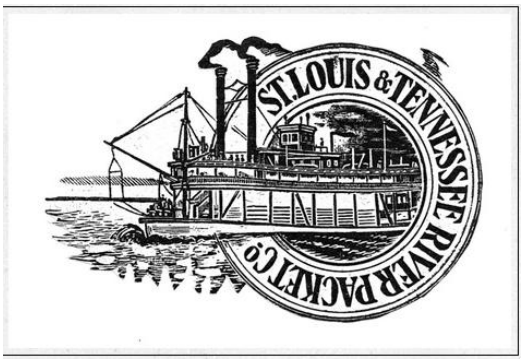
St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co.
Being A True History And Account, 1885 — 1942



I - The Background: How to Make a Steamboat Company

Origins of the St. Louis and Tennessee River Packet Company can be traced to coincidental events coming together in Nashville, Tennessee beginning in 1867.

A bit of history here, is that the unpleasant disagreement between Northern and Southern States had been resolved militarily for two years by this date, and although all damage was not yet repaired for the South taking the brunt of battle, citizens were reorganizing their lives and occupations. This was the date that Tom Ryman purchased his first small, light draft boat, the *Alpha*, which served to originate his line of steamboats, a venture that was to produce considerable wealth for Ryman, and, later on incidentally, give Nashville a new auditorium, called Ryman after its sponsor.

The firm of B.S. Rhea & Son, engaged in wholesale grain purchase and sale, had been established in Nashville for some time, and since Nashville was an occupied city not subject to opposing army predation, and bread is always necessary, the firm seems to have prospered during the war. B.S. Rhea has been characterized as the 'Corn King' of Tennessee, from the volume of commodities he handled; the firm appeared to have no problem finding markets, but was anxious, at this postwar date, to expand its supply. As a result, as an adjunct to its regular line of trade, it engaged itself in owning, or chartering, or binding itself to other owners of, small boats running the valley of the Cumberland River, where grain could be obtained from farmers and consigned to Nashville. Tom Ryman and the Rhea firm, therefore, had a common interest in moving foodstuff commodities to the profit of both.

The family of Henry W. Massengale migrated to Nashville in 1868 from southwestern Georgia, where the civilian members waited out the end of hostilities, after losing property in Chattanooga to Northern action when that town was captured. Two older boys, veterans of the Confederate Army, had settled in Nashville, and set up a flour mill; this business seems to be the direct first tie to the B.S. Rhea Company and the family, for Rhea could have supplied wheat for the mill. It is possible that Tom Ryman knew or knew of the family from Chattanooga days, as Henry, who owned a modest merchandise business, served several terms there as Mayor in the decade following 1850. But in any event, the youngest boy in the family, John E., age 19 late that year, quickly met the '& Son' of the grain firm, Isaac T. Rhea, who was a couple of years older. The two became friends, eventually to develop into a business partnership which remained for fifty years, only broken by Ike Rhea's death.

John had pursued some formal education in Georgia on his own initiative, but probably gained not more than half of four years of high school; in the nineteenth century this was not a remarkable failing. In the towns of those days, whether Chattanooga on the Tennessee, or Nashville on the Cumberland, the river was a prime occupation for many. His easy course at this time would have been to join the firm of his older brothers, but the river held an attraction for him that his brothers, apparently, never felt. Whether he received early clerical training at B.S. Rhea, or started a clerk's career on one of the Ryman boats is not known. Some references in surviving letters indicate a close familiarity with Ryman boats, so either guess is reasonable. Since the Rhea firm had control over some boats bringing grain in, his first training may have been both through B. S. Rhea's sponsorship and on a Ryman boat as clerk. A clerk on a steamboat was an officer of the boat, and essentially an accountant, but the steamboat trade had bookkeeping of a particular sort. The boat was a business, but it did not own the product it carried, and its 'inventory,' so to speak, had to be accounted for an owner not on board. And the product was of a variety that no business on the bank was liable to be trading. (For 1890, the Merchant's Exchange in St. Louis tabulated a list of 27 widely varied items, largely commodities measured in their various units, shipped by Tennessee River boats, plus a 28th item classed "Merchandise and Sundries," which alone totaled 193,000 packages.) The task in accounting was keeping accurate track of this multitude of different items, from different origins and destined for different delivery points, and one trip of several hundred tons was inevitably going to be different from a prior or future trip. The boats carried a First Clerk, or Purser, usually a Second and sometimes a Third, depending on the size of the boat and volume of business handled. We do not know the date or the boat on John's first trip, or even the second or tenth, but he must have learned the intricacies of steamboat cargo and methods fairly rapidly, for by 1872, four years after arriving, he was in a position to try out an

entrepreneurial quest.

He had accumulated enough in savings to buy a share in the steamer *West Wind,* and an existing bill of lading (barrel staves) has him running as clerk and part owner. Little is known of the boat; no picture has been uncovered, specification as to size lost, but the freight bill is written for Tennessee Rolling Mill landing, about 50 miles up the Cumberland from the Ohio River. It is believed the boat had been brought around to the Cumberland from earlier trips running Madison to Cincinnati on the Ohio; not extremely old, likely she was put in a Nashville to Cairo, Illinois trade. December of that year brought unusual cold with it, and ice solidly formed in the Mississippi extended all the way to Memphis, an event so unique as not to be repeated in the following century. The *West Wind* had been moved and tied off at Memphis to avoid ice further north, but a newspaper report notes the boat was sunk at the Memphis levee. Salvage of the wreck, which was sold, may have given him a few dollars, but John wrote home to his family that he would have to start all over again; so by early 1873 his stake was lost.

In following years the City Directory of Nashville has him listed as briefly running a wholesale grocery operation— probably intended to supply steamboats— but by 1877 he is listed as 'Clerk, Str.. Nashville' and on board again; we don't know how long, but the boat seems to have been brought into the Cumberland River no earlier than 1876, running Evansville to Memphis previously. The Directory has John listed as 'Steamboatman" for the year following 1877; now, no boat. A picture of the *Nashville has* turned up, showing her at Cincinnati with water well above the main deck, and apparently in process of being dismantled; whatever reason for the accident, this must have occurred in early 1878.

One interesting part of this incident, today, is that ownership of the boat does not appear in standard reference sources, but in August, 1878 a surviving letter from John to the Howard Shipyard is written on the letterhead of B.S. Rhea & Son, requesting a bid from them on construction of a new boat, evidently for the Rhea firm. Mentioned in the letter— the Howard Yard would be responsible only for a hull and other woodwork of a boat— John notes, *"we are negotiating to build for the Nashville's machinery."* This is a little ambiguous, but may be reasonably interpreted to mean we (the firm) are asking for a bid (which we will argue over) and will use the *Nashville's* engines, and, maybe, other useful parts; apparently the firm had been successful in salvaging "machinery." Howard was no doubt aware the boat had been lost and was thus notified the new boat to be designed and the bid should meet specifications of the old machinery, which was to be used.

These incidents of the 1870's are important because, behind events of that decade, Ike

Rhea was in close contact with the maturing clerk and his entrepreneurial spirit. The Rhea firm had contact with producers for the whole of Western Tennessee, that is, from Nashville as a major terminal on the Cumberland River, all the way to the Mississippi, including the valley of the Tennessee River, which entered the Ohio at Paducah. The calendar was a little late; by 1879 the easy days of high freight profits from any small boat that could turn a wheel and stay afloat were over, and where the trade had not already been severely limited by railroad penetration (Nashville was a rail hub) large firms running boats financed by a corporate structure (as opposed to partnerships, or single ventures) were taking the trade.

But Ike Rhea saw, and passed to John from his observation, the idea that the Tennessee Valley had a yield of products coming from territory that had not been penetrated by railroad construction. If there happened any single concept the two believed that firmed up in these years, it was that the Tennessee River yet held promise for a line of steamboats. The key to it was no railroads. Unlike Nashville with its capital status and large population, the small towns and landings of the Tennessee provided little lure for railroad capital; and the hills rising from a sharp valley with the river at the bottom made parallel rail construction extraordinarily expensive. The lower end of the river flowed basically North from the Alabama border. It was crossed by two rail lines, the Louisville and Nashville, and the North Carolina and St. Louis, routes heading west and north, but these crossings, both of them close to 100 miles from Paducah, were no convenient benefit to a population away from the crossing points, living miles south toward Alabama and Mississippi. In spite of knowing Nashville, what was not considered by the two was a line of boats running the Tennessee and terminating in Nashville, a concept that would needfully imply direct railroad rivalry.

Logic implied in the letter to Howard, in 1878, is that John would continue to work with the Rhea firm, and he *should* end up as clerk on the new boat. It never happened. Further, the Rhea firm took no title to a new boat, although Tom Ryman did from Howard at about the right date, calling her *B.S. Rhea;* but John for reasons not fully known was not the clerk, and what we do know, shortly departed Nashville and his occupation there.

Slightly over a year after the letter to Howard, the former clerk relocated to St. Louis, Missouri, and started searching for work in a much larger city. The determining reason for the move may be that other older members of the family, the two brothers with another flour operation, and two sisters who had married St. Louis men, preceded him by a couple of years. John had married a Nashville girl, had two children by 1879, and surely must have decided to depart with regret. On arrival in St. Louis he carried a letter of recommendation,

citing experience and character, to John A. Scudder, then manager of the old established Anchor Line, which at that time was regularly scheduling between fifteen and twenty boats out of St. Louis for trade to all points down river as far as New Orleans. With the numbers of crew necessary for this company, it seems one more clerk should fit in quickly. Apparently it was not that easy, for John ended up a salesman, noted from the City Directory in what appears to be a haberdashery, in company with a son of one of the older brothers.

Capt. Scudder took his own time in hiring new clerks, but by July, 1880, John was back at his trade again. In a letter posted at Cairo, probably twenty hours out of St. Louis, he reports a hurried departure (A regular clerk fell ill ?) causing him to have to buy a change of clothes: "tis OK," he said, "as I need them anyway." The stamp of the steamer *Ste.Genevieve* decorates the brief note. The family may not have been entirely enthusiastic about the clerk's traveling life, as he also says: "I would like to be at home but thankfull (*sic.*) for any work." It seems that St. Louis was no paradise of choice employment for the young and willing. *Ste.Genevieve* was average or less for Anchor Line sidewheelers at a hull length of 241 feet, but a good tonnage larger than anything common on the Cumberland River, with commensurate freight and passenger capacity. The clerk apparently adapted to the demand of new duties quickly and competently, for he remained with the Anchor Line and the *Ste.Genevieve* through the years '81 to '84 in her St. Louis to Memphis run, scheduled as a seven day trip. Then, in 1884, the Anchor Line contracted with Howard for a new boat— the Line commonly ordered one or two new boats in most years— and John was promoted to Purser, the title of First Clerk, on this new one, which came out as *City of Bayou Sara* in July of that year.

From events that followed we know he must have maintained regular contact with Ike Rhea after leaving Nashville, for too much happened in 1885 for action to develop out of a vacuum. Unfortunately, the *Bayou Sara* remained in her St. Louis— New Orleans run for only eighteen months. Lying at the bank after a northbound stop at New Madrid, Mo., she caught fire in December of that year and totally burned. Several persons were caught in the rapid spread of the fire and lost their lives; John barely escaped, delaying too long in the clerk's office to pick up boat papers, and was the last person off the boat. This was the end of his career with the Anchor Line, and, indeed, the last of a career employed by others. A general rule was, crew members caught up by, but surviving, a boat's fatal accident had no guarantee of continued employment by the Company. They were employed by the boat, now vanished; there might be a suitable place on an alternate boat, or a boat might appear as a replacement. If not, the event was hard luck. But in John's case it seems he may not have been too greatly concerned, and the accident merely accelerated plans in formation for some time.

He related anecdotally, later, he saw his first thousand dollars in one sum while clerk on the *Bayou Sara*. The boat normally took cotton to New Orleans, routine freight, picking it up at landings from southern Missouri and south. The enterprising clerk undertook to buy bales from owners where offered at some of the landings. The advantage to owners, here, would be an immediate determined price, rather than wait for the market as established in New Orleans. Having it consigned to him, he then resold the bales to a contact he had established in New Orleans, who had promised him a dollar a bale commission for whatever quantity he could find. Apparently the Anchor Line had no objection to free spirit entrepreneurial activity, as long as the freight bill was paid; it was convenient the rousters rolled it on board for him along with other items. In those times, what was earned could be kept, as the income tax was not invented. From savings or whatever sources, John had accumulated his cash in the years between 1880 and 1885; and, he had accumulated friends among the Anchor Line crew as well.

II - A Start

Even before the fatal fire on the Bayou Sara, notice was given in St. Louis that a small boat moved from the Cumberland River, Henry A. Tyler, would commence a regular trade to points on the Tennessee River; this was in September, 1885, and represents the initial venture of the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. John E. Massengale was noted as Agent in St. Louis; Lem Hill, Master. A regular service was offered to shippers by this innocuous notice, first to Clifton, Tennessee, at mile 187 (from Paducah) then extended to Savannah, mile 221, when it was found the boat could make the round run on a weekly basis. This included 180 miles south from St. Louis to the junction of Ohio and Mississippi, then up the Ohio 50 miles to Paducah. Not much is known of this first boat, although it logically may have come from Tom Ryman. She was built in 1882, on a 160 foot hull, and while not new, should not be considered antiquated at that initial date; regardless, John later characterized her as “practically worthless” which explains why she was not long retained. Initially, it seems, the boat was only chartered. But the trade immediately justified expectations: a new market for Tennessee River products, and new customers for St. Louis merchants, so after a successful series of trips in the fall before winter ice halted the trade, John and Ike Rhea went ahead with more permanent plans.

The original company was built as a partnership of five, who contributed the capital to begin operations, a sum which could not have exceeded $10,000. John was to remain in St. Louis as Agent and Traffic Manager, which meant stirring up business, Ike in Nashville was

denoted President and contributed extended experience in management of a firm, while two friends formerly with the Anchor Line came over to run the boat: George Murray and Lem Hill. (Colin Baker, who had been second clerk on the Bayou Sara also joined, but apparently not at this initial date.) The fifth partner was James Koger, who was placed at Paducah as superintendent for managing affairs there— the town was a key layover point and terminal for freight transfer— including repair and construction. By May, the boat had been bought for $8000. John and George Murray put up cash for half the boat, while the Rhea firm put up an equal amount; half of this was credited to Koger, which indicates Ike Rhea had some special tie or concern to him, unknown to us. Lem Hill was credited with a small share without cash: His contribution was a Master's license, without which the boat could not operate. The Tyler used the Star Line wharf at the foot of Olive Street, St. Louis.

Thus the firm opened its office to forty years of successful packet operation, more remarkable since the most profitable days for steamboats were already in question. The key to this success, what would be called today a business plan, rested on two elements: As noted, the Tennessee Valley lacked railroad transportation serving the citizens, and the boats offered a scheduled service. The first fact assured the partners that no railroad with much larger capitalization would be handy to engage in a rate war, and the second served to assure those same citizens that the boat would arrive at a predicted time. The Tennessee, at this date, was not without steamboat service, but the boats were based in Evansville or further up the Ohio, and generally gave preference to serving towns along the Ohio; if trade was a little short, a boat would venture up the Tennessee to pick up a trip, but occasional or erratic service was of minimum benefit to farmers and merchants in the towns. Knowing this, the partners agreed the boat should depart St. Louis on a strict schedule of once per week. This meant, as a monetary matter, any given trip might be short on tonnage, and in effect, create an operating loss. The partners bet their capital on the principle that superior service in the form of a firm schedule would build to profit. The idea worked.

By early in the summer of 1886, it was apparent regular scheduling was bringing in business in excess of what the Tyler could handle. On advice of Ike Rhea, John came down to Nashville for a survey of boats offered for sale there; he bought the Sam J. Keith from Tim Armstrong, (a rival to Tom Ryman), who had used her in upper Cumberland River trade. Buying the boat undoubtedly saved cash (all of which must have been acquired in only a few months operation of Tyler), but also saved time in capturing new trade, for a boat taken out of the yard took months. She was about four years old, built by Howard, and required

some maintenance and upgrading. This was done at Paducah, evidently the first job supervised by Koger. She was renamed City of Florence, following a notion perhaps developed from Anchor Line days, whose new boats were frequently named after Mississippi River towns, that good public relations would follow from flattering the towns' people along the Tennessee.

Florence was the most distant city for the lower Tennessee River, situated just below Muscle Shoals, a point where shallow, fast water halted passage of steamboats; actually, the larger boats frequently could not reach even Florence unless the water stage was somewhat high, a periodic event. But putting such a name on the boat indicated the Company optimistically was extending its anticipated service another 80 miles above Savannah, and expanded the overall route to about 530 miles out of St. Louis, to the practical head of navigation from the Ohio. This was not liable to be run, down and back, in one week, if time was allowed for loading any profitable trip tonnage; the boat might well have to lay over for six to twelve hours picking up some items such as lumber, one board at a time. But with a second boat now on hand a new ten day schedule, one departing Wednesday and Saturday, would not seriously interrupt convenience to customers.

By fall of 1886, even before the season ended, it was evident the Tyler was too small for this fast growing trade, and she was sold; after modification for cotton trade out of the Red River, she ran for some years as G.W. Sentell. To keep the company's treasured freight business moving during this winter, John worked out a cooperative arrangement with the Illinois Central, shipping by rail to Cairo while ice or its threat prevailed in the Mississippi stretch north from Cairo. The City of Florence then picked up the Tennessee River consigned items, and moved them up river, which, flowing out of the south, remained mostly ice free in most years. (In the future, the Company was to maintain Tennessee River traffic in the winter by running boats based at Paducah.) While at Cairo, John saw a Ryman boat built in 1882 (after he left Nashville) a little larger than Florence, called the W.H. Cherry, running Nashville to Cairo and bringing grain for the Rhea elevators. Likely, Ike Rhea opened negotiations on this one, and may have supplied some cash from the firm for no price was published; whatever the detail, the upshot before the winter was out, Cherry was turned over to the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co., putting the Company back to a 'fleet' of two boats for 1887. John Massengale and Ike Rhea had a profitable company, not just a boat, and shortly incorporation would put a seal on the matter for five partners.

III - Rivals and New Boats

Nice fat boat trips had not gone unnoticed by other operators in the Ohio River. As pointed out previously, the desire by typical owners was for Tennessee River trade without the risk of running a scheduled service. Some of the Tennessee River product was seasonal, such as peanuts, which were shipped by the hundreds of bags at harvest. Previous to 1884, John Gilbert, of the Evansville and Tennessee River Packet Co., had three boats he ran sporadically into the river, and the steamer *John Gilbert* in particular developed a reputation for hauling these nuts in huge trips to an Evansville market. Maybe because of more timely service, or the St. Louis market paid a premium for nuts, the new Company immediately began to make inroads into Capt. Gilbert's trade, and a rate war ensued for the '86 season. All of his boats were relatively new, and significantly larger than his rival, but his price cuts were met or excelled, and Capt. Gilbert seems not to have great staying power, for in 1887 an agreement was reached between the two firms. One of his boats had been sold about the date the Packet Company started its service in 1885, and now as part of the agreement the *Clyde* was turned over to John's control while a revenue pooling or charter arrangement (which one has not been fully clarified) was made for the *John Gilbert*. She must have helped out the *Florence* and *Cherry* in the season 1887, but was sunk without salvage in the vicinity of Chester, Illinois, in 1888 on a trip to St. Louis. The *Clyde* became the most versatile of all Company boats, partly because of her shallow draft on a 181 foot hull, and she turned up in various trades at different times, but initially was assigned to the Tennessee River for a Paducah to Florence run. This became a permanent, profitable weekly trade with later on two boats a week. S. King Hale came over from Gilbert with the boat, later became regular Master, and finally Superintendent at Paducah. (As a trivia question, there is no hint of the origin of the name of the boat, although Clyde Howard of the shipyard is a possibility.)

Aside from dispatching the first serious competition, 1887 was also a year of revision for the structure of the Company. A fifty year charter was obtained in Missouri, and incorporation papers were filed in the spring. A partnership can be dissolved by simple agreement at any time, while a corporation, with additional complexity in its form, has advantages in flexibility; it limits liability and can issue stock to finance operations. Possibly the implementation of the Interstate Commerce Commission in this same year had something to do with making the partners feel a more permanent structure to the Company was justified, as now the railroads, with their overbearing financial power, would be held subject to a degree of oversight by the Federal Government. The Commission was primarily just a rate regulating body, but rates were the core problem when it came to a large firm driving a small one out of business. In addition to tariff oversight, some rules were added: One was, a railroad was not to own a steamboat. (An exception, here, provided the rails could operate 'transfer' vessels, steamers used only for

rail's cars crossing a river.)

The original stockholders were the five partners who organized the Company two years before. The stock was given a par value of $100 per share, with a total capitalization of $40,000, 400 shares of "fully paid" common shares. Later on the capitalization was increased to 900 shares, and finally 1500. Ike Rhea must have contributed most of the planning behind this new organization, as commensurate with his experience; John Massengale was an operator and traffic manager. But from management viewpoint one advantage of the corporate form was immediately apparent: Stock could be used to purchase new assets, saving cash for other things. There seems no exact record left, but Capt. Gilbert must have received stock for his contribution of, at least, the *Clyde*, for nearly a generation later Mrs. Gilbert still held shares. The manager had to learn, of course, that now some of the cash generated had to be handed over to stockholders— who were no longer original partners— in the form of yearly dividends. The policy as set was to generally pay out 50% of earnings as dividends; the yield was intended to approximate 6%. But since the Company was still small, even by late nineteenth century standards, no attempt was ever made to list the stock on exchange, or to enter any public market; holdings were confined to individuals in a private market, and new stock issued was directed to the purchase of assets, as in Capt. Gilbert's
case.

Boats first purchased for the Company generally carried a full length cabin on the boiler deck, but no Texas; the emphasis was on freight capacity, not passengers. In his experience, John felt the largest profit center was on freight— this statement meant to emphasize his bias, but not to proclaim the Company intended to ignore the passenger side of the business. By 1889, with a handsome cash flow generated from operations the Company began to order new boats built to their specification. Nearly all acquisitions in the future, whether or not new, were Howard Shipyard boats; again, a bias of John whose experience directed the decision. The *City of Savannah* was the first one, named for the relatively large town which frequently marked the limit of water with sufficient depth for the full run boats from St. Louis. At 186 foot length of hull, she was substantially larger than the older *Florence* or *Cherry*, and comparable to the *Clyde*. Reflecting attention to minimizing construction cost, she carried no Texas deck. (Late pictures show one, but it was added by new owners.) This boat was followed in 1890 by another of similar design from Howard, the *City of Sheffield*, named for a town further up river near Florence; the Company was obviously trying to make friends, followed by money, out of upper reaches of this portion of the Tennessee.

Relying on *Savannah* and *Sheffield* for the St. Louis trade, the older, smaller boats were sold off in 1890, and a third new boat ordered from Howard, to come out as *City of Paducah*, 190 foot hull, and the largest boat so far. Departing past practice, the new boat added a Texas cabin, which would relieve a crowded boiler deck cabin, and incidentally provide for crew quarters away from passengers who could avoid the noise of nightly watch changes. Paducah was rapidly becoming a center of activity for the Company, with St. Louis boats stopping over as they entered the Tennessee, and foreign Ohio River boats leaving freight for transfer, while the *Clyde* continued her weekly trip for local traffic from Paducah, carrying freight and passengers bound for intermediate landings up river.

The decade following 1890 experienced a general economic hesitation from prior expansion; boats and river traffic were affected, as might be forecast. At one point John reported to the St. Louis Merchant's Exchange, for inclusion in their annual report, ". . . [the year 1893] just passed, we believe it will be long remembered by the business world, the depression having been felt by all. . .," but then adds that the Company paid all operating expense and interest— handling nine million feet of lumber, two thousand bales of cotton, thirty thousand bags of nuts and two million [barrel] staves plus some stock and country produce out of the Valley. This would seem not bad for two (St. Louis) boats, operating for nine months of the year from a Company not in existence ten years before.

But the ability to keep moving did not eliminate all problems. The *Clyde*, brought over from Capt. Gilbert, sank in the spring of 1893 and salvage was not worthwhile. In spite of business not so sprightly as might be wished, a new boat was ordered from Howard in 1894. The old one had become a familiar fixture to the citizens on the river, and the new one was called by the same name. The first made about twelve years of service, a respectable above average life; but in imitation, the second ran over twenty years before being dismantled, surviving a couple of sinkings in her career.

In 1896 the *City of Savannah* was sold, as surplus to the Company need, and now seven years old. In a search for new trade, the *Tennessee* was ordered from Howard, delivered late in 1897. This boat was somewhat shorter, with lighter draft, than others designed for the Tennessee River, and it was hoped a new trade could be built on an Evansville to Nashville run on the Cumberland. This was tried for a brief period, but in spite of anything Ike Rhea might do to direct business in that city, the rails and other boats had built too firm a competition for the route to pay. After a few trials in one season it was abandoned, and the *Tennessee* turned back to the Tennessee River. Here she fitted well into a two boat weekly service, Paducah to Florence, working with the second *Clyde*. For many years following, this local service remained profitable enough to use two boats a week, with

regular Wednesday and Saturday departures. The Company also placed a wharfboat at the Paducah levee, incorporated it as the Paducah Wharfboat Company, which became a center for all boats to store freight in transit, bringing in wharfage fees for the service provided from outside firms; there was office space for James Koger here, and later on, King Hale.

Capt. Gilbert seems to have put no boats into the Tennessee, joining the Fowler family in the "Evansville, Paducah and Cairo Line," during these years of the the '90s, but there were others who still thought the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. had too much business, and wanted to shave off a piece. It seems on paper there were two separate operations, but indications are it was just one, informal cooperative effort. One old boat, the *Mayflower*, built as an excursion boat, was brought down from Pittsburgh, and attempted to run a direct Tennessee River packet service to St. Louis. For several years, two other boats, the *Will J.Cummins* and *Edgar Cherry* also tried to intrude on the trade; these were newer boats, with some serious financial backing behind them. (As noted above, the ICC Act supposedly prohibited *railroads* from owning steamboats, but writers of the Act forgot that individuals ran railroads and *individuals operating* a railroad could own boats just like any citizen. Collectively, such might be willing to run a boat at a loss in the hope of driving off any rival.) The *Cummings,* built in '95, seems to have first come from Tim Armstrong, of Nashville, (a rival to Tom Ryman) but remained not long in the Cumberland; after running in northern Ohio trades, by late 1898 she ended up in the Tennessee. The *Cherry*, with no evident owner of record, teamed up with her, the operators benefiting from a US. Mail contract. This fact alone is evident of influence in Washington, for mail contracts were generous in the extreme, and would cover much of the operating cost for a boat. Picking up mail at the rail's crossing, delivery could be made up river and some freight or passenger traffic gained thereby, with a mail subsidy to help out if the trip was short on tonnage. These three boats continued to ply and try their trade in defeating the Company, but seem to have been more gadfly than threat; the *Mayflower* sometimes wandered out of the St. Louis trade for better water in the Lower Mississippi, and in a letter from James Koger to John in May, 1897 Koger indicates his confidence in holding freight rates steady, which will put the *Cherry* out of the river, he declared, in six months. At the time he was on a trip to Jeffersonville where the *Tennessee* was under construction, and he stopped by the L & N office in Louisville to ask a few questions; the L & N was feeling squeezed, he found out, and wanted everone to raise rates.

Koger was a little too optimistic with his time line, but by early 1899 all three boats were taken over by the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co., the owners receiving stock, and three of them also seats on the Board of Directors. (There is a lot less time and work to

vote yearly dividends than run a steamboat.) John did not much want the boats, just the customers, it seems. The *Mayflower* was old, and shortly sold to a broker who returned her to the Pittsburgh area. The *Cherry* might have been used in the mail contract, which the Company intended to retain, but she was not a Howard boat and John's bias there helped sell her off on an unsolicited offer in six months. The *Cummins* was Howard built, a trifle longer in hull length and a good shallow draft boat, so the Company used her for the mail run.

IV - The New Century

Abruptly without fuss or commotion, in the spring of 1898 the old established Anchor Line at the St. Louis levee quit business. This was a tribute to parallel rail lines running the Mississippi, but also to a series of accidents from weather and marine misfortune. The tornado of May,1896 had damaged several of the Anchor Line boats, requiring their abandonment or repair. (The St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. lost all but the hull of its *wharfboat*, but no steamers were in the harbor at the wrong time.) The Anchor Line tried rebuilding via purchase and repair, including a new boat, but several sinking accidents in the two years following as well as the new boat burning left the management little choice.

In spite of a decline in business in recent years, this line had been handling several hundred tons weekly out of St. Louis, and it seemed shippers might want to continue their river delivery schedules. John moved into this apparent gap in service by bringing the *Clyde* up from her Tennessee River run for service to Memphis, Tennessee, some 230 miles further down river from Cairo, where his boats usually turned to head upstream for Paducah.

Moving *Clyde* should not much hamper Tennessee operations, with *Sheffield* and *City of Paducah* available from St. Louis, and *Tennessee* with *Cummins* running out of Paducah; but the latter was obligated to give priority to mail service. So a new boat was ordered from Howard, which came out as *City of Memphi*s, and in 1899 began service to that city while *Clyde* went back to the Tennessee.

Unfortunately, the Lee Line, based in Memphis, under the direction of Capt. Robert E. Lee (a cousin of the former Confederate general) was capably run, had been in a Memphis — South business for some years, and viewed this move as a threat to Lee Line affairs; also, the worthy captain probably decided, why not us to pick up some of the stuff left over by the Anchor Line? The Lee Line had put boats into the Ohio on occasion, but generally seemed reluctant, up to this date, to run the stretch of Mississippi between Cairo

and St. Louis: This was called the graveyard stretch, for the number of wrecks accumulated over the years. Truly, the river supplied an impressive, renewable army of snags willing to take out any wood hull boat on a moment's notice, and much of the stretch had either shoal water with bars ready to ground a boat, or bad channel crossings, and a river constantly shifting: From a flood in 1882, the whole river had shifted to the east, capturing the mouth and a parallel channel of the little Kaskaskia River on the east bank, thereby leaving the river town of St. Marys to eventually lose all possibility of river access.

Capt. Lee put his *Georgia Lee* into St. Louis early in 1899, apparently able to capture some shippers of the former Anchor Line. Rates on freight were, immediately, cut by both firms in an attempt to gain the business. Nobody gave up, so in December that year Lee put his *Rees Lee* into a Tennessee River run from St. Louis, and cut rates there, as well. It was probably seasonally too late to try this, for the boat ran into shoal water in the graveyard stretch on her return trip, grounded hard, and was delayed for two weeks, passengers rather trapped; after which ice in January, 1900 halted any more risky trips. John noted there was plenty of water south of Cairo, and sent the *City of Memphis* all the way down river to Friars Point, Mississippi, about as far as Lee boats normally ran. Lee responded by putting the *Peters Lee* into the Paducah — Waterloo trade, province of *Clyde* and *Tennessee*. (Waterloo was well above Savannah, but in low water season the limit of larger boats.) So John pulled *Clyde* out of the Tennessee and sent her down river for Lee trade between Memphis and Helena, Arkansas. One can only wonder why a pooling agreement on revenue was not made for the Memphis to St. Louis trade, or have each firm put one boat into the run to avoid all the fuss. For river operators, it is all or nothng. By April of 1900 management and crews (the latter pulled far off their regular routes, and homes as well) were well weary with this business. Capt. Lee was surprised John and the Company could still make money under the circumstances, and John no doubt was surprised at the determination of this serious competition, of a caliber he had not found before. A pair of Capt. Lees came up to St. Louis, where Ike Rhea, Koger and John met with them to effect a settlement. John had to retreat from his desire for the Memphis trade, while Lee agreed to stay out of the Tennessee River. The Lee Line would continue to run to St. Louis (putting the *Georgia Lee* and later, *Stacker Lee* in), and would use the wharfboat of the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co, paying wharfage. The Lees, in anticipation of continuing the conflict, had previously ordered a new boat from Howard, suitable for the Tennessee River. She was near complete, now, adequate for the service John wanted, and he agreed to take her from the Yard putting his own name choice on her: *City of Clifton*, for the town some 35 miles below Savannah. Commonly, the newer and larger boats were given the St. Louis run, and Rhea Massengale, John's oldest son, was assigned to *Clifton* as clerk; he had some prior experience on *City of Sheffield*. As

evidenced by the Anchor Line circumstance, it was becoming increasingly difficult for boat traffic to survive where rails had expanded, but John managed to continue two boats a week out of St. Louis, and two more in local trade from Paducah up to Savannah or Waterloo. Two factors helped maintain this traffic, aside from the negative of no rails built parallel to the Tennessee River. One was Federal sponsorship and opening of a National Park, in 1895, commemorating the battle of Shiloh in1862. This conflict had been a significant move against the South by Grant, leading to further penetration of Central South areas in Tennessee, Mississippi and Georgia. Many regiments of both North and South troops were involved, and the states' military corps, in which the troops served, were given individual monuments, with locations established that units held during the two day battle. The automobile was yet an amusing curiosity, roads were wagon tracks, and no rails led to the Park at Pittsburg Landing, (230 miles from Paducah) but the landing was already a packet stop for occasional cotton bales; it developed into a major objective for visitors, whether history buffs and teachers, or old soldiers who survived and wanted a nostalgic trip a generation later. There was a surge of passenger interest for the Park, which John quickly decided to encourage in special trips, particularly at anniversaries of the battle, in April, and at Memorial Day, (called Decoration Day), a holiday created for this particular war. July Fourth and Labor Day contributed other holiday fares. For the first time, what was called tourist traffic became an important revenue producer, distinguished from passengers traveling on business or pleasure between towns.

A second factor supporting traffic the Company created without Federal help. The river frequently dried out in its upper region, relatively speaking. A required passage over shoal water at Riverton and Waterloo, hampering trade to Florence, was a stretch the larger boats could not make in dry season; the distance amounted to 35 miles, and had perhaps a dozen landings including Florence. Small boats run by Tom Reeder, native to the area who had married the daughter of the owner of the largest farm in the region, operated first *Bessie Smith*, followed by *J.T. Reeder*, in cooperation with the Company schedule. These boats, respectively 140 and 98 feet length, with three foot depth of hull, could carry a light trip drawing two feet of water, maybe less, and cross the shoal water. Freight, as well as passengers, could be picked up by transfer at Savannah or Waterloo for points above as far as Florence, thus completing service of the St. Louis boats past the hazardous part of Colbert Shoals.

Tourist trade and the Tennessee local traffic held up well following 1900, but there was no expansion of St. Louis tonnage, in spite of population growth, and the period would also

show some bad luck from the river. Actually, the Company *had been* lucky in operations. There had been sinking of several boats, but generally salvage, with Koger supervising, had worked well: A sunk steamboat could be a disaster of magnificent proportions, particularly if accompanied by fire or explosion, or no more a troublesome nuisance to experienced salvors than a flat tire on an auto.

The practice had been to keep equipment maintained in off season, and sell off older boats. The *City of Sheffield* was sold in the spring of 1901, so of course promptly two months later the *City of Paducah,* downbound, was backing off an Illinois landing at night when her stern struck a snag and she sank in deep water. Machinery was salvaged, but the boat was gone. (Although two passengers and two crew were lost, first news reports dramatically claimed 22 of the crew were missing; shortly, however, they showed up in St. Louis wanting their pay for time out of St. Louis before the boat sank.)

This loss was compounded by sinking of the *Will J. Cummins*, also in the spring of '01, in the Tennessee. *Clyde* was put into the mail run (she seemed willing to take on any odd job demanded) after surviving her own sinking with little damage in six feet of water, at Buffalo Island in '99. The *City of Clifton* and *City of Memphis* continued the St. Louis to Tennessee River trade, and *Tennessee* continued the local run.

The Company moved with deliberate haste to replace the losses, voting to build two new boats at the Director's meeting, January, 1902. The first of these, *City of Savannah* [II] on a 200 foot hull was designed for the St. Louis to Tennessee River trade, and with expeditious energy the Howard Yard had her launched and ready by late summer; delivery was critical since *City of Memphis* had been forced to turn back passengers for lack of space in July. But the river determines all. The Ohio, like the Tennessee, had its resting and drying out time. This time, it expanded a special sandbar some miles above Paducah; the new boat, though running light coming from the Yard, grounded hard, while the river rapidly retreated, shortly to leave her 300 feet from water, although supported evenly with her hull undamaged. She had to remain until a rise in December floated her off, but the season was over. In this same year, Howard was able to complete construction on a smaller boat, *Shiloh*, 150 feet, for the Tennessee River mail contract, and have her ready by November. This released the *Clyde*, the new boat being a direct replacement for *Cummins*. *Shiloh* connected with the L & N at Danville (91 miles above Paducah) and made a run to Savannah,128 miles up, pausing at Johnsonville, one day, then returning the

next with mail and any passengers and freight for rail connections. The trade with this reliable small boat remained on a schedule largely unchanged for ten years.

Extreme cold afflicted the Ohio Valley that winter,'02, and ice forming in the vicinity of Paducah forced a precautionary measure of moving the St. Louis boats further upstream; the *Clifton* was placed at Savannah. As the ice conditions moderated in February, she was returning to Paducah, reaching Clifton town, some miles below Savannah, when fire from indefinite causes burned her to the waterline, a significant loss in a boat only three years old. It was the only serious fire the Company suffered, although there must have been minor incidents over the years, squelched by a quick thinking rouster or Mate. Flammable cargo combined with tarred decks of wood and live embers from the furnaces, or the casual passenger's cigar still lit as tossed, leads reasonably to this conclusion, for other boats had similar experience.

A replacement boat was ordered from Howard in 1904, and at this time the St. Louis trade was being adequately handled with *Memphis* and the new *Savannah,* so the *Kentucky*, delivered early in '05, was somewhat smaller at 176 feet, intended for the Tennessee. She was probably thought of as replacement for *Clyde*, but as events were to transpire ultimately she became a St. Louis boat.

The exact date, or even specific season, is not known but at around this time the Company decided *Clyde* was worth keeping and was able to use her to expand trade in a new direction, up river from St. Louis. The Upper had been served by other carriers, but a problem of low water in far reaches had always hampered service all the way to Minneapolis; meanwhile, the rails extended their lines, just as on the Lower River. But there was a small, local trade, seasonal in nature, from Calhoun County, Illinois, situated above Alton, squeezed between the parallel Illinois River and the Mississippi. Apples were grown by the thousand in the area, and passage by river was convenient with a short wagon haul for the growers to river landings; shipped in barrels, the apples found a ready market in St. Louis, where also they could be forwarded.

Avoiding low water problems in the uppermost part of the Mississippi, fatal to scheduled service, a boat out of St. Louis could limit its run to the Iowa border with fair water. This made a short two or three day trip carrying groceries and merchandise, such as barrel

staves, to the river landings as far as, first, Hannibal, later extended to Keokuk, Iowa and Quincy, Illinois; on the turn downbound, the apples were loaded by hundreds of barrels adding handsome freight revenue to the trip. The boats ran the normal warm weather season, but it was the fall apple season that made the scheme worthwhile. This trade remained active and profitable into the late 1920's, and including revenue to the Company, the actual cost of shipment to St. Louis was around 15¢ per barrel, divisible over three bushels per barrel. The whole barrel at market sold for about $5, and the purchaser had a useful sturdy barrel left over for further ideas.

It appeared in 1904 trade to the Tennessee was still of enough volume to justify two boats and in addition to *Kentucky*, a replacement was ordered for *City of Memphis*. Perhaps the *Savannah (II)* met with special favor in the crew's opinion, or maybe Howard could promise faster delivery of a duplicate boat, but in any event the *City of Saltillo* was a near twin sister. Her cabin was dressed up a bit, and she was decorated a little more elaborately, but essentially she was the same boat, and designated the lead boat out of St. Louis after her initial trip in July, 1905. The record is vague on whether *Memphis* was sent back to the Tennessee, or, because she had better passenger accommodation, was placed in the *Clyde's* place on the Upper Mississippi. Without publicity it appears some tourist trade was building for the Upper; popular trips lasting three or four days fitted into vacationers' schedules for a brief break. The Company did not commonly prefer to keep a 'reserve' boat— a common practice acting as sort of insurance against accidents— but the *Memphis* was retained through the season of 1909, as well as *Clyde*. *Kentucky* was yet new, and with the *Tennessee* maintained a Wednesday and Saturday departure schedule from Paducah. As an older boat, *Tennessee* was sold in the summer of 1907 to run the Missouri River, and *City of Memphi*s remained available for special trips.

Probably this decade represented the most consistently, if routinely, prosperous of the Company' existence, partly because there were no further serious accidents as headlined by the *City of Clifton*, and partly because revenues were supplemented by new passenger traffic up river. No boats were ordered from Howard, after 1904, as none were needed for further expansion— with the qualification that a new *City of Florence [II]* was built for Tom Reeder in 1909 to be used in the shoals trade. So far as known, the Company had no financial stake in this boat as she came from the Yard, but she was later transferred to the Company when Reeder was made Vice-President in a few years. She was substantially smaller than other boats, 130 feet, but of light draft and of value for low water periods.

Swift shoal water at Colbert Shoals was not to remain indefinitely, for a Government project placed a canal and lock with a small dam, easing this difficult stretch by 1912.

Unfortunately the decade is also remembered for the disastrous accident to *City of Saltillo*. She had been brought up from Paducah for an old soldiers expedition to Shiloh in April, and made two more trips that month, on the last bringing up members of the Rhea family for a St. Louis visit. The boat loaded as usual on May 11, but was delayed in departing at five, partly on account of a stubborn bull with hostile horns who refused to come aboard. *Saltillo* did not get away from the wharf until nearly seven, with dusk beginning. Proceeding down river, the boat ran into momentary poor visibility at mile 156 (24 miles below Eads) from lime kilns situated on the Missouri shore; discharge from the burning kilns blew heavy smoke across the boat's path obscuring everything. Ed Pell, pilot on watch, became momentarily confused, judged his position as further out in the channel than was true, and steered the boat coming full ahead onto the rocky, steep bank under a Missouri cliff. The broken hull filled and started to sink immediately; and because of the severe slope to the bank, here, the crew was particularly alarmed the boat might capsize before passengers could disembark. There was no panic, but nightfall left the scene without light. As quickly as possible, with some steam remaining, the stage was set to the bank, and Barney Carragher, Mate on watch, led a group of about thirty passengers across the stage to safety, lighting the way with a lantern. First Clerk Colin Baker, long time friend of John from Anchor Line days, followed immediately behind them with more light. It was unknown to the crew, but the stage had not settled firmly; a stump or uneven ground held it insecurely. As the group proceeded across, the boat shifted from water being taken, and the stage flipped to one side, dumping all on it to the ground or river below. The mate, at the end of stage, and some of the passengers, fell several feet to the rocks below, and while bruised and shaken, were not seriously injured. But passengers behind were suddenly dumped into deep water, the swift flowing channel running against this shore, and drowned. Even good swimmers had minimum chance to reach the close shore under the circumstances, and women wearing long skirts of those pre-twenties days had no chance at all.

The bodies of twelve people were recovered the next morning, the most serious loss of life the Company ever experienced. It was personal, as well: Clerk Col Baker of the crew was gone, and members of the Rhea family; Ike Rhea's wife and two of his daughters were on board that night. His wife was drowned and one of the girls, all returning to Paducah from the St. Louis trip. After other disasters he had experienced as a younger man, John

had to face another that was, basically, an inconceivable accident; it never should have happened. An act of fate from trivial, coincident events. The boat was running par, parties had acted reasonably, it was dangerous to delay to set the stage, the smoke was not uncommon in the area. . . .and so forth.

John, who was not a vindictive person, was frankly bitter in his view of Pell's error; the pilot was supposed to *know* his position at *all* times, and should not have pulled down on the wheel. But Harry Crane, Master of the boat and John's brother-in-law, confirmed at the official hearing over the accident that the smoke enveloped the boat suddenly. He had been standing on the roof deck, and visibility dropped immediately to zero. The boat was already two hours late on her schedule; to call for emergency halt to the engineer, would have been questionable judgment and a delay for the boat further, to wait while a temporary condition clarified. Staying in the channel meant moving toward the Missouri shore. But it is true, Pell did not *know* his position; current from behind had forced the boat closer than he thought. The official hearing placed significant blame on him, and his license was suspended for a time.

The boat never did turn over; the swift current pulled her stern downstream, and she rested well up on the bank, bow north, at a near 45º angle. Other occupants came off that night, while some cargo and baggage was recovered the next day. Boilers and machinery were later salvaged. Remnants of the wreck are still visible today, at low water stages. Ike Rhea never blamed John for the incident.

The *City of Savannah* was immediately brought up from Paducah, where she had been held pending more trade as the season progressed, and put into service for St. Louis to Tennessee River. The *City of Memphis*, the other, but aging, 200 foot boat, had been sold in April for the Lower River so the season was carried on
by *Savannah,* with *Kentucky* and *Clyde* out of Paducah; *Shiloh* remained in the mail run. The *City of Florence* was available for the Tennessee landings when *Clyde* was brought around for the apple season.

As a matter of fact, the trade did not seem to justify ordering a new boat at this time. While *Savannah* had a profitable year, tonnage for two boats out of St. Louis seemed to be diminishing, and even with loss of the *Saltillo* there was no pressing need for a new,

large boat for 1911. The *Savannah* worked well in 1911 and nearly finished the year; about on her last trip before ice formed, she sank near Buffalo Island in December.

V - Times of Profit and Stress

The damage to the boat seemed not too extensive, and some reports have stated the Company planned to improve her with rebuilding. But reports also stated the river refused to cooperate, with divers being forced or unable to work in water too deep, and the boat was abandoned. Later, John was to state James Koger "refused" to raise the Savannah, but how these conflicts in view might be resolved to clarify the full story remains to be written. It is certain the Board meeting in January, 1912 was faced with the fact the Company had no first class boat of suitable size for the up coming season to start that spring. Just a year before, City of Memphis, although old, had been sold as surplus, and hindsight carries great shrewdness with it.

Of course, it was voted to have Howard begin a new boat immediately, and it was further decided that the St. Louis trade could be handled with just one boat from now on. So the new one, Howard was told, was to be somewhat larger than any ordered before, and in view of the fact that we need this boat to save the 1912 trade, we are not going to argue over the price. Just do it. Ed. J. Howard, in charge of scheduling construction, and John's primary contact for many years with the Yard, agreed it was important to move, and he promised a hundred men on the job if necessary. Perhaps it is useful to recall, when a younger John wrote to Howard in 1878 he said the B.S. Rhea firm would be "negotiating" for the planned new boat; a lot of letters went back and forth, likely. This year was different, but results were going to depend on Howard.

Realistically, there was a lot of uncertainty about Howard. In 1897 when Koger visited the Yard, the Tennessee then on the ways, he reported back that while the boilers and engines would certainly be ready in short order, Howard would never have the woodwork done by August; Koger was right, and it was more like November. On the other hand, in 1902, when both the second Savannah and Shiloh were scheduled, they came off in good time to credit of the Yard, even if low water impeded the final result.

By ordering the new boat early, which was to be christened as Saint Louis, John had hoped to have her ready for end part of the season, from June or July. But what Howard did

not tell John, was the Yard had two big ferries on order for St. Louis, as well as three towboats and a little sternwheel packet for others which had somehow entered the books ahead of Saint Louis. 1912 was not the same picture as 1902. The Saint Louis was the largest hull (210 feet) to come off Howard that year, (The yearly sidewheeler from Anchor Line was no more, of course.), and there seems some question, today, even if Howard had put the one hundred to work, was there space on the ways in the spring, as John anticipated, for framing the hull and cabins and setting up for a summer launch? It was hopeless for the Company to pretend the standards of prior years could be maintained with only the aging and smaller Kentucky left to put in the St. Louis run; Clyde was older yet, and the little Florence did not carry a Texas. A big trip for old soldiers was due for the Shiloh anniversary in April, fifty years after the battle. John chartered the 250 foot sternwheel Dubuque from Streckfus Steamers, the Upper River company nearby with a wharf at Eads Bridge, for this one special event; but it had never been necessary to go outside for adequate capacity before. Florence apparently was taken over from Capt. Reeder at this spring date for regular use with Clyde in the Tennessee. Reeder was to assume a Vice-President title with the Company in 1913.

Ike Rhea seemed to sense early that the schedule was not to be made, but John was optimistic the new boat could still earn something in the season. As the spring progressed tension rose between John and Ed Howard over lack of progress. There seemed to be some delay over high water, but as John saw it: “We can’t let the weather rule us.” The one hundred labor never did materialize, whether from a short supply or time necessarily put on other work. An intermediate sort of climax came when the Company sent their chief ship’s carpenter at Paducah up to Jeffersonville to inspect the work. Instead of a boat approaching launch, the frame was barely completed. John wrote letters of fire and complaint to Ed, who replied with brimstone: John had no business sending a carpenter up to check and see “if the frame was really up;” and by the way, he impeded progress by telling the workers what to do. John complained that the season was far advanced, and the only advice to do was to deny the use of some timbers with wane or a bit sappy. Today, it seems apparent Ed Howard was down deep on the job, and simply took on more work that year than was justified, given facilities and labor available. He could not be expected to suddenly create more production than the Yard could turn out, but his rudeness to an old customer, caught in a tight spot, must remain a matter of astonished puzzlement.

The Company had decided to order another new boat, trying to bring the fleet up to standard six, this one to be somewhat shorter in length, and John asked for a bid, even in

the middle of controversy over delay in Saint Louis. Howard never bothered to reply with any comment. When Ike Rhea, hoping to add incentive, offered a bonus for completion of the big boat quickly, with a penalty in case the date was not met, that idea was met with maximum silence. Ike, seeing the manner in which work was proceeding, or not, took his own action and found a bid for the smaller boat from the Smith Yard, far up the Ohio in West Virginia. But even mention to Howard of a rival yard's guarantee of delivery did not float Ed J. from his sandbar.

Construction began immediately on this boat, which came out as Alabama, and the Smith Yard did deliver in good time. It seems some of the final fitting may have been done down at the Paducah facility, where the Company directly supervised, but even if she was not in keeping with all the design features that Howard had been accustomed to install, and to which John was loyal, she turned out a good boat. Originally built without Texas, one was added in 1920 and she became the last boat to run a scheduled service on the Tennessee River, in 1929.

Meanwhile, the Saint Louis could not be extracted from Howard. Now August was promised, then September. John, seeing the anticipated season wrecked, had no alternative but to keep Clyde in the Tennessee and charter what he could find; this turned out to be the old Tarascon, an Evansville packet that had been a regular out of that town for some years, and now at seventeen, was not much to look at, but could still turn the wheel. She ran the apple season for the Company and did well enough to salvage that part of the trade, while Clyde kept to the Tennessee and Kentucky took the St. Louis run.

October, and the Saint Louis was still not ready. Now there was no season left. On pointing this out to Ed, even though "thankful that fifty men" had finally been assigned, John tried to make a case the boat would have made a substantial revenue contribution to the Company if only he (Ed) had kept his word on putting one hundred men on the boat. Ed replied back that the river was very uncertain and John did not know for sure the boat would have made any money. Maybe; but John had certainly found Ed could be saucy at times. Among other events, at one point Ed ran out of money, for payroll or other helpful things, and requested, hurry up, John, send him four grand immediately. There had been no agreement for advance payment, but John obliged, "as accommodation." No thank you note to his new banker resulted from Ed. J. Howard. John had to write and ask about its

receipt. The mistake John had made, early in the year, was to assure Ed that cash was sitting in the bank to pay for the boat.

Finally, in November the boat was launched and finishing work accomplished sufficient she could be sent down to Paducah, but of course for winter quarters; it would not be for another three months she could make her first trip to St. Louis. Alabama was to take over for Clyde in the spring, while Kentucky would return to the Tennessee, and the two boat, weekly schedule there.

There is more to the construction tale of Saint Louis, but immediately in 1913 came the loss of City of Florence, coming in collision with a tow headed downstream at Coffee Landing, 4 miles below Savannah. A sharp bend concealed the barges as Florence was leaving the landing and she found herself directly in front with the tow having right of way, and too much headway to stop. One report said an inexperienced cub pilot panicked and failed to signal a backing bell quickly enough, but whatever cause the result was one crewman and one child were lost. The boat took on water from the head, drifted down river and sank near the bank in deep water. Although relatively new, Florence was too extensively damaged to be worth recovering; main use of these small boats was to cross Colbert Shoals, but the new canal around the shoals made a small boat's place in the traffic between Waterloo and Florence of diminished value now, although essential just a few years earlier.

Shiloh was pulled off the mail run early in 1913, and tied off as essentially surplus. While ten years old, she was yet in shape to run, and action of the Company suggests the railroad must have changed a schedule so this boat could not make the required time from Savannah to connect with the proper train at Danville; this, in turn rather implies there was only one (mail) train a day using the crossing, but we have no specific evidence of an arrival time. An experiment was tried to retain the mail contract on new terms. Near Spottsville in the Green River (Entering 150 miles up the Ohio, not far from Evansville) was a little boat (122 foot hull) called Speed. She had been built as Verne Swain far up the Mississippi at Stillwater, Minnesota, about the same date the Company was founded. After adventures on the Upper River, and the Illinois, (where her name was changed to Speed,) and the Lower near Greenville, she ended up on the Green River, and sunk. All of which is listed here to show how far away from anything John, or probably, Ike Rhea,

wanted in a steamboat: Too old, wrong builder, mighty small, and incidentally, not floating on water. It is simply an unknown: Who in the Company believed raising this boat for mail and freight was practical? Her sinking must have been coincident with the railroad's action. As a wreck, certainly very little cash was given up. There was just one element that made the argument: She had been designed for fast runs, with a wheel perhaps twenty percent larger than expected for a boat of her size. Pictures show the startling difference, buckets reaching nearly to the top of the boiler deck but much narrower proportionally, measured against the stern transom than other boats. With oversize circumference and compressed width, the point was: Turn that wheel.

A schedule shows she had to leave Danville at 8: AM, the L&N crossing, and make Johnsonville for the N.C. & St.L. in two hours, or exceed 10 miles per hour upstream to be sure of making both connections; but what was supposed to happen if the L & N was late? Without a railroad schedule, there is no way of telling how much slack was needed; or, perhaps, none, if the train passed Danville very early in the morning. In any event, 20 miles in two hours is probably the upper limit of what might be expected of any boat held to schedule when varying water conditions are taken into account. But the boat may have been a useful experiment: She was kept in the service for one or two years, and then sold, finally ending the Danville to Savannah mail run for the Company after many years. It may be that another change in schedule by the railroad forced the end. Service was maintained by other boats in the local run from Paducah, which continued to pick up at Danville, but general freight was not mail demanding immediate delivery.

Rather than leave Shiloh idle, she was chartered in the fall, 1913, to a Memphis company, running south. Bringing the boat into Memphis that December, careless handling let her hit the levee much too hard, and some planking was split. No one bothered to check for significant damage, and the boat settled overnight ending up with only the pilot house clear of water; she seemed too old to be worth salvage. Thus, both of the small, shallow draft boats the Company might rely on for low water service were lost that year. 1913 had started with great anticipation for the introduction of the largest and most elaborately appointed of all the boats. Saint Louis was now to handle all of the freight and passengers from the home wharf on about an eight day schedule to the Tennessee. With the coldest weather retreating rather early this year, John had the boat brought around early in March. He arranged a ceremony for christening the new boat, had her decorated with bunting, and brought guests aboard for a short trip down river. All was well; the boat loaded and departed for the Tennessee at five o'clock. Capt. Harry Crane, who was normally given

command of the newest boat, was aboard. The river was on a rise at St. Louis, a usual circumstance in the spring, but over on the Ohio a heavier than normal spring melt had started what was to be a serious flood; Cincinnati was to have a record on the gage there, and as the Saint Louis passed Cairo and started upstream the current there must have been running a millrace. The boat was surely under stress as she steered to swing up the Ohio, compared to the downstream run in the Mississippi. She had only a little over fifty miles to Paducah, but a few miles short of the terminal, at night, there was a tremendous crash of bent metal on the top deck, when a broken hog chain on starboard parted and crippled the boat; there was nothing the pilot could do but head for the bank and tie off as quickly as possible.

These chains, which were not chains at all, but steel rods an inch or more in diameter, were essential stiffening devices on wood hull boats, designed to counter the effect of the concentrated weight of boilers, forward, and engines with other machinery near the stern; they also tied to, and helped support, the wheel, another center of concentrated weight, and to lose a hog chain might lead to loss of the wheel as well. Thus the haste of the pilot in landing immediately, even though Paducah had extensive repair facilities not far upstream.

Repairing a broken hog chain was not unknown or an impossible task, but the boat was glossy new, had only a few hours of operation behind her, and John, when he found out, could only conclude the Yard had slipped up on this end of the job as another part of the whole unsatisfactory construction history. Howard had personnel in Paducah, and some of them came down to the boat immediately word was sent to aid boat engineers in getting the Saint Louis moving again. Only temporary repair was possible under the circumstance. It seems Howard in taking extraordinary time in getting the boat off, had also not used extraordinary care in tightening the chains, a rather critical job which had to be done with due allowance for balancing strain on each side. And John had found out the boat had developed what he called “a hump” in her decking toward the stern, indicating again lack of care by the Yard in the building process. Today, bureaucrats would demand the boat be recalled, and the steamboat inspectors would make rude comments to Howard.

The Howard people were in no way ready to do any recalling. Only admitting, that yes, there was a problem here, but, it seemed, pulling the boat out of the water, putting her on

the ways for correction, was not possible immediately; we are too busy, and expense will be required.

This was past the limit John could take. After losing expected revenue off his new boat from delay in getting her, added to prevarication over completion, now a new season was starting off with more delay and lost revenue, evidently due to bad workmanship. And he had no intention of paying for correction, with that hump getting worse the longer the boat ran. John had a card he could play. Of the billings by Howard for woodwork, around $21,000, some $2000 was yet to be paid; whether this was arbitrarily withheld or resulted from delayed billing for finish items— the latter seems more likely— someway, Howard was due two grand. "We will do the work ourselves," John told him,(the Company maintenance crew at Paducah), "now, without delay we cannot afford; and the $2000 due will be used to cover costs, and we consider the matter finished." Then Howard finally inquired about the "other boat" that John had asked to bid months before. Unfortunately, the Alabama was already up and running, and Ike Rhea had not been bluffing, Howard finally fully realized, when Ike told him he had an alternative bid and builder.

Surviving correspondence ceases at this point, but it looks a bad bet Howard ever received the two grand. All things considered, it may have been fortunate the boat had to face a particularly heavy flood on the Ohio that night, as it brought out the defect immediately, rather than leave it concealed to emerge later with some fatal result. Harry Crane had been uneasy about the boat as she left St. Louis, saying she might have an accident; now the hog chain was seen as the culprit, the Captain relaxed.
Major personnel shifts were made in 1912-13 as James Koger decided to retire from his place as Superintendent in Paducah. While two of the original partners had died before the Company had achieved a continuing level of prosperity, Koger's departure was the only instance of a split in the original agreement. A surviving letter shows John felt Koger's actions were hostile without adequate cause, and that he now regretted trusting him; but the letter does not contain enough detail of events to tell us the whole picture behind Koger's view. He may have felt, the popular view of many, that steamboat trade was falling off soon to nothing and departure quickly was shrewd strategy; but such a view was only an insult to John and his devotion to the business. One result of Koger's defection was to appoint Tom Reeder as Vice-President to fill the slot Koger had held on the Board, making Reeder a stock holder at the same time; thus City of Florence became Company property. But Reeder was much occupied with business affairs at Riverton, nearly across from Waterloo where freight transfer was sometimes made, 260 miles up from Paducah, and

could not fill the half of Koger's function, on site Super at Paducah. It was decided to move Capt. King Hale off his current post, long time successive Master on Clyde, Tennessee and Kentucky, and place him on the wharfboat as Superintendent of Paducah operations.

Loss of both Shiloh and City of Florence led to a decision in 1914 for a new boat, this of light draft and particularly suited to shoal stretches and the uncomfortable low water the Tennessee produced at times. Maybe surprisingly, after all the difficulties involved with Ed Howard, John wrote him asking for a design centered on a very simple, cheap little boat to fill this place, and after discussion some sort of blueprint was produced (which has not survived), but the project was never carried to completion. This correspondence discussing the features of the boat consumed an inordinate amount of time, for a boat was not in water before February, 1915; and, she was not built at Jeffersonville, but came off ways at Paducah. It is uncertain whether Howard controlled this yard at this date or not, for while the firm had purchased several facilities other than the original one across from Louisville, by the 1920's the Yard at Paducah was "Ayer and Lord."

The new boat was called Tom C. Powell, departing from geographic names in respect of assistance given by a railroad executive who was influential in having a spur of the Southern Railroad brought into Riverton, thus linking the distant end of the Tennessee to a main east-west rail line running through Corinth, Mississippi. Shippers now had access to a direct line into the South, and were not confined to forwarding through Paducah. The Powell, although only 137 foot length, became the utility boat and served to fill in on various trades as Clyde had done for many years. The latter was sold to Memphis owners, in 1914, then later returned to Paducah and was dismantled in 1918.

Overhanging all trade after August, 1914 were the forces of World War I; the impact of an explosion in northern France was not felt instantly, but over coming months built up to entry of the United States in 1917. The Company kept rates down initially, and the Saint Louis profited from big trips to Shiloh; the round trip fare for tourists in 1915 was still $15: eight days of scenic travel, room and board, just as it had been for years. The Alabama and Kentucky maintained the twice weekly Paducah to Florence trade, with Tom Powell available when Alabama was sent up to take the Calhoun County trade. But the Company was now down to four boats, the lowest number in years. Although overall steamboat traffic was falling now under the impact of both rails and autos— Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1913— on the Tennessee River trade held up fairly well, and the year of 1915

was profitable enough, John thought, to justify a new boat; the Kentucky was now eleven years old.

John made the last of personnel changes in Paducah while Tom Powell was under construction. Capt. Hale, while an experienced boat man, had not experience in a multitude of small tasks and decisions required in the Superintendent's job, and John decided family representation was needed to improve matters. His oldest son Rhea, after running no post other than clerk on the boats, had left the river for his uncle's lumber yard in 1902, and picked up a good deal of knowledge about the stuff used in building boats. He remained in St. Louis those years, and he was in on Company decisions, difficulties and planning. So John sent him down to Paducah as General Manager at the time the War started, August 1914. Hale kept his post, but if John needed someone he could trust, he now had it. Rhea would remain there for ten years.

The new boat was ordered from Ed Howard relatively late in 1916, the last entry on Howard's book of seven, and the only boat with a wood hull. John was still convinced that the Howard boats were top of the line, but he also advised Ed that "we" agree the Company will be allowed to check construction in progress, a reminder to the rage Ed had exercised when his workers had been corrected.

Following inevitable trends, Howard had now shifted over to steel hulls. John would have none of it: "You tell me, which floats better, a breadboard or a frying pan?" There had been discussion of steel for the Saint Louis, but even then for the leading boat old prejudice ruled. There was a valid point: Even with the technology of fabrication now proven, the cost was twice as much for a steel hull of the same dimension, and deeper draft cut the paying cargo, for no one could argue that steel displaced less water. So a higher initial cost was added to a potentially longer pay back time. The Corp of Engineers had much decreased the danger to wood hulls of big sawyers and planters by constant snag boat service, and as John did correctly observe, the only thing a steel hull protected against was snags; fire and explosions were still of consequence on wood superstructure, and a steel hull grounded as easily as wood in shoal water; and it could not avoid a collision. Old wood hulls were sure to demand maintenance cost to remain afloat, but John was never one to favor keeping a boat if its age dictated performance. He remarked: "After five years, anybody can have one of my boats at my price, their price at ten."

So Howard went ahead with the new boat called Paducah, 170 foot wood hull, about the same as Alabama, but with a Texas as she was launched. The intent was to replace Kentucky, but there had been a surge of business in 1916 and late in the year as Paducah arrived, John penned a preliminary report to Ike Rhea: "With a little luck we will make $60,000 this year." (Today, of course, the number seems a trifle, but it must be remembered the capitalization of the Company was $150,000, and passengers were being carried on a week long trip with room and board for $15.) It was to be the high point of earnings the Company reached in a single year, and the last year for construction of a new steamboat.

Whether encouraged by entry into the War in April, 1917, or part of a usual upswing in the business cycle, activity remained high and profitable during the year. Not all river companies did so well, the influence of rails now forcing their full effect in the Mississippi Valley: The Lee Line had to go through reorganization to keep operating. But there were no new rails in the Tennessee Valley, and the Saint Louis made all her trips with paying tourists for the Battlefield site; the Company had hired a Chicago travel agency to promote the trip to out of town visitors. The Streckfus Line gradually abandoned overnight service on the Upper River, successively changing over its old Diamond Jo Line packets (purchased in 1911) to excursion service. This trade was quite different: eliminating freight, using the largest boats obtainable, removing cabins for a dance floor and food concessions, while fares were cut to a dollar or so for a four to eight hour cruise in local water; such a boat could run two excursions a day with hundreds of fares. But for the Alabama, the Calhoun County run was keeping the boat busy, consistently bringing down tons of apple barrels; and the trip was sometimes more than the boat alone could handle so she towed a barge alongside loaded with more barrels. Kentucky and Paducah maintained the Tennessee River local run, with Powell on occasion being sent up to St. Louis to assist Alabama; it was necessary to add a Texas to the Powell (in 1916) as business built for her. John had originally thought of the little boat as running only daylight hours with a single crew, but it looks as though the idea of a defined shoals boat was no longer important; even the Saint Louis could pass Colbert Shoals, now, with the canal giving passage to Florence. One boat with shallow draft was a hedge against the river's tendency to dry up at times.

The calendar was passing. In the fall, Ike Rhea died, the fourth of five partners at inception of the Company. Late in 1916 he had purchased two small Cumberland River boats, apparently on his own account, for John had communicated with him on using Company tradesmen to do necessary repair and renovation (at Paducah), on"your boats,"

and passed on his opinion for some of the crew. Tom Ryman, Sr., had died in 1904, and that line was not as prosperous as in former years; so it seems Ike was undertaking his own steamboat operation. One of the boats was wrecked in a sudden windstorm, but the second, Robert Rhea, (for Ike Rhea's son) was left over as estate property; the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. took her over for use in the Tennessee in late 1918. Although not a Howard boat, at 149 feet she seems to have performed well in the Tennessee, even if considered too small for St. Louis, and continued running until 1927. The Company added a long Texas cabin to her, one of the renovations discussed at the time Ike Rhea bought her.

VI – Transition

As if the passing of Ike Rhea was an insufficient reminder of mortality, Ed. J. Howard of the Yard also died in 1919. Animosity over building *Saint Louis* seems to have been resolved, and relations remained better through delivery of *Paducah* in late 1916; indeed, that boat served well and never had a serious accident up to her final sale in 1928, so the Yard could still build a good boat when proper attention was paid to detail. But John seemed no longer to want work done at Jeffersonville after the passing of Ed. Or maybe this is putting too much on the fact that the next building would be done at Paducah. It must be recalled that Rhea Massengale was now an experienced manager at the wharf there, and handy for inspecting anything done just around the corner (of the river) at Paducah's ways. If you can't trust family, who? No need to run up to Jeffersonville just to check on Howard's men. The Company, partly through luck, and partly because of Rhea's instinct, came through the winter of 1917-18 without significant loss. Such was not true for boats in Cincinnati, other parts of the Ohio, and specifically for the Eagle Packet Co. out of St. Louis, which commonly brought boats into the warmer water of the Tennessee River for the winter.

Eagle Packet at the next wharf up from the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. had run packet service for many years up the Mississippi, and cornered a niche of the Illinois as well. They had some trade down to Commerce, Mo., turning back at Cairo, and they had survived as a company since the 1860's, in 1917 running both packet and excursion services. The disaster this winter came as ice formed in the Ohio, not at all unusual, but by December, it spread further south, hardening the situation at Cincinnati and down river, and spreading exceptionally into the Tennessee. All was frozen over at Paducah, and the ice extended up river. Eagle had put its *Bald Eagle* on the ways at Paducah out of water; but sidewheelers *Spread Eagle*, *Grey Eagle* and *Alton*, and sternwheel *Peoria,* were up river a distance in the Tennessee.

As the unexpected ice halted traffic, Rhea moved Company boats across from Paducah, to the upper end of Owen's Island, against a gently sloping bank that side of the river, while the channel and swifter water came down against the Paducah side. "I thought I would just keep an eye on them," he said, meaning from his office across on the wharfboat; looking over them like a mother hen. The weather warmed slightly the last few days of January, the ice broke, and four of the Eagle boats were carried down by the current, held by the locking pressure of floes to ultimate destruction in the Ohio. The wrecks were found scattered, and of one, not a trace. Rhea's boats, out of the current, were shoved aside and pushed onto the bank, but as the broken ice passed they slid back to safety and afloat without significant damage. Eagle had left only the *Bald Eagle*, and a little reserve boat, the *Piasa,* as the remnant of a fleet; the latter survived after being left up north at the dangerous ice port of St. Louis.

The impact of Federal spending for an expeditionary force began to build in 1918, only part paid by taxes, and commodity prices, first for food, followed by other items, rose at rather extraordinary rates. Businessmen of that era had no experience with this phenomenon; their lives had been spent in an environment of stable or falling prices as productivity increased with population, and the last unusual stress from war had ended in 1865. The Company was forced to raise the tourist rate to Shiloh to $20, in 1918, followed in the next two years by $25, and $30--- huge percentage changes after holding steady for two decades, but it only reflected Company costs.

Maintenance work on the boats was also affected by prices for lumber, metal, and the multitude of small items needed in repair. (One thing that did not rise was wages: Power of trade unions was limited at this date, and it would seem most workers were taken unaware what was going on, or knew not the effect from cause.) This inflation would continue for several years, but also it reflected increased economic activity and the boats remained busy. *Saint Louis* ran tourist excursions to Shiloh, and continued to carry profitable freight for the Tennessee communities; *Kentucky* and *Paducah* had their weekly local trade, while the up river business with *Alabama* had departure from St. Louis three times a week. *Tom Powell* had to help out with the apple trade.

Late in the season, of '18, the last holiday, the *Saint Louis* completed her Shiloh visit and was returning on the night of Labor Day when she struck an unidentified obstruction, square in the center of the channel, above Sulphur Springs, Mo. light; it was within rifle shot of the wreck of the *Saltillo* and in the graveyard stretch of the Mississippi. Both pilots were in the pilot house, and the boat was immediately headed for shoal water and sandbars on

the Illinois side, but she went down too fast to be grounded. There should have been nothing in the channel at this point— an old wreck turned up by the river, or an unnoticed snag moved into place seemed to be the culprit. The water was so deep where she sank that with a port list she was covered above the boiler deck. Among others aboard that trip was Rebecca, John's daughter, with her son, age seven. The time was late at night, with the boat due in town after midnight. Many years later the son remembered crossing the cabin floor with water washing his bare feet as he and his mother were escorted by the mate to companionway stairs for the roof, only minutes from the time the boat hit. The passengers gathered on the rear starboard portion of the roof free of water, the boat headed at an angle toward Illinois, and with the crew, watched downstream for lights of the *Bald Eagle*. They had passed her loading at a landing some miles down river earlier in the evening, and knew she would be coming before too long; it took about an hour. Some attempt was made to account for everybody that night, and it seemed as though all were present. The Eagle boat found the wreck with her searchlight and shortly was able to place a stage across to the roof rail. Everybody came across safely— no repeat of the *Saltillo*, well remembered by Mate Barney Carragher who was one of the survivors of that boat.

By the light of day, the boat was seen to have settled further, on what was apparently a sand bottom, and salvage first was thought possible. The mother of a young girl turned up unaccounted: There was no clear story as to what happened, since some thought she had left in a yawl (which shortly returned as no aid in the area was available) while others maintained she had been with passengers on the roof. She could not be found the next day, and as a speculation it seems she may have not moved promptly to the roof with others but returned to her stateroom for some valuable, ending trapped. The list of the boat was a danger sign, and noting it Mate Carragher made a special effort to have an historic roof bell rescued; this was successful, but also the only thing salvaged, for within twenty four hours the current undermined the hull, and the boat turned and disappeared below water. No sign of her has been found. It has never been clear what obstruction in the channel could have so badly damaged the hull; the thought occurs, steel might not have taken so much damage.

This head blow to Company operations came at a particularly awkward period, for rising costs as noted above had placed a check on what would have been an immediate normal, if forced, decision: Build a new boat. Data available today show the inflation in prices was to continue and peak in 1919; but there was no way of knowing in September, 1918 what the future price level was going to be. To make a major commitment at an extreme level was not good judgment, tariffs and fares could not remain high, and odds favored a decline. Wages, so far, had not confirmed that inflation would continue. But to have *no* St.

Louis boat for the coming year was not possible if the Company was to maintain its business. Perhaps a person with less determination would look at the overall decline in packet traffic, and decide to cut back on new capital expense; but this does not fit John. The river teaches determination. On those terms, after Eagle lost its fleet in early '18, it purchased an old cotton boat, called it *Golden Eagle* and kept going with tourists to 1942. Maybe John's friends one wharf up river helped inspire him.

The *Alabama* had built a profitable trade up river, while the old Tennessee trade could be sustained by a newer *Paducah* and *Tom Powell*. *Kentucky* had filled in for *Saint Louis* on occasions before when the bigger boat was temporarily pulled out. She was old, still reliable; not really big enough, but the largest available. (*Alabama* had no Texas at this date.) *Robert Rhea* could fill in where necessary, although not proven in use, yet. Thus the boats were arranged for coming 1919, with the idea held that some price relief was due with the war finished in November, and there would be time to turn around.

Now a waiting game for 1919 and 1920; wholesale prices did peak but there was not much decline, and construction of a new boat was deferred while *Kentucky* kept the battlefield run. *Alabama* was enlarged for better passengers' quarters, with addition of a full Texas cabin. The exact date of completion for this seems to have been lost, but clearly the Company did it in an off period for the apple trade— that was too valuable to give up. The work was not bid by the Howard Yard, and this particular modification did not require the boat be pulled out on ways; Paducah could do it. And, it seems the Company was looking forward to the day when *Alabama* might have to be put into the St. Louis - Tennessee River run.

An additional bit of modification was made to the St. Louis wharfboat, which to this date, and going back to at least 1900, had been floating; naturally, that is what a wharfboat did, so the boats avoided problems of grounding or breaking buckets and rudders on levee slopes. A simple decked barge would work as well, but a full covered wharf allowed discharge and storage of any cargo subject to weather or theft. The superstructure, nothing but a 250 foot open warehouse, with a fair sized three room office on the roof, was yet sound, but the hull had become waterlogged, and was in danger of sinking some dark night if not pumped religiously and vigorously. Putting a new hull on the boat was not technically impossible, but a question of cost entered the equation here, as with new steamers. John came up with the idea— and he may have gained it from seeing how the shipyards worked— of avoiding the cost of a new hull by placing the sound upper part of the structure on a series of large timbers, (nine sets altogether) stacked as cradles which conformed to the slope of the St. Louis levee. This was the same concept a yard used to

hold a boat level while out of water for construction or repair. The advantage a floating wharf had, of automatically being at whatever level the river dictated the boats would arrive, was substituted by letting these cradles roll up and down the levee; standard railroad truck wheels were used, the rails set down level into a groove in the levee stones, which at St. Louis were granite blocks. (Horses, wagons and autos had to be able to drive across the levee.) The wharf would move up or down with the stage of river, with boats tying off and unloading directly into it, as before.

The idea was ingenious, but did not work as well as the concept implied, an idea which would have eliminated the cost and maintenance of wharf hulls forever. It was found raising the wharf as the river rose could be handled, but the reverse trip stalled. Movement up and down had to be done with hand labor, using a come-a-long (or hand winch, although eventually large motors might be devised) and the wood structure like a boat had a tendency to give, and twist slightly; but railroad wheels, flanged, had to run true on narrow rails. If one end of the wharf was slightly pulled up, relative to the other end, wheels jammed. Counter intuitively, with weight against them, teams of rousters could work well in unison and judge the force applied going up— action that was tedious but effective; but going down, gravity caused misalignment as one set of wheels happened to run ahead of another: That meant, back up, free the wheel, and do it over.

Secondarily, the river disliked the scheme as evidenced by its tendency to deposit mud, sticks, logs, barrels and oil drums, sorts of floating trash, and an occasional waterlogged voter, all trapped against the cradles under the deck, all of which had to be cleared to get the system working. Mud was perhaps the worst. Mississippi mud (from the Missouri River) hardens up like cement, and once in the rail grooves, sets for life. It could only be dispatched out with pressure of fire hoses. Rent was paid to the city for the use of levee space, and the city was supposed to wash mud off the levee, which would be necessary whether or not rails were in place, as each high water left its deposit. (Aside from dry, the other state of mud was wet, having the consistency of glue to the unwary hiker.) But the city was not always too prompt about seeing the job done, and this could lead to frantic phone calls at city authority, should a boat be due and the wharf not in position for discharging and loading. Viewed as a whole, substituting the hull solved one problem and created a different one. Shipyards could use such a system, as a boat was pulled up once, and let down once when repair was complete; there was no recurrent, time consuming haul back and forth.

A wholesale price index (good indices of various price movements had not been constructed at that time) shows some of the anticipated relief from war shortages did

develop by 1921: From an index level of 82 in 1915, (when the *Paducah* was ordered) the peak was reached in 1919 at 163, about double in four years; soon it would fall back to 118. But that was still 42% above 1915, and from John's view, assuming a bid would reflect this index, paying 42% more in 1921 than he had in 1915 for his last boat was a form of madness. He had no reason to assume he could raise his own tariffs or fares by anything that would yield such an increase in revenue. He had grown accustomed to falling prices over the years, for the calendar base of this index (= 100) was the same year the company was incorporated, 1887, and in 1911 stood at 76. Somebody had thrown a whole new economic ball game at him. He, with others of his generation, did not understand how to play these rules.

The *Kentucky* remained in the Shiloh run for 1921, but there seemed little to be gained, and a loss in service standards, for keeping the old boat as she was any longer. Quotations on materials were still high, but it was thought some savings were possible by rebuilding this boat rather than taking on the cost of a totally new one. It is suspected that John was not entirely at ease with the Howard Yard, now that Ed. J. was no longer around. So at end of season *Kentucky* was pulled out and put on the ways at the Paducah Yard. Although repaired from time to time, she had eighteen years of service since first launched. The boat was to be completely rebuilt in all important respects, and modernized as well with such features as hot water to cabins and steam heat for chill days. Much hull work was done, and new boilers added. "She'll be just like a new boat," John commented cheerfully, "so we can call her what we choose." He would never consent to his name on a boat, a decision forcefully announced even before the *Paducah* had been launched, when Ike Rhea and others suggested it. (There was a vague tradition that boats with M in the name were unlucky.) Somebody decided that *Tennessee Belle* was suitable. As it progressed, work inevitably turned up other repair that had not been anticipated, and it seemed as though price lists contained only new, bigger numbers for familiar items. John grimly paid each new bill all out of Company cash that had accumulated over time, but the total ran to $80,000 before the last one came in; two or three new boats could have been built for this amount just a few years before, and while tourist trade seemed sound, with new trips up river, the freight trade out of St. Louis was not what it had been.

VII - The Old Order Passes

Rebuilding *Tennessee Belle* was not complete by the time the 1922 April start of trade came around, when a faithful, if dwindling, number of old soldiers signed up for the Shiloh anniversary, and *Alabama* was put in the battlefield run. *Tom Powell* had to be brought up from the Tennessee to help with the apple trade, and it was well that *Robert Rhea* had been bought, for the Tennessee freight from Paducah still was making money. Barney Carragher

took the Master's post on *Alabama* at some time this year, although it is uncertain whether his promotion came about for her initial trip, or later on; in general, Harry Crane was Master on St. Louis boats, but he had not been well for some time with a vague diagnosis of anemia, (and possibly today cured with a few shots of B-12), so he may have turned the post over to Barney after the season started.

By the 1923 start of season *Tennessee Belle* was off the ways and (back) into the Tennessee River run. *Alabama* took the Upper River on a Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday departure, with $3.50 the charge for anyone wanting a brief holiday, including meals and berth. *Tom Powell* ran a short schedule from below the old Colbert Shoals to Florence, and could be put in other short runs when necessary.

The old order was passing. Boatmen of the nineteenth century were getting along in years. In the fall of 1923, Harry Crane died, and shortly Tom Reeder followed. John continued in the management as President, and son Rhea was named Vice-President, taking Reeder's place on the Board. A younger son, George, had completed a new notion of education called college, and joined the firm at St. Louis; John was not entirely convinced such education was not excessive, but wanted him in the office. With Rhea remaining in Paducah as manager of operations there, at St. Louis a younger man could fill in with possibly useful tasks such as collecting freight bills from the merchants who had parcels shipped by the boat. He said later on, collection of the bills was a diminishing task over time, but driving his father to and from work every day performed a real service since John, who never learned to drive an auto, could no longer run easily up the cliff of Chestnut Street from the levee, to catch the Fourth Street car for home. John was 74 in November, 1923. He continued at the office as usual in 1924, but his family knew he was not feeling well. By May, he was persuaded to go to the hospital for more treatment than a doctor could provide, and he died a few days later. He was the last member of that generation of the family, although his wife, some younger, the sister of Harry Crane, lived for a number of years. The business and decisions now were in the hands of his two sons.

The Company was to suffer just one more serious accident, as *Tom Powell* tackled some heavy broken ice running in the Ohio, January, 1924. It appeared there was some demand for freight transfer from Paducah up the Cumberland as far as Nashville, and the plan had been to let *Powell* make this run on an irregular schedule, not a regular weekly trip. The Cumberland, like the Tennessee, was not plagued with ice to the extent found in the Ohio, and the boat had only twelve miles to go leaving Paducah to reach the mouth of the Cumberland; six miles short, the hull started taking on water from pounding given it by ice, and she sank. Several lives were lost, one report stated, with the boat going down so fast

that a number of people were left stranded in the pilot house; but a contemporary account has twenty-five passengers and crew making it to shore in yawls, a less dramatic sequence. The *Powell* was a small boat, lightly constructed for shallow draft. She should not have been required to tackle heavy broken ice. The Company carried insurance on her to about the amount of her value.

While Rhea had considered his job centered at Paducah for some years now, by time of the last trip of *Tennessee Belle* for the season 1924, he had reconsidered the matter and returned to St. Louis with family and baggage. He had a house newly built in 1914, rented out in the interim, to return to, a company diminished in earning power now subject to his decisions, and a younger brother to help out. For the moment, the two made no significant changes, keeping the *Tennessee Belle* for the lead boat in the St. Louis run, with *Alabama* running up river, *Paducah* and *Robert Rhea* in the Tennessee.

The crews were experienced, many of years standing with the Company and loyal, and while the smaller boats were by no count new, it was clear the only practical course was keep on course. George was not optimistic about the future of the river trade, particularly for packet service. Having taken a blow from railroad expansion, some packet trade survived, but a new threat in the form of auto travel had claimed much of what might have been passenger travel, aided, as the twenties progressed, by the Federal Government's aid in road construction. All weather roads had first paved the towns; now inter city travel was to have highways. Coming up, although not very visible in 1925, those same roads were going to encourage truck traffic, and trucks carry freight, the real revenue maker for boats in past years. George was not committed to the river; he had no great fascination with boats, as his father had and as Rhea, much like him, had acquired at an early age. Rhea could see the truth of what was happening; there was no disagreement on that score. But Rhea was past 50 in age, and to abandon trade and business he had known all his life was as unrealistic as expecting the river to mysteriously revive.

The Streckfus Line had faced falling packet trade by converting its boats to daily excursions service, and deleting freight. The Lee Line had left St. Louis in 1919, seeing declines in traffic, and reorganized to run only to the South. Eagle Packet, after years in both excursion and packet business, at the loss of its boats in 1918, found excursions redundant and concentrated on overnight passenger - tourist trips; they even built a new steel hull boat in 1923 of a size comparable to *Saint Louis*; a move George verbally, not just mentally, characterized as crazy. Just goes to show how opinion can vary. Shortly George was to get a new idea, but for the time being the brothers kept the old boats going.

People still liked to ride the boats; there was a kind of camaraderie brought on by a slow pace of travel and good food that one would never get on Route 66. Trains were getting better for passengers, but they were still smoky, noisy, rough riding and at best had cramped quarters, with or without the Pullmans, while on the boat there was room to stroll around, with the river bank making a changing panorama. Somewhat ironically, in1820 steamers brought new, speedy travel to Western Rivers, and then technology outclassed *that* speed by 1920; but loyal river travelers felt speed of transport was not always the deciding element in moving from one place to another.

Passenger travel about covered the costs of operation of *Alabama* and *Tennessee Belle*, and *Alabama* had the added benefit of freight in volume when the apples came down from Calhoun County. The two Tennessee River boats did have some helpful freight revenue for the towns and landings up river. And thus the economics of packet service remained for 1925 and '26. The Company maintained its cash position, but there was no growth to be expected and the boats were getting older: Just like the old soldiers who each year returned to make the Shiloh reunion, they were not going to last forever.

On a July day in 1927 Capt. Dick Dicharry arrived in St. Louis. He had been running a small boat of about 150 foot hull out of Vicksburg, but his boat had burned; believing there was yet packet traffic to be had on the Lower River, Dicharry wanted another boat. Capt. Fred Way, another optimist on the future of packet service, on the upper Ohio, had been first visited by Dicharry, object: Sell him the *Betsy Ann*, Way's boat then running between Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. In spite of any argument that Dicharry could bring to bear, Way said no. Thus the St. Louis visit, which Dicharry seemed to think was next best town for surplus boats, where he found, first, on walking down from Washington Ave., the *Belle of Calhoun* tied off at the levee. The *Belle* had been bringing down apples in direct opposition to the trade of *Alabama*, and since the owners had come from that county, they achieved some success; not enough, however to stop the *Alabama*. Possibly they lacked finesse in customer relations, as illustrated: Dicharry started up the stage set on the levee, and barely reaching the foredeck, heard a loud voice, "Git off the boat." The worthy captain hastily retreated and went down levee fifty yards to the wharf of the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co., where a cordial reception was gained from Rhea in the office.

Dicharry spoke with a thick accent Rhea had some difficulty in comprehending at first, but eventually the word came through that his visitor wanted a boat. Of course, selling off a major asset called for consultation with the younger brother, theoretically, but the brother was out of town at the time, and as Rhea contemplated the situation he was not inclined to ponder. Whether the *Alabama* came up for discussion is not known, but with rebuilding,

the *Tennessee Belle* was technically a newer boat; it is suspected she was not at the wharf that day, but must have arrived from her regular Tennessee River trip in short order, and Rhea must have had Dicharry return as soon as possible to see the merchandise. When Rhea found out Dicharry was prepared to pay cash, there was no hesitation. Actually, the boat had been doing well that season, and a new trip with staterooms about filled had already been booked. But, as Rhea viewed it, the trade had no assurance of continuing and it was unlikely any better offer than cash was going to materialize. He agreed to accept $25,000 offered by Dicharry, who wanted the boat immediately, and promptly sent off telegrams to the booked passengers to not come to St. Louis, that their trip had been canceled.

Capt. Dicharry took the boat to Vicksburg, and put her on a run to Natchez. As the depression years of the 1930's deepened, Dicharry ran out of cash, like everybody else, did not maintain the boat, and she became a shabby imitation of anything the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. would ever have run in its fleet. But she kept running anyway, and achieved some fame as the last packet remaining on the Lower Mississippi. She finally burned below Natchez in 1942.

Sale of *Tennessee Belle* may have been interpreted, from outside parties, as a sign the Company was disposing of its equipment that summer, for in August, 1927 an unsolicited offer was made for *Robert Rhea*. Rhea was glad to accept. New owners took her to Mobile for the Alabama River, and she continued in service for several years; her ultimate disposition is unknown.

VIII - Changing Times

There was some trade yet on the Tennessee River, the local service out of Paducah, and it might seem sale of *Robert Rhea* an error. But something else was happening. The brothers had decided, quite sensibly, (regardless of Dicherry or Way) that packet boats were passing quickly, and to even stay in business required a new approach; at the same time there did not seem much profit in exclusive excursion or tourist business, rivaling the provinces of John Streckfus and the Eagle Packet Company. But in 1926, publicity and information began to circulate on the use of Diesel engines in towing operations; 'to circulate' means advertise. As early as 1923 a Diesel boat had come into use on the upper Ohio, but near St. Louis the earliest example seems to have been around 1925 with a small sternwheel boat on the tiny Meramac River, where sand and gravel were being dredged for construction contractors. Towing a barge or barges along side a standard steamer had been known as far back as 1850, and on the Upper River steam towboats had operated bringing down grain in multiple barge tows; the same was true for delivery of coal out of

Pittsburgh on the Ohio. But towboats were steamboats with a different service, for there was less (if any) variety in cargo, generally a full tow being sent from point to point with occasional barges dropped off between; and this was not common carrier (*i.e*. regulated) service, but contract agreement. The Company had never had interest in towing as a river service; towboats may well float, but the type of operation was different. The thing that made towing of interest in 1926, to the brothers, was a new power in Diesel engines. And the reason for Diesel was cost savings. Such an engine was intrinsically simpler, with no boilers for external combustion, and a smaller crew that was not required to have steam license under Government rules. The Fairbanks-Morse Company had several marine Diesel engines in production at this date, and was eager to sell more, expanding the river market.

The question was not: A Diesel boat for passengers? The issue was hauling freight, call it package goods or bulk commodity, (the usual barge use), for the money was in freight. Planning, discussion with Fairbanks-Morse, and inspecting the only local example on the Meramac was begun in 1926. By early 1927, and before sale of the steamboats, with the enthusiasm of Fairbanks-Morse having some influence, a decision had been made to carry out what was viewed as an experiment. A small boat capable of handling one barge about the trip of a moderate size steamer, 300 tons, was designed and was to be built at Paducah.

The boat was deliberately built short enough to be classed as a motorboat, and would be driven by a rated 180 horsepower F-M, direct reversing Diesel. (Because fuel was supplied under injector pressure to each cylinder, the engine, like a steam engine, could reverse direction for backing; cams to valves were shifted.) After some discussion, a sternwheel design was retained rather than drive through a propeller— Rhea felt the shallow draft available with the sternwheel was important, for low water conditions. The engine turning at two to four hundred revolutions needed speed reduction through a gear box just ahead of the stern transom, and additional reduction by a pinion outside the hull drove a gear mounted directly on the wheel; this limited the wheel to normal sternwheel speed of ten to fifteen revolutions. The pinion was tied to the gear by chain, rather like a bicycle drive, which at this date was a standard connecting method for high speed engines to low speed output. The complete rig, including a covered barge of about 100 feet, was 160 feet long, or comparable to a boat about the size of *Alabama,* but with a much lower profile from lack of towering furnace chimneys and Texas deck surmounted by a pilot house. The pilot house was placed well forward in front of a second (call it boiler) deck with a large cabin behind containing some 12 staterooms.

Rhea did not know, fully, in what service this boat would actually engage, and hedged the question by allowing for passenger space in the cabin; there were only eight in the crew. (Rousters, hired on a trip basis, who might travel with the barge quartered themselves there) The barge was covered to protect the cargo, not the rousters, whose task was about the same as on a steamer, to load and unload whatever was aboard. In other words, although this was a towing operation, initially the freight was handled much like a steamer, and if the freight was of a varied package type, then this was very nearly a packet operation. But the boat crew required was a fraction the size of a steamer, and Diesel fuel amounted to only a few cents per gallon, automatically fed to the engine: One central idea of the Diesel concept was cheap fuel, as compared to gasoline or coal, and no crew was needed to carry pieces aboard. (Gasoline engines had been tried on river boats, but the cost was excessive from available low compression engines, for any but the smallest craft.)

The boat was built during spring and summer of 1927, a lengthy time for her small size, and came out for use that fall in the Tennessee; she was named for Rhea's daughter, *Jane Rhea*. She was expected to replace *Paducah* still running in traditional packet service, and in view of her spartan quarters, reflecting towboat construction, it is interesting to note from old accounting notes she had some passenger revenue on her early trips. She immediately became a successful experiment; emphasis on both words. The cost savings promised by F-M proved accurate, and the boat could operate on fixed cost of $50 per day compared to the steamer's $200. This made the difference between profit and loss when the trade was generally falling over time. The largest unexpected failure developed not from the new engine but the driving chain to the wheel, which had a tendency to break at unexpected intervals. In addition to stopping all further work for the moment, if the break occurred at a particular point in the cycle, the chain was dropped overboard; fishing it off the river bottom might not be possible in deep water, so cost and delay was encountered.

The Link-Belt Company, suppliers of the chain, became concerned and interested in the case as a matter of both courtesy and self-interest, as they wanted their chains in wider use; this business of transmitting power to a water wheel was still new. Evidently, fabrication did not allow for the torque applied from a geared down, 180 h.p. engine suddenly starting. First modification was to install a sort of trough attached to the hull, under the chain, where it could drop if a link gave way; although the chain was heavy to manipulate, removal and repair of a broken link was not a complex job, and saving the chain from watery loss was essential. The material for the chain had to be experimentally changed to allow for the sudden strain when the wheel started up from stop; water cushion

as the buckets picked up speed had been anticipated, but chain weight created a fair amount of slack, snapping the chain hard which, it was soon determined, caused it to fail. Working over several months, the correct shape and material for the links was finally achieved, and this primary technical failure was routed. Some difficulty in handling the covered barge plagued the pilots, for wind acted against the box-like exterior, and leverage against the boat was actually more than the force of the rudders could comfortably handle. The hull had been constructed like a steamboat, with rudders placed ahead of the wheel, and later on slave rudders (called monkey rudders) were added behind the wheel for added steering control. Large steam towboats had the same arrangement for the same reason.

The *Alabama* remained in the Upper River in 1928, and the *Paducah* kept the Shiloh excursions in place by an arrangement which brought passengers from St. Louis and Chicago by train to Paducah, where the remainder of the excursion was made by river. This was the first time in its history the Company had not run a boat out of St. Louis for the entire trip; now, even with the cabin well filled, the boat could not make money on tourists alone, and freight was slack. The *Jane Rhea* acted in her towing nature by some trips with mussel shells, caught from the shoal waters below and around Florence. The animals were of little value except as bait, but the shells could be marketed for the gloss pearly interior, very hard, which could be stamped into buttons. This was one cargo better handled in open barges and as far away from the boat as possible, hoping the wind came from the right quarter.

Road building had been proceeding rapidly over the past few years, and now CalhounCounty had truck service to Chicago. Many of the growers found it more convenient to load immediately at their orchards, saving a haul to river landings; and, Chicago was a large market with top prices paid for these apples. *Alabama* continued with her apple season and up river tourist trade, but Rhea had a special problem to contend with in the *Belle of Calhoun*. The *Belle* would wait for *Alabama* to finish her up river schedule to Quincy, then start out in front of her for the Calhoun landings, where the apples had been stacked in anticipation of *Alabama*; too many of the barrels were thus skimmed off. The advantage *Alabama* had, of covering cost with the other business was real, but the profit in the apples was disappearing. There was no longer trade enough for the two steamers to share.

Firmly, if reluctantly, Rhea decided to pull *Alabama* out of her St. Louis run for 1929. The *Paducah* was tied off, and laid up. *Alabama* used the rail—and—boat scheme for passengers who might want the river trip, but 1929 was the last year for steamer

scheduled service on the Tennessee River, the idea at the core of Company plans in 1885. Demand was no longer there. At the end of 1928 Rhea had the wharfboat pulled up away from the river to a flood stage point at the top of the levee, and it signaled the end of boats using the wharf at St. Louis. The wharf remained in that place, becoming a river landmark, until the advent of World War II. Meanwhile the *Jane Rhea* was getting enough contract towing to earn some money for the Company. The railroads never did consider the Tennessee valley of sufficient importance to be worth the cost of extending lines along the river; but by 1929 the autos and trucks had spread from cities, to towns, to villages, and roads were needed to connect all. *Jane Rhea* hauled cement for these concrete roads all the summer of 1929, using the covered barge, since cement, at that time, was still packed in 90 pound waterproof sacks. It is hard to know whether to characterize this as towing, or package freight. The rousters still had to load and unload the sacks, and only the fact that a boat with barge was utilized— rather than a steamer with sacks on the main deck— distinguished the service. But new concrete roads meant transportation by trucks of all sorts of goods the boats formerly delivered. Result: The *Jane Rhea* hauled the cement that put her finally out of business on the Tennessee River. The total picture might not be as bleak as that sounds, for the earnings on that cement contract also paid back the full cost of the boat. All Rhea had to do was find other towing in some other place. But the incident illustrates an essential truth of operations by the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co., that the railroads never killed the boats' traffic, but gasoline engines applied to trucks did.

The *Paducah*, still laid up, was sold in 1929 or '30; the exact record seems ambiguous. She was used for some time as a quarter boat for a contractor doing bank stabilization on the Mississippi, serving as a floating hotel for workers.

With *Alabama* doing the battlefield run, Rhea had the option, when apple season came, of bringing *Jane Rhea* around for Calhoun County. Early in the year advised of this, owners of the *Belle of Calhoun* became concerned; it was no secret the Diesel boat could operate on a fraction of what their steamer could manage, and if a rate war started up there was not much doubt about, a, where the shippers would place their trade, and b, who would win and make money in the process. A discussion was had in the office of the wharf boat. Rhea indicated he understood the concern, but he had to keep his boat busy. An idea offered was, keep the boat busy somewhere *else* than the Upper Mississippi. If a sum of money would aid this, then it could be arranged. Rhea accepted, and the payment was made weekly all summer, while Rhea kept his boat making money in cement.

Like running boats, growing apples has risks involved, and just before the apples were

due for harvest, a miniature drought brought down a sudden, hot baking wind to Calhoun County, and the apple crop failed completely; only a fraction was saved. Suddenly the payments stopped, but it was a matter of little importance by that time. There was never another failure of the crop, not like that one.

Up into 1928, some surviving correspondence indicates, Rhea had been so pleased with the performance of the *Jane Rhea* that he planned for a new, and larger, Diesel boat, to, in effect, shift the Company over to towing operation only, with the old steamers put on the block. Steam power and large crews were only possible with freight trips that did not exist. It was apparent that mult- barge tows were feasible, with adequate power, and two, four or six pieces could be towed with only small increases in operating cost; but the *Jane Rhea* had insufficient power. Then something, it is not apparent what precisely, made him change his mind. Through hindsight, it rather seems that the transportation industry somewhat earlier than other business began to feel the effects of a coming recession, which of course later developed into the most serious experienced since the 1870's. Rhea abruptly pulled back on future expansion. His brother, never in love with boats, had found other work, and now decisions depended on Rhea's judgment, although the younger continued to maintain the Company books for tax purposes and stayed in contact; this was not much of a problem as he shortly built a house on an open lot across the street from Rhea and his family in suburban St. Louis.

The *Alabama* was chartered to the long time Louisville and Cincinnati line in 1930, which developed from a legal quirk. The line had declared bankruptcy, and its boats were tied up as a result; but managers yet had some customers who could be served, and the *Alabama* filled in, keeping the line operating for a time, in one sense of the word. She was later sold, and dismantled at Memphis. By 1930, as depression years for the economy began, the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. had abandoned any attempt at running steamboats.

Rhea managed to obtain small towing contracts over the succeeding years, which kept the boat going, but the trade was small. The trucks won the apple business, and barrels once stacked on the autumn levee vanished. One contract he did not get, highly desirable, was hauling garbage for the City of St. Louis. The garbage collected by the City was taken a short distance down river and dumped to the benefit of a gentleman raising hogs; in those days, such nutrition was considered suitable for future pork chops, and since the operation was cordoned off on an island a boat was necessary. Rhea very much wanted this contract (no word on what the crew and Master-Pilot Charlie Beard thought) for the City was bound to pay on time for the work, was bound to collect the garbage, and a contract would have

been a long term affair with the garbage not liable to run out. Somehow, Rhea was underbid. One can suspect some crony arrangement, but who can say for sure?

The nature of towing was changing in these years, or, more accurately characterized, reverting to its natural form, focusing on bulk commodities; the grain trade out of the Upper had been so structured in the nineteenth century. Packages, eggs to concrete block, belonged to the trucks. The Inland Waterways Corp. had been set up by the Federal Government to 'demonstrate' the cost savings in shipping on the rivers by barge; some enterprising investors created Mississippi Valley Barge Line, based in St. Louis, in 1930— both firms depending on large boats and multi barge tows, with commensurate capital invested, and for the former, Government subsidy. Rhea, of course, could not directly compete with such firms for business being handled on large scale, but he did shift his thinking to commodity movement, and point to point towing. Making a trip dropping off parcels along the way was obsolete.

The exact date is uncertain, but about 1936 Rhea signed a lease on a new type of barge, designed to carry a liquid commodity, gasoline. This was a long way from packages stored in a wood barge, or mussel shells dumped in an open hopper. The barge had to be absolutely tight to keep the cargo from running off, and had pumps with an engine (powered by gasoline or Diesel) to move the product in and out of several sealed tanks inside. This was the first use ever of a steel hull by the Company, and the first hull used that required as much as nine feet of water to stay afloat. Unloaded, the barge itself required only eighteen inches, with the remaining draft being gasoline, thousands of gallons. The original wood barge, named *Eda*, was tied off at the river in front of the wharfboat to serve as a landing barge— for times the *Jane Rhea* might tie up— since the tank barge needed eight or nine feet of water. The *Jane Rhea* had to have her tow knees extended up to allow for a barge that would stand seven feet above her deck when empty— the extreme for *Eda* had never been more than three feet— and the deck hands now needed a ladder to climb on the barge for necessary work. (Towboats in future years would have steps built into the tow knees.)

If the autos had taken passenger travel from the boats, and trucks the packages, there was a sort of *quid pro* resulting, for wheeled vehicles must have gasoline, and as roads were extended the gasoline had to move to where the vehicles were. Gasoline is not well refined in the back room of a town druggist, so refineries ended up in locations from which it had to be moved. A whole new trade grew up with the spread of the auto, and tank barges, the new variation on the barge idea, soon proved the cheapest way of moving large quantities of gasoline, a product which at the time sold for perhaps 15¢ a gallon. Rhea,

through foresight or luck, maybe both, saw the possibility of this trade and found a contract with the Illinois Farm Supply Co. Supply, in this case, meant supplying gasoline; the firm had a local line of service stations. At the landing of Kingston Mines, below Peoria on the Illinois River, was a storage tank farm, where the gasoline was delivered for final local distribution by truck.

The *Jane Rhea* at 180 h.p.. could handle only one barge, but, Illinois Farm Supply was not that big a firm, nor was Kingston Mines that large a facility, that one of the Valley Line tows could be bothered to drop off multiple barges; actually, Valley Line did not have rights to run the Illinois River at this date, so some firm like Rhea's was important for Illinois Supply. The gasoline was loaded at either the Phillips refinery, below St. Louis, or the Shell refinery at Wood River, Illinois, (at the Missouri River mouth), and the route for the boat was then past Alton on the Mississippi to the mouth of the Illinois River, and up to Kingston Mines, 145 miles. Including a distance from St. Louis, the *Jane Rhea* took around two, to two and a half days up. A lay over was always involved, for the tank barge had to be pumped out, probably taking a half-day. To say the boat could handle this barge may be putting some optimism on the case. The deep draft of the tank barge was *all* she could handle, and then not well in a stiff wind with an empty, nor through the fast water at Chain of Rocks with a load. In the latter case when the boat was coming up from Phillips dock, Rhea had to hire the *Suzy Hazard*, a small steam tug based in St. Louis harbor, to tie on to *Jane Rhea* and help shove through that fairly short, fast stretch ten miles above Eads Bridge. (This part of the river has been bypassed now, with a canal and lock.) But once past the Missouri River mouth, and the dam and lock at Alton, pool stage water was available into the mouth of the Illinois and on up with so little current the boat made reasonable time. The Illinois had a series of low dams, with the first at LaGrange, about 80 miles up, making the remainder of the trip also in pool water most seasons.

By spring of 1937, when Rhea was 64, the Company charter expired, and had to be renewed. On the advice of his attorneys it was extended to perpetuity. With some cash the Company had generated, Rhea bought in outstanding stock from outside holders, some of them being heirs of holders going back to the 1880's, and left stock only in the hands of immediate family, which in effect gave him full control. His age was not the year before retirement until Roosevelt decided it was, and Rhea was not overly focused on retiring at this time. He had started paying into the Social Security system, along with others required, after its passage in 1935, but with the boat continuing on the gasoline contract, he was content to ride along with events. A couple of years passed. Management of one boat, which just kept going, and a small crew, members who had been around for years, was not that big a problem. But he did make one more important decision: Feeling that the

contract was secure, he purchased the tank barge when it was offered to him. The barge itself, in spite of any difficulty the *Jane Rhea* might have in handling it, was being superseded in its design by other, larger ones; but this did not make it any less useful. The pair was operational, but obsolete.

So actually, two events conspired to lead Rhea to terminate the Company, hardly in his thinking when a decision was made to extend the charter. First was the new realization that he could draw a small Social Security check each month; he had not long paid into the system, but at start up it was realized there were many in a similar position, and they were allowed to start taking the pension, based on age. The second event was, as Hitler started his plans for Europe, the country embarked on war planning; this was protested by an isolationist faction, and Congress passed a neutrality act in response, but the Federal Government started spending regardless, and an economy long depressed began a more extended recovery. This spilled over, or worked its way, into river transportation. Maybe it was time to sell the boat.

His gasoline deliveries continued through 1938 and '39, that is, before the war actually broke out, and Illinois Farm Supply prospered, as many oil firms did, from more gasoline being sold. In 1940 they placed an order with Nashville Bridge for a new, all steel boat powered, of course, by Diesel, and along the line of towboat design of the time, propeller driven. The combination of Federal spending on dams, for the Mississippi and Illinois, plus dredging in various places, had established channels deep enough that Rhea's concern in 1926 over low water and shallow draft was no longer relevant, and the wheel went under water. Illinois farm needed capacity for delivery and distribution of gasoline, and purchase of the new boat was part of their expansion. Actually, they were a little late, for in 1940 France surrendered and only Britain among the major nations remained defiant of German rule. They were late, since steel was becoming a scarce commodity, and shortly there would be no more new towboats or barges built. Rhea continued to tow for them through 1941, and then with the Japanese attack in December, the country went to full time war mobilization, with civilian production shifted to military goods, controls fixed over wages and prices, and rationing imposed for scarcer items. Oil and gasoline were not, in themselves, in extreme short supply, for the country still produced more oil than it used, but rubber trees it did not produce, and the Japanese military was soon to corner major sources in the south seas; where gasoline went, it rode on rubber, and the military used a lot of tires. Rubber was going to be a problem. Rumors of gasoline rationing began to circulate early, and while use of gasoline in war related transportation was not an issue, it appeared that the distribution of gasoline in civilian markets might be severely curtailed, and Rhea was apprehensive he might have to lay up the boat. This point was reinforced by

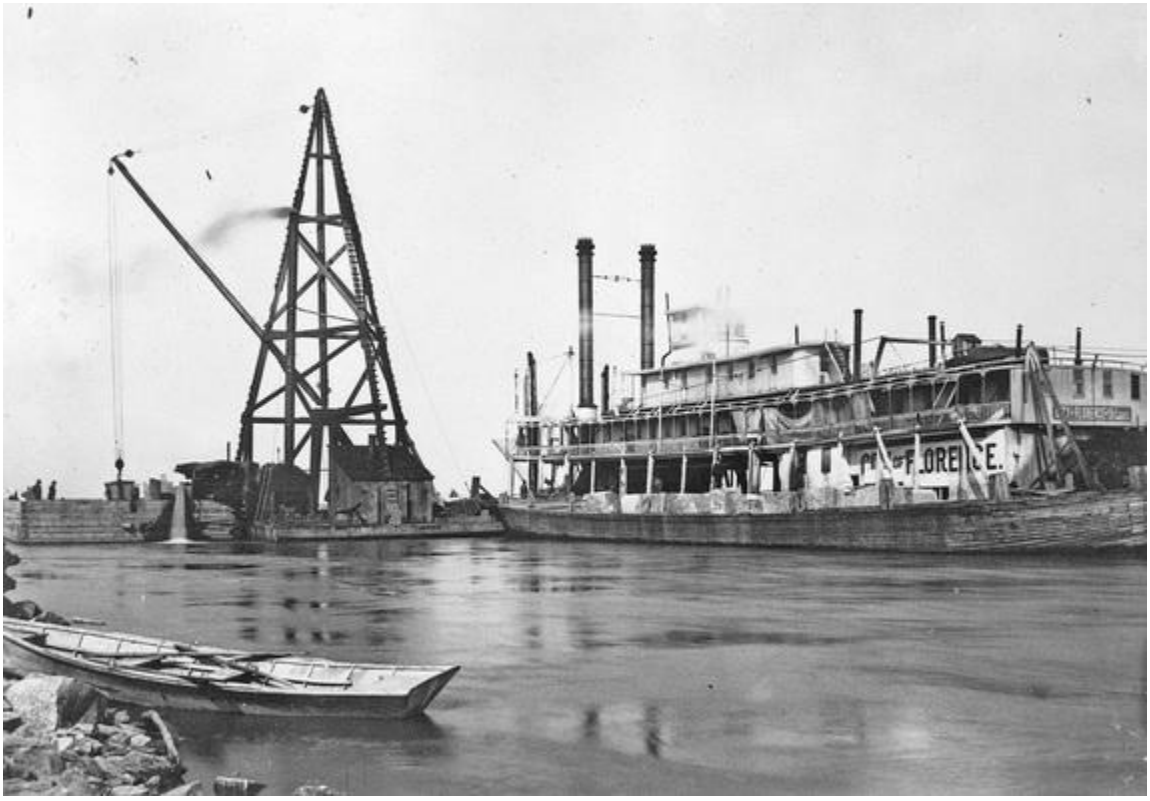
a suspicion it appeared as though Illinois Farm might prefer to do all its towing directly, hiring crews, their objective in buying a boat. (Several large oil companies such as Standard and Mobil did own boats to be able to schedule their own petroleum delivery.)

There was a great deal of uncertainty from all angles, and Rhea was not alone in this position; a war causes disruption in many directions, as his father had found twenty-odd years before. By the spring of 1942, Rhea decided his own best interest lay in selling off the boat and barge, and letting the Company charter go. It did not take long for Illinois Farm to show an interest, as Rhea communicated his position. But what they were interested in was that barge. It had been near impossible to obtain any tank barges for their shiny new towboat, *Blue Seal*, and the fact she could handle four to six at one time with all that new Diesel power was fairly irrelevant if the company had no barges. There were not going to be any tank barges coming off any ways for the foreseeable future. Illinois Farm did not really want, did not want to be bothered with, a fifteen year old wood hull boat called *Jane Rhea*. The officials concerned knew nothing of river boats, or the operation of them; they were in the business of selling oil and gas. Rhea had to smile about their naivety later on: They asked him if the boat leaked. " Leaks like a sieve," he told them. Anyone should know: wood hull boats always leak, and have to be pumped. But he was adamant in his position: The boat and barge go together as a package. So Illinois Farm, if it wanted that barge had to take the boat. They took the boat. There was nothing really wrong with her, within the limits of her power, but Rhea disgustedly predicted they would do something fatal before long; the worst thing he could think of was to have the crankshaft break. She did not, as a matter of fact, break the crankshaft, but careless maintenance ruined the engine from overheating. She was repowered, and later on, modified in appearance, with the oversize cabin removed, went to work as a harbor boat on the upper Ohio river.

The affairs of the St. Louis & Tennessee River Packet Co. were wound up in the summer of 1942, the stock called in and the charter dissolved. Because the Company had operating rights on all rivers, that charter probably was worth something to a large firm, but Rhea seemed disinterested in keeping the shell. The wharfboat was dismantled, much of the white pine lumber still sound, and the large timbers from it were no longer to be had in any market, so they were sold for reuse. The steel rails and railroad wheels supporting the structure, amounting to several dozen tons, Rhea donated to the war effort as scrap. They were piled on the levee for pickup by the proper authority. After nine months they were *still there*, as Rhea noted with disgust, his comment on government efficiency. He had been through years of hard times, and seen a successful company gradually lose its earning

power through the changes of technology. But, it helps to recall, the Company never ran out of cash to meet a payroll.

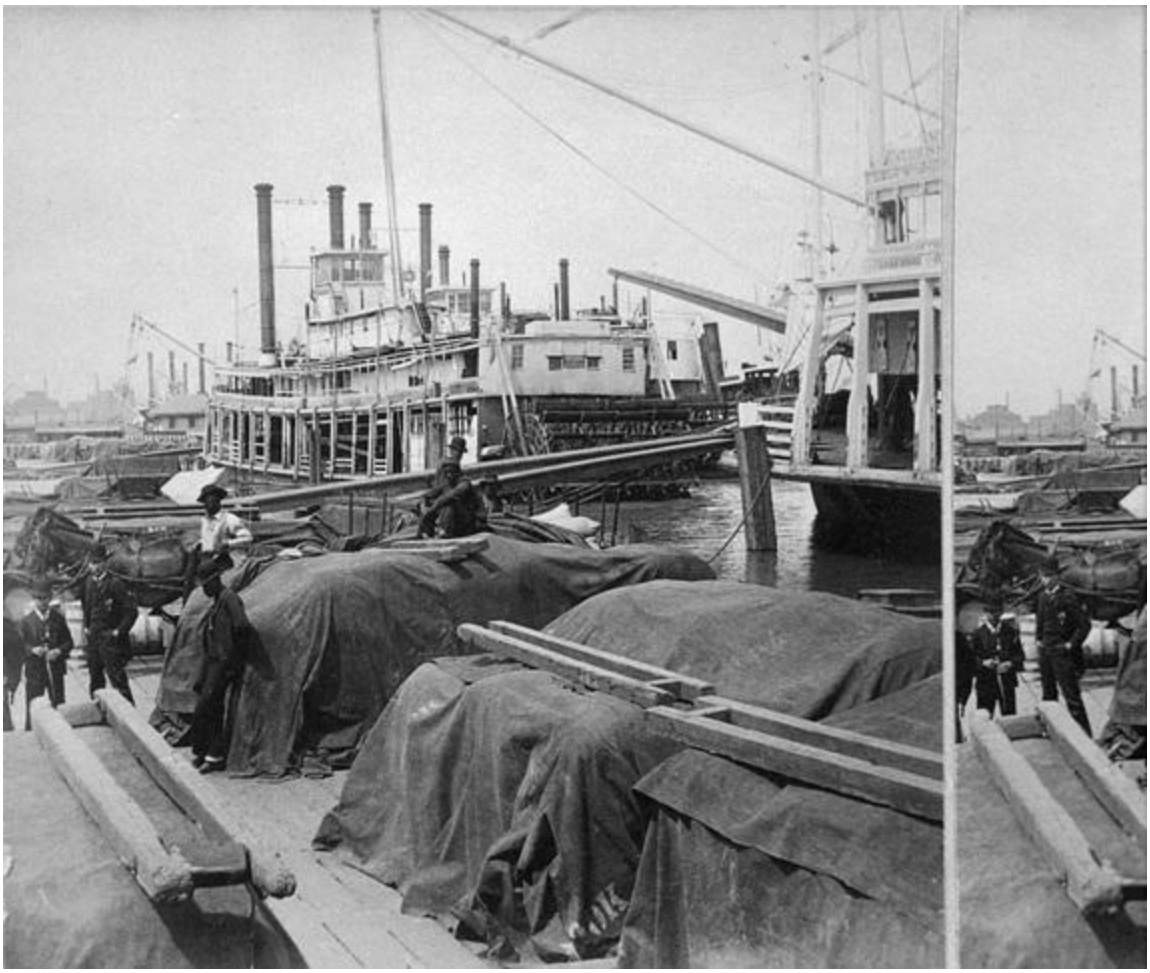
Boats of the
St Louis & Tennessee River
Packet Company
Most of these pictures are from the family's personal collection.
Some were purchased from the Murphy Library Collection at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.



City of Florence

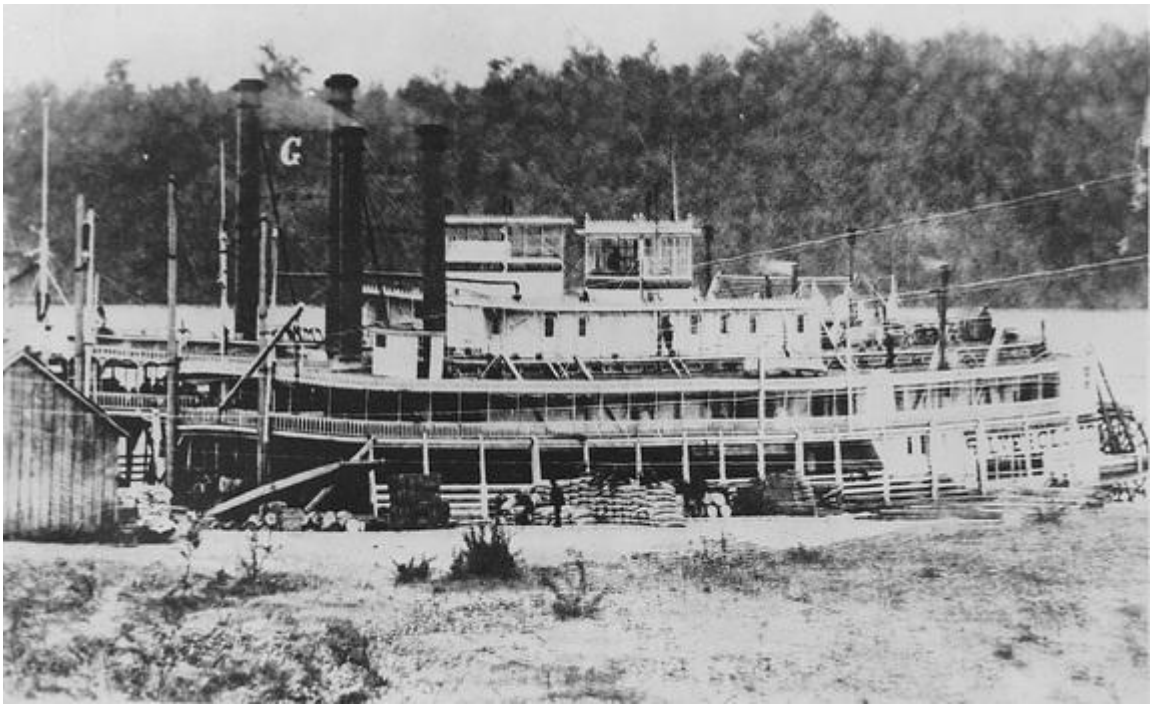
Way's # 1070
Built: Pre-1882
Acquired: 5/1886
Sold: Late 1890

Built as Sam J Keith



W.H. Cherry

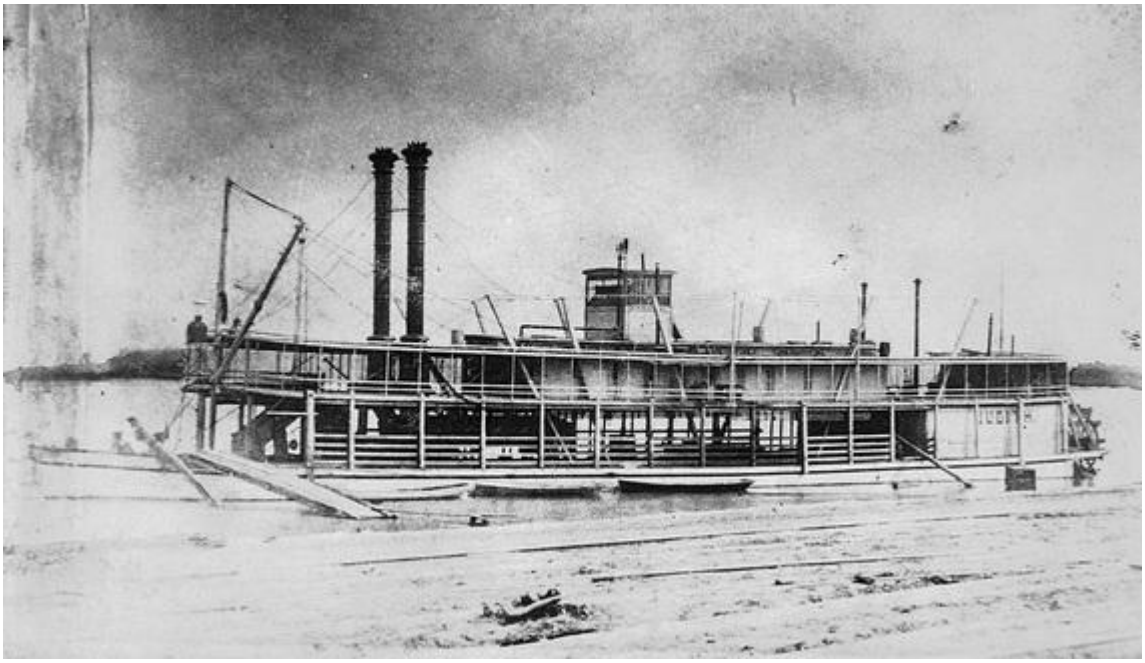
Way's # 5634
Built: 1882
Acquired: 2/1887
Sold: Late 1890



John Gilbert

Way's # 3066
Built: 1881
Acquired: ?
Sank Oct 1888

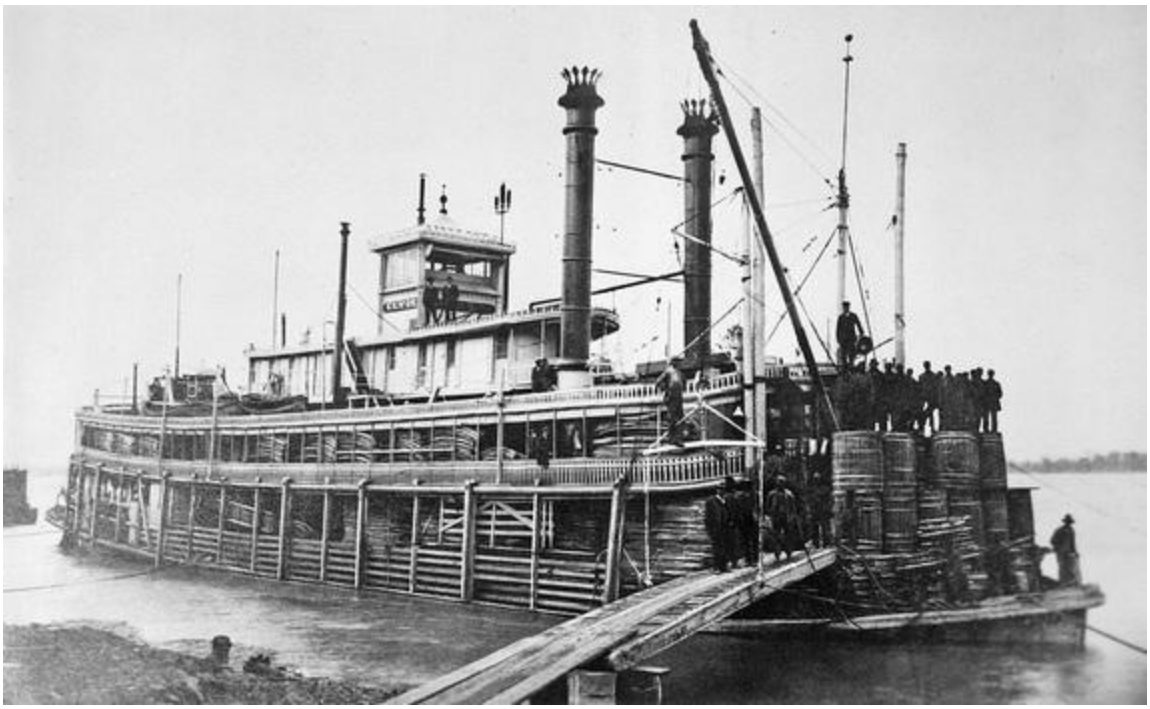
Boat was Chartered
Boat behind Silver Cloud



Judith

Way's # 3170
Built: 1881 or 2
Acquired: 4/1888
Sank July 1888

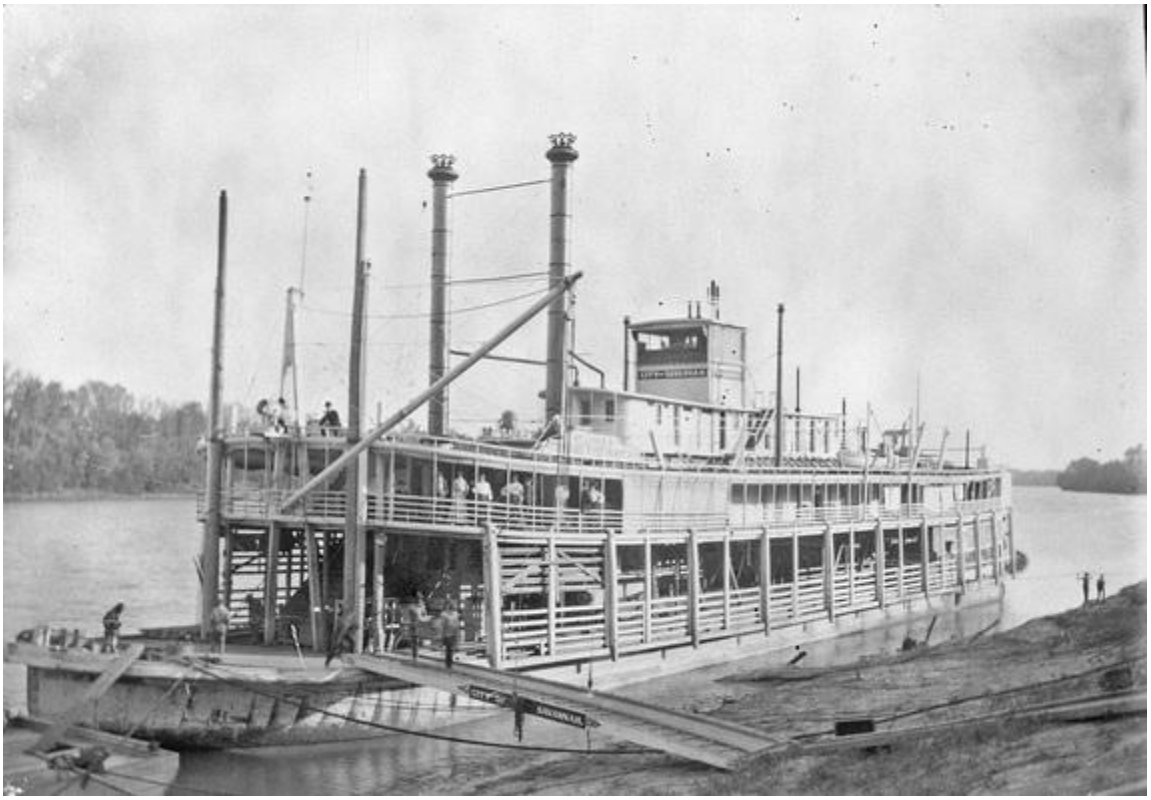
Only known picture



Clyde

Way's # 1201
Built: 1880
Acquired: 3/1888
Sank 1893

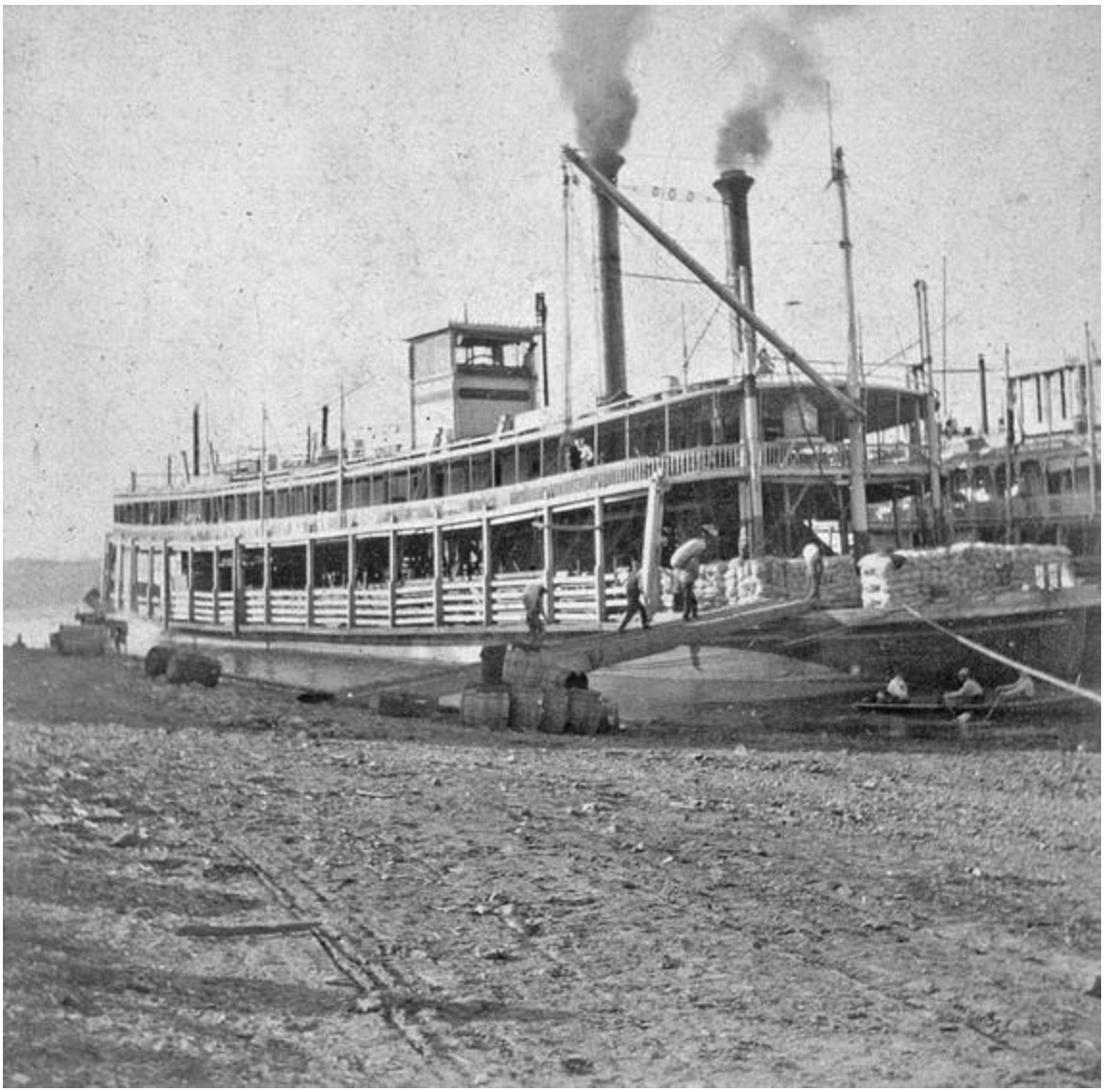
First boat with this name



City of Savannah

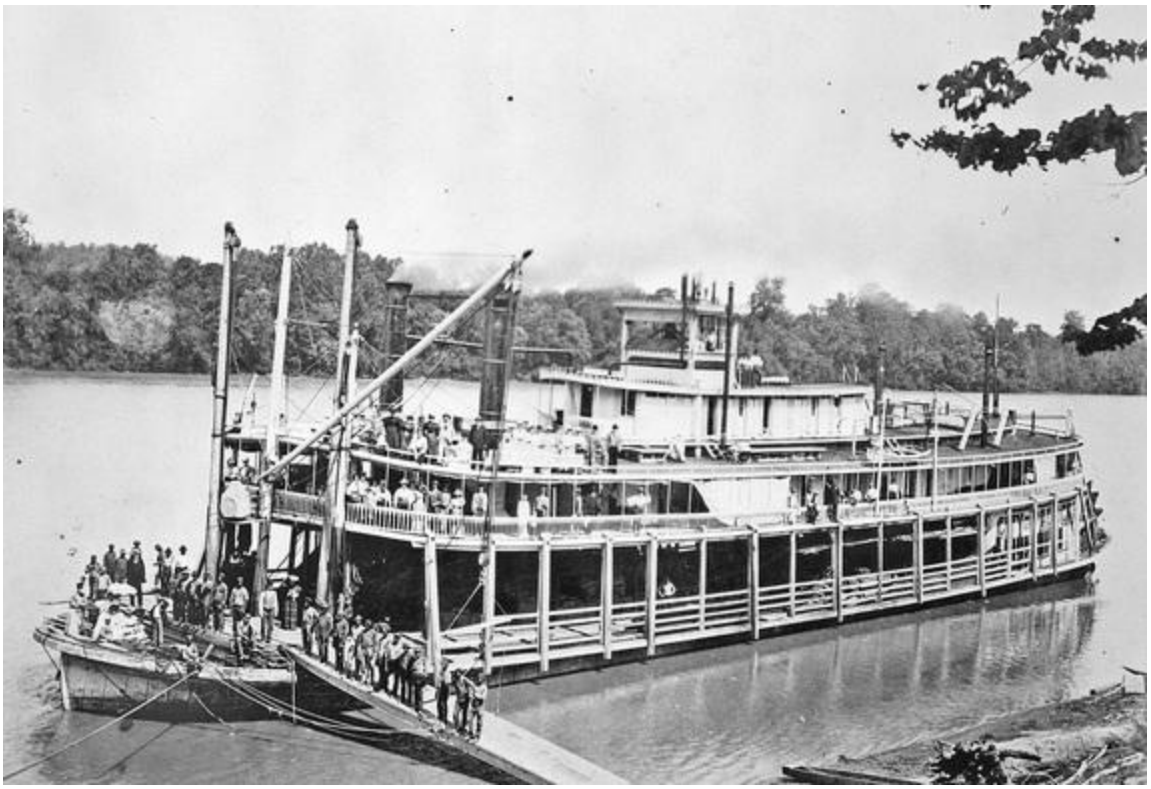
Way's # 1135
Built 1889
Acquired: New
Sold: 5/1896

First boat with this name



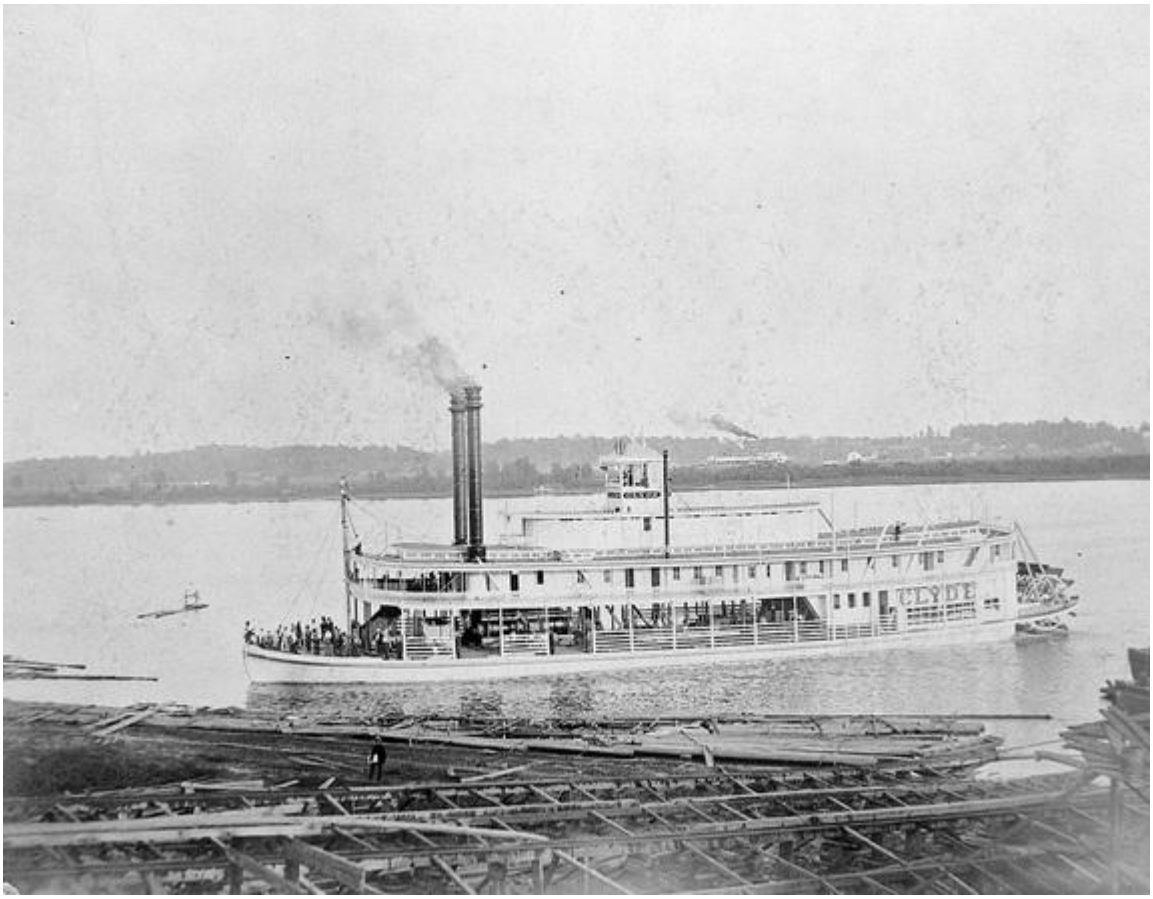
City of Sheffield

Way's # 1137
Built: 1890
Acquired: New
Sold: 3/1901



City of Paducah

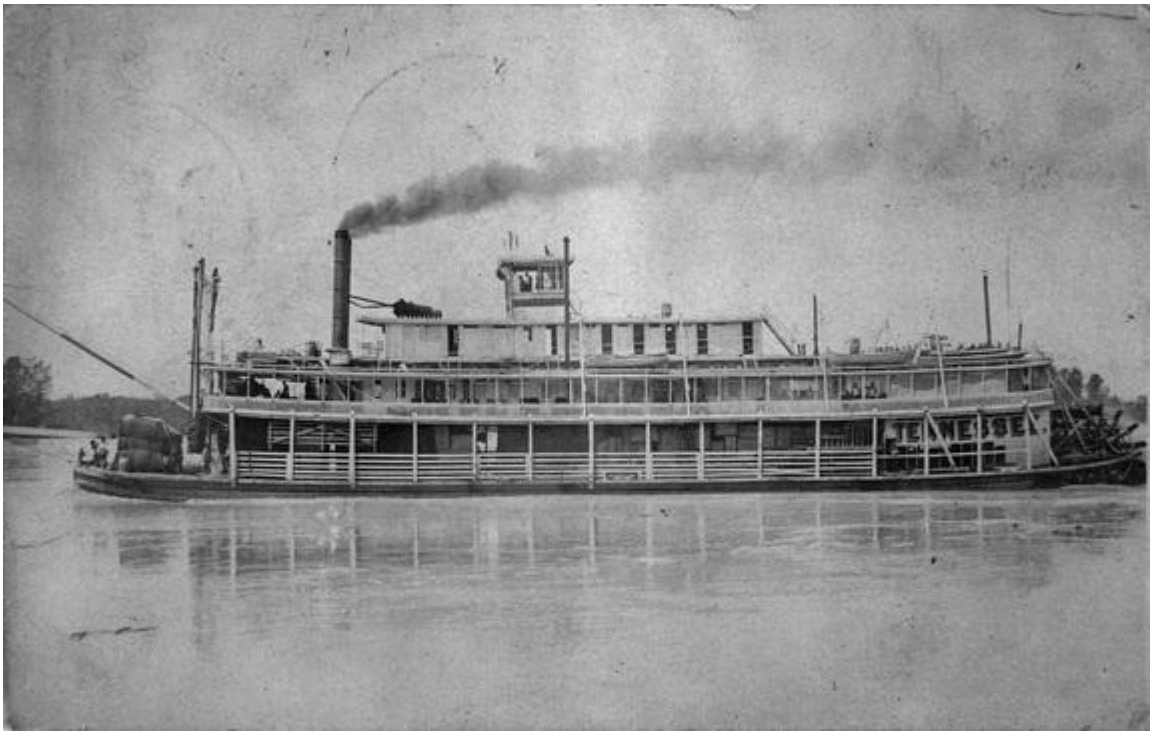
Way's # 1116
Built: 1891
Acquired: New
Sank 5/1901



Clyde

Way's # 1202
Built: 1894
Acquired: New
Sold: Late 1914

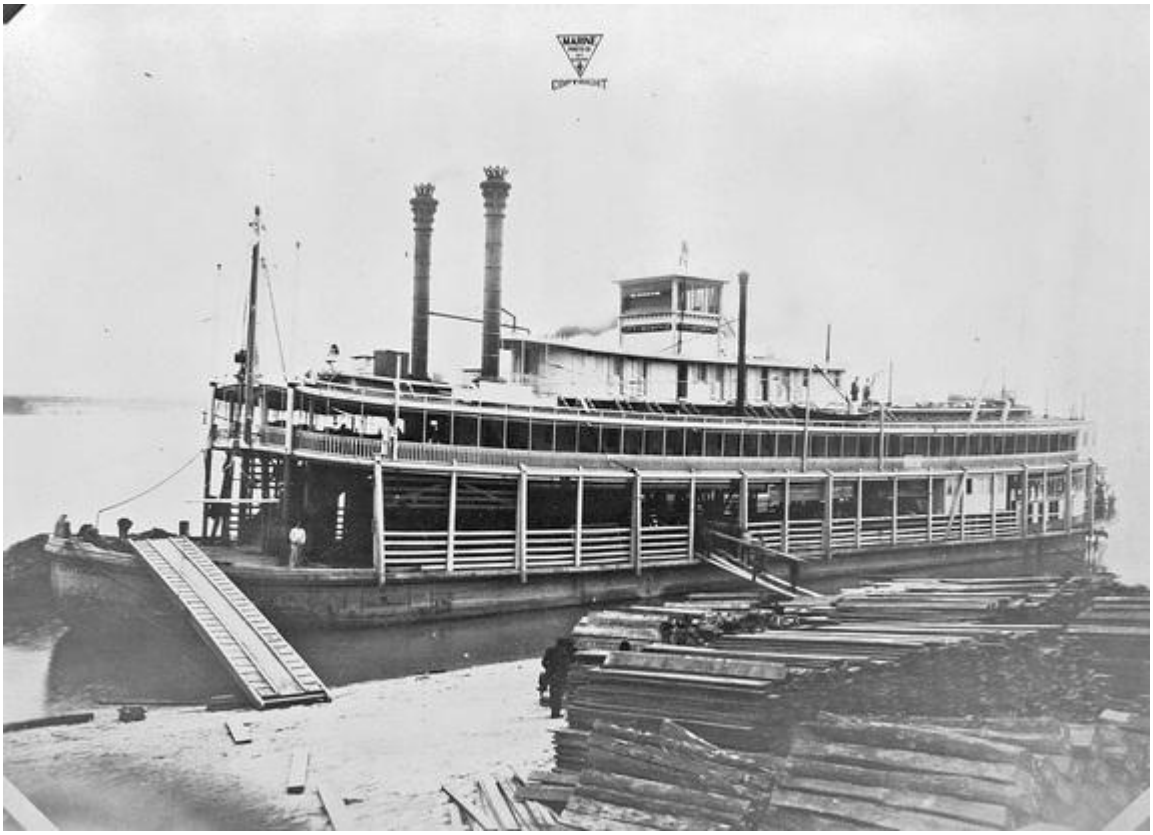
Second boat with this name



Tennessee

Way's # 5339
Built: 1897
Acquired: New
Sold: 7/1907

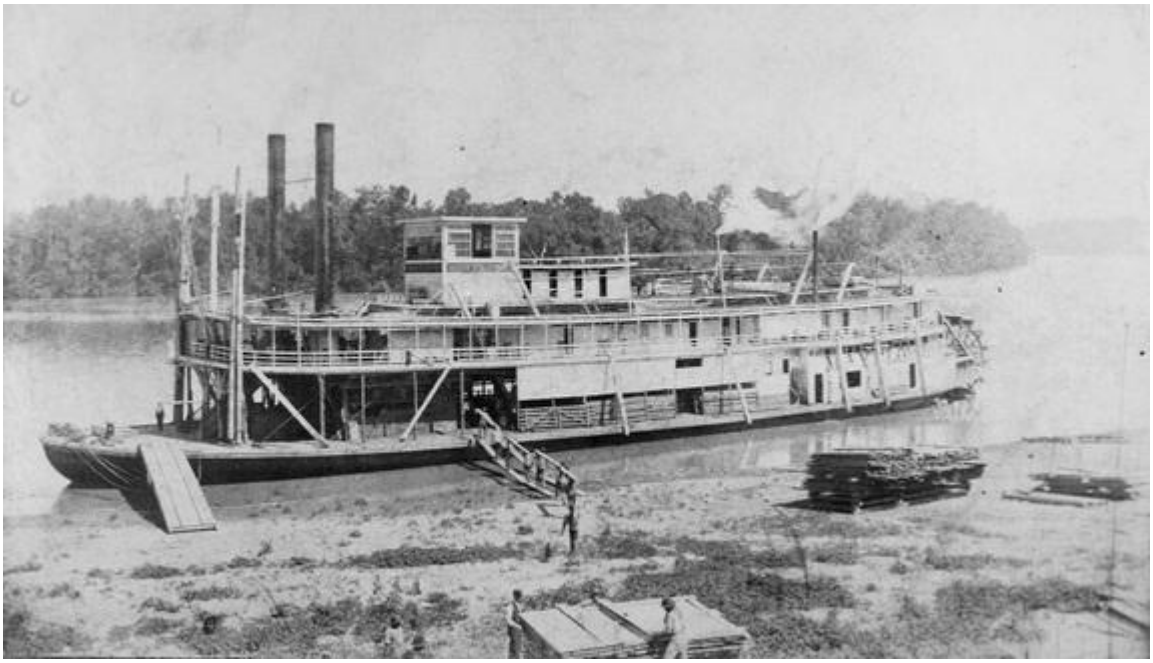
Sank in the Mo. River



City of Memphis

Way's # 1102
Built: 1898
Acquired: New
Sold: 3/1910

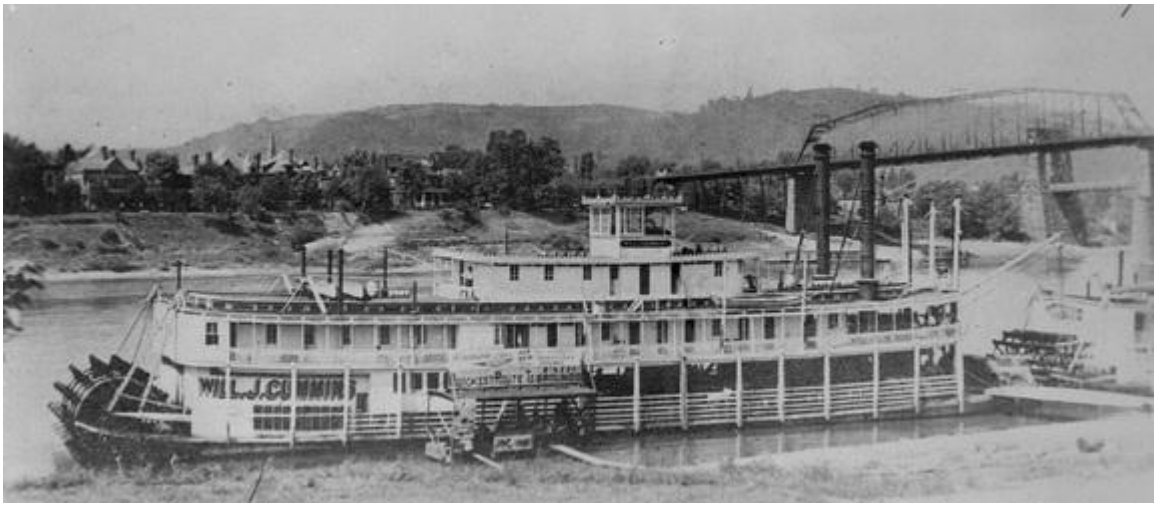
Burned 1/1912



Mayflower

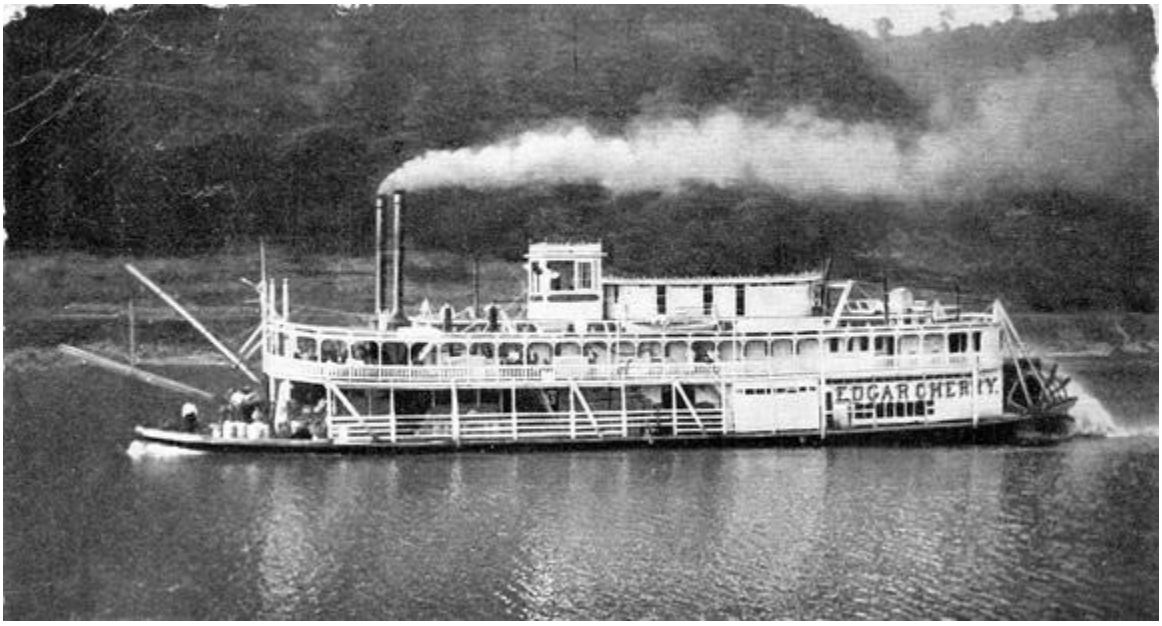
Way's # 3884
Built: 1887
Acquired: 3/1899
Sold: 9/1899

Acquired by merger



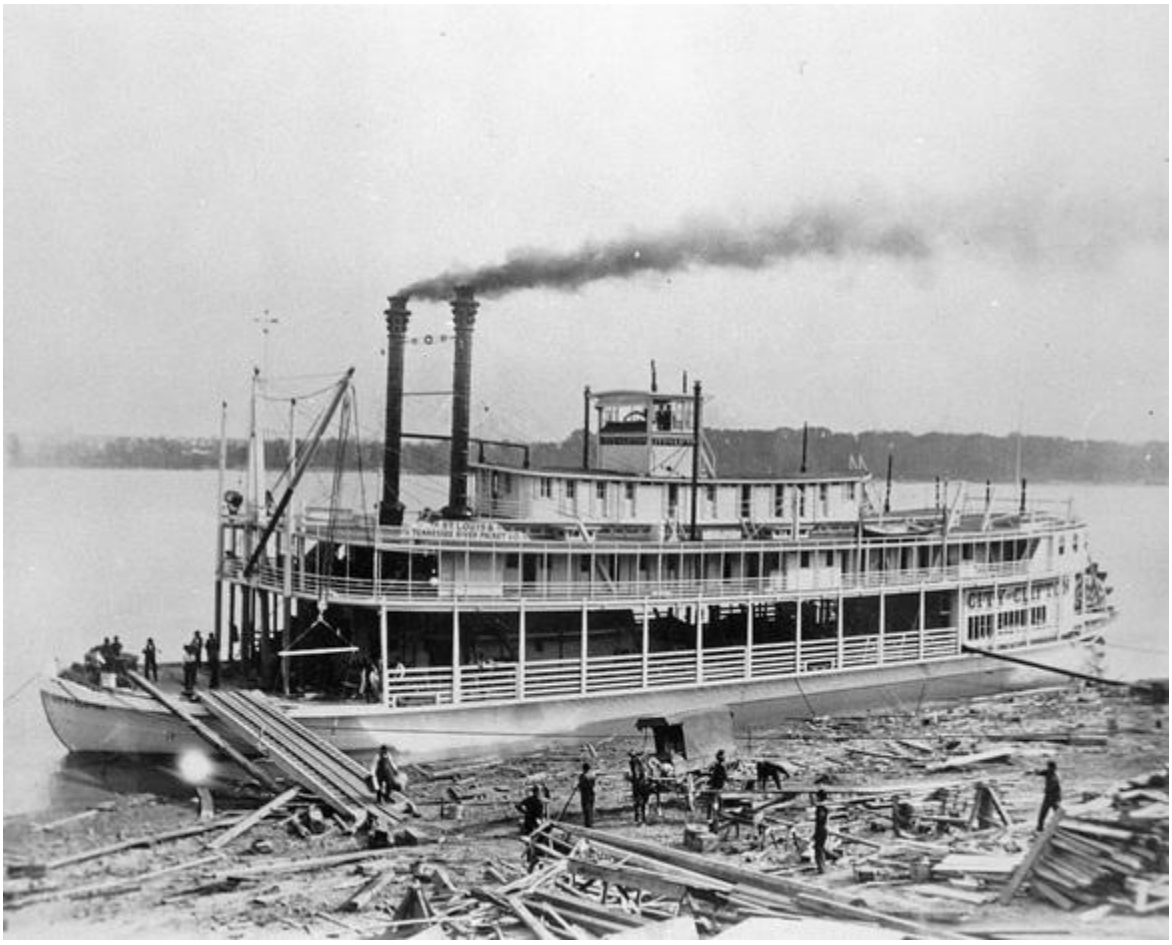
Will J. Cummins

Way's #5792
Built: 1894
Acquired: 3/1899
Sank: 4/1901
Acquired by merger



Edgar Cherry

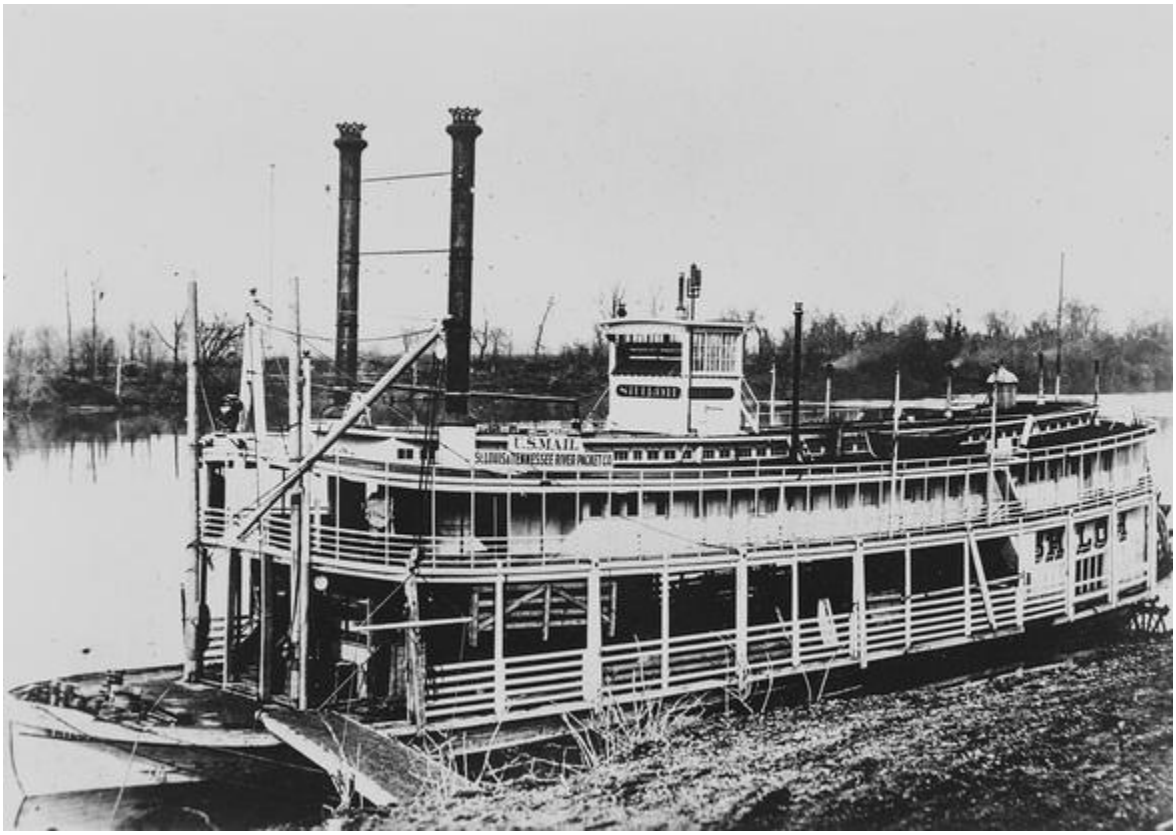
Way's # 1710
Built: 1894
Acquired: 3/1899
Sold: 3/1900



City of Clifton

Way's # 1068
Built: 1899-00
Acquired: New
Burned 2/1903

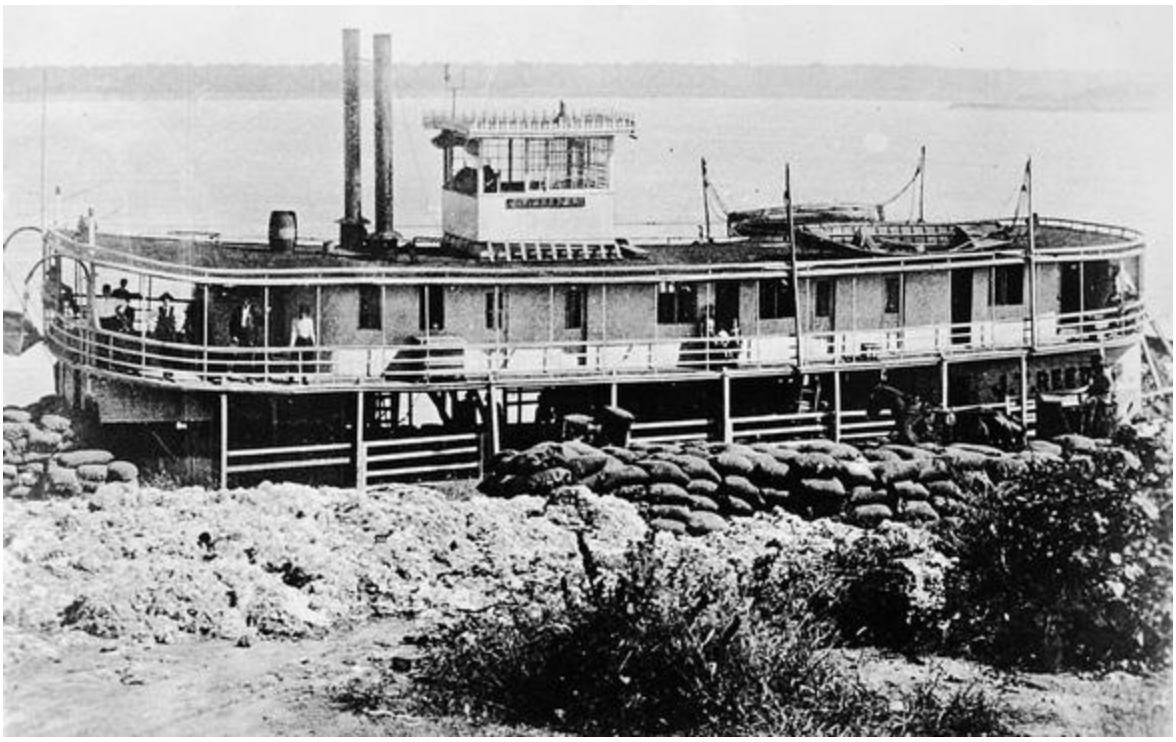
Originally being built for Lee Line.



Shiloh

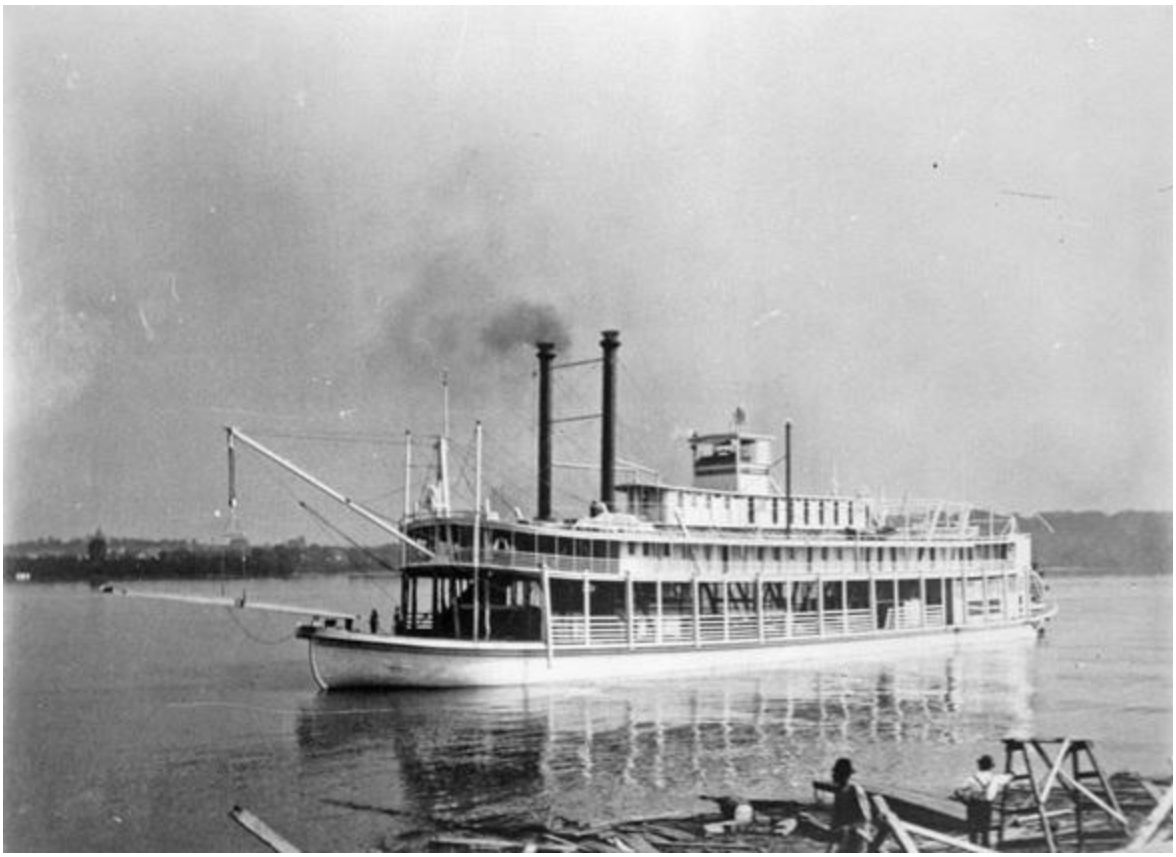
Way's # 5097
Built: 1902
Acquired: New
Sank: 12/1913

Sank under charter to another company



J.T. Reeder

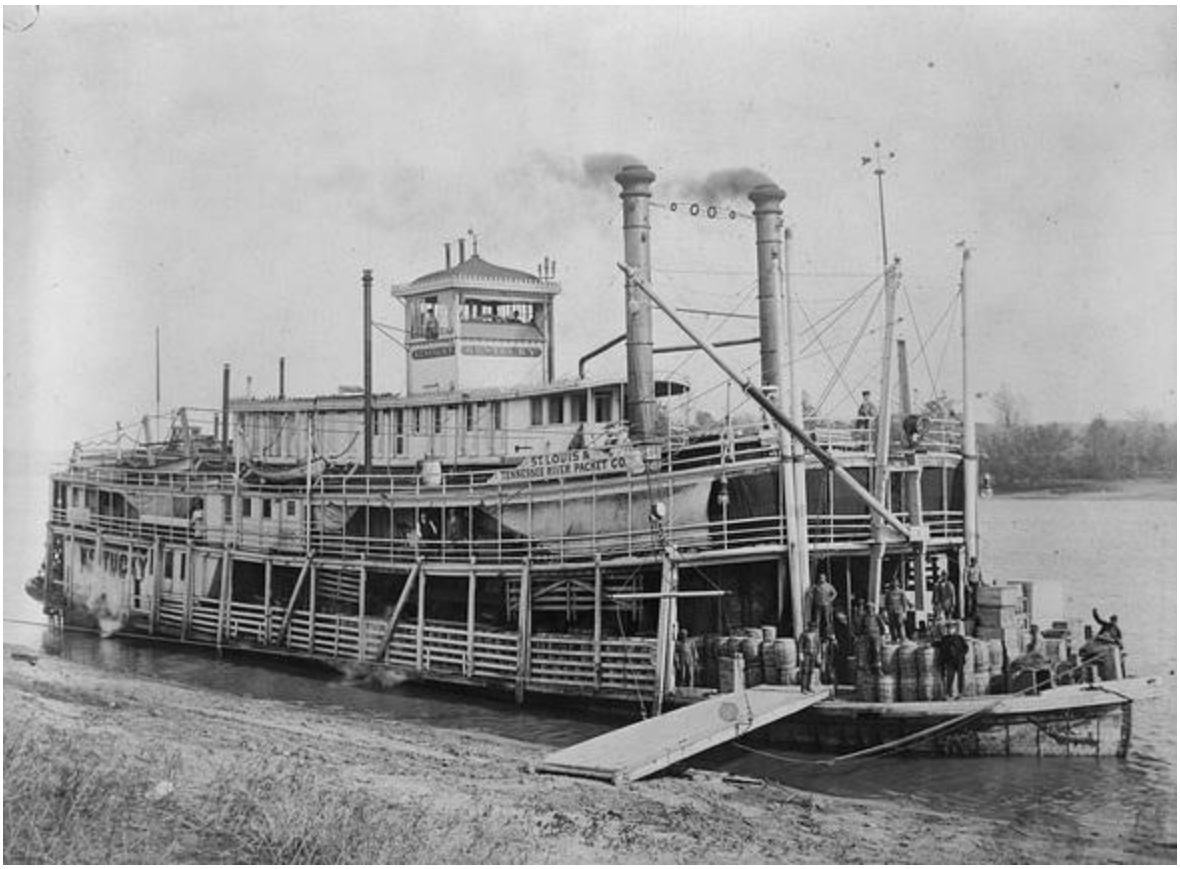
Way's # 2890
Built: 1902
Sold: 3/1911



City of Savannah

Way's # 1136
Built: 1902
Acquired: New
Sank: 12/1911

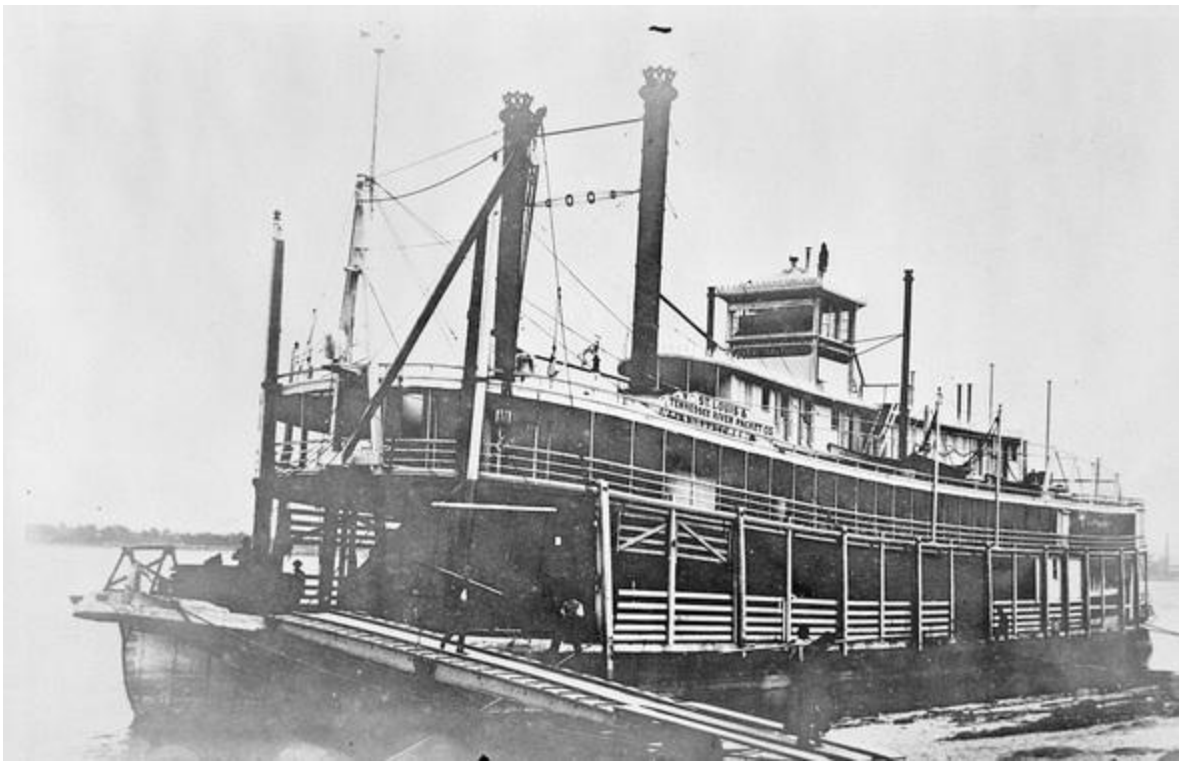
Second boat of this name



Kentucky

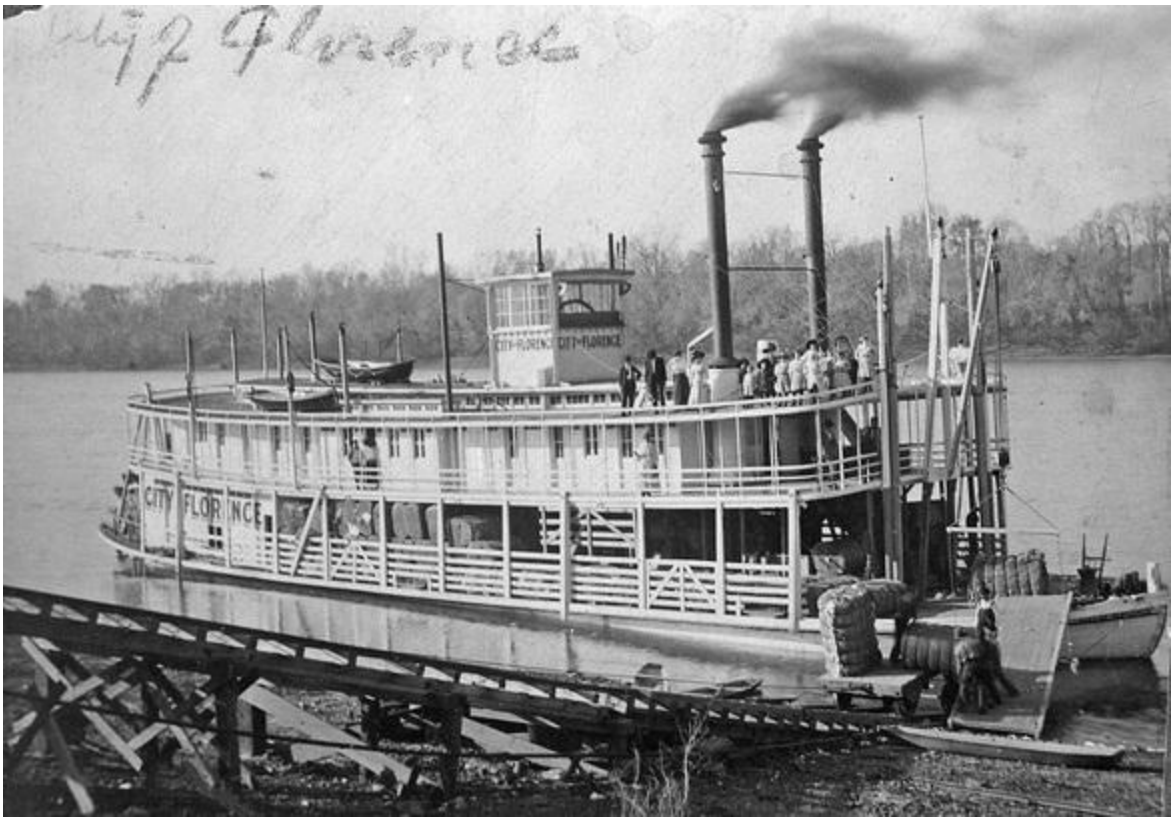
Way's # 3267
Built: 1904
Acquired: New

Rebuilt into the
Tennessee Belle 1922



City of Saltillo

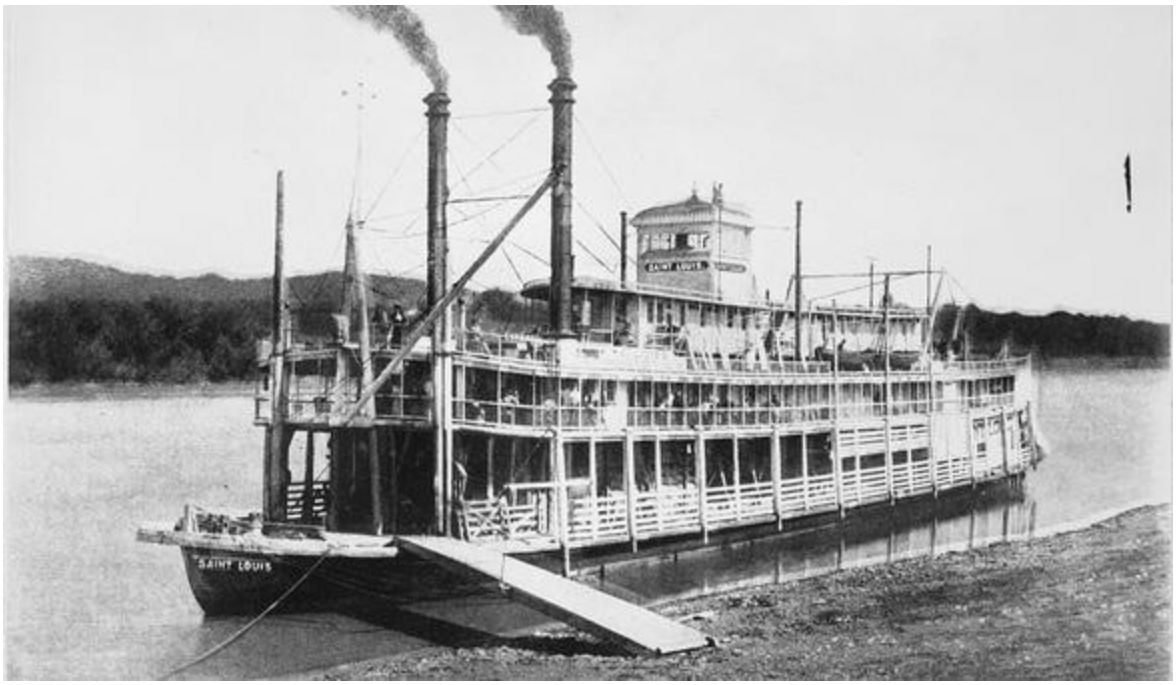
Way's # 1134
Built: 1905
Acquired: New
Sank: 5/1910



City of Florence

Way's # 1071
Built:1909
Acquired: 1912?
Sank: 2/1913

Acquired from T. Reeder
Second boat by this name



Saint Louis

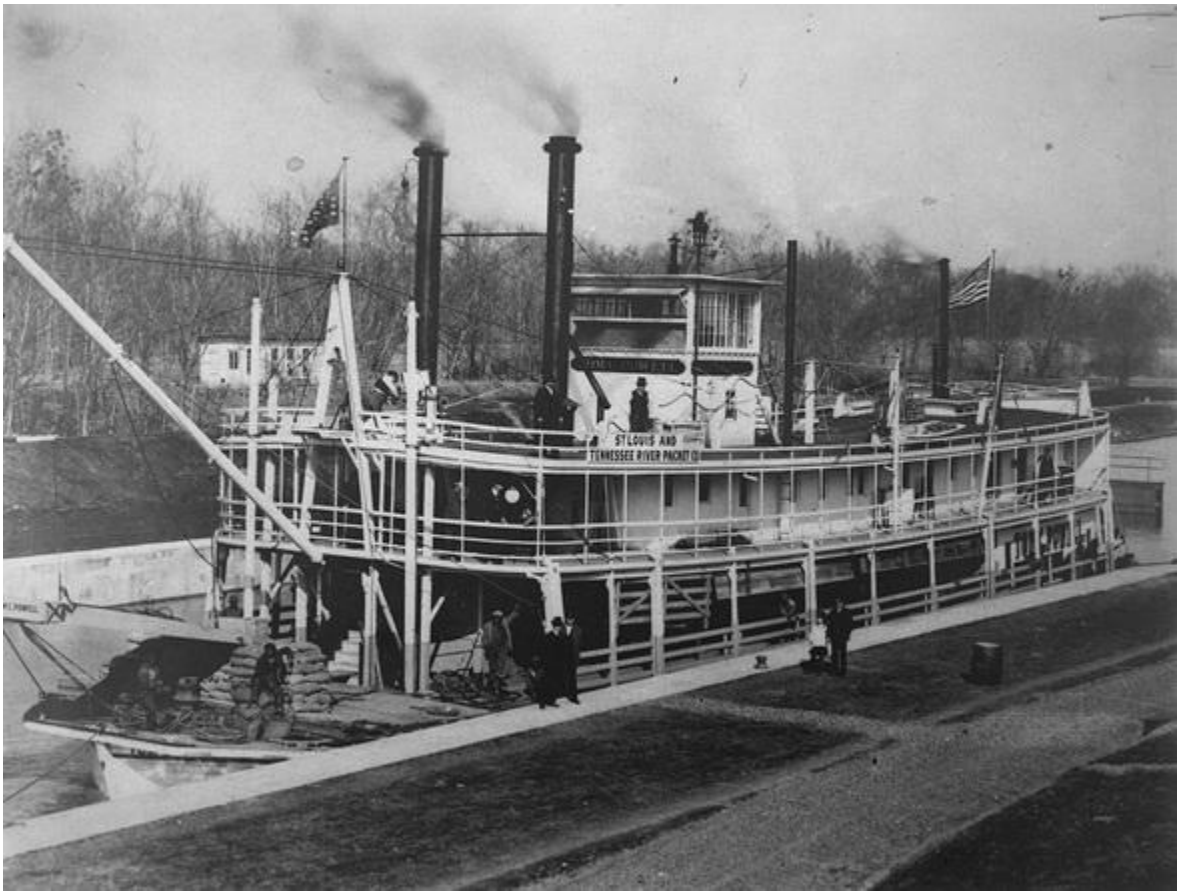
Way's # 4951
Built: 1912
Acquired: New
Sank: 9/1918

Alabama

Way's # 96
Built: 1912
Acquired: New
Sold: 6/1932

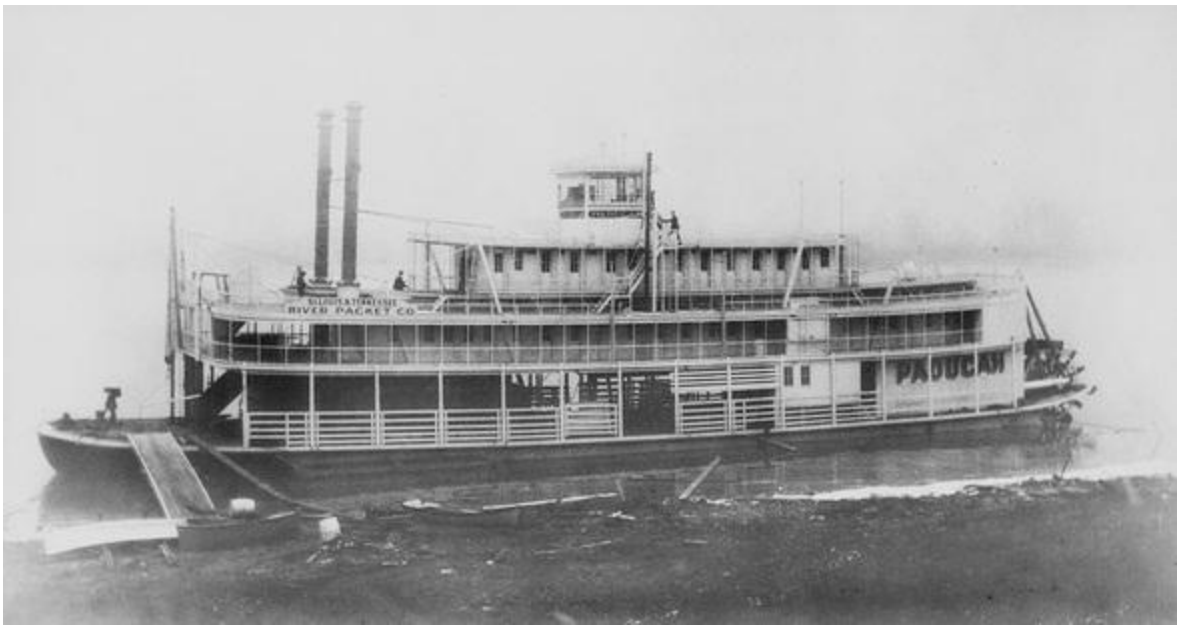
Speed

Way's # 5162
Built: 1886
Acquired: 1913?
Sold: 2?/1916



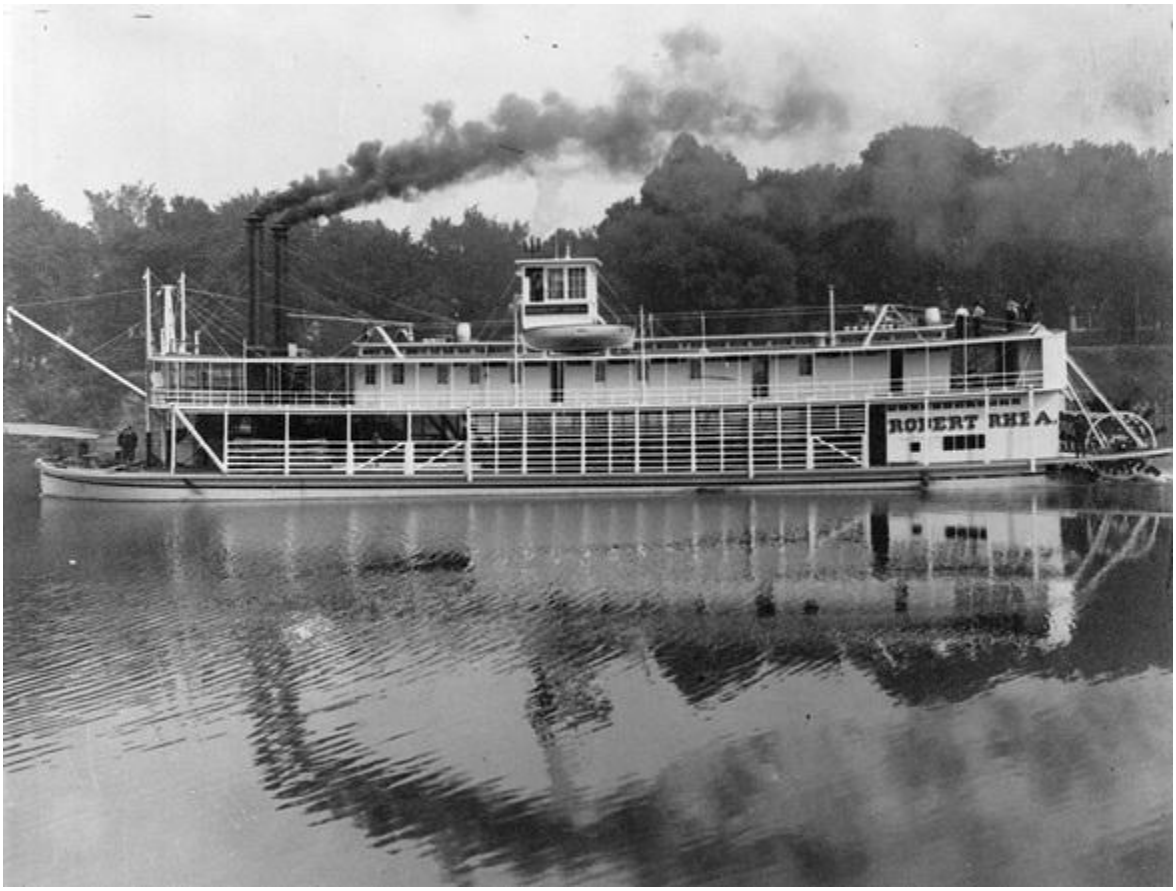
Tom C. Powell

Way's # 5411
Built: 1915
Acquired: New
Sank: 1/1924



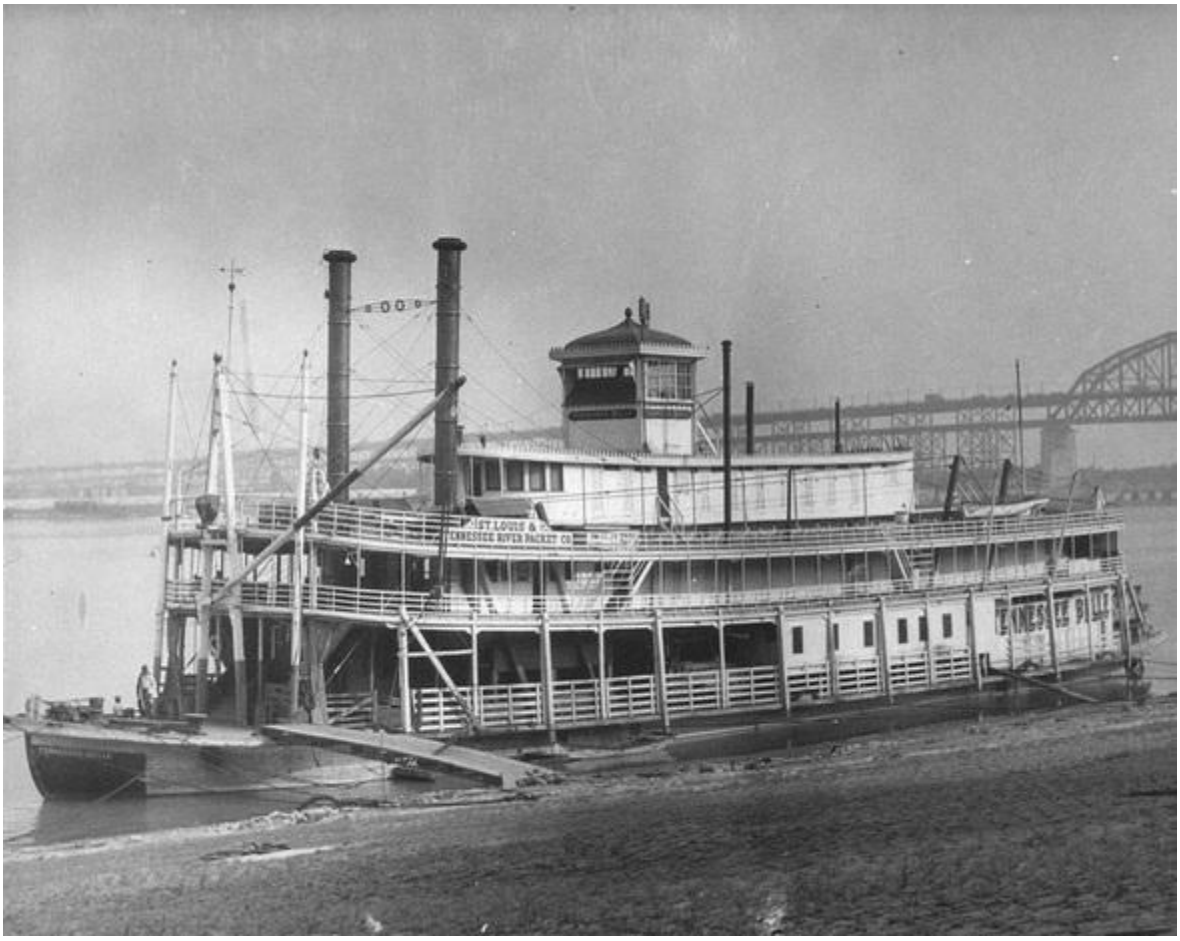
Paducah

Way's # 4377
Built: 1916
Acquired: New
Sold: 2/1931



Robert Rhea

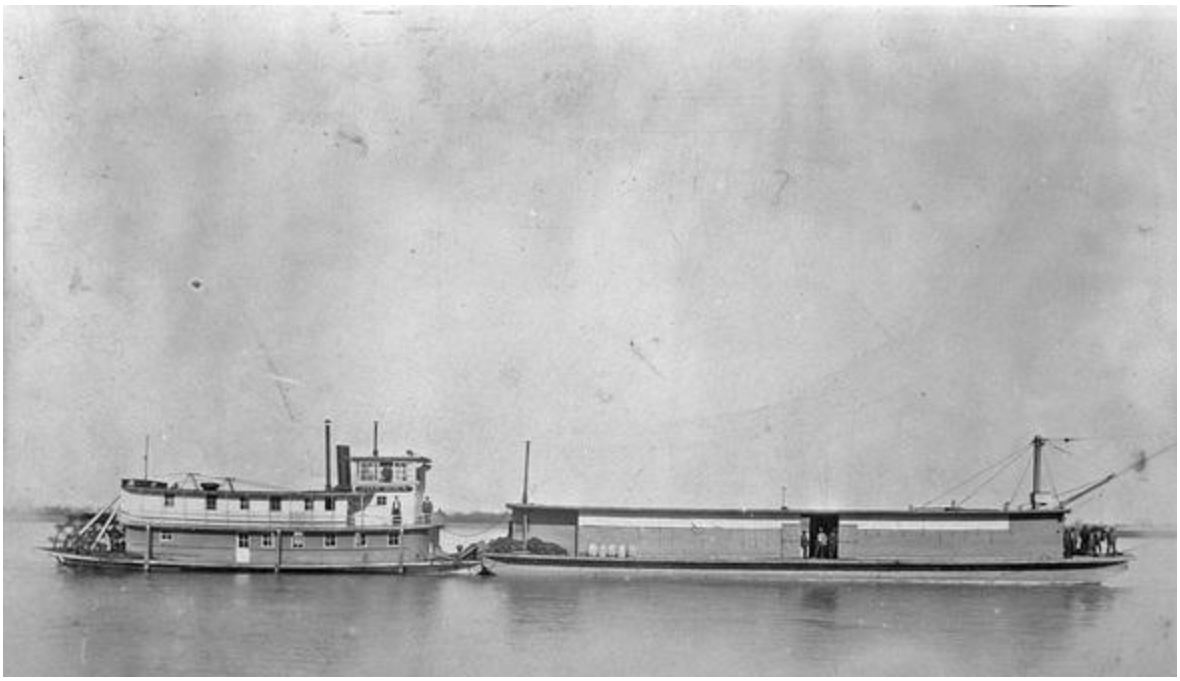
Way's # 4796
Built: 1908
Acquired: 1/1919
Sold: 8/1927



Tennessee Belle

Way's # 5341
Acquired: Early 1923
Sold: 7/1927

Rebuilt from Kentucky



Jane Rhea
Diesel Towboat
Built: Spring 1927
Acquired: New
Sold: 8/1942