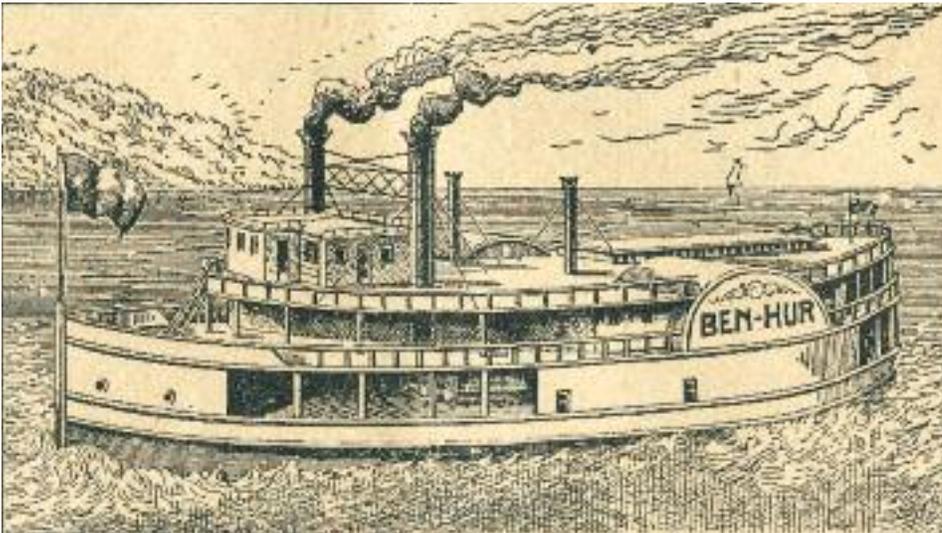


Jerry Canavit

It was 1889 and the city of Austin, Texas had good reason to be concerned. Many Austinites feared that the capital city had plateaued as a government and university town and was being bypassed by the oil boom in the state. To make matters worse, the local power utility was charging more than premium rates for delivery of utility services. What better to

# Austin Once Had The Best Dam Steamboat In Texas.



*Built in 1893, the lake excursion steamer BEN HUR was the largest and most luxurious steamboat to ever run on the Colorado River. Built in Austin, Texas by Capt. Albion Shepard, she was for years the pride of that city, reflecting Austin's growth and prosperity at the turn of the century.*

cure all of these problems than to build a dam on the Colorado River to provide the city with cheap hydroelectric power.

It seemed like a marvelous idea – and a timely one. A dam would lower rates on utility services and at the same time help attract new industry to the capital city – insuring continued growth and economic prosperity. It seemed like a win-win situation.

In 1888, civic leader Alexander Woolridge thought so. And so did John McDonald, who was elected mayor to do just that. The year after his election the city sold 1.4 million dollars in bonds for financing – and the Austin dam project was off and running.

The Austin Dam was completed in 1893 and the powerhouse in 1895. The dam was named in honor of Mayor McDonald and was the first dam to be built across the Colorado River and, at the time, was the second largest hydroelectric dam in the United States. It was constructed of granite and limestone, was 65-foot high and 1,100-foot long, but had no walkways or floodgates.

The city was proud of their dam and quickly found uses for its new source of electricity by using it to power the city's water and light systems as well as the existing electric rail line.

As a result of all of this activity, Lake McDonald became a very popular area attraction. Water enthusiasts could canoe, scull and sail. Visitors could enjoy a weekend outing at the newly built Bulian's Garden where pleasure-seekers could enjoy the picturesque location while partaking in fine dining at the restaurant and entertainment at the large concert hall.

Anticipating the attraction that the new lake and dam would provide, the Lake Navigation Company was formed. The company was managed by



*The BEN HUR with passengers about to begin her 60-mile daylight cruise around Lake McDonald. Dinner, dancing and even Vaudeville shows were provided. A midnight cruise was also scheduled.*

Charles H. Morse (President), Burt McDonald (Secretary – and son of mayor John McDonald), H.L. Breneman (Vice- president), John D. McCall (Treasurer), and Capt. Albion E. Shepard (Operations Manager).

Construction of a large, sidewheel excursion steamboat began on the shore of the Colorado River in 1892, near where the new dam was under construction. She was called the BEN HUR and would be larger and more elegant than anything ever seen on the Colorado River.

The BEN HUR was powered by two high-pressure steam engines, each generating 538 hp. Four Western-style boilers provided steam that helped turn two paddlewheels, each 22' in diameter. With overall measurements of 181' x 59', she could carry up to 2,000 passengers and could travel at 15 mph. She had a large cabin measuring

130' long, 15' wide and 11' high, with a skylight extending the full length of the cabin. There were 20 staterooms flanking the main cabin with a dressing room and toilet for ladies and a toilet and washroom for gentlemen. A nursery, laundry and a fruit and lunch stand were also available for passengers. Atop the cabin deck was located a "Texas" deck with quarters for the boat's officers and a pilot house for steering.

The new vessel was painted a gleaming white with an oil finish on all decks and gold trim for the cabins and railings. The BEN HUR also had her own generating system, powering 75 electric lights and two large arc searchlights.

She was launched when nearly completed in late 1892 when the waters of the dam-impounded Colorado River raised her from the ways on which she was being constructed, and was floated by the rising waters of the newly formed lake.

Her trial run was in early 1893 and she soon began making her daily 60-mile trip around the new lake – making one daylight and one moonlight cruise (returning to Austin at midnight). Capt. E.N. Leitmaker was in command with R.S. Bacon serving as chief engineer.

Her cruises provided dinner, dancing and occasionally, Vaudeville shows. Picnics and excursion parties were a specialty. She would play host



to statesmen, opera performances, noted orchestras and international regattas. Local events like "Cake Walk" dances were frequently featured.

*The following article appeared in the local Austin newspaper:*



*The BEN HUR under construction near the shoreline where Lake McDonald would be created by the new dam under construction. The vessel was built under the direction and supervision of Captain Albion Shepard, a retired sea captain and former surveyor for Texas railroads.*

### **THE CAKE WALK**

#### ***The Ben Hur Crowded to Witness the Prize Contest***

*The cake walk on the Ben Hur last night attracted an unusually large crowd. Everyone of the reserved seats were occupied, and many were compelled to stand while the walk was in progress. The seats were arranged to the best advantage, and everyone witnessed a good cake walk from start to finish.*

*Besides the contest for the big three-deck cake, the program consisted of some up-to-date "hot-foot" numbers and the participants reeled off the pigeon wings and the possum-mamas as they never did before. The large crowd was more than pleased with the program and manager Hill scored a big success. The judges for the cake contest were W.B. Worthham, Adj. General Wosencraft, Judge Robertson, A.P.*

*Woolridge, Miss Jessie Smith and Miss Murdock. There were ten couples in the contest, and they were all walkers, natural born. The merits of the contestants were based upon the step and general carriage of the couples. Columbus Washington was the Chesterfield of the occasion and acquitted himself in "hot stuff" style.*

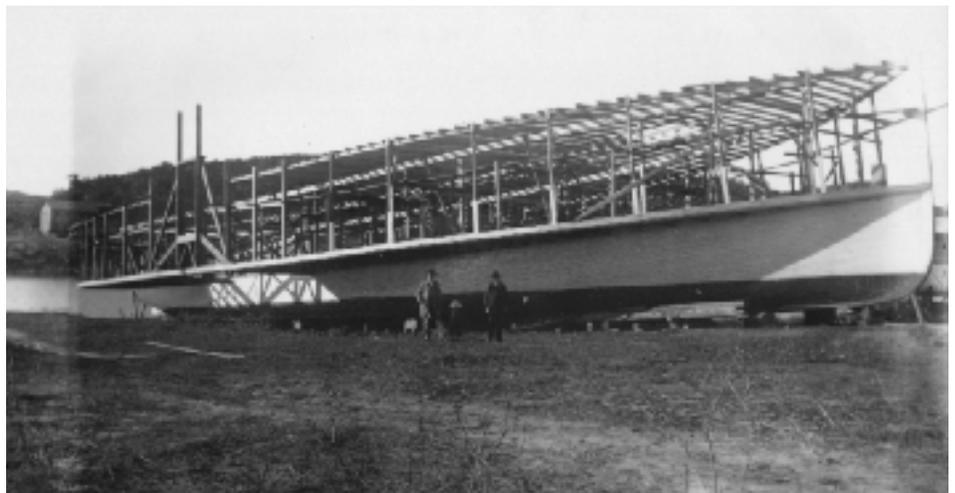
*The contest was a long one, and after the big boat had whistled for the landing on the return trip, all walkers had been retired in order. The prize was awarded to Sam Burke and his partner, Madeline Washington. The decision of the judges was satisfactory and everyone was pleased. Of course portions of the spectators had favorites from the start, but the*

*winners were considered the best all-around walkers of the bunch.*

*Jim Quinlan was seated in the rear of the press stand, and his funny jokes were like dew drops. They only sparkled at times, but he would make a good end man just the same*

Along with a grandstand and a pavilion for musical performances, a giant diving tower was installed at the wharf where the vessel was docked. Thirty-one "Moonlight Towers," each 150' high, were erected to illuminate the dam, the lake, and other parts of Austin at night. A trolley car line ran from Austin to the new dam and reservoir. The city was proud of their splendid new steamboat and the BEN HUR became the showpiece of the city.

Unfortunately, Austin's anticipated economic boom never materialized and, to make matters worse, the dam had problems. Because there were no major obstructions on the Colorado River at that time, the dam trapped large amounts of sediment and the dam silted up.





*On April 6, 1900, nearly 17-inches of rain in a 48 hour period caused the McDonald Dam to break, resulting in eighteen deaths, the destruction of 100 homes, damage to the dam powerhouse and waterworks plant, and the destruction of the excursion steamer BEN HUR.*

To compound the problem, the granite and limestone had been constructed on a spot where the Balconies Fault passes under the river, allowing water seepage under the dam.

The dam's design, as would later be discovered, could not accommodate the pressure exerted by a large force of additional water – and the problem was also compounded by the fact that the dam had been built without flood gates. Also, several engineers on the project had quit because, according to them, design “meddling” by the mayor had caused inferior materials to be used.

On April 6, 1900, a torrential rainfall occurred in the Austin area. It was estimated that nearly 17-inches of rain

fell in a 48-hour period. Very heavy rains had also fallen in the Hill Country and, with no upstream dams to capture the runoff, the McDonald Dam was defenseless against the oncoming wave of water rushing down the Colorado and the dam began to slide. The surge of water was estimated to have been about 30-feet high and one mile wide. Water went cascading eleven-feet over the crest of the dam, making it look much like Niagara Falls.

At 11:20 a.m., the dam disintegrated, with two sections (totaling about 500-feet) breaking completely away and sending a 50-foot wall of water rushing down the river. The resulting flood drowned 18 people and

destroyed 100 houses in Austin – at an estimated loss of \$1.4 million (in 1900 dollars). The dam powerhouse and municipal waterworks plant were extensively damaged and five workers lost their lives.

Another casualty was the excursion steamer BEN HUR. She was destroyed when she was ripped from her moorings and foundered on the west side of the lake in about 30' of water. The water rapidly drained away leaving the big boat stranded and broken atop a hill. The crew was able to safely exit the vessel before she was wrecked. After a few months she was dismantled and her engines were removed and sold. The wreckage eventually disappeared as the remaining timbers and wood were removed and used for construction projects.

The dam was partially rebuilt in 1912, but was never completed because



*The BEN HUR was destroyed when she was ripped from her moorings and foundered on the west side of the lake in about 30 feet of water. The water rapidly drained away leaving the big boat stranded and broken atop a hill..*

of a dispute between the contractor and the city of Austin. In 1915, high water damaged the unfinished dam even more.

In 1938, the Lower Colorado River Authority approved the building of a new dam and in 1939, with the assistance of Federal money, the Tom Miller Dam – a 1,590-foot long concrete pier

and slab structure – was built.

Austin would enjoy the benefits of having a fine new dam, and the Colorado River would see larger and better dams, but it would never again see the likes of a magnificent steamboat like the BEN HUR. She was, for a time, the pride of the city of Austin, Texas – and the best Dam Steamboat in Texas.



*f i n i s*

