

## SOME NOTES ON THE MEN OF THE INLAND RIVERS

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The remarks which follow are based on material contained in a collection of tape recordings of the recollections of inland rivermen which is now deposited in the Division of Inland Rivers of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio. The subjects of the interviews were men whose work associated them with the last days of steam packetboats and tows on the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Occupations varied widely among the seventy men interviewed by the present writer. They included deckhands, lograftsmen, captains, pilots, civil engineers, mates, roustabouts, steam engineers, cooks, commercial fishermen, musicians and others. The form which the interviews took was a simple one: the men were asked to establish their occupations and backgrounds, and were then encouraged to dwell at length on the phases of river activity which most interested them. As a result, although the tapes are often discursive, they contain a large quantity of information and also reflect individually the attitude toward the river of each of the speakers.

Generalizing from some of the recorded experiences, one can say that the old rivermen constituted a rather special society. Many of the survivors of the age of steam are the sons, grandsons and even great grandsons of rivermen. Their competitive instinct, though strong, was modified by an intricate network of blood relationship and acquaintance that crossed whole generations in time and spread out over the midcontinent with its three great rivers. If there was a tradition for a tough, cash on the barrelhead kind of business, there was an equally strong willingness to trust a man in a transaction. The value of a man's word was high, and deals were made with handshakes that involved the change in ownership of valuable packetboats. A captain could take possession of a boat by verbal agreement and pay it off with the profits from the next summer's run. He signed no paper that said he had to. This casual method of exchange makes documents relating to boat ownership somewhat untrustworthy. An owner's name on a steamboat list means merely that he was the owner of the vessel on the morning the information was gathered.

This willingness to do business on trust, it seems to me, is ancillary to the general attitude of independence of these rivermen. A captain hired his own crew, regardless of the boat owner's desires. After the dams were

constructed on the upper Ohio, it became customary to pick up new hands at the locks. The captain's right to hire was a jealously guarded one, and even the United States Coast Guard had to acknowledge it. But the right expired with the demise of locally owned passenger carrying packets along the river. As for the company-owned towboats, the right was compromised during the depression years when the big steel and coal corporations began to furnish crews from records in the personnel offices. The action was benevolent, done to protect the hands and secure steadier employment for them in those hard days, but it left the captains with less status than they had formerly.

The decline in the power of the word is something for the social historian to puzzle. Those steamboatmen would have been hard put to understand the present frenzy for a man's signature, the ballpoint diabolism of our age. It may be that something more than the national fortune was broken in 1929. In any case, I think it is probably the most significant change that has taken place in American life since the first steamboats, those fire canoes, as the Indians termed them, plied the western rivers.

If these ideals of integrity and independence had been matched by an equal value placed on the dignity of labor, the men of the valleys might have presented the world with an enviable picture of democracy in action, but as the facts stand, the picture is not a pleasant one. For the roustabout, who was also a man captivated by the river, life consisted of hard, stiff and often demeaning work. He was expected to be able to carry his own weight. On a short-haul boat he labored in proportion to the demand: six hours loading apples on the north bank of the river, then six more on the south. His work was entirely done by hand, back and shoulder. There were no carts or trucks to ease his burden. He slept under the boilers on cold nights. And his surname, like his position, was without respect. He was like Friday in Robinson Crusoe in this regard. His name was given to him. He was called Wing, or Devil, or One-eye or The Old Original Hog-head. And sometimes he became so used to his nickname that he forgot his real name, so that his Christian name was only established with difficulty when Social Security regulations required his proper identification. His badge of office was as common as he was, a spoon. That spoon was the one article a mate looked for when he had to take on a strange hand. It meant that the new man was not a drifter, but an experienced worker who knew that packet cooks did not supply eating utensils when grub was ladled out on trays for the roustabouts. Finally, he was an uneducated man who could not read or write. Because of this, of all rivermen, the picture of the typical rouster is the most distorted: he is remembered as a happy-go-lucky, smiling man, strangely savage at times, who lost his money gambling whenever the boats were underway. But there is another side to the profile. This shows the face of physical exhaustion. If a man fell dead in line, the coroner called it a heart attack, but for the rousters, the man just worked himself out.

In fairness, however, the position of the river roustabout should be considered in terms of the general state of unskilled labor in this country

before the First World War. When Italian work-gangs were employed in dam construction, as one salvage man stated it, the work-boss got down in the coffer dams with a pick handle to make them go. A dollar a day for a man, fifty cents for a boy, for work from dawn until sundown, were not unusual wages in the early 1900's. Perhaps, too, in the case of the roustabouts, it was the position itself, rather than the man, that was demeaned. Negroes were used for the job in the last days of the packets; before the Negroes, German immigrants did the work, and before Germans, Irish immigrants. At the very end, when Negroes could not be made to work during the hot dogdays of the summer, there was speculation that Italians might serve well as roustabouts because they had more tractable dispositions.

Perhaps more than the roustabout, the figure of the mate is left with a distorted image. He is remembered as a particularly tough individual who possessed an unlimited capacity for swearing, but at his best he was a man of character and capability on the river. He was a commander of men. He had to know how to stir the roustabouts up to get the most work out of them. He was always working against the clock, getting the boat in and out of the landings as quickly as possible. If he was an experienced man, he had a refined sense of touch. He could tell merely by walking across a dark deck at night whether there were any strains in the boat due to improper loading. It was his job to see that the freight was so distributed that the packet would neither be stern nor bow down in the water. A bad job of loading caused leaks to spring in the wooden hulls of the boats and if the stern or sidewheels were too deep or too shallow, they would not function at their full capacity, and steam and power would be lost as well as time. He needed to know a thousand practical tricks for meeting sudden and bizarre emergencies when underway. On the Cumberland River, for example, where boats were fragile constructions that drew fifteen inches of water, shipping a stud horse was a hazardous venture. If anywhere along the river the stallion scented the mountain mares, he would begin to stamp in his pen, an action powerful enough to break the wooden deck and sink the boat. But the mate knew how to handle this situation: he sent a roustabout down to chew on the stallion's ears and so pacify him. He had to be a man of some physical courage. If the roustabouts hid in the excelsior pile beneath the main deck (stored there for plugging leaks in the hull), it was the mate's responsibility to crawl in there and force the men out, sometimes at the risk of a knife slash or a bullet wound.

The mate's life was turbulent and demanding, the river a close-knit and long-remembering community. This may account for some of the brutality of the river, for certain mates did have a reputation for cruelty. If a mate had a history of savageness, he had to cope with a real or imagined fear of retribution. Someone would catch up to him some night and get him. Some mates carried sticks, and at least one, a cane reinforced with lead. Others condemned the practice. One such mate, a small man with a powerful

voice and six knife slashes to show for his trade, speaking of the life of the roustabouts, accounted for much of the struggle and pain of the river in a single sentence: "It was the worst kind of inhumanity, but we were country boys, and we just didn't know any better."

The clerk was also a man who lead a life of hard work on the boats. He was always at odds with the mate. He told the roustabout where each load was going to be shipped, and the rouster relayed this information to the mate who then decided where to store the load on the boat. "Care" was the watchword of the clerk, "speed" of the mate; it was a twain that seldom met. Some idea of the clerk's responsibility can be formed from an illustration of his work on a single trip during a good freight season on the upper river. In this example, so much had to be done in so short a time that two clerks were used. They had to get off as many as four hundred shipments on a run from Pittsburgh to Wheeling, a ninety mile journey with perhaps seven or eight landings where freight was picked up or put off. During this time they had to rate the freight bills, enter these in the freight book, make out the bills and write up calculations in the discharge book, meanwhile checking the freight out at the various landings. The boat left Pittsburgh at two in the afternoon and arrived at Wheeling the next morning. Obviously, this work kept them busy.

Whatever other rewards there were for working on the river, for most men the wages were low. The clerk could make four dollars a day on a run such as the one just described, but more than likely it was less than this, and on the last boats that ran freight and passenger service the wage dropped as low as sixty cents a day for a twenty-four hour day. This was in the middle thirties, after the building of good roads liberated the back counties from dependence on the river for supplies and trucks could move quickly among the big towns, making store-door to store-door deliveries. There were other reasons, too, for the decline of the packets. With unionization of the unskilled worker, it became increasingly difficult to get crews to work the boats. Government regulations following on the Moro Castle disaster in inland waters required the mounting of expensive fire prevention equipment on the packets which the owners could not afford to have installed. The despoliation of hardwood timberlands made it almost impossible to get good oak for the repair of hulls and wheels and checked what impulse there was to build new boats. Insurance rates were high and adjustments for damaged or destroyed boats made replacement financially impossible. Finally, the cost of coal to run the boats became a prohibitive factor when measured against the diminishing returns of the trade. These things, added together, broke the enthusiasm of even the most spirited and resourceful of the rivermen. The price was too high, and the age of steam was allowed to run itself out.