

Confessions of a Steamboat Addict:

Part Two: The Steamer Avalon

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Since about 1956, I had been regularly riding my bicycle from our house on Seventeenth Street in Rock Island, over to Arsenal Island to watch the towboats lock through at Lock and Dam Number 15 on the Mississippi River. The Crescent Railroad Bridge was located just to the west of Rock Island and just above Credit Island. When I would hear towboats coming up-stream signal for this bridge to open, I would grab my sketchpad and pencils, hop on my red Schwinn bike and make it over to the Government Bridge before the tow would arrive at the lock. In a years' time I must have made dozens sketches of different



The Government Bridge at Lock & Dam 15 on Arsenal Island. Once I heard the towboat's horn blast to signal for the downstream Crescent Railroad bridge to open, it was just a ten-minute bicycle ride from my house on 17th street in Rock Island.



towboats as they locked-through. I can still remember names like *L. Wade Childress*, *W.S. Rhea*, *Minnesota*, *Austen Cargill*, *Cayuga*, *Delta Cities*, and *Lachlan Macleay*. These, and a host of others whose names I cannot recall at the moment, made it onto my sketchpad via a sharp and quickly moving No.2 pencil.

The towboats were interesting and I liked to draw them. I had recently acquired a copy of a book called *The Inland River Record* – and was able to look up information on the boats I had sketched – so, I was into riverboats, so to speak. But the summer of 1957 took my interest to a whole new level. The newspaper ad in the *Rock Island Argus* stated that the *Steamer Avalon* would be visiting the Quad Cities area for the weekend and would be providing day and nighttime excursions. Now, I had heard of the *Avalon* and had even begun a very crude oil painting of the excursion steamer – so I was very excited when I learned that I would actually be able to see her in person. It was also a good reason to finish the painting



Clarke C. Hawley (Doc). First Mate (and calliope player) on the Avalon. He started it all.

(which I again began working on immediately). I had two days to complete it before the Avalon would arrive. There was not much time left, and it had to be good. This was the first time that I can recall the pressure of an on-coming deadline; a feeling that I would become accustomed to later in my professional career

in advertising.

I figured she would arrive early that Saturday. So, I was up and out the door by 7:30 that morning – with my sketchpad and pencils, and on my bike and headed down Seventeenth Street for the Rock Island levee to see the big excursion boat arrive.

I tore past the Old Dutch Inn and the Montgomery Ward store, bumped across the railroad tracks at close to breakneck speed and arrived at the parking lot at the levee. To my surprise I found the Avalon already there. What a bummer.

After I recovered from the disappointment of missing her arrival, I spent about an hour walking around the big steamer and sketching. Eventually, a young guy came up beside me and began commenting on my drawings. He seemed to know an awful lot about the Avalon. The more he talked, the more

questions I had. This guy really knew a lot about steamboats and he had a willing audience. We talked for about fifteen minutes, then he asked me if I wanted to go aboard and look around. “Heck, yes,” I replied. So, I grabbed my sketchpad and followed him on board.

Everyone there was really friendly. A lady wearing an apron spoke to us. “Hey Doc, who’s the young fella?” He introduced me as a local artist. Boy, did I feel



Capt. Ernest Wagner. The man “in-charge.” He told great “river stories” and . . . he liked my painting.



The Avalon was originally the Steamer Idlewild, built by James Rees & Sons of Pittsburgh, PA in and operated by the Memphis Packet Co. She became the Avalon in February, 1948 and became the Belle of Louisville in 1962.

special. As we walked around, he told me that his name was Clark Hawley, that he was First Mate on the Avalon. And, that he really liked my sketches. He also told me that people called him Doc because he was studying to become a dentist.

I received a full tour of the boat and I think I met just about everyone on board including a real big guy chewing on an unlit.



The Avalon at the ferry landing at the Rock Island levee in 1957.

cigar. Doc called him Captain Wagner and seeing that he had *captain* written on his hat, I figured he must be the real deal. He liked my sketches, too – and asked if he might have one. “You bet,” – I enthusiastically responded.

We had just finished the tour of the engine room when Doc asked if I’d like to see his

photo collection of the boat. “Sure,” I replied – and we spent the next twenty minutes looking at old photos. As I remember, there were two very large three-ring binders just chock-full of old black-and-white photographs. “She used to be called the Idlewild and was built in 1914 at Pittsburgh,” he told me. The binders were a treasure trove of history and Doc was filling me in on all of the details and nuances of the boats’ history. I was completely blown-away.

As I was leaving the boat, I had to keep pinching myself to make sure all of this was really happening. And, as we were walking toward my bike, he told me that they would be in Rock Island all week-end and that I could have a free ride anytime – just to come aboard and ask for him. And, I could bring my

folks down and they could take a free ride, too – just to let him know, and he’d take care of it. Now, I had heard of these things happening to other people before, *but not to me.*

As it turned out, Mom and Dad had plans for that Saturday night, but they agreed to drop me off and pick me up later – and that I could take the trip solo, as long as I was careful. With sketches and my hurriedly-finished oil painting in hand, my parents delivered me to the boat that evening, met Doc, and left me to my adventure. And what an adventure ...

My first ride on the Avalon began with spending time at the concession stand (with the lady I had met earlier wearing the apron) and leaving there with my oil painting hanging behind the popcorn machine.



The steamer Avalon as she appeared in 1957. She was operated by Steamer Avalon, Inc., of Cincinnati, OH and “tramped” up and down the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, Kanawha, Cumberland and other U.S. rivers until 1962.



The Avalon had a rich and varied history. She operated as a passenger ferry, a packet (hauling passengers, cotton, lumber and grain), an amusement park shuttle boat, a floating USO nightclub, a towboat, and an excursion boat. She now operates out of Louisville, KY as the Belle of Louisville and is in her 100th year of operation.

Other than at home or school, it was the first time my artwork had ever been displayed. Then it was down to the engine room, with the sweet smell of steam and oil, and watching the workings of all of those mechanical gizmos. I remember it was especially fun watching the pistons moving the pitman arms and the crank turning the large paddlewheel. It was absolutely fascinating.

But the most fun was being able to go up into the pilothouse later and sit on the lazy bench and talk with the pilot and captain while we were underway. It was completely dark by that time and the lights along the river provided a wonderful and appropriate ambience. I remember telling myself that I still couldn't believe that all of this

was all happening to me. While in the pilothouse, I don't know whether it was more exciting listening to the Pilot and Captain Wagner tell stories, or when the pilot (I think his name was Roy, but I'm not sure of that) actually let me hold onto the wheel. Imagine that – I was actually steering the Avalon.

My last memory of that wonderful experience was of sitting all alone on this old bench outside of the pilothouse, leaning back and looking up at the star-filled night. It felt like I had gone to heaven. As we passed under the Centennial Bridge, I could hear the "huff-huff-huff" sound of the smoke escaping the smokestacks and bouncing off the underside of the bridge – and the sounds of music and activity from the dance floor below me.

A memory that would be indelibly etched in my mind forever. It was the end of a perfect night.

Since that night, I have been totally captivated by the old boats. They have become my life-long hobby. And a young guy named Doc had a lot to do with it. I would see him occasionally at a convention or while riding on the *Natchez* at New Orleans. I'd always stop and say Hi and remind him of that special day back in 1957 – that in reality he probably didn't remember, but that's okay. It was a game-changer for me and I'll be forever grateful.



Many thanks, Doc.

