

Steamboat Racing and Boiler Explosions

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"I think that much the most enjoyable of all races is a steamboat race. Two red-hot steamboats raging along, neck-and-neck, straining every nerve—that is to say, every rivet in the boilers—quaking and shaking and groaning from stem to stern, spouting white steam from the pipes, pouring black smoke from the chimneys, raining down sparks, parting the river into long breaks of hissing foam—this is sport that makes a body's very liver curl with enjoyment. A horse race is pretty tame and colorless in comparison."

*— Mark Twain,
Life on the Mississippi*

It is a popular belief that there was a great deal of steamboat racing going on back in the "good old days" and there was a wide difference of opinion about the part played by racing in precipitating steamboat explosions.

That steamboat racing was a principal cause of these explosions was one view that was widely held. It was felt by those who shared this opinion that, in the excitement of the race, ordinary safeguards and precautions were forgotten or ignored and excessive steam pressure was used in a frantic effort to attain more speed. Safety valves were overloaded or tied down and the furnaces were fed with resin, turpentine, lard and other exotic flammable materials until the boilers were unable to withstand the

internal pressures generated – and, perhaps with an inadequate water supply and because of carelessness or forgetfulness in the excitement of the race, resulted in explosion and death.

Another view was that the idea of racing as a primary cause of exploding boilers was a fantasy of the imagination that had been fostered by a willing press until it was pretty much accepted as reality. It was felt that in almost all cases, these disasters occurred only a few days or weeks sooner than they might have otherwise. It was also argued that by many that these explosions were even less likely to occur during racing than at other times since most of the participants were alert and at their post – and machinery and boilers were being

carefully tended to insure maximum performance. However, this argument is not entirely convincing because it does overlook that fact that excessive pressure could cause a boiler in perfect working condition to explode.

It must also be stated that well-authenticated examples of explosions brought on by racing were few in number, even though the charge of "racing" was frequently raised and reported. The fact did remain that there was a general tendency to drive steamboats hard and fast and to use steam pressures, which in relation to the strength of the boilers, were at times excessive. Since the power of the high-pressure steamboat depended primarily on the pressure that could be maintained in the boilers, operators were inclined to push the boilers and engines in excess of rates for which they had originally been intended.

A Closer Look. A Matter of Business.

The fact is that the business of most steamboat captains and owners was to earn dividends and profits from their commercial endeavors. Racing was only an occasional byproduct of this activity.

Most early steamboat races were not really planned, but probably resulted from two vessels coming together, going in the same direction, deciding to engage in a "burst of speed" in an attempt to beat a business competitor to the next landing to secure passengers and freight.. These encounters or "brushes" resulted in added revenues for the winner – and, if a fast boat was consistently

successful, a reputation for rapid transit was earned. So, in most cases, this was a business venture rather than a sporting event, as the first boat to reach the landing usually ended up with the passengers and cargo in waiting.

Over time, certain fast boats developed a reputation for their swiftness and some contests of speed were arranged to satisfy the egos of the owners and supporters of these vessels. It must be said that these contests of speed were not always readily entered into – as racing steamboats was an expensive and risky business and, unless the vessel was owned by the boats' commander, it is more likely that "permission" to race was not readily granted.

There were many different types of steamboats and some didn't participate in racing because they just weren't equipped to do so. Some towboats and raftboats were powerful but had no need for excessive speed. Small boats engaged primarily in freighting did not require great speed, as did the passenger packet, which required speed as a prime factor in gaining patronage. Speed required power,

and power cost money. And, fast boats were expensive.

The successful passenger packet had to be not only fast, but she also had to be elegant. Some of the larger vessels of this type were actually "floating palaces;" rivaling the best hotels of the day in service and accommodation. Therefore, it isn't too difficult to understand how pride and ego were involved in helping define one vessels' worth over another. And what better way exhibit the difference between two comparable vessels than a test of speed. Speed was important – important to acquiring and maintaining business – and to also satisfy the egos of those involved.

When a vessel had proven itself faster than all others in a specific area, it became fashionable to "brag" about it. Not so much by talking about it (although I'm sure this was done frequently), but to display it visually for all to see. In the early years of steamboating, this display took the physical form of a broom – usually placed on or near the pilothouse; the broom, of course, signifying that an area had been swept clean of all speed

challengers. Later brooms were joined by the use of deer horns or antlers similarly displayed.

These trophies were often displayed and much coveted. They usually signified that a boat "owned" a speed record between to major ports or cities and that this had been done honestly and in the presence of qualified witnesses. Etiquette dictated that a vessel did not "own" these symbols or had a right to display them except for the period of time they held a record. When the record was beaten, the trophy would be surrendered to the new champion. The transfer of these symbols from one vessel to another was often accompanied by banquets, parties and gala events.

But there was a downside to rapid steam propulsion. When the safety of passengers and property were the primary concern, the steamboat was a practical and relatively safe mode of transportation. When this concern was lessened to accommodate a vessels performance (i.e. racing), bad things could happen. And they did. Before 1851, there were 1,700 vessels operating on U.S. waters. Of these, 250 vessels and over 2800 lives were lost because of boiler explosions – some of these as a result of steamboats racing.

Racing as an Event

The popularity of a well-promoted steamboat race in the nineteenth century rivaled the popularity of a modern-day sporting event. The races between the ECLIPSE and A.L. SHOTWELL (1853) and the ROBT. E. LEE and NATCHEZ (1870) attracted national and international attention, with serious wagering occurring





here in the U.S and in Europe. The boats, like pro teams, each had their supporters and cheerleaders and the events were promoted in the media of the day. The excitement and the dynamic were the same.

Steamboat racing continued into the early twentieth century, but by then they had become tightly regulated public events and the attraction and excitement had become less. Contests on the Ohio River between the BETSEY ANN and the Greene Line steamers (CHRIS and TOM GREENE) in the late 1920s revived a little of the old excitement, but the day of real racing steamboats had passed.

Today there are still symbolic races that remind us of the past. Occasionally the DELTA QUEEN and BELLE of LOUISVILLE have a go at each other and still provide a reminder of how the fast boats on our rivers once vied for the Horns, Antlers and Brooms... and the title of Champion.

Although racing was often cited as one of the primary causes of boiler explosions and received much attention in the printed media and in Congress, there are relatively few documented examples of such activity and it is likely that this link between racing and boiler explosions is more the result of the hysteria and sensationalism accompanying these disasters. It is probably safe to assume there were more boiler explosions resulting from racing than I was able to document – and certainly attribution is not always present in accounts. However, of the 1,319 boiler explosions I was able to document, less than 4% were directly attributed to racing. My list of steamboat boiler explosions while racing is as follows:

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May 4, 1817
Constitution vs Washington
 Mississippi River,
 near Point Coupee, Louisiana
 23 fatalities.

June 2, 1825
Legislator vs ?
 North River, New York City
 4-5 fatalities.

September 10, 1830
United States vs ?
 Long Island Sound,
 Between New York City
 and New Haven Connecticut
 9 fatalities.

October 8, 1833
New England vs Boston
 Connecticut River near Essex, CT.
 13 fatalities.

May 8, 1837
Ben Sherrod vs Prairie
 Mississippi River
 Near Natchez, Mississippi.
 80-200 fatalities.

April 25, 1838
Moselle vs ?
 Ohio River,
 Hillsboro, Ohio (near Cincinnati)
 81-160 fatalities.

November 25, 1838
General Brown vs Empress
 Mississippi River,
 Neat Helena, Arkansas
 55 fatalities.

December 13, 1841
Albert Gallatin vs ?
 Trinity Bay, Texas (near Galveston)
 5-15 fatalities.

April, 1843
Harry of the West vs Grey Eagle
 Mississippi River ,
 35 mi. below Memphis, TN.
 4-6 fatalities.

October 23, 1844
Lucy Walker vs Minerva
 Ohio River. (near Albany, Indiana)
 50-60 fatalities.

1847 (date unknown)
Niagara vs Roger Williams
 Hudson River. (between Albany
 and New York City).
 2 fatalities.

January 8, 1848
Blue Ridge vs Triumph
 Ohio River,
 above Portsmouth, OH
 30 fatalities.

May 22, 1848

Halifax vs Balloon

Kennebec River.

Waterville. ME

6 fatalities

May 7, 1849

Louisiana vs ?

Lake Ponchartrain, LA.

4 fatalities.

May 3, 1851 (June 14, 1851?)

New World vs Wilson G. Hunt

Sacramento, CA

(near Benecia)

2 fatalities.

April 25, 1852

Prairie State vs Avalanche

Illinois River,

near Pekin, IL

110+ fatalities

July 7, 1852

St. James vs ?

Lake Pontchartrain, LA

(at Point-aux-Herbes)

20 fatalities

July 28, 1852

Henry Clay vs Armenia

Hudson River,

Riverdale, NY.

80-90 fatalities.

March 22, 1853

Farmer vs Neptune

Galveston Bay (at Galveston, TX)

36 fatalities.

March 23, 1853

R.K. Page vs Gov. Dana

Sacramento River

(near Nicholas, California)

3-4 fatalities

April 17, 1854

Secretary vs Nevada

Sacramento River

(near Sacramento, CA)

16 fatalities

January 29, 1855

Pearl vs Enterprise

American River

(Yolo, CA)

70 fatalities.

March 25, 1857

Forest Rose vs Yorktown

Mississippi River.

Napoleon, AR

6-12 fatalities

July 3, 1857

Berlin City vs Pearl

Lake Butte des Morts, WI

(near mouth of Detroit River)

5 fatalities

April 22, 1858

Ocean Spray vs Hannibal City

Mississippi River.

(above St. Louis, MO)

20-30 fatalities.

September 5, 1864

Washoe vs Chrysopolis

Sacramento River

5 mi. above Rio Vista, CA)

16-85 fatalities.

November 3, 1864

John Rumsey vs Albany

Upper Mississippi River,

Below St. Paul, MN.

5-7 fatalities.

January 30, 1866

Missouri vs Dictator

Ohio River

(near Evansville, IN)

100-120 fatalities

February 17, 1867

David White vs Mollie Able

Mississippi River

(below Helena, AR)

65 fatalities

June 20, 1868

LeRoy vs ?

Hudson River

(Battery at New York City

near William's Island, NY)

3 fatalities.

Sep. 15, 1869

Phantom vs Clara Scott

Ohio River.

Paducah, KY

5 fatalities

October 13, 1875

E.H. Miller vs City of Alpena

Lake Huron (at Thunder Bay -

off Alpena, MI)

2 fatalities

September 5, 1879

Alaska vs City of Detroit

Lake Erie

3 fatalities.

June 6, 1881

John H. Hanna vs St. Johns

Mississippi River

(near New Orleans, LA)

14 fatalities

June 28, 1881

Phaeton vs Handy

Ohio River, Maysville, KY

4-5 fatalities.

May 2, 1882

American Eagle vs Jay Cooke

Lake Erie

(near Sandusky, OH)

5 fatalities

October 28, 1882

Rudolph Wetzel vs Henry S. Sill

Lake Michigan

(12 mi. north of Racine, WI

3 fatalities

July 2, 1894

Omega vs Kindrick

Tennessee River

(40 mi. from Chattanooga, TN

1 fatality

June 22, 1895

Christopher Columbus vs Virginia

Lake Erie (also reported as a bursting steam pipe)

2 fatalities

August 28, 1901

City of Trenton vs Twilight

Delaware River

(Between Philadelphia, PA

and Trenton, NJ)

11 fatalities

February 5, 1907

Parker vs John A. Patten

Tennessee River

(9 mi. below Chattanooga, TN - near William's Island).

3-4 fatalities

Total Explosions:

41

Fatalities:

967-1,309

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