv. Lew Simms. On Thursday evening, back at the foot of Olive Street, the Goldenrod was open for business as usual. The Menkes had bought one of the DPC oil barges and had cut out a well deep enough to receive the showboat, hull and all. For some time now the operation has been suspended awaiting a little higher river stage than has prevailed. The barge had been taken ahead of the showboat to the St. Louis ways where E. M. ("Eve") Enslin's crew did some cutting and welding. It was then pulled out on the ways and its bottom opened to permit the influx of water. The barge was lowered into the river and the wooden-hulled showboat floated into place over it, after the wooden guards

> had been cut off the Goldenrod. Barge and showboat were then made tight and the ensemble was then returned to the river. The deck of the barge forms guards around both sides of the showboat and permits ample room at each end.[39]

The new hull with its tremendously protruding front deck left the GOLDENROD looking rather freakish, never to ply the rivers again.

As already mentioned Billboard had announced that Captain Menke planned to recondition FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION and take it to the World's Fair in Chicago in 1933. Even if this had been Captain Menke's plan, the NEW SENSATION was destroyed before the World's Fair. There was a showboat at the Fair, however. In May of 1933 the Waterways Journal carried the following article:

> Leroy Cook, of Chicago, writes: The Showboat Cotton Blossom, with 26 players on board, was towed into the lagoon Monday, and was docked near the Midway. (Editor's Note: It is presumed this is the showboat built last winter at Mantowoc, Wis., and not the Cotton Blossom known all along the rivers.)[40]

Whatever the origins of this boat it was not one known along the rivers. In July the Journal carried another story saying that this showboat was denied a permit and would not be open at the Fair. It was allowed to open later, however.[41] There are other articles in this publication about this COTTON BLOSSOM in 1933, but then a familiar name appears in January of 1934:

> Friends of Capt. Ralph Emerson, pioneer river showboatman, report that he purchased the showboat Cotton Blossom. This boat which was built for the

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[39]Waterways Journal, December 13, 1947

[40]Ibid., May 27, 1933, p. 23.

[41]Ibid., July 8, 1933, p. 8.

> Chicago World's Fair, is of seaworthy construction, 150 feet long, 35 feet wide, and has a seating capacity of 800. Emerson intends to play towns along the Great Lakes, it is said.[42]

A short while after Emerson purchased this showboat, it burned in the Chicago River, destroying much of Captain Emerson's memorabilia and records.[43]

Captain Emerson was involved with another Chicago showboat. In 1932 he supervised the building of a boat for Chicago financiers. According to Captain Menke, who kept in very close touch with Captain Emerson, the boat was built at Sturgeon's Bay Wisconson. (This is perhaps the showboat the Waterways Journal article referred to with regards to the COTTON BLOSSOM in Chicago.) The showboat was towed out of Green Bay, around the Wisconson "Thumb", to Chicago. This boat was called the DIXIANA and was quite a large boat. After the tourist season(s) of the World's Fair it too was abandoned as a showboat, partially because of a collision. This was indeed Captain Emerson's last venture with a showboat.[44]

In 1939 a family by the name of Cooper built a showboat at Kansas City. Mr. Cooper had once worked for Captain Menke and used his knowledge from this experience in the building of the DIXIE QUEEN. This boat operated on the Missouri River around Kansas City for approximately three seasons; later it operated as an excursion boat on the Missouri and Mississippi, but it sank at Greenville, Mississippi in 1945. The Menkes bought the boat but it was too far gone even for

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[42]Ibid., January 27, 1934, p. 6.

[43]Letter from R. W. Emerson, August 24, 1947 (GHWC).

[44]Letter from R. W. Emerson, June 1, 1947 (GHWC).

salvage and it was abandoned. According to Captain Menke, "I owned her for five days."[45]

The same year that the Coopers were building the DIXIE QUEEN the ubiquitous Jim Bonnelli built a new showboat at Cincinnati. As with his SUNNY SOUTH, he revived the name COTTON BLOSSOM for his new venture. This boat was never successful and was sold to Oscar Bloom, a showman of some background, in 1941; it burned at Memphis in 1942.[46]

Remaining to be dealt with in this study is T. J. Reynolds' MAJESTIC. It is last because it is the one boat on the Western Rivers built as a showboat that is still operating as a showboat, offering popular fare. The MAJESTIC was still in the thought process when Tom Reynolds sold the AMERICA to his brother and father. Construction began at Pittsburgh in 1922 and final outfitting was completed in early 1923. Although advertising often credited the MAJESTIC with seating 450, the actual capacity was 423. It had a hull 120 x 28 feet and guards added 3 feet to each side.

The MAJESTIC went out under the joint ownership of T. J. Reynolds and his brother-in-law, Tom Nicol. Billboard for March 31, 1923 carried the first advertisement for people, even though much of the operational and performance duties fell to family. This Billboard ad stated that the show was to open the second week of April, and Waterways Journal of April 14 announced that "The Showboat Majestic, Nicol and Reynolds' new boat, is to open the season on the Monongahela River about the middle of this month."

For the most part the MAJESTIC played straight plays with a

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[45]Letter from J. W. Menke, March 3, 1947, loc. cit.

[46]Bert Banks, loc. cit.

smattering of variety or vaudeville. Only one ad has been uncovered that states differently; on September 12, 1925 Billboard carried an article to the effect that the MAJESTIC was departing from its usual bill and presenting a musical and vaudeville review. The MAJESTIC was a family boat in every sense. Captain Reynolds had built it, did his own piloting, and was generally in charge. He had nine children, all of which were born on the river (five on the MAJESTIC) and each took a part as performer or with some operational duty when he or she became old enough. Captain Reynolds bought out his brother-in-law, Tom Nicol, in 1929.

In her original active days, approximately twenty years, the MAJESTIC played the Ohio as far down as Paducah. She played the Tennessee and Cumberland, the Green, Kentucky, Muskingum, and Kanawha. Most years the opening was on the Monongahela and even before Captain Menke's long stays in suburban Pittsburgh, Captain Reynolds and the MAJESTIC played some forty miles up the Allegheny (1928). The MAJESTIC did not play the Mississippi and was never intended to do so.[47]

By the latter 1940's the Reynolds family was no longer very tightly grouped, as several of the children had married, but most chose to continue with employment dealing with the river. For several reasons the MAJESTIC remained at Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia, and Captain Reynolds rented it to local organizations for meetings and performances. In 1947 the showboat was advertised for sale but there was no one interested who had sufficient ready capitol.[48]

During the summer of 1948 the MAJESTIC was leased by Kent State

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[47]Letter from T. J. Reynolds, May 23, 1947 (GHWC).

[48]Loc. cit.

University, and student actors from Kent and Hiram College performed on it as it plyed the Kanawha and the Ohio. Hiram College attempted to continue this summer venture but with only limited success. Finally in 1959 the MAJESTIC was for sale again. This time it and its tow, the ATTABOY, were purchased by Indiana University. In the early spring of 1960, Captain Reynolds passed away at Pt. Pleasant.

The MAJESTIC was taken to Jeffersonville, Indiana where it was put in dry dock for repairs to the hull. Traversing the Ohio, mainly on that part of the river bordering Indiana, the MAJESTIC under the Indiana University banner was successful for several summers. At each season's end the showboat and tow were tied up at Jeffersonville to winter. Because it had a wooden hull, the Coast Guard finally deemed the MAJESTIC unsafe to travel, especially the distance it had been traveling, and the boat was sold. Today, mounted in a spacious steel hull, the MAJESTIC is moored at the public landing at Cincinnati, and, under the auspices of that city, performances are still being given.[49]

In 1978 those interest along the Western Rivers can celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the first true showboat: the first of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATIONS was launched at Cincinnati in the fall of 1878.[50]

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[49]This writer worked extensively with the Indiana University Showboat MAJESTIC during the summer of 1960, was aboard as a director and assistant manager in 1961, and worked on the preparations for the 1962 season.

[50]The Chapman operation was perhaps the first showboat in America but the people were of a very English orientation if not origin. Other showboats before 1878 were primarily circus boats or were related to the circus through owners.



Figure # 178

The GOLDENROD

This picture is of the GOLDENROD when owned by the Menke Brothers and when it was still traversing the rivers extensively.



Figure # 179

Captain J. W. Menke

This picture was taken of Captain Menke aboard the GOLDENROD in St. Louis in 1947. The Captain, in a characteristic pose with the ever-present cigar, is standing on the roof of the showboat beside the pilot house.



Figure # 180

The GOLDENROD in 1936



Figure # 181

Advertisement for the GOLDENROD in 1945

This is a photograph of the front of an ink blotter used for promotion for the GOLDENROD in 1945. The blotter was one of many "give-aways" used over the years for showboat advertising.



Figure # 182

Forward End of the GOLDENROD in St. Louis in 1946



Figure # 183

Exterior of the GOLDENROD in St. Louis in 1946



Figure # 184

Stage of the GOLDENROD in 1946

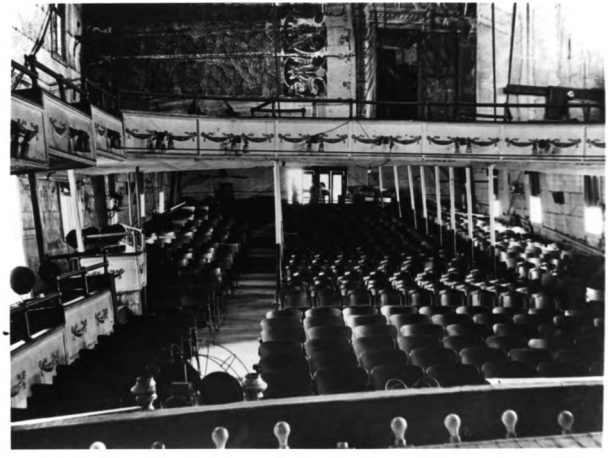


Figure # 185

Auditorium of the GOLDENROD in 1946

Although in bad repair this photograph gives an idea of the spaciousness of the GOLDENROD. Note that the balcony, except for the boxes, has been closed off with old drops to aid in better heating.

Figure # 186

Advertisement for the GOLDENROD in the late forties

This small flyer was copied to actual size, showing both the outer and inside copy.

Late in 1947 a large barge was opened up to the dimensions of the GOLDENROD's wooden hull, then allowed to fill with water and sink. The showboat was floated over it and the water was then pumped out of the barge, leaving a giant steel hull under the GOLDENROD.



CAPTAIN J. W. MENKE'S

ORIGINAL MISSISSIPPI RIVER

SHOW BOAT - GOLDEN ROD

PRESENTS

OLD TIME MELODRAMA

EVERY NIGHT AT 8:30

FOOT OF LOCUST STREET

Don't Miss Seeing The Original Mississippi River Show Boat

GOLDEN ROD

To derive full enjoyment from the evening's entertainment, turn back the pages of history to the days when show boats provided the only outside amusement that ever reached that vast area through which flows the mighty Mississippi, the Missouri and the Ohio — every river and bayou throughout the country.

The Golden Rod, depicted in Edna Ferber's "Show Boat," dates back a half of century. Captain J. W. Menke, her owner and manager, has taken her up and down every navigable river of the West.

Show Boat audiences are not ashamed of reaction. They laugh, they cry, they hiss, they cheer. Forget that you have ever seen a Jolson or a Barrymore. Give yourselves up to the enjoyment of the evening, as though these were indeed the Gay Nineties and that this was the one big night of your life. Fun by the Boatload.

VAUDEVILLE BETWEEN ACTS

Special Rates to Organizations

For Reservations Phone GArfield 8675

Figure # 186

Advertisement for the GOLDENROD in the late forties



Figure # 187

The DIXIANA

This showboat was not built for the Western Rivers, but rather built in Wisconsin to be used in Chicago around the time of the 1933 World's Fair. It is included here because it was supervisd during construction by Captain Emerson.

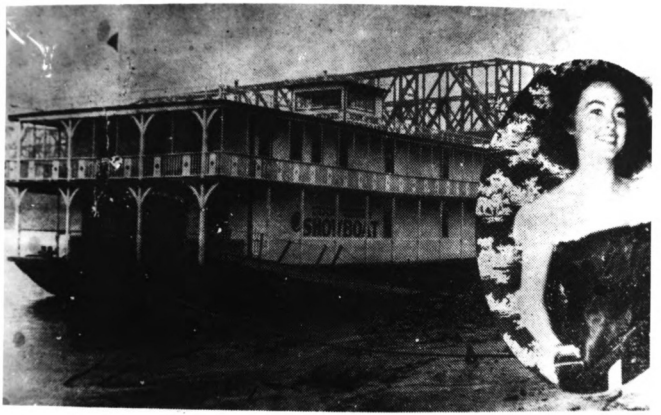


Figure # 188

The DIXIE QUEEN

This picture was copied from one in the G. Harry Wright Collection which in turn had been copied from a newspaper. This showboat was built on the Missouri River near Kansas City; it was lost on the lower Mississippi after a short career.



Figure # 189

KANAWHA RIVER AMUSEMENT Boat

There are many unsubstantiated accounts of boats such as this. Ownership, launching dates, area of travel, etc. cannot be ascertained, nor can the nature of the "amusement."

Figure # 190

The COTTON BLOSSOM (?)

No identification exists for this showboat picture. There are three COTTON BLOSSOMS for which no pictures exist. This could not be the one described as being built for the Chicago World's Fair. Too, this boat has a sleeker line than that described as operated by Hitner as the COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION. It is believed that this is the COTTON BLOSSOM built in 1940 by James Bonneli which burned in 1942.



Figure # 190

The COTTON BLOSSOM (?)

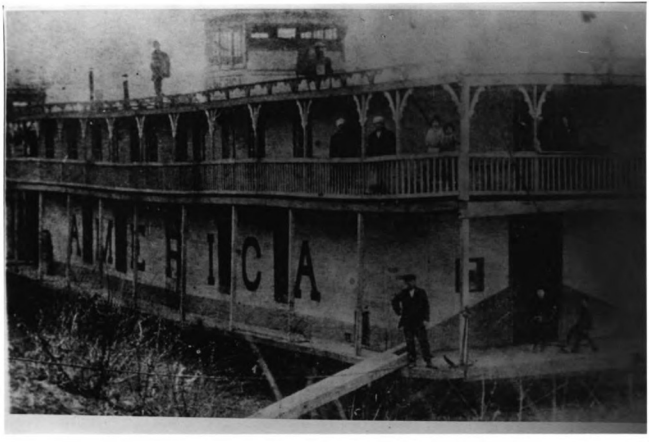


Figure # 191

The AMERICA

This showboat, operated by various members of the Reynolds family, was the first showboat that the Reynolds' had in true competition with the others. Notice that the MAJESTIC resembles it a great deal, if on a slightly larger scale.



Figure # 192

The MAJESTIC

Built in 1923, the MAJESTIC began under the names of Nicol and Reynolds, but was later owned fully by Captain T. J. "Tom" Reynolds of Pt. Pleasant, West Virginia.



Figure # 193

The MAJESTIC and the towboat ATTABOY

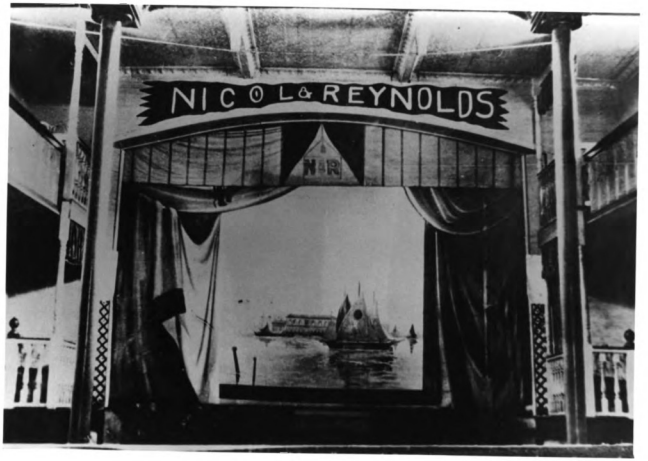


Figure # 194

The Stage of the MAJESTIC

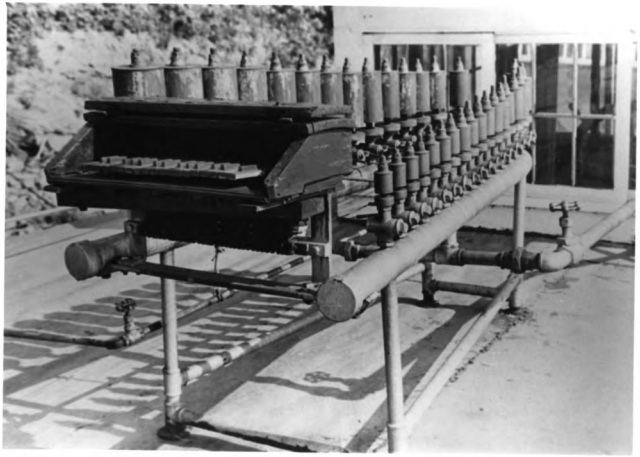


Figure # 195

The Calliope of the MAJESTIC



Figure # 196

"Below" on the ATTABOY

This photograph shows Captain T. J. "Tom" Reynolds and his oldest son in the engine room of the ATTABOY.

HERE COMES THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY



Peg O' My Heart*

June	8	Thurs.	Madison, Ind.
June	9	Fri.	Madison, Ind.
June	10	Sat.	Madison, Ind.
June	11	Sun.	Madison, Ind.
June	12	Mon.	Vevay, Ind.
June	13	Tues.	Rising Sun, Ind.
June	14	Wed.	Aurora, Ind.
June	15	Thurs.	Lawrenceburg, Ind.
June	16	Fri.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	17	Sat.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	18	Sun.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	19	Mon.	No performance
June	20	Tues.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	21	Wed.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	22	Thurs.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	23	Fri.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	24	Sat.	Cincinnati, Ohio
June	25	Sun.	Warsaw, Ky.
June	26	Mon.	Carrollton, Ky.
June	27	Tues.	Bethlehem, Ind.
June	28	Wed.	Westport, Ky.
June	29	Thurs.	Louisville, Ky.
June	30	Fri.	Louisville, Ky.
July	1	Sat.	Louisville, Ky.
July	2	Sun.	Louisville, Ky.
July	3	Mon.	No performance
July	4	Tues.	Louisville, Ky.
July	5	Wed.	Louisville, Ky.
July	6	Thurs.	Louisville, Ky.
July	7	Fri.	Louisville, Ky.
July	8	Sat.	Louisville, Ky.
July	9	Sun.	West Point, Ky.
July	10	Mon.	Brandenburg, Ky.
July	11	Tues.	Mauckport, Ind.
July	12	Wed.	Leavenworth, Ind.
July	13	Thurs.	Leavenworth, Ind.
July	14	Fri.	Leavenworth, Ind.
July	15	Sat.	Leavenworth, Ind.
July	16	Sun.	Wolf Creek, Ky.
July	17	Mon.	Derby, Ind.
July	18	Tues.	Cloverport, Ky.
July	19	Wed.	Cannelton, Ind.
July	20	Thurs.	Tell City, Ind.
July	21	Fri.	Troy, Ind.
July	22	Sat.	Lewisport, Ky.
July	23	Sun.	Rockport, Ind.
July	24	Mon.	Owensboro, Ky.
July	25	Tues.	Owensboro, Ky.
July	26	Wed.	Newburgh, Ind.
July	27	Thurs.	Evansville, Ind.
July	28	Fri.	Evansville, Ind.
July	29	Sat.	Evansville, Ind.
July	30	Sun.	Evansville, Ind.
July	31	Mon.	No performance
Aug.	1	Tues.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	2	Wed.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	3	Thurs.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	4	Fri.	Mount Vernon, Ind.
Aug.	5	Sat.	Uniontown, Ky.
Aug.	6	Sun.	Shawneetown, Ill.

The Old Soak*

Aug.	7	Mon.	Shawneetown, Ill.
Aug.	8	Tues.	Mount Vernon, Ind.
Aug.	9	Wed.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	10	Thurs.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	11	Fri.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	12	Sat.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	13	Sun.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	14	Mon.	No performance
Aug.	15	Tues.	Evansville, Ind.
Aug.	16	Wed.	Newburgh, Ind.
Aug.	17	Thurs.	Owensboro, Ky.
Aug.	18	Fri.	Owensboro, Ky.
Aug.	19	Sat.	Rockport, Ind.
Aug.	20	Sun.	Lewisport, Ky.
Aug.	21	Mon.	Troy, Ind.
Aug.	22	Tues.	Tell City, Ind.
Aug.	23	Wed.	Cannelton, Ind.
Aug.	24	Thurs.	Cloverport, Ky.
Aug.	25	Fri.	Derby, Ind.
Aug.	26	Sat.	Leavenworth, Ind.
Aug.	27	Sun.	Mauckport, Ind.
Aug.	28	Mon.	Brandenburg, Ky.
Aug.	29	Tues.	West Point, Ky.
Aug.	30	Wed.	Jeffersonville, Ind.
Aug.	31	Thurs.	Jeffersonville, Ind.
Sept.	1	Fri.	Jeffersonville, Ind.
Sept.	2	Sat.	Jeffersonville, Ind.

* Performances begin at 8:30 p.m. at preceding time of the company.

Figure # 197

Itinerary card for the SHOWBOAT MAJESTIC

Figure # 198
Some Construction Details of the MAJESTIC

The MAJESTIC is an example on a smaller scale of the general plan for showboats. This drawing is not to scale but in fair proportion.

A - Ticket Office @ 10 x 11
B - Concessions & Storage @ 10 x 11
C - Ladies' Restroom
D - Gentlemen's Restroom
E - Fan Boxes (fans faced house @ 6' above stage level, hatches at stage level opened on side guards for air intake and provided access for block ice)
F & F' - Stage & Backstage (this backstage area had sinks and showers under Indiana University; access to the bilge from the backstage area provided access to the pit)
G - Stateroom @ 8 x 16
H - Stateroom @ 6 x 10
I - Stateroom @ 10 x 10
J - Stateroom @ 9 x 10
K - Stateroom @ 9 x 10
L - Stateroom @ 10 x 16
M - Stateroom @ 16 x 16 (this would have been the parlor on a family boat, as it was for the Reynolds family)

X - Front Rake
Y - Guards
Z - Rear Rake

The MAJESTIC drew @ 18" with a full audience aboard.

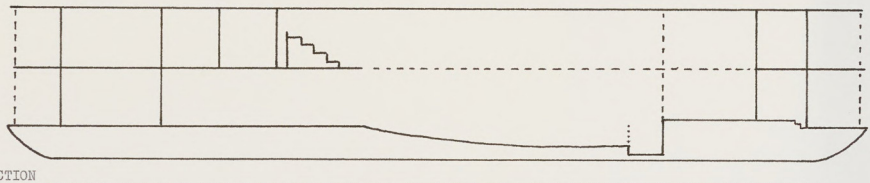
Water for the restrooms was gravity fed from barrels on the roof, pumped there from the river. Fresh water was carried in a 1500 gallon tank on the ATTABOY. Fresh water was either purchased from a city or put aboard by a community fire department.

The doors onto the side guards were made double years after the boat was built due to Coast Guard and city fire regulations.

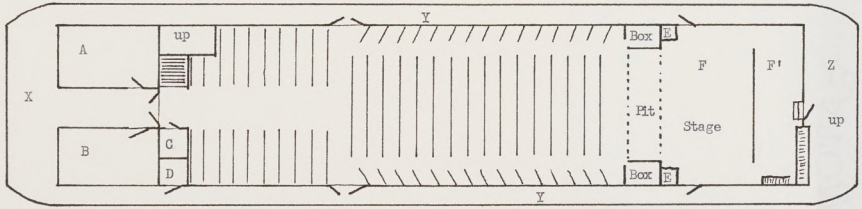
The pilot house was directly over the elevated seating in the balcony.

Seating: lower level		Seating: balcony	
Each box seated 4	8	Each box seated 4	8
Sides, 14 rows of 2	56	Sides (Q), 14 seats each parallel to cabin wall	28
Center, 12 rows 9 & 4 rows of 8	140	Elevated, 5 rows of 11	55
Rear, 11 rows of 6, each side (rear house left was minus a few seats due to balcony stairway)	128		91
	332		332
			423

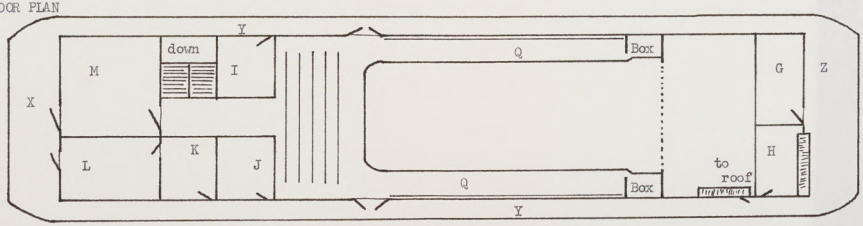
Larger boats seated more proportionately and also in greater width.



SECTION



FLOOR PLAN



SECOND LEVEL

Figure # 198

Some Construction Details of the MAJESTIC

PART IV, Chapter 13 - An Afterword

> And now folks, I want to thank you all for coming tonight. You know, of all the places on these rivers that we stop, we find the best audiences right here ever'time.
>
> I've been goin' up and down these waters for a good many years now, and I been thinkin' about buyin' me a piece o' ground to build a little house, just someplace for a few flowers and a vegetable garden, someplace me and the missus can spend the few years we got left.
>
> I just can't think of anywhere I'd rather have that little patch o'ground than right here in Rising Sun, Indiana.
>
> . . . and Warsaw, Kentucky, and Rabbit Hash, and Ghent, and Vevay . . .

And so on, down the river.

Such is the much bespoken curtain speech of a showboat owner, manager, or leading personality. Combining this with a mental picture of "Cap'n Andy" gives an impression of showboats held by a great majority of people.

That Edna Ferber was a good writer goes without question, but a writer of fiction by her own admission. Just as Margaret Mitchel gave the world one idea of the ante-bellum south and the Civil War, Miss Ferber gave a fictionalized account of showboats, but without which few Americans would have known anything of their existence. Hopefully this account gives a better documentation of showboats and the entertainment they brought to many, many people for many years.

By the mid-twenties, showboats were burlesquing themselves, but the romantic spirit of showboats was revived in the twenties and thirties, due in large part to Miss Ferber's book. Certainly Bryant

Menke, and Reynolds were able to reap profits from major cities during this time. Billboard of April 18 and 25, 1925 carried "wanted" ads for talent for a FRANTZ SHOWBOAT on the Lehigh River in eastern Pennsylvania, considerable distance from the point(s) of origin of showboats. After Showboat was published, the interest in such operations grew to a "craze" and several showboats were operated on the eastern seaboard. A good example is given by this Billboard article of October 11, 1930:

> Portland, Me., Oct. 4 - The four-masted schooner HORACE A. STONE, which has been in operation along the Maine coast this season as a showboat, will be sold at public auction at Boston, Oct. 24. A. W. Hanlon and C. U. Kelley, of Bangor, Me., are owners of the craft. The showboat played one-night stands up and down the Kenebec River and at various resorts along the coast for several months. It was scheduled to play in Portland Harbor this fall. . .

This same publication, the Waterways Journal, and the New York Times of the early thirties give many accounts of such showboats in and around New York City, i. e. the BEAR MOUNTAIN, the PERIWINKLE, and the BUCCANEER; and the JAMES ADAMS was still playing the Chesapeake Bay and the Carolina coasts.

To say that showboating died and that audiences lost interest in such theatre in the twenties is a shadowy truth. If the first part of this statement must be admitted, the latter part cannot. Audiences did not lose interest in the fare offered by the showboats: vaudeville reaches more people today than ever before under the guise of the television variety show (e. g. The Carol Burnett Show); melodrama was never more alive than today in daytime television; and such spectacle as Eisenbarth offered in "The Johnstown Flood" and "The Erupting of Mt. Vesuvious" comes to the public today through "Earthquake" and "Towering

Inferno." Showboats were simply a unique version of the road company.

The substance lingers and remains the popular, the behicle changes.

- -

Other works will aptly follow this one. At the time of this writing, all known material on showboats has been dealt with but there is room for pursuant studies. First, there are possibly many small town newspapers that contain material on showboats that might fill gaps not covered by major newspapers and river oriented publications. Secondly, there are perhaps descendants of showboat owners, managers, and personnel that at this writing are unknown who could supply significant supportive information. Thirdly, there might have been many showboats of short duration or on seldom traveled waters that could add dimension to the history of showboats.

The worth of this study will be in future proportionate to the new material uncovered and added. With the passing of more time the causes and effects of showboats may become more obvious.



Figure # 199

Old Showboaters

George Bundy, Frank Griffith, Captain R. W. Emerson, and G. Harry Wright met at the Palmer House in Chicago on June 1, 1947. From such men and meetings come much of the material in this study.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Sample pages of logs and river travel charts



Figure # 200

First pages of the log of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

This is the first page(s) of the only extant log of the first real showboat in the United States. It covers from September 29, 1886 to June 30, 1889.

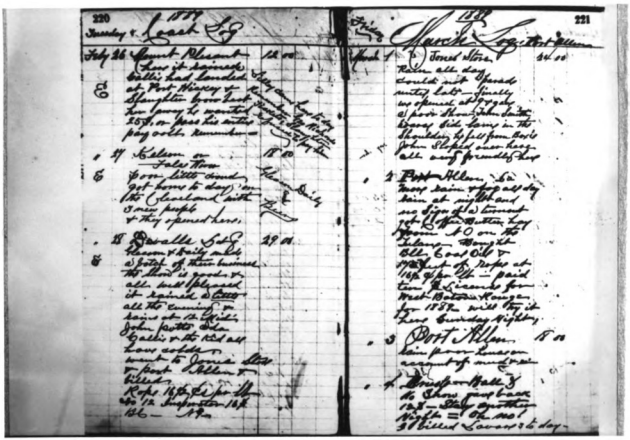


Figure # 201

Pages of the log of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION

An example of the extant log of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION. This page of early 1889 is toward the end of the log; this is of a time after the building of the second showboat of this name.

On the pages following in Appendix A are maps showing the extent of travel of some of the major showboats. This page will provide a key to these maps: rivers, major cities, and general relationships.

The "Western" Rivers is a misnomer, but its origin dates to before there was government regulation of the Columbia, Sacramento, etc. Any river that eventually empties into the Gulf of Mexico is a "Western" River with regards to Coast Guard and Corps of Army Engineers Regulations. (For some reason, the Red River of the North, dividing Minnesota and North Dakota, which empties into Lake Winnipeg in Canada, is under the same regulations.)

Alphabet symbols mark the headwaters of rivers

A - Allegheny
B - Youghiogheny
C- Monongahela
D - Muskingum
E - Kanawha
F - Kentucky
G - Wabash
H - Cumberland
I - Tennessee
J - Chatahoochee
K - Alabama
L - Tombigbee
M - Yazoo
N - Tallahatchie
O - Arkansas
P - Ouachita
Q - Red
R - Bayou Teche
S - Atchafalaya
T - Bayou Lafourche
U - Missouri
V - Platte
W - St. Croix
X - Illinois
Y - Green
Z - Pearl

Number symbols mark major river cities

1 - Pittsburgh
2 - Pt. Pleasant
3 - Cincinnati
4 - Louisville
5 - Jeffersonville
6 - Paducah
7 - Cairo
8 - Natchez
9 - Baton Rouge
10 - New Orleans
11 - St. Louis
12 - Minneapolis
13 - St. Louis
14 - Columbia, Alabama

The Ohio River and the Mississippi River are assumed obvious on these maps and are unmarked.

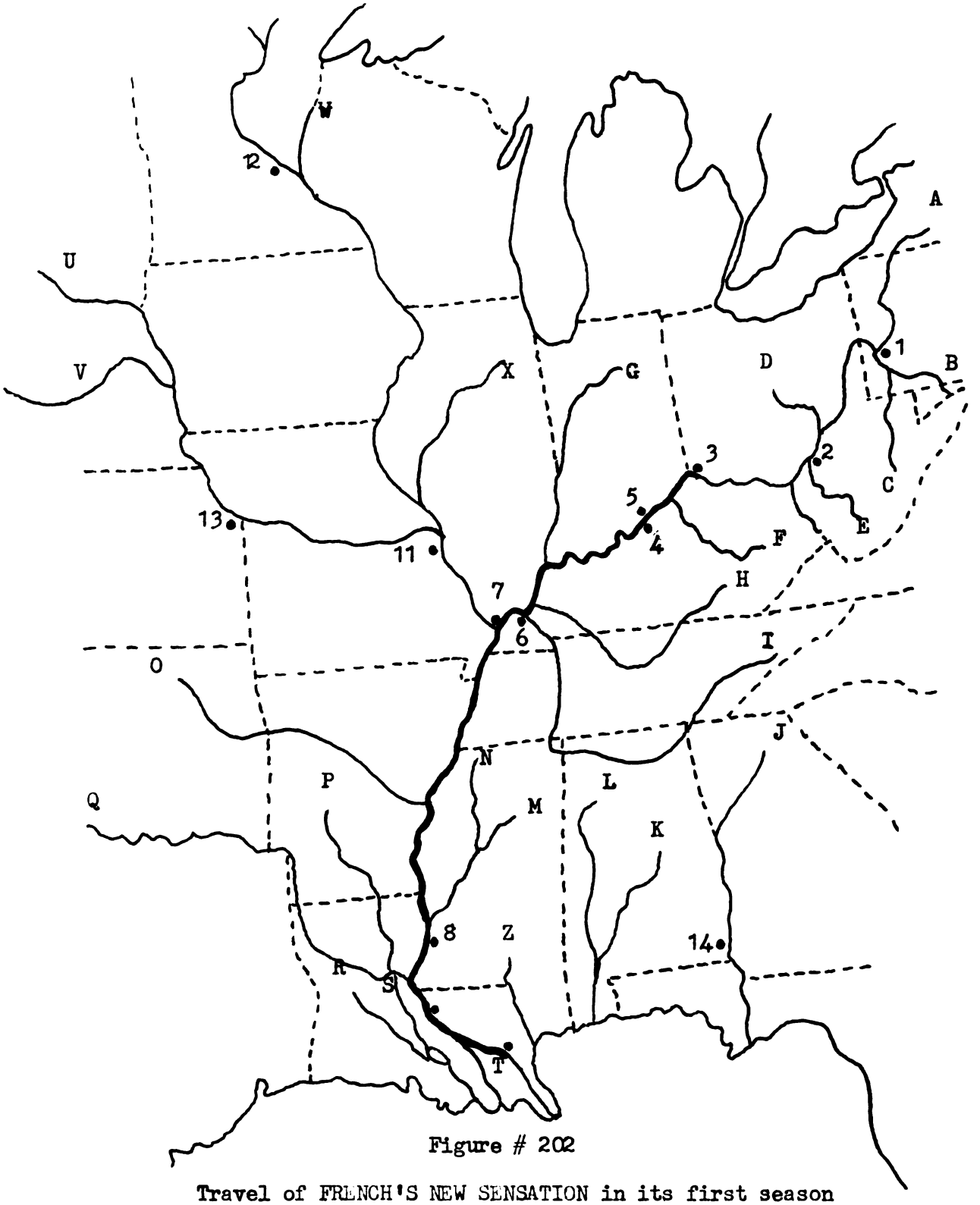


Figure # 202

Travel of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION in its first season

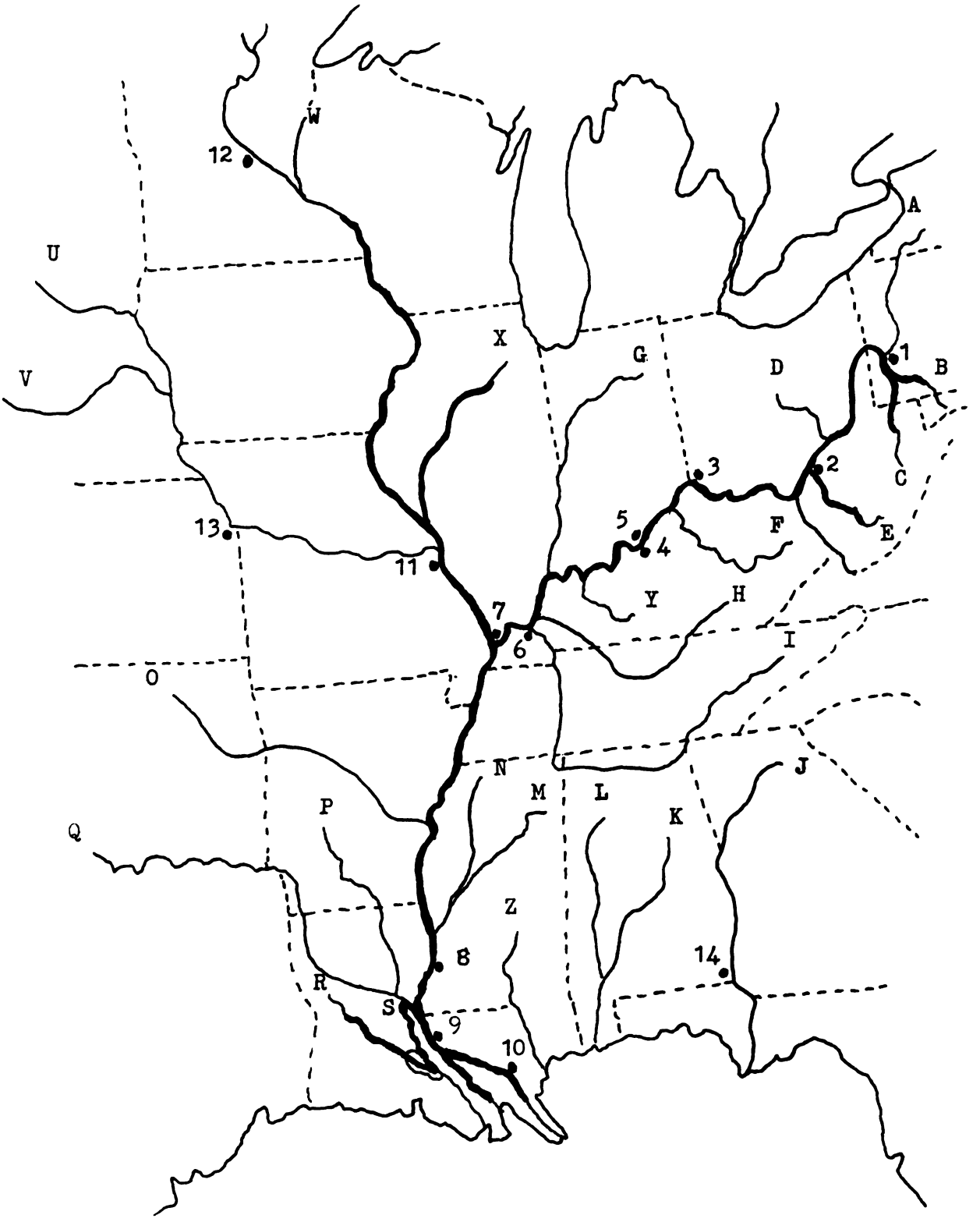


Figure # 203

Known extent of travel of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATIONS circa 1900

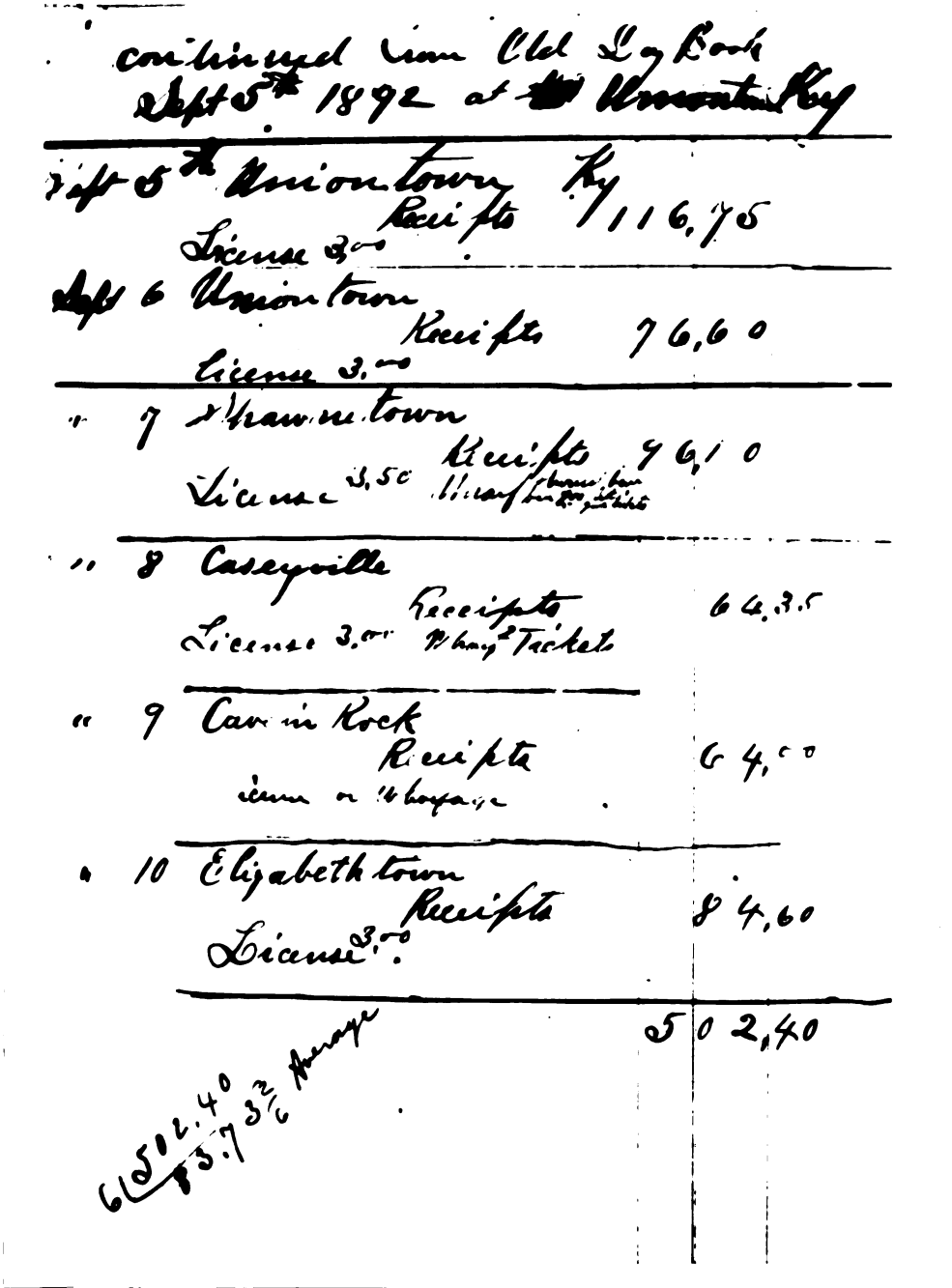


Figure # 204

First page of the log of PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA

This is the first page of a log book in the Cairo Public Library thought to be for FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION. It has now been established to be for PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA.

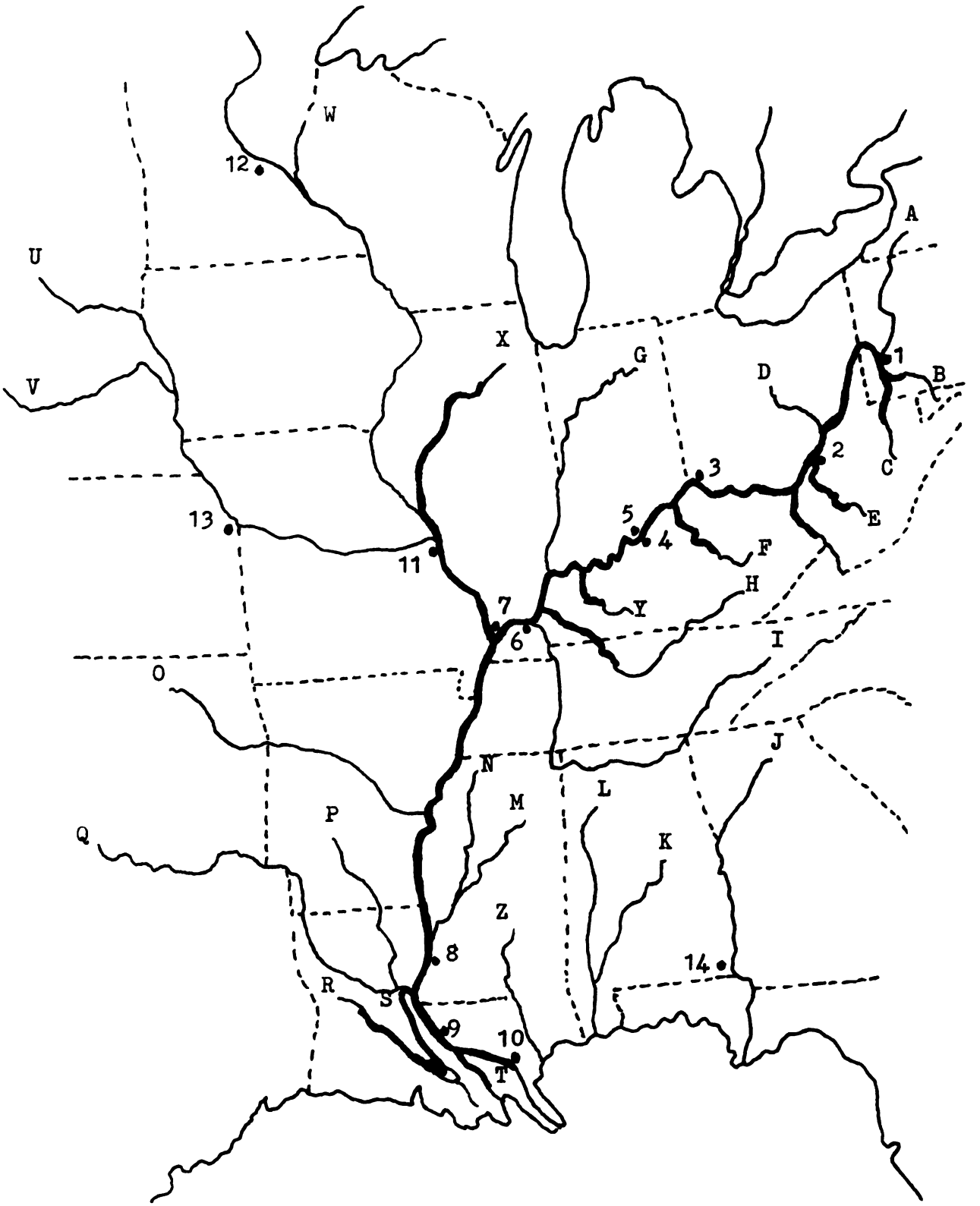


Figure # 205

Known extent of travel of PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA, mid-nineties

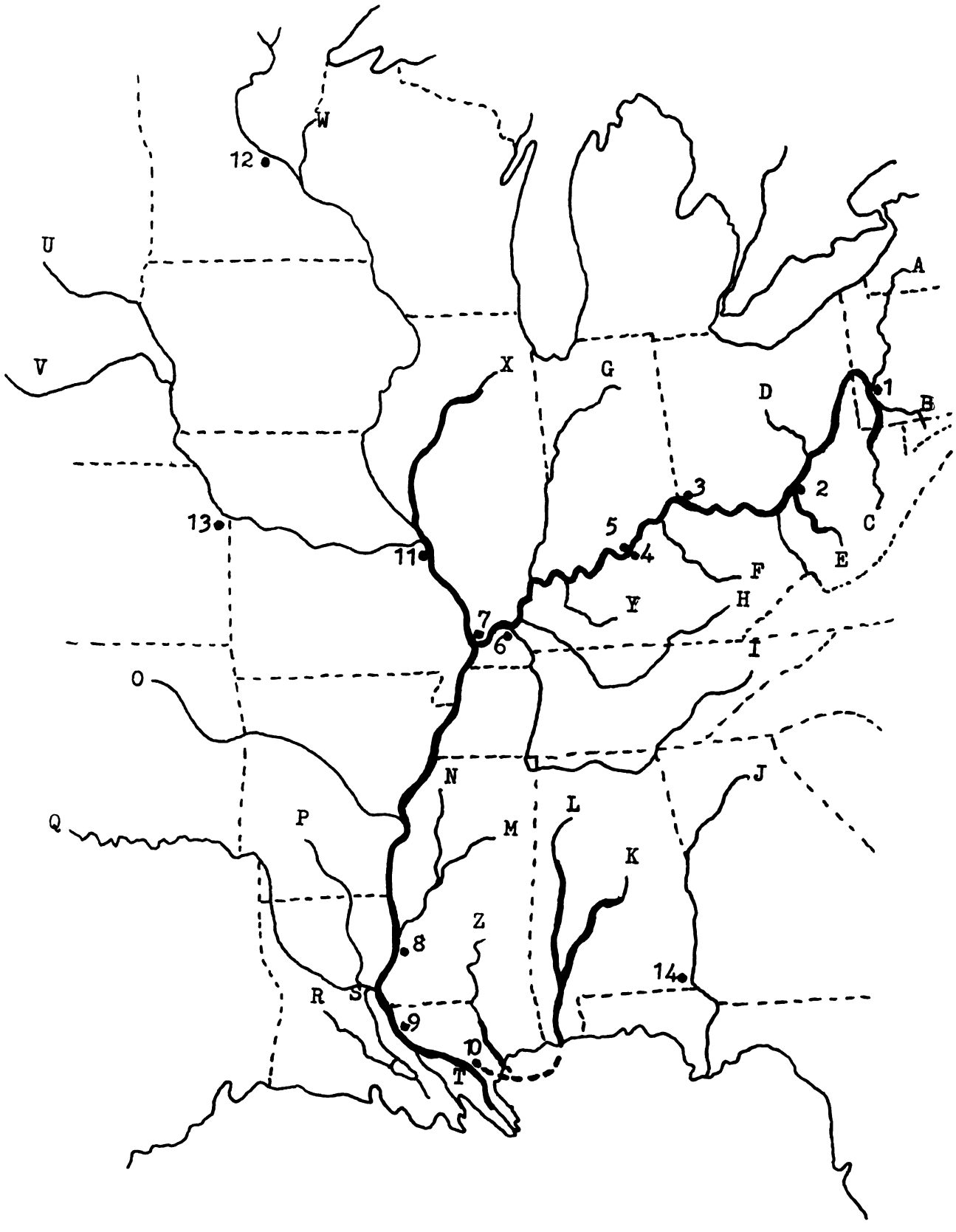


Figure # 206

Known extent of travel of the SUNNY SOUTH/HIPPODROME, 1905-1918

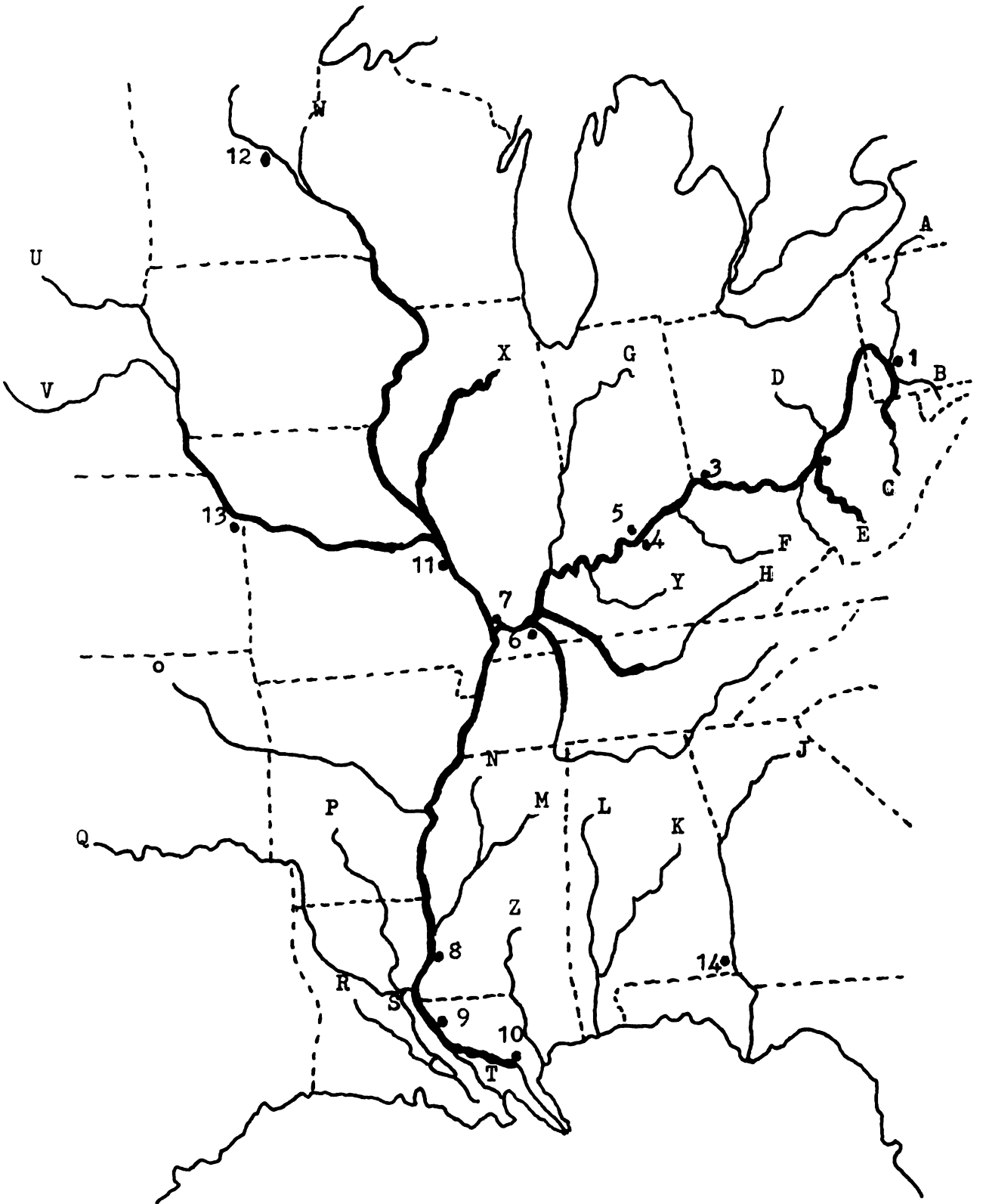


Figure # 207

Known extent of travel of the AMERICAN/COLUMBIA/HOLLYWOOD, 1911-1928

Figure # 208

Known extent of travel of major showboats dealt with in this study.

This seemingly wide coverage of the Western Rivers must be tempered with the following:

Only Bryant and Menke ventured up the Allegheny (A).

The Youghiogheny was traveled for only a short distance, one or two stops (B).

The Muskingum (D) was traveled by Price but mostly by those who had homes on this river, as the Hyatts.

The Wabash (G) was used in the earlier nineteenth century by circus boats.

The St. Croix (W) was used by early circus boats, but there is no record of the later larger boats going there.

Very few boats ventured onto the Missouri (U) past Kansas City - chiefly the AMERICAN and the WONDERLAND. The IDA BLANCHE, about which little is known, supposedly played the upper Missouri.

It was mainly competition that drove the larger boats north on the Mississippi as far as Minneapolis.

Only Hitner's large COTTON BLOSSOM played the Red River (Q) and the Ouachita (P).

The only real record of showboats on the Yazoo (M) and the Tallahatchie (N) was the NEW ERA which traveled these streams a great deal.

Only the HIPPODROME (SUNNY SOUTH) ventured across Lake Borgne from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico to try the Pearl (Z) and the Alabama (K)/Tombigbee (L).

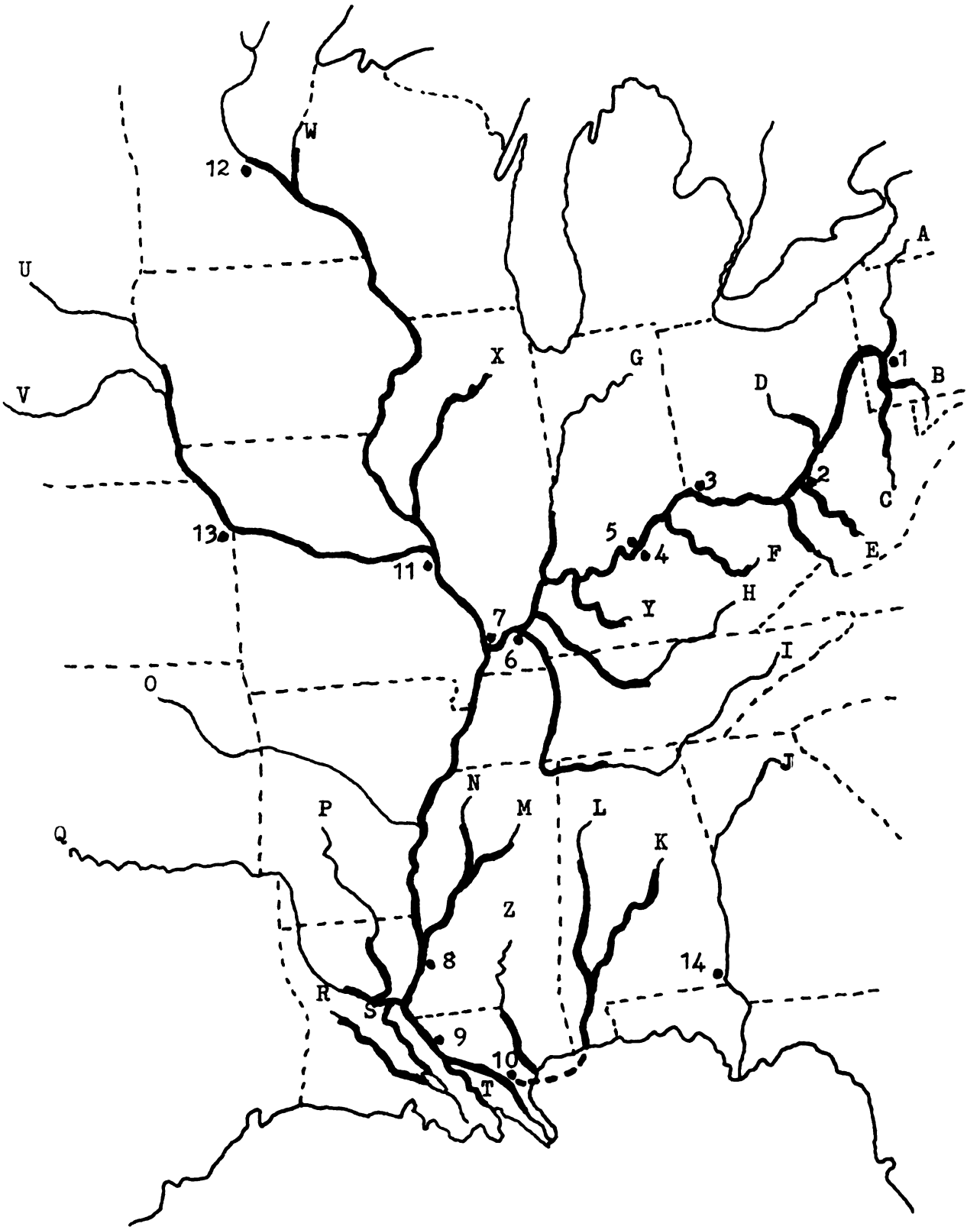


Figure # 208

Known extent of travel of major showboats dealt with in this study

APPENDIX B

Chronology and Longevity Chart

Figure # 209

Chronology and Longevity Chart

This is a graphic depiction of the chronology and longevity of the major showboats dealt with in this study. The following list gives the original name and the builder (original owner).

1 COTTON BLOSSOM, Otto Hitner
2 MAJESTIC, Thomas Nicol and T. J. Reynolds
3 SUNNY SOUTH, James Bonnelli
4 COTTON BLOSSOM PAVILLION, Otto Hitner
5 WASHINGTON, F. M. and W. M. Reynolds
6 BRYANT'S SHOWBOAT, Bryant Family
7 AMERICA, T. J. Reynolds
8 ILLINOIS, T. J. Reynolds
9 AMERICAN, Walter Needham (later Steiner, then Emerson before Price)
10 GOLDENROD, W. R. Markle
11 PRINCESS, Bryant Family (later Kinzer, then Thom)
12 WONDERLAND, J. W. Cooley and James Hagans (later Thom, then Pell were Cooley's partners)
13 SUNNY SOUTH, Cheeks and Markle
14 EISENBARTH-HENDERSON, E. E. Eisenbarth
15 LIGHTNER'S FLOATING PALACE, Lightner (the actual date of construction is unknown)
16 FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, French and McNair
17 NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE, Swallow and Markle
18 BREIDENBACH'S THEATORIUM, C. F. Breidenbach
19 EISENBARTH-HENDERSON, E. E. Eisenbarth
20 ROBINSON'S MUSEUM THEATRE, Eugene Robinson
21 FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, A. B. French (operated as the VOYAGEUR under Orke, McNair and Armstrong)
22 PRICE'S FLOATING OPERA, E. A. Price (three boats by the same name between 1885 and 1900)
23 FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, A. B. French (built in 1878 and operated with little competition until 1885)

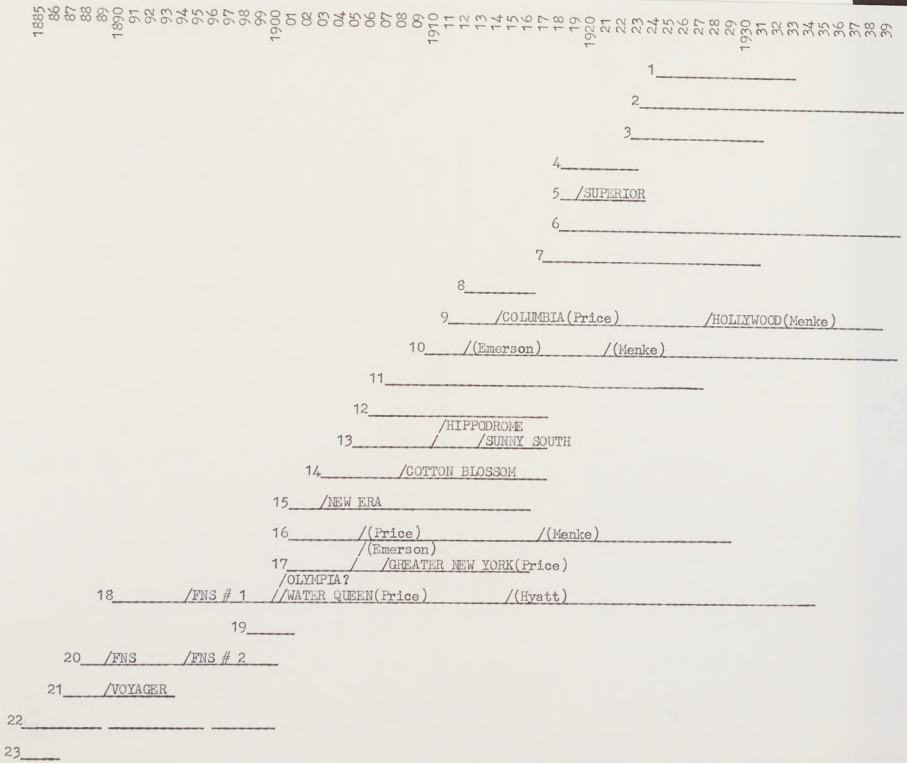


Figure # 209

Chronology and Longevity Chart

APPENDIX C

Apocrypha

Apocrypha

The following stories are included here because they add color and an important feeling for the era of showboating and of showboat people. In some cases there is no more reason to doubt the validity of the recounted event than there is some of what is included in the text. These do not help to tell the history of showboats, but in many cases do add considerable to the character of prominent showboat personalities.

Some of the things included here are "much told" yarns, others are sheer whimsy.

Solomon Smith, The Theatrical Journey-Work and Anecdotical Recollections of Sol Smith, (Philadelphia, 1854), pp. 112-13.

Re. the Chapmans:

. . . while playing The Stranger (Act IV, scene 1) there was a long stage wait for Francis, the servant of the misanthropic Count Walbrough.

"Francis! Francis!" called the Stranger.

No reply.

"Francis! Francis!" (a pause) !Francis!" rather angrily called the Stranger again.

A very distant voice: "Coming sir!" (A considerable pause, during which the Stranger walks up and down, a la Macready, in a great rage.)

"Francis!"

Francis (entering): "Here I am, sir."

Stranger: "Why did you not come when called?"

Francis: "Why, sir, I was just hauling in one of the d...dest big catfish you ever saw!"

It was some minutes before the laughter of the audience could be restrained sufficiently to allow the play to proceed.

"Dramatic Feuilletons, or Leaves from the Common-Place-Book of an Old Stager", Spirit of the Times, July 26, 1851 (Clippings in New York Public Library).

Re. the Chapmans:

On one occasion coming to a newly-formed location, christened "Young Woman's Settlement," . . . the whole population turned out . . . The Prices of admission, with a due regard to the exigence of the currency and the economy of the time, would, as it was announced, be taken in the produce of the place on the truck and trade system - real free trade - one commodity being paid for with another. A goose or couple of chickens, a quarter of lamb . . . Before night almost more tickets had been disposed of than the vessel would comfortably hold. . . . With the libations they had taken, it is, perhaps, needless to state that, rolling themselves up in their several blankets, they all very soon fell soundly asleep. During the night some of the Tom and Jerry rowdies of Young Woman's Settlement primed for a lark . . . cut poor Chapman's playhouse loose from its moorings.

/On bumping into a landing the next morning, the company awoke to find an entire community waiting to buy tickets. Chapman informed them there were no tickets, that all had been sold, and the townspeople returned to their homes. When the performance time came, not a single person came./

"Hang their tastes!" cried the disappointed Chapman, who thought he had supplied the whole of the inhabitants with tickets, and was surprised they did not come. "Well, never mind; if they are fools, their geese and rum and potatoes ain't; so we'll console ourselves with the entertainment of a good supper. . . .

/Twelve months later the Chapmans returned to Young Woman's Settlement. The house was sold to capacity and the company was very pleased until the curtain went up./

"We pays you with a very different sort of goose this time," cried one, apparently the ringleader. "You remember this place last year - Young Woman's Settlement! You cut and run then, and now we'd advise you to cut and run again - that is, as soon as we'll let you."

The whole truth flashed at once upon poor Chapman's mind; but before he could explain, he was driven off by another volley of rotten eggs and boiled appled, . . . The curtain was hastily let down, amidst shouts of triumph by the incensed audience.

"Doctor" Judd, "The Water Days of the Drama," in Theater Magazine (New York), August 1903, pp. 202-04.

Re. Henry Butler and a showboat on the Erie Canal:

. . . Butler sailed up and down the raging canal with his play-ship in this manner for a number of years till he was blind; . . . Although blind, he could be found at all exhibition hours in his little box office dispensing tickets to adults for one shilling, and to children under a certain age for sixpence. He had no way of telling a

child's age except by ascertaining the height. This he would do by feeling for their heads. If that useful appendage came under his conception of the six-cents line, the owner got in at children's prices. The boys used to fool him by stooping, consequently he often touched and passed judgement on heads out of their proper sphere.

James Hall Brumsey and Nancy Brumsey Fenwick, Column "Show Boat Once Institution on Rivers," in Peoria Star, April 24, 1938.

Re. Spalding and Rogers' FLOATING PALACE:

Spaulding and Rodgers' was the first showboat ever to ascend the Illinois. They were to give three performances, one at 9 in the forenoon, another at 2:30 in the afternoon and the final one at 7:30 that evening. Their coming was well advertised. People came from the nearby towns by stage, and farmers drove their families in from their prairie homes. At fifty cents for box and main floor seats and twenty-five for those in the regular and colored balconies, the huge barge was jammed to capacity.

The first and second performances, according to my father, went fine. But there were many steamboats tied up at the levee that day. When the actors weren't on the stage they visited with the captains and officers they had met along the river. Many visits were made to the saloons a few steps away, and before it came time for the final show most of the players were drunk.

Old Man Spaulding was frantic. With at least a thousand people packed on the barge, most of the actors were laid out.

"In a rage he started up town," my father said, "dropped into a saloon where I was playing, saw several of the actors laid out, and said to me, - 'get on that boat and help us put on a show!'"

"Well," my father used to say, "I didn't know much about show business but I could play and sing a little. So with the few who were able to appear, I helped Spaulding & Rodgers put on a show that at least amused the crowd."

He must have made an impression for when they pulled out, Spaulding & Rodgers took him along.

Ralph Keeler, "Three Years a Negro Minstrel," in Atlantic Monthly, XXIV (July 1869), p. 82.

Re. Personalities and attractions on the FLOATING PALACE:

Professor Lowe and Madame, his wife, conducted the performance of the "Invisible Lady," a contrivance that may not be familiar to all my readers. A hollow brass ball with four trumpets protruding from it is suspended inside a hollow railing. Questions put by the by-standers are answered through a tube by a person in the apartment below. The imaginations of the spectators make the sounds seem to issue from the brass ball. It used to be amusing to stand by and listen to the answers

of the "Invisible Lady," alias Madame Lowe, whose English was drolly mixed up with her own vernacular. Bur if the responses were sometimes unintelligible, this only added to the mystery and success of the brazen oracle.

(Joseph Schick in an article in Mid-America summed up this attraction by noting that "The naivete of the inventor of such a device can be matched only by the naivete of the persons it attracted.")

Clarkie McNair, letter of May 10, 1950 (GHWC)

Re. Performance situations in playing Uncle Tom's Cabin on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION:

As you know there were only 4 real Tom people in the show. Mr. May, the uncle Tom, Mrs. May, Aunt Ophelia, and another couple whose name I do not remember but the man played Marks, the lawyer and his wife, who had a lovely voice was one of the plantation negros and led all the singing, including that doleful death-bed dirge. You know that I was 6 or 7 rather a young Little Eva and I was too old to play Eliza's little boy, so I did both. You know there are as many versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin as Mr. Heinz had pickles and in ours Eliza crosses the ice and disappears from the scene before Little Eva appears. My Mother doubled as Eliza too and I can remember still her holding me firmly by the hand, she would jump and stagger from one canvas covered block to another and I always wondered what would happen if I should miss one and catch my foot between two of those make-believe cakes of ice. It was as Eliza's boy that I was supposed to introduce the song that was the cause of the trouble. Mr. May, feeling that his authority was questioned, threatened to drop the curtain on me and my song and that was more than my loving parents could take so they instructed me to go ahead with my song, which I did in fear and trembling. The curtain did not drop and for a good reason. My father had quietly but firmly taken his stand by the side of Mr. May who stood scowling in the wings. When I was partly through with the number, he (Mr. May) muttered something extremely explosive and gathering up his wife walked out of the show and practically out of our lives forever. The rest of the night was a mad scramble. We had one more, no two more scenes from Uncle Tom, one with Little Eva and her family, revised because of the conspicuous absence of Aunt Ophelia and another between Eva and Topsy. From then on it was anybody's show. During the interval all our regular troup of vaudevillians dug into trunks and came up with costumes. Mr. Rowley, who played St. Clair and his wife Nina, a tiny little thing, who was Topsy had to go into a huddle and decide what to do. They were a very clever team of singing, and dancing, and banjo playing. It was obvious that they wouldn't look right as they were, so while Nina hunted music and tuned the banjos, Ed slapped burnt cork on and the act went off. Little Eva made another appearance as an acrobatic dancer, which considering how frail and delicate she had been must have given the audience quite a shock. To make it all the more ludicrous, we finished with the ascension scene where Little Eva behind four gauze curtains with painted angels on them, wings her way to heaven balanced

precariously on a chair atop a table with the inevitable Gene managing all.

The next day we did some frantic rehearsing and a scene painter (the one who painted the gauze curtains with the angels) bid for the role of Uncle Tom. His name was Douglas and he insisted that he had watched the show every night and knew it word for word, so he was it, for the night. He didn't know the part and I had to prompt him and he had the worst case of what we know as the thing your best friend hesitates to tell you about that I have ever encountered. That night also we had to make a change in the Aunt Ophelia part and the only one qualified was the remaining member of the Tom players. So when Little Eva lay dying and heard that familiar voice still leading the singing, naturally she was curious. By closing the eye on the audience side and letting the other one rove around she discovered that Aunt Ophelia had knelt behind the bed and bowed her head low so that she could lead the singing and no one would be the wiser. My Mother who sat at the head of the death-bed couldn't see what was going on but she could see Ed Rowley and he was apparently sobbing his heart out and when the curtain came down and with tears streaming down his face he said and I quote "My God Clarkie, don't do that again." My Mother, of course, thought I had done something awful and was all for punishing me until Ed who was lauching so hard he shook all over explained. It must have been funny but we fooled the public. Aunt Ophelia got by with her spiritual singing, Ed, trying not to laugh gave a wonderful performance of a man shaken with grief and I don't think anybody in the audience knew that Eva was dead only on the right side of her face.

The following day Mr. Douglas, after giving one performance, went back to painting and the man who played Simon LeGree took over the Uncle Tom part. That man was an actor and made a wonderful Uncle Tom. He was a wonderful Simon too but to my childish mind it seemed that we were harboring a sheep in wolf's clothing. . . . At any rate I had to grow up to realize it, he was a fine actor and I would give a lot to know what became of him. His name was Maurice Burr. The man who played Marks, the lawyer, took over the LeGree role and I don't recall who did the Marks part but it wasn't much of a part anyhow.

Did I tell you that during one performance of Little Eva I developed mumps and by the time Little Eva went to heaven she looked like a full moon rising from behind a bank of clouds.

Horace Murphy, letter postmarked June 24, 1947, received June 26 (GHWC).
(Mr. Murphy worked for both Captain Price and Captain Emerson on three different showboats.)

Re. Captain Price:

Here's a little incident in which Capt. Price accidently let the feline out of the poke. On the "Greater New York" we had an excellent band, and after each concert uptown Cap Price would always remain to hear the words of praise from the townspeople long after the band had gone back to the boat and changed into their street clothes. We were playing Vicksburg, Miss. After the noonday concert we had changed to

street clothes and five or six of us started up the long sloping bank to "take in" the town when we met Cap Price coming down the bank. Away up on the bank and a little to the north was a row of questionable houses - the "red light" district.

When the Captain came in speaking distance he said "Where do you fellows think you are going?" One of the boys - just for a joke - said "We are looking for some women who are not what they ought to be." The Capt. said "Look, see that great big white house up yonder? That's five dollars. See that little house right next to it? That's one dollar - and it's just as good."

When he realized his faux pas he clapped his hand over his mouth and ran for the boat as fast as his little short legs would carry him.

Horace Murphy, letter received May 25, 1947 (GHWC).

Re. Captain Price:

. . . Captain Price was the most unique and interesting character I knew. . . .

Captain Price was about the stingiest man I ever met; and yet he was one of the most loveable. He never became angry, no matter what happened, and he was always deeply interested in the welfare of his employees. One could tell the day of the week by looking at his pockets. During the week he would collect pieces of twine, bent and rusty nails, bottle corks, etc. By Saturday his pockets would be buldging. Sunday morning he would empty his pockets, straighten the bent nails, put the rusty ones in a pan of coal oil and wind the twine into a ball and start all over again. And yet, he was a millionaire.

The day we played Gretna, Louisiana he went across the river to New Orleans (it was in January) and came back wearing a brand new straw hat. I mentioned the fact that hat was slightly out of season. He said "Well maybe so, but it's brand new and I got it for thirty-five cents. You can't make anything by passing up bargains like that. Soon after we were steaming into St. Martinsville on Bayou Teche. We were fighting a cross wind and the Captain, wearing the new straw hat, was up front on top of the showboat to give signals back to the pilot to assist him in making a smooth landing. The Captain had a very bad habit of omitting understandable signals to the pilot: instead he would go into his leaning act. He would lean this way and that way expecting the pilot to understand. In one of his "leans" a heavy gust of wind blew him overboard. The deck hands knowing he couldn't swim jumped into the yawl and quickly rowed out to where he went under. When he came up they grabbed him by the arms and tried to pull him aboard, but he would fight them off. Every time they would get hold of him he would jerk loose and under the water he would go. Finally big "Tim" got hold of him and held on. When the Captain could speak he sputtered, "Never mind me, get my hat."

Captain R. W. Emerson, enclosure with letter of December 6, 1947 (GHWC).

Re. Emerson's own recollections:

On the Kentucky River only small boats traveled that stream as locks were only 130 x 35 ft. You can recall the stories of the Hatfields and McCoys in Kentucky but the people in Kentucky are a good set of people if they are treated right. And they were religious enough not to allow my Sunday shows.

I landed at a small town one Sunday A M, expecting to allow actors and others a good day off. But something told me I could give them a ride on the river, so I saw the Sunday School Sup't and invited them all to take a ride up the river on a showboat. They had a wonderful time, but believe you me I violated the law, I mean Marine law, for I should have had a life preserver for each one carried. That night one of the big Sunday School officials came down and presented me with a gallon of liquor, and here is what he said, "Captain we had a good time today and you will get a good crowd tomorrow. I want you to have a gallon of the best corn liquor in these parts."

At Hickman, Ky. I was doing a part on the stage at the opening, after it was over I came out front and found a drunk in the back seats annoying people, so I picked him up and out he went, his head hit the sand and his feet in the water. The sheriff came down after putting him in jail, saying "we don't want no one to molest a good show, but I want you to appear against him." Well, I refused as I felt my task was over, but to my surprise, the sheriff says "you will go up and appear against him or I will arrest you." Well I got up to a store room and there sat a judge. And the first question he asked was "did you hit this man." Naturally I said no. "$10.00 and costs" the judge said.

I did $20.00 more business in the town than I had expected so I was ahead $10.00. Such is life in Kentucky.

George Bundy, letter of January 29, 1948 (including letter from Frank Griffith to Bundy) (GHWC).

Re. Story and joke much told and spoken of in letters among Captain Emerson, George Bundy, Frank Griffith, etc., in the forties:

George Bundy, even as a very young man, was a very fine musician, band director, and showboat performer. Too, he was from the "east" - Corning, New York. He was well liked, well-known along the rivers, but thought at times to be precocious by other members of the company.

The NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE had passed on the river an old abandoned packet, rotting and in a state of decay, and in long use as an outhouse by vagabonds, etc. Some of the company painted "BUNDY'S FLOATING THEATRE" on the derelict boat, knowing that all other showboat personnel of other boats would see it as they passed by.

Following this the members of the company of the NEW GRAND FLOATING PALACE placed an ad in the New York Clipper, thusly:

Wanted for A Long Rainy Southern Tour for
GEORGE M. BUNDY'S FLOATING THEATRE
Musicians for band and orchestra. Must have Studebaker Instruments; Crutch comedian who can comede; Soubrette to wait on table. Can place good state-room detective, also band leader, Hagan write. No clarinets wanted as I am the reed section. All address George M. Bundy.

The ad got results and letters began to arrive as well as samples from printers, concessioneurs, etc. When Captain Emerson became aware of the prank, he inquired of Bundy if he were unhappy on the FLOATING PALACE and why he was going into business for himself. All involved had a good laugh at the expense of the young man from the "east." (George Bundy later proved his musicianship and knowledge of musical instruments - and business - in becoming head of Selmer, one of the largest manufacturers of musical instruments in the world.)

Tom Craggs, Diary/log of time on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION, 1886.

Entry of March 20:

Met Mr. J. T. Brooks, the man who owned the dog that would eat glass. The dog was a setter. And I have Mr. Brooks' word of honor that what he said was true; and not only that, but I saw no less than twenty five persons who had seen the dog, and they say that they know of the dog eating glass up to the time of its death which was three years from the first they noticed him eat the glass. Mr. Brooks says when the dog could not get glass to eat that he would eat old broken dishes that he would find in the yard about the house.

Entry of March 21:

Mr. Brooks told me that he would answer any letter written to him concerning his dog and would give names of an "100" who had seen and knew the dog.

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The G. Harry Wright Collection
(This material is loaned by Mrs. Lila Wright for this study. It is to be housed in the Special Collections Department of the Kent State University Library.)

The material in the Wright Collection is uncataloged and extremely diverse; consequently it cannot be listed here in its entirety. The following are prominent parts of the collection:

1. photographs of showboats, showboat personnel, and showboat productions;

2. flyers and advertisements for many showboats;

3. a copy of a log of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION from September 1886 through June 1889 (the original is in the Smithsonian Institution);

4. an original log of FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION of the early 1890's

5. Callie French's friendship book;

6. extensive files of correspondence;

7. extensive clippings from newspapers and periodicals (this includes thorough gleenings from the New York Clipper, the Waterways Journal, the New York Times, and many regional newspapers;

8. interview material with showboat Captains and personnel

The T. W. Craggs Logbook
(This logbook is the possession of Donald T. McDaniel of of Columbus, Ohio. Mr. McDaniel is the grandson of T. W. Craggs, and he graciously furnished a copy of his grandfather's log for this study.)

Mr. Craggs was a member of the company and performer/musician on FRENCH'S NEW SENSATION from 1882 through 1887. This logbook has been very useful in determining the activity of the Frenches and McNairs during their early years of showboating.

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