

# Hell Roarin' Jack

I have always loved an account of a good steamboat race. Many years ago I came across a story of one whose source I do not remember. I include it here in hopes that the reader too, will be as entertained as I was when I first read it.

The coming of the 20th century brought about the gradual decline of steamboating on Puget Sound. Even though their days were numbered, the steamers of the Mosquito Fleet didn't know it and they continued to go importantly about their business. The "Inland Sea" had been the breeding ground of many colorful and unique personalities who commanded or served on these vessels. One of these was a rough-and-ready skipper known far and wide as Hell-Roarin' Jack.

Jack seldom shaved and had a strong aversion to such frills as the wearing of shoes and socks, and he was absolutely convinced that water was useful for just one purpose - to float a steamboat. He also had a rough hand at the wheel and little respect for anything that chanced to get in the way of his boat. These minor eccentricities made Jack rather unpopular with the more nervous and fastidious passengers.

At about this time the old sternwheeler CITY OF ABERDEEN was operating on the Seattle - Olympia route for the S. Wiley Navigation Company. It was at this time that she was placed under the command of the venerable Captain Jack. With such a skipper, this previously sedate paddler developed an aggressive nature, as Hell-Roarin' Jack would race with anything that would float.



*Believed to be the only known photo of Hell Roarin' Jack*

There was no denying he could get top speed out of the old stern-wheeler. He had recently won a questionable victory over the very speedy stern-wheeler GREYHOUND after he had managed to creep up on her off Dash Point and, with boiler straining to its limit and its whistle blasting away, charged past the 'HOUND before anyone on the little speedster knew what was happening. When the deck hands on the GREYHOUND realized that they were really in a race, they made a desperate attempt to throw cordwood over the side in a desperate attempt to stave off defeat. But the ABERDEEN had too much momentum and the GREYHOUND had been caught off guard, and, for one of the few times the 'HOUND had been bested in a race.

After beating the GREYHOUND, he was determined to humble the proud FLYER or bust a boiler trying. The FLYER was single screw steamer, a little larger than the ABERDEEN, and was considered by most to be the fastest ship on the Sound. His moment came as the ABERDEEN approached Tacoma on a run up from Seattle. Far astern the FLYER could be seen putting out from Elliot Bay and squaring away for her usual fast run to Tacoma. The ABERDEEN had a consignment of cased bacon aboard, and this provided Hell-Roarin' Jack with an idea.. First, he had most of the cargo moved forward, for stern-wheelers went faster with their nose down and their

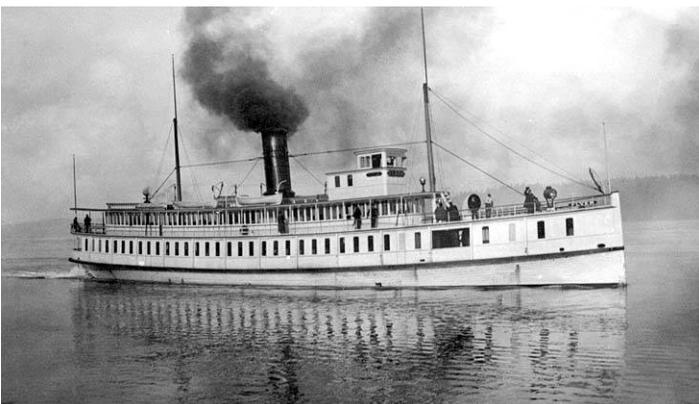


*The City of Aberdeen was a small sternwheel vessel operated by the S. Wiley Navigation Company on Puget Sound around the year 1900. In the hands of Hell Roarin' Jack, the normally sedate little vessel became a fire-breathing monster..*



*The Greyhound was one of the fastest boats on Puget Sound. She was described as being “all wheel and whistle” and had bested the likes of such speedsters as the Bailey Gatzert and the T.J. Potter.*

big wheel turning high in the water. Then, the bacon went to the boiler room where Chief Engineer Nick Perring used it as fuel. By the time the FLYER arrived on the scene, several cases of choice pork had gone to build the ABERDEEN's boiler pressure to atomic proportions, while the section of Puget Sound near Commencement Bay was permeating with the rich odor of broiled bacon. As an additional strategy, Jack had timed it so the FLYER caught up with the ABERDEEN just at the point where the fast propeller was to start slowing down for her entrance into the harbor. By the time the FLYER's master realized that the stodgy looking stern-wheeler with her cooking odors was actually challenging him to a race, the ABERDEEN was far in the lead, with all her fat-fed boiler pressure expended in one tremendous sprint.



*The Flyer continually made four trips daily between Seattle and Tacoma. She regularly covered the 28-mile distance in less than an hour-and-a-half. She was known as the “Queen of the Sound” and was powered by a single screw propeller and a triple-expansion steam engine generating 1200 horsepower.*

As the CITY OF ABERDEEN flew past the FLYER's dock, her stern-wheel was turning so fast that onlookers reported that it was shucking herring clean over its jackstaff when it caught up with a school of the startled fish. Be that as it may, the unbeatable FLYER was far astern, with her captain still scratching his head and wondering what was going on.

When Hell-Roarin' Jack claimed his bacon-eating sternwheeler had outraced the queen of the Sound, the FLYER's crew protested with screams of rage. They didn't even know they were in a race until it was all over! It was a sneak attack! It was a nasty, unethical trick! But Captain Hell-Roarin' Jack had little concern with the finer points of sportsmanship. He had waited for the FLYER, challenged her to a race, and won. He had beat the FLYER and to hell with their excuses.

Engineer Nick Perring, who coaxed amazing bursts of speed from the dumpy looking CITY OF ABERDEEN, was questioned in a newspaper interview as to the ABERDEEN's boiler pressure on the occasion of her victory over the GREYHOUND. The old steamboatman parried that question with a mildly evasive axiom that probably deserves to go down in history as a motto of all racing steamboat engineers. "Of course," said Nick, with a straight face and candid eye, "the greater amount of steam carried will naturally increase the speed to an extent." And then the old man smiled a remembering smile; probably recalling how he and Hell-Roarin' Jack once bested two of the fastest boats on Puget Sound.

