

The Last of the Breed

A Brief History of the steamer Lone Star; the longest continually operating wooden-hull steam vessel on the Mississippi River System.

J E R R Y C A N A V I T

The life of a steamboat on the waters of North America in the nineteenth and even into the twentieth century was sometimes a precarious and often a short one. Snags, boiler explosions and other accidents took their toll on many of these primarily wooden vessels and, as a result, the life expectancy of these boats was very limited.

Many of them found new life in rebuilding as it was fairly common for an older vessel to be used as a “source” for building an entirely new vessel. It was, however, uncommon for a wooden riverboat to last beyond 20 or 25 years of active service.

There are to be found a few exceptions to these age limitations. The Sacramento River sidewheeler CHRYSOPOLIS (1860-1940) operated for 80 years of active service, running as a packet for 15 years, then rebuilt (using the same engines and basically the same hull) and operated on San Francisco Bay for an additional 65 years as the ferry OAKLAND.

Another example of unusual longevity is the sternwheeler BELLE OF LOUISVILLE (1914-2013).



The original LONE STAR was built at Lyons, Iowa in 1868 for Captain Sam Mitchell. She was a small stiff-shaft sidewheeler and was used as a short-trade packet between Davenport and Buffalo, Iowa. She was later used as a raft boat.

She began as the IDLEWILD and, although she never had a wooden hull, she was remodeled / refurbished a number of times, changed her name twice (AVALON - 1948 and BELLE OF LOUISVILLE - 1962) and continues to run daily excursions out of Louisville, still powered by her original Rees high-pressure steam engines - 99 years and still counting . . .

The record for longevity for a continuously operating steam-powered wooden steamboat, however, belongs to a small sternwheel tow-

boat that currently sits out of the water on display at the Buffalo Bill Museum at LeClaire, Iowa. Her name is the LONE STAR and she has the distinction of having been the last operating steam-powered sternwheel towboat on the Mississippi River System.

Evidence seems to indicate that the LONE STAR was originally built in 1868 at Lyons, Iowa. Her original configuration was that of a stiff-shaft, wooden hull, side-wheeler. Her hull measurements were 68.4' x 19.3' x 3.2' and she was a



The LONE STAR was completely rebuilt at the Kahlke Yard in 1890. She was enlarged and reconfigured as a stern-wheeler and a sand pump was mounted in the engine room.

27 ton wood-burner. She was built for Captain Sam Mitchell and he ran her as a short-trade packet between Davenport and Buffalo.

Mitchell ran her as a packet until 1870 then he used her for towing log rafts, for general towing and for occasional river passenger service. Records show that George Winans had her chartered at one time for towing logs for the Mississippi Logging & Lumber Co. – Lome Short was her captain for several seasons. In November of 1876, Captain Mitchell sold her to

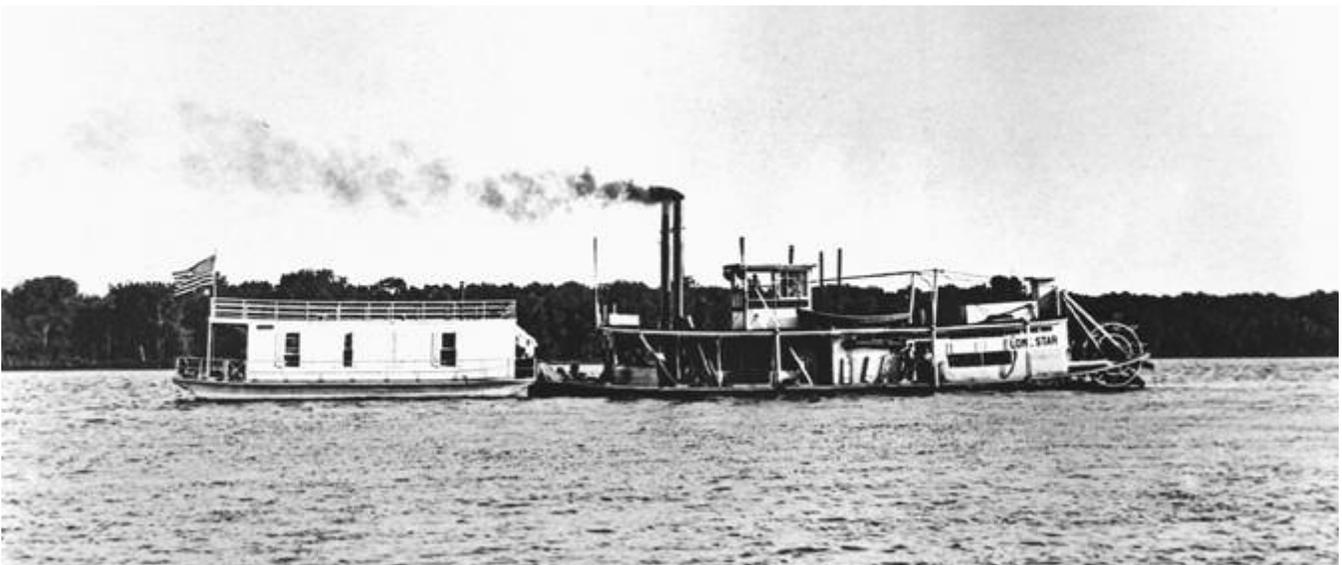
Goss & Company of Davenport, Iowa for the sum of \$1,050. Goss & Company then had her converted into a regular towboat and she assumed the duties of dredging sand from the Mississippi river bottom. During this time she reportedly towed a digger and a sand barge between the sand deposits and the company yard at Davenport, Iowa.

In 1890, Goss & Company had the LONE STAR enlarged and rebuilt at the Kahlke Yard at Rock Island in order to accommodate the

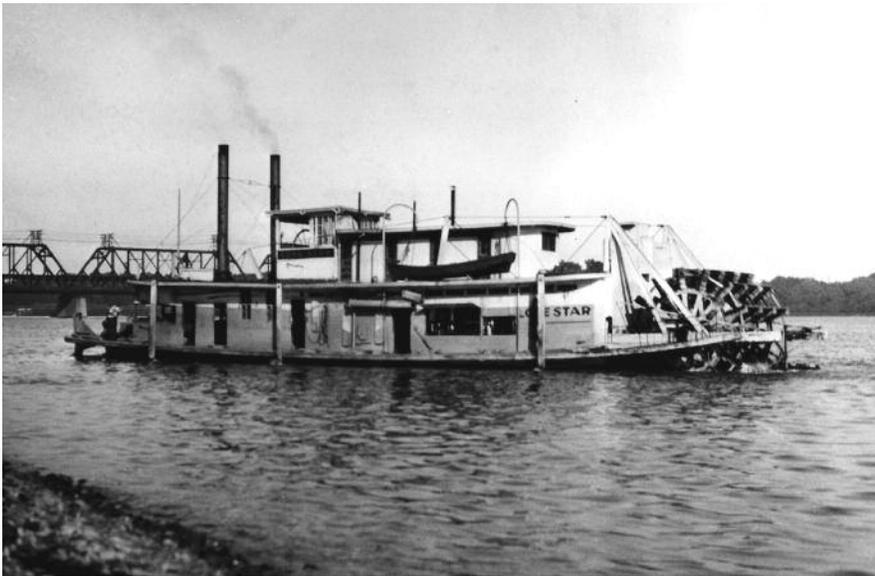
mounting of the sand pump in the engine room. She probably received new engines at this time and she was re-configured as a sternwheeler. Her new hull measurements were 84' x 20' x 5.'

On April 15, 1895, she towed a barge into the Hennepin Canal (entering from the Mississippi River) giving her the distinction of being the first commercial tow in the canal.

In 1900, Goss & Company became Builder's Sand & Gravel Company and they continued to operate the LONE STAR in the sand business. At this time she was completely rebuilt at the Kahlke Yard. New high-pressure tubular boilers (225 psi) were added at this time and she was converted to coal-burning. Her profile changed at this time as the new boilers brought her smoke stacks from behind to forward of her pilothouse. She also may have received newer engines at this time. Although she was rebuilt from the original sidewheel LONE STAR and kept the same name, she was re-documented and given a new number. The practice of rebuilding vessels in this manner was a fairly common practice as it



The LONE STAR is shown here under way shortly after she received her new high-pressure boilers and was converted to coal-burning.



Shown here after her rebuilding in 1922 at the Kahlke Yard, the LONE STAR, now even larger and with additional cabin space behind the pilot house, continued her towing duties for Builders Sand & Gravel Co.

provided owners with the opportunity to have the vessel re-documented, allowing less expensive insurance rates as well as longer periods of time between time-consuming safety inspections. From 1902 to 1905 she carried a license for carrying passengers (probably for occasional excursion business) and from 1906 to 1921 she was licensed for "inland towing."

In 1922 she was again enlarged and rebuilt at the Kahlke Yard. New hull measurements: 90' x 24.5' x 4.1.' Crew quarters (four cabins) were then added behind the pilothouse. The 340 hp steam engines (12's x 5-foot stroke / Iowa Iron Works of Clinton, Iowa) and other machinery were probably transferred from the old vessel. She was again re-enrolled and given a new number. She continued her towing duties for Builder's Sand & Gravel until about 1957, when her hull began leaking. She was taken to the Kahlke Yard and was again extensively reconditioned and had her hull replanked. She continued her towing duties until she failed a USCG safety inspection in 1967.

The end of the LONE STAR'S working life came on August 28, 1967 and when she was cooled down for the last time; a colorful area of towboating ended. The crew on her last trip was: Glenn Johnson, master and pilot; William Horlas, engineer; Mrs. Eleanor Johnson, cook; Dick Schmidt and

Louis Chapman, firemen-deckhands.

The LONE STAR was acquired for the Buffalo Bill Museum at LeClaire, Iowa by the LeClaire Business Mens Association (for \$1.00) and hauled out on the Mississippi River bank where she is currently maintained for public viewing as a National Historic Landmark..

The LONE STAR had an interesting and varied career as a working steamboat. She began in 1868 as a small sidewheel wood-burning steamboat in the packet trade, then used as a raftboat and towboat. She was converted into a towboat in 1876, then rebuilt /enlarged in 1890 into a sand-sucker/towboat and reconfigured as a stern-wheeler. She was modified in 1900 and changed to coal-burning, rebuilt and enlarged again in 1922, then reconditioned again in 1957. For 99 continuous working years she carried the name LONE STAR and outlasted all of her contemporaries.



The LONE STAR on one of her last trips up river in 1967. Although she had her hull re-planked and was extensively reconditioned in 1957 at the Kahlke Yard, she failed a U.S. Coast Guard inspection and her owners decided to retire her and replace her with a new diesel-powered vessel. When she was finally cooled down on August 28, 1967, the 99 year career of the LONE STAR finally came to an end, writing the final chapter to a colorful era of steam towboating on the Mississippi River.

