

# Confessions of a Steamboat Addict:

## Part One: The James P. Pearson

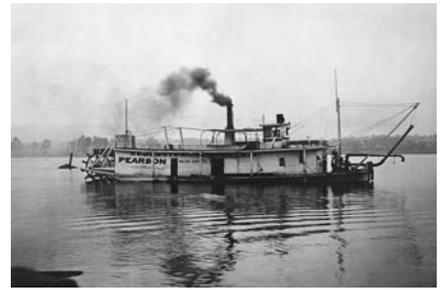
*Jerry Canavit*

I first saw a steamboat when I was about six years old. It was 1949 and my family lived in Moline, Illinois. We lived in an apartment on the first floor of an old two-story house at 2529 Fifth Avenue. The rent was \$22.00 a month. Dad worked at Deere & Company in the parts department – Mom was a traditional housewife – we had a cocker spaniel named “Lucky,” and my sister Sherry and I were not quite old enough to be in school. I also recall that all of the side streets in the neighborhood were made of red brick

and that there was a business about a block away called the Tri-City Cleaners that smelled funny and always seemed to have a lot of white smoke around it.

We didn't have a television yet. In fact, no one we knew had one. The first television in the neighborhood was at the local grocery store two blocks down the street – I believe it was called “Lovejoy's Market.” That would have been around 1951. For family entertainment at home, we would all gather around and listen to a big console radio in the living room. I vaguely remember listening to the Great Gildersleeve, The Shadow and a few other broadcasts. On weekends, our family would also take walks around the neighborhood. It seems there were always people out in their yards and we would stop and talk a lot. Neighbors seemed to talk more back then.

Since we didn't have a car, Dad and I would occasionally take a walk down Fourth Avenue over to River Drive along the



*The James P. Pearson as it appeared around 1907. She was originally the H.A. Barnard and was built at Moline, IL in 1898. She was owned by the Moline Consumers Co.*



*The Pearson as she appeared in 1915. She was used as a sand dredge for the Moline Consumers Co. and did occasional excursion work. She is shown here pushing an excursion barge. Note the passenger canopy and chairs behind the pilot house.*

Mississippi River and watch the boats pass by. If it were an afternoon walk, we would stop by the Moline Licorice Factory on the way and pick up a few sticks of red licorice to chew on. It was on one of these early walks with my Dad that I first saw a steamboat.

The Moline Consumers Company was located at the end of Second Avenue close to downtown Moline. They were in the sand business and they had these very large mounds of sand located next to the river. They also had boats that would dredge sand from the bottom of the river, then load this sand onto barges and take it to places that needed sand. Anyway, that's how Dad explained it to me. This was usually the destination for most of our walks along the river. Dad and I would climb up onto these piles of sand (sometimes with our sticks of red licorice in hand), talk, gaze at the river, and just observe all

of the activity going on there. Today, I guess you would call that Father and Son bonding.

She was called the James P. Pearson – a small stern-wheel steam towboat owned by the Moline Sand Company (later to become Moline Consumers Company) and named for the president of that company. Her job was to push barges full of sand and, at the same time, provide wonderful entertainment for a little boy and his Dad.

The Pearson filled the bill spectacularly.

She started out as the H.A. Barnard and was built at Moline, IL – but I'm not sure by whom. She became the Pearson around 1907 when she was purchased by the Moline Sand Company and was used as a sand dredge and for occasional excursion work. She was sold and later did passenger and towing work in the Chicago area and in Missouri before being purchased again by the Moline Consumers Company. In 1937, Fred Kahlke completely rebuilt her and she was used as a sand-sucker/towboat until around 1953.

After being decommissioned she was taken to Winona, MN, rebuilt by the Winona County Historical Society as some kind of packet/towboat hybrid, and put on exhibit as the Julius C. Wilkie. She burned on March 17, 1981 (suspected arson)



*The Pearson was completely rebuilt at the Kahlke Yard in 1937 as a combination sand-sucker/towboat. She operated in and around the Quad-Cities area until she was retired in 1953.*



*With barges of sand in tow, the Pearson approaches the Moline Consumers facility in 1949 – a familiar sight to Dad and me as we watched her from the sand dunes on the shore. I can still recall how effortlessly she moved through the water – how the water cascaded over the paddle-wheel, and how smoke and steam filled the air. It was like my senses were locked in a trance.*



*The Pearson was built into the Julius C. Wilkie by the Winona County Historical Society in the late 1950's and put on exhibition. She burned on March 17, 1981 – but was rebuilt and remained on display at Winona, MN until 2008.*



*When the expense of her upkeep became too much, she was demolished. So much for helping preserve the historical heritage of our country and for 110 years of historical significance. Rest In Peace: H.A. Barnard, James P. Pearson and Julius C. Wilkie.*

and was completely rebuilt and remained on exhibition there until 2008, when it was decided to demolish her because of upkeep expenses. So much for preserving our country's historical heritage.

I still remember, as clearly as if it were only yesterday, the first time I saw the Pearson. How effortlessly it moved through the water – how the water cascaded over the paddle-wheel, and how smoke and steam filled the air. I can recall the sounds of hissing and puffing and splashing water... and the sound of the beautiful whistle, as it seemed to echo up and down the river. It was like all of my senses had become locked in a trance – and all I could do was stare and experience the event. Mesmerized. Transfixed.

For those of you who have never experienced this state-of-mind, an explanation can't be sufficient. For those of you who have, no explanation is necessary. To this day, the sight of a steamboat, any steamboat, traveling on the water has the same effect on me.

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