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Thomas Wagner Memoir

W125. Wagner, Thomas

Memoir

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STEAMBOATS AND INLAND RIVERS

Wagner recalls river life at the turn of the century, catching logs, showboats, and the theater in Ironton, Ohio.

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 April 30, 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.

Thomas Wagner made his living from 1896-1906 by catching logs from the river. In this memoir he discusses Ironton, Ohio, showboats and theatre in Ironton.

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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Thomas Wagner, April 30, 1957, Columbus, Ohio.

John Knoepfle, Interviewer.

A: In McKinley's administration there was pretty hard times and it just started then to get good times and everybody was working. They would go up in West Virginia and cut poplar timber, walnut and oak. But mostly poplar. There were five sawmills in Ironton and the biggest sawmill in the United States at that time was the Cole Crane Company in Cincinnati. Sometimes they would have over seventy thousand logs a season. Would get away from them in the Big Sandy and Guyandot Valley and come out in the Ohio River. The state legislature had a salvage law, and whoever caught those logs pulled them ashore and tied them up, they got fifty cents a log, abandoned logs. The logs was abandoned and was free property, it belonged to anybody. But everybody was out trying to catch logs, everybody with a skiff. Which they wanted you to do because if a log got below Cincinnati it was just gone, that was all. That's how we made our living year after year from 1896 to about 1906. They would catch those logs and pull them into the Ohio side, fifty cents, Kentucky side a quarter. The legislation changed and the Kentucky side went to fifty cents and Ohio a quarter. That's how we had to do. Whichever state paid the most, we'd land the logs in that state. (pause)

In those days you went to work when you was twelve years old. You didn't fool around. My mother was a widow and six kids and we had to get out and hustle. That's where those logs come in at.

Q: I guess everytime you got a nice free log you would have a kind of bonanza then?

A: Oh yes, Wilbur [Pyle] and I at one time we caught seventy-two logs one day. They wouldn't give us the money, we had to get Dr. Ellison, he was the coroner, he run the drugstore, he come over and appointed himself our guardian and he collected the money. We were only fifteen years old, they weren't going to give us no thirty-six dollars. (chuckles) We lived on the river all the time, us kids. We would make our own boats and everything. Of course the men would pitch in and help us. We would tell Pete Newman we wanted lumber for boats; he'd give it to us, take it and dry it and run it through the planer. One board would be as wide and as high as the boat, maybe twenty-four or twenty-five inches wide. He would give us that for nothing. Of course we always caught his logs. If a log would get away from them, get down, there was no way of getting it back up the river. Nowadays it's pool stage, just like a pond as you come up it, but when that current goes, why they couldn't tow those logs back up the river. But now they can. In those days before they built these dams there was no

traffic going towards Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. It would always come out of Pittsburgh.

Q: Now Ironton was the home of the Bay brothers.

A: They lived on South Sixth Street in Ironton; they owned quite a few boats. Their small packets ran between Huntington and Portsmouth, daily trips. Let's see, Huntington is fifty miles. A hundred miles each day. Fifty miles each way. They only charged fifty cents from Huntington to Portsmouth, from Portsmouth to Huntington. They had the Chevalier, the Greyhound, the Lizzie Bay, the B. T. Enos, the Louise, the Georgia. The Georgia was the first steel hull boat around the Ohio River, that was a little kind of a yacht. Captain Doss Davis had the Bob Ballard, that was a towboat. They towed freight trains across the Ohio River to Ashland, Kentucky. Ore would come into Ironton and it was taken across to the furnace in Ashland. There was another furnace in Ashland. They would transfer about eight cars at a time, they got the freight train across the river that way.

Q: There was no bridge there at that time?

A: There was no bridge there, the Kenova bridge was just finished, but they'd have to send ore clear to West Virginia and bring it down through Kentucky. So they ferried it across the river at Ironton.

Q: Do you have any personal recollections of the Bay brothers?

A: Oh yes, I have. The Sunday morning we was up on the incline, that's where they would put those cars down and Captain Billy Bay got his leg bashed off one Sunday morning up there.

Q: If you would if you could talk about that logging a little bit more. You said the logs were branded.

A: When these trees were going to West Virginia they would strip the trees and the ones that were going to be cut, to be on the safe side, they had kind of like a sledge hammer with initials in the end. They'd hit the tree so they couldn't miss having it branded, then after it was cut down they would hit it on the end. That would put the initial and the lumber firm on the log.

Q: What were some of those brands?

A: Yellow poplar was YPC, Nigh was BN, and Newman & Sparta was NS and Cole Crane Company was CCC and Cross Ties was C C Clark. You got six cents for a cross tie and twenty-five, fifty cents for a log.

Q: Cross ties were for the railroad I guess?

A: That's right. They were all hand hewn cross ties not sawed ties, they were hand hewn.

Q: I didn't know that. Do you remember any of the flooding of the river?

A: There was never a, of course I was just born then, was just a year old in 1883 flood or the 1884 flood. That was the biggest one until the 1913 flood. I had left Ironton at that time. Annually we would have a flood. I got two dollars and a half a day then ferrying the mail from the end of, as far as the C H and D could go, and then about two miles and a half would be water and I would have to row a boat over with the mail to the other end and transfer the mail across that water. I got two dollars and a half a day for that.

Q: It must have been quite a strain on a wide river?

A: It wasn't the river, it was the backwater, a creek. The N & W, when it would go down through the water, a guy would have to walk in front of the engine to keep the logs in place. They ran that train; as long as the water didn't get to the firebox the trains would run.

Q: Ironton was a big steel center in its day, wasn't it? Do you remember much about that industry?

A: I can remember Ironton when the only way they could get the iron in from those furnaces--[Heckly]—see there was forty-nine furnaces within twenty nine miles of Ironton. They were charcoal furnaces and the only way they could get the iron in was by oxen.

Q: Oxen?

A: They would have from sixteen to thirty-two oxen pulling this iron ore. One ton of iron. Down those hills. But it paid. I've seen those big packet boats pull into Ironton at eight o'clock in the morning and they wouldn't leave until five that afternoon just loading iron and nails.

Q: Guess they were going south on the river?

A: That's right.

Q: Iron and coal and lumber, that's a lot of industries for a small Ohio town, isn't it?

A: I tell you, Newman & Sparta Lumber Company, when that burned they had sixteen million feet of lumber loaded on the cars. They let the insurance stop at noon, and those sixteen cars burned up besides forty-eight million feet of lumber besides that. Started at seven o'clock Tuesday evening and the N & W didn't get a train through there again until Sunday morning. It was stacked forty to fifty feet high and about three blocks long and about two block wide.

Q: I guess that just about wiped them out?

A: It did. Well, it killed old T.

Q: Well you spent a lot of time down on the riverbank, I suppose?

A: That's all us kids did.

Q: Do you remember much of the activity that went on when the boats were up along the shore? Could you describe any of that?

A: They had what they called a wharfboat which was about forty feet wide and about one hundred and twelve feet long. The boats would land and tie up to this wharfboat and unload their freight on that. They would never stop in Ironton unless it was nails. Of course the nails and the pig iron, they would load from the bank. They'd hire men from Ironton to help. Of course they had their regular crew of roustabouts and it all had to be done carrying it by hand. Carry a keg of nails that weighed a hundred and eighty pounds. I have seen them load as many as twelve hundred kegs at a time.

Q: It must have been awful for labor in those days?

A: We were young guys about seventeen or eighteen and we'd hire out at Ironton, Ashland, Catlettsburg, we got seventy-five cents. It cost us fifteen cents to get back home.

Q: You worked on this loading and unloading then, so you must have known I suppose some of the roustabouts?

A: No, I didn't know anybody. Oh, say one thing, this is really important. There was a family named Havelly Hasly, they called Captain Havelly. Him and his wife, they had fifteen girls and two boys all raised on shanty boats. They had two big boats. Fifteen girls and two boys. We would go down there and play. They would take the windows out, the girls would dive out through the windows.

Q: Well that's pretty much a past existence, those shanty boats?

A: I don't think there was one girl out of that whole family went bad. Different ones of them were just fine.

Q: Were there many shanty boats up around Ironton?

A: Oh yes. See, I don't think they allow them now. But in those days I would say there was twenty-five along Ironton, nice boats. Even the police, you know. A dirty boat come along there, they wouldn't allow it. They'd just have to move. In those days it didn't matter how high the water rose, if that boat stuck up there that was his then until the next water came and carried it away. Police had to watch that. Old man Havelly would never let his boat do that. He would always keep it in the water. He fished, him and his two boys. Well the girls did too, and he rented boats. In the wintertime why they would all pitch in and make skiffs. Just think those skiffs sold for fifteen dollars a piece and he thought he was getting a tremendous price. Now you couldn't buy one for a hundred and fifty dollars.

Q: Well he managed to carve out an existence for himself then off the river?

A: Oh yes.

Q: How did you make out in low water on the rivers? It must have gotten to be the size of a creek bed sometimes.

A: You could never wade the Ohio River at anytime around Ironton.

Q: Deep channel there I guess?

A: That's where Bay made his money with those little boats. They weren't little boats, I would say they were a hundred feet long. But very little draft. The Virginia and the Queen City, they very seldom had to lay up on account of low water.

Q: Did you ever go and see any of the showboats?

A: I worked on the stage and that and I got to go to the showboats free.

Q: Could you talk about it?

A: Charley Hunter was a friend of mine from down there, he was the one that coached Edna Ferber on the showboat when she wrote it. (pause) He could play any instrument, I don't care what it was, any musical instrument that anybody else could play he could play it better. He was on the Cotton Blossom and Edna Ferber got him to help her, you know give her pointers, I think it was the Show Boat, wasn't it, that she wrote?

Q: Yes, what other showboats came into there, do you remember?

A: I don't remember the names. All of them stopped at Ironton. Ironton was a town with the money. Ironton in those days had more money than Huntington and Portsmouth and Ashland put together. They had two or three steel mills and two great big nail mills. I guess they made three or four thousand kegs of nails a day at one time. I worked for twelve years on the stage in Ironton from the time I was a little kid on up.

Q: They had a legitimate theatre there?

A: Oh yes, Julia Marlowe was born in Ironton.

Q: Is that so?

A: Ben Hayes and I, we still argue about that. He said the book says she was born in England and the fellows that I worked with on the stage when I started there, they claim she was born in Ironton and used to sing on the street corners in Ironton.

Q: Well can you recollect, it would be an interesting departure if you could tell us something about the theatre in Ironton.

A: All the legitimate shows, they'd make a stop between Chicago and Cincinnati. They would stop in Charleston, Huntington, Ironton, Portsmouth and Maysville. That's where they would break that week

stand. They'd pick up their money there. They had a regular, Elsie Janis and George M. Cohen and all of those shows played there.

Q: Can you remember any particulars about these people?

A: I used to have their pictures and history. Elsie Janis, she was only seventeen when she first came to Ironton. Of course that Mrs. Bierbower, she wanted everybody to see her daughter. They had what you called a repertoire company, they would play six nights and it would be easy to get well acquainted with people, but by gosh you would forget them as soon as they would leave.

Q: In and out. Were you a stagehand?

A: I was a stagehand, I was property man, assistant props, and then property man.

Q: I guess they were rather amiable people coming in and out all the time?

A: Oh yes, they had to be. You see we drank the raw water right out of the Ohio River. You have seen these creeks when they get muddy, well that's the water we would drink. Take that in, of course I was the one that, "Props. Props?" "Yes ma'm." "Get me a glass of water, will you?" I would take that into them about ten times darker than that. "I'm not a going to drink that." I said, "You drink it or else, that's what we drink." They couldn't understand people drinking that. You could take your hand and put it down to hold it like that, pour it out and your hand would be all muddy.

Q: Well what kind of a theatre going audience was there in Ironton?

A: That theatre seated eight hundred. It was filled nearly all the time, every show. Of course there wasn't nightly, it would be, say, in the wintertime, beside the, of course the ten, twenty and thirty cents shows would be nightly, but the two dollar shows would be twice a week, maybe three times a week. They would have musical comedies, just the biggest there were come in there. Only had about a thirty-five foot proscenium where the Hartmans got about a hundred foot, but they'd cut it down. They would have thirty-five girls on the stage in the chorus besides the men.

Q: This was all in the . . .

A: The Milk White Flag, The Texas Steer, all of those shows and the Isle of Spice. The biggest shows out of New York would come there. John and Ian Campbell, see they were the founders of the town.
(pause)

Those old Welsh nailers back in those days, that was when I was kid ten or twelve years old, that's during Grover Cleveland's administration, whenever that nail mill would work they would make-- that was when nails were made by hand, and they got machines though that turned these plates. These were cut nails, not wire nails, long

before wire nails. These guys would make twenty-five to fifty dollars a day. They were nearly all Welsh. Davises.

Q: That's right, there was a heavy migration of Welsh in the valley here.

A: They were all down through there.

Q: Were the Bays Welsh too, I wonder?

A: Yes, they were Welsh.

Q: The Bays came on the river before the Civil War, I guess?

A: The old man did. The two boys, the youngest boy of the two boys of Billy Bay. George never married. But Billy married and he had two boys, George and Billy. They left Ironton after and they went to college. They left Ironton.

End of Tape