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Dent Sanford Memoir

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Memoir

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STEAMBOATS AND INLAND RIVERS

Sanford discusses his river experiences as an engineer on steam towboats.

Interview by John Knoepfle, 1957

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by John Knoepfle on June 21, 1957. Margaret Reeder transcribed the tape and Dr. Knoepfle edited and reviewed the transcript. This and other interviews in a series on steamboats and inland rivers were produced under the auspices of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio and Sangamon State University, Springfield, Illinois.

In this memoir Dent Sanford discusses his river experiences as an engineer.

John Knoepfle was born in Cincinnati in 1923. He obtained his Ph.D. in literature from Saint Louis University in 1967. Dr. Knoepfle is presently a professor of English at Sangamon State University. He was named Illinois Author of the Year in October, 1986. John and his wife Peg have one daughter and three sons.

During 1953-1955 while working as producer-director of an educational television station, WCET-TV, Cincinnati, Dr. Knoepfle proposed a project on steamboats and inland rivers. These river memoirs are a result of the research collected during 1954-1960.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio are not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Dent Sanford, June 21, 1957, 411 Broadway, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Interviewer, John Knoepfle.

Q: Mr. Sanford has a long and distinguished career as an engineer and we are going to talk this morning about some of his steamboating days.

A: In my early days of engineering on the Ohio River I can recall some very interesting happenings. I happened to be chief engineer on a large towboat by the name of B. D. Wood. Towing coal and iron from Pittsburgh, we happened to lose a wheel as we were coming down in the Mingo Chute at Mingo Junction. The steamer Voyager coming up the river with empties landed her empties and caught us with our loaded tow and landed us. Then in about four days we had a new wheel and then proceeded on our way to Louisville. As we were passing Cincinnati the wheel was squeaking pretty loud, about like a new pair of shoes, and the barges at Mill Creek Landing in those days stuck out pretty far. Big loaded barges with coal that belonged to the Combine. To make the turn there in the river, it was necessary to give her all the power that you could possibly give her when the pilot notified you of that effect with two raps of the gong. Of which I received in due time and I gave her everything that we had and again lost the wheel. The steamer Hercules Carrel came to our rescue and landed us down below town. Those were wonderful days with Captain "Doggy" Dippold and that type of real mariners. Men that knew the river and how to handle towboats. Then another experience that I had was on the biggest sternwheel boat at that time, the steamer John K. Speed. We were on our way up from New Orleans to Cincinnati and about six miles below Rosedale, Mississippi, about eight-thirty in the evening a boilerhead burst, moving the smokestack, called the bricheling from the front of the boiler, allowed the flames to go up through and caused the vessel to catch fire which we were successful enough to keep from burning up. Furthermore, I was the only one, probably fires under the boiler, and I didn't want them to burn up and consequently I went down with a brand new pair of overalls on to extinguish and put the fire out under the boilers. Which I accomplished, although it happened that I got argyrosis from the blue in the brand new overalls. I burned the back of my neck pretty bad; the hair never did grow there. Captain Harry Doss was my pilot on watch when that incident happened. We cast anchor there; a mate by the name of Jim Howard from Indiana was a mate on the boat. The big steamer Kate Adams happened to come along and picked us up and towed us up to Rosedale where we waited for boiler makers from Cincinnati to come down with a new head, and we installed the new head and proceeded to Cincinnati. (pause)

As a child, if I recall correctly, my father was a pilot on the steamer Andes, running in the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati trade. That was about my first year in school, if I recall correctly, and I was

coming down from my grandparents, by the name of Meldahl up in West Virginia, on Daddy's boat coming home to go to school. As the boat rounded to at Catlettsburg, Kentucky, to make the landing there, Daddy rang to stop the engines but the engines didn't stop. Consequently, due to the turning around of the boat there to make the landing, it was impossible for him to do anything else and he started up the Big Sandy River. Of course the captain, his name was Muhleman and his brother was the chief engineer. The captain came running up to the pilot house, asked Daddy what was taking place. I just don't recall exact words, but nevertheless, Daddy said, "Something has gone wrong; they can't stop the engines." Captain said, "What in the world should we do?" Daddy said, "Why, just put the reversing lever in the middle, so that it will shut all the valves on the engine." The captain called down to his brother and he immediately did, and consequently the wheels stopped rolling and the Andes just naturally slowed down and eased herself into the landing until they got the throttle valve repaired (which I afterwards found out). It was a throttle valve that the threads were stripped and they couldn't shut the steam off the engine. It was quite an experience and very good judgement used, because the Andes had quite a trip under her at that time if I recall correctly. (pause)

In the early days of towboating and just prior to my time as an engineer, I would say about the time of the amalgamation of the coal companies up there with two and with the Consolidated Coal and Coke Company that took over and operated the towboats for a number of years there. The engineers had a pretty tough time of it and went by luck a great deal. A good many of the big towboats blew up and it was caused by the fact if you did not engineer your towboat with steam in excess of that of the law your towboat didn't do the work that it should do; consequently they didn't want you as an engineer. In other words the old saying was, "You don't carry steam on the big Pittsburgh towboats according to the gauge, you carry it according to the bank," the way the towboat is taking its empties up the river. I happened to get in on that just in the real heydays of that experience and time and I found it to be very very interesting. I recall on one occasion of having an assistant engineer with me, the first time he had been an engineer on a boat; anyhow when he saw the, as we call it down in the flower garden, where it says the name of the gauge manufacturer on the gauge. The needle was pointing right straight down and he looked at that gauge and he said to me, "Is that gauge wrong?" And I said, "No that gauge is all right, it's just we that are wrong." "My goodness alive," he said, "isn't that dangerous?" I said, "Oh yes, quite dangerous." He said, "My goodness, I wonder how much more steam we got than we are allowed." "Well," I said, "look at your steamboat certificate and then check your steam pressure and you will find out." "Oh," he says, "how come you got so much steam?" I said, "You had some help out there and you put the false weights on according to my instructions, on the safety valves that fit right over the big weights that they had on those lever valves in those days." And I said, "Consequently, it carries more steam." "Well," he says, "about how much more steam do we have now than we should have?" "Oh," I'd say, "about a hundred fifty, maybe two hundred pounds more," and I said, "we got plenty. You know," I said, "when you first start out of port with one of these boats before you put these weights on, they are very

docile and quiet like a kitten, but after a little while when they get to rolling their wheel with this dynamite steam," I said, "each time they exhaust it sounds like a cannon going off." In those days it was quite interesting. We had some mighty good, even towboat races, and I want to say that in those days I was mighty guilty just the same as the rest of them in carrying dynamite steam. However, many years after that, especially during this last war, I had an occasion twice at sea to either carry dynamite steam or loose the ship with all the soldiers in transportation on that ship.

Q: What ship was that?

A: That ship was the President Monroe. There was sixty-eight hundred soldiers on her. Another ship that I was requested to do my best with her, because it was matter of getting away from a submarine was the-- Victory and she was a high pressure boat as it was, but she was still a more high pressure boat when I got her safety valves fixed the way I wanted them. We made our port successfully.

Q: Could you explain the flower garden again?

A: Yes I will gladly. At the bottom part of the face of the steam gauge, practically all steam gauges, you will see a monogram there stating the manufacturer of the gauge, and that was in terms in those days, of calling it the flower garden. (pause)

Another very funny experience that I've had, rather queer, to sit there and watch it and not be able to do anything about it, but I happened to be in the pilothouse on the Vulcan of the Jones & Laughlin Company when the Voyager and the Nellie Walton were racing for the locks. If I recall correctly I think it was Lock #3, it may have been #2, but I don't really remember, but I remember the incident. But anyhow I know that the Walton was on the inside and the Voyager was on the outside of the shore swell, when the Walton stopped so as to slide into the lock, the locks were open for them, they had blowed their whistles for the locks and everything accordingly, but the Walton being inside made the grade but she couldn't stop. The wheel stopped all right, but the swell washed her right on down into the locks. She took the gates clear out and went on down through. The Voyager happened to be a very powerful towboat and made the turn all right and didn't go down over the dam. But to see that Nellie Walton going down through that lock, no train would have gone any faster than she went down through there, and to see the water leaving that lock and see the way it was washing down below the lock was really a treat to behold. (pause)

There used to be quite a big towboat here on the river. She was a very expensive, very fine boat by the name of Cruiser and I happened to be on the Cruiser making a trip to Louisville with coal and iron. It happened so, that we wanted to be in Louisville in the morning and when we got just above Grassy Flats or very close to them, the pilot on watch, Captain Al Eckler must of dozed off because I happened to look out and I could see a light, being still dark yet, but it didn't seem that the light changed positions, or the boat changed positions from the light. After having the sounding line dropped, I saw the

boat was not moving and was then fully aware that we were out on the Grassy Flats with our full tow. As luck would have it with us the river was raising. The next big problem was what to do and how to do it to get out of there. So I called for the fireman to come back to watch things for me. She was working full straight ahead, or working ahead full power. I went to the pilothouse and sure enough there was the pilot, Captain Eckler, sound asleep sitting in the chair with his hands on the steering levers. The question comes up though, as to what to do with a party of that kind, because when they are in a condition of that kind you never know what their actions may be. So I hooked the pilothouse door open, so I could make an exit right quick if I had to and I stretched myself and I reached over and woke Captain Al up. And it happened just as I anticipated, he did jump up and was all excited. I finally got him quieted down; we left the boat working full ahead and we went down and had a cup of coffee. After we had our coffee I talked to Captain Al, I says, "She is all right now, Captain, and I understand that we have a raising river yet." "Yes," he said, "the river is still coming up." "Well," I said, "it's naturally then up to you because you are the man in the pilothouse here." He says, "Well, I think I can make the whole turn here. I think I can make a swing and get her righted up and we will be all right." I said, "I'd just get ahold of the mate after you get her turned around and casually talk with him." Captain Eckler was very much excited, very much nervous yet, and he said, "Please, please don't ever tell this story on me." I said, "Captain Eckler, as long as you are alive, I will never tell this story." He said, "I would be ruined with the Combine, I would never be able to pilot again, if it were found out that I went to sleep at the wheel on watch." I said, "Captain, I'll never say a word until after you're gone," but I can tell the story now because it was one of the things that happened during my time. Well, anyhow we made our turn, we went on into Louisville, and very few people know of the circumstance yet to this day. (pause)

I believe I omitted one of the very important parts when I said I had a young man that it was his first trip on duty as an engineer and his name was Clifford Stockoff from Henderson, Kentucky. Anyhow, Cliff was a mighty fine, big robust young man and when he saw this excessive steam being carried and had to work with it, it looked to me like I could see that he began to fail. When we got back to Pittsburgh he quit and was quite sick. If I recall correctly, I think it was in the neighborhood of six weeks after that, he died and the coroner's verdict was that he died of fright; they found nothing organically wrong with him in any shape, way or form. I was questioned by the coroner if I knew what could have taken place and that was my answer. I thought the boy not having that experience—you have to grow into that you just don't walk into it and then master it—consequently that young man died of fright and fright only.

Q: Just shattered him I guess?

A: Yes.

End of Tape