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Captain D.W. Wisherd Memoir

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Memoir

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STEAMBOATS AND INLAND RIVERS

Captain Wisherd, riverboat captain, discusses river experiences and excursion boats on the Mississippi River.

Interview by John Knoepfle, 1955

OPEN: released by John Knoepfle

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Captain D. W. Wisherd Memoir

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by John Knoepfle on July 5, 1955. 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.

Captain D. W. Wisherd started on the river as a purser and clerk on the steamer City of Quincy in 1891. He bought the S. R. Van Metre in April 1894 and had the Burlington to Keokok, Iowa trade until March 1899 when fire destroyed the Van Metre. In this memoir Captain Wisherd discusses his river experiences and other excursion boats. He retired from active service in 1946 but continued to make special trips until 1948.

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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Captain D. W. Wisherd, July 5, 1955.

Interviewer, John Knoepfle.

A: Ceased operating the Josephine and went up to Chicago to operate a hotel called Josephine. I got a position as a purser and clerk on the steamer City of Quincy which was built by the Parmalee Brothers at Canton, Missouri. She operated daily service between Keokuk, Iowa and Quincy, Illinois. I was on her in 1891 and 1892. Then she ceased operating due to the railroad competition. She was sold to Captain Walter Blair at Davenport, Iowa. Captain Blair said he was going to take the City of Quincy down to operate in the southern river. So I proceeded to buy the S. R. Van Metre. Purchased her at Madison, Indiana in April 1894, the Madison Monterey Packet Company.

Q: Captain, could you describe the Van Metre for us?

A: The Van Metre was a hundred and twenty feet long, twenty feet wide and four feet deep. She had packet valve cutoff machinery and one boiler which allowed a hundred and fifty pounds of steam. I started her in the Keokuk to Quincy trade and Captain Walter Blair changed his mind with the City of Quincy and came back and we were in competition. After operating at cut rates for two years we got together and drew straws as to which would stay in the Keokuk to Quincy trade or go up in the trade that he was taking care of between Burlington and Keokuk. I got the short straw. He stayed in the Keokuk and Quincy trade and I went in the Burlington to Keokuk. The railroads decided, C B & Q Railroad at that time they didn't want any boats to operate and they cut the rates to ten cents a hundred for all freight including household goods which is three times first class rates, about sixty-four cents. I met it by taking freight free of charge, made my income from the passenger business. Finally won out, the railroads withdrew their rates and we continued in the trade at a profit. We operated the Van Metre until March 1, 1899. Had her already to open the season and some fire that had been built out on the island, the wind came up and blew fire onto the boat and she burned, completely destroyed.

Q: Were you aboard at that time?

A: No, this was about one thirty in the morning. There wasn't anybody aboard except the watchman. I went down to the boat but she was too far destroyed to my being of any benefit to her. After losing her, I located in Hannibal, Missouri operating my father's business. Also, agent for the Diamond Jo Line, and I decided to retire from steamboating. Captain John Streckfus of the Acme Packet Company in Davenport, Iowa in 1901 wanted me to put his steamer, the J. S., in the excursion business. He had been operating in the Davenport and

Clinton trade, packet trade I should say, with the J. S. and the Winona. The railroads started to operate on both sides of the river so that it detracted from this business being profitable. I went with him and started operating the J. S. in the excursion business on the upper Mississippi River at points between St. Louis and St. Paul. Operated her in 1901-02. In the fall of 1902 took her to New Orleans to operate excursions daily on night trips out of there. Intended to operate her in the upper Mississippi in the summer season and New Orleans in the winter--until she was destroyed by fire in 19__ . We had no other steamer to take her place so we decided to buy the Diamond Jo Line which was in the tourist and packet service between St. Louis and St. Paul. In purchasing the boats we secured the steamer Quincy, Saint Paul, Dubuque, and Sidney, wharfboats at St. Louis and St. Paul and warehouses at all the towns along the river. We converted the steamer Sidney from a packet boat into an excursion boat. Operated her in the upper Mississippi River in place of the former J. S. Later they converted--this is the Streckfus Steamers now--converted the Quincy and named her the J. S. for Captain John Streckfus. The Dubuque was converted from a packet into an excursion boat and operated in the excursion trade on the upper and lower Mississippi.

This is the W. W.--in 1905 Captain Streckfus abandoned the Davenport and Clinton trade and took the Winona down to Paducah, Kentucky, remodeled her into an excursion boat and named her the W. W. When I was getting ready to book her and advertise her for excursions on the upper Mississippi I asked him what he was going to name her and he said it wasn't any of my business, I would find that out soon enough. I didn't know what to advertise until one day I was coming down over the levee and I saw a big W. W. on the pilot house. I knew what it was. She was nicknamed by the people along the river as "Watch and Wait", "The Weary Willie" and similar names. She operated until I resigned my position as traffic manager with the Streckfus Steamers in the fall of 1911 having been with them for eleven years.

I proceeded to organize my own company, the Wisherd Line Steamers. I purchased the steamer G. W. Hill which was a new boat built at Jeffersonville, Indiana, as a packet to operate in the Calhoun County trade. Converted her from a packet boat to the foot of Market Street in St. Louis. This was the first excursion boat with a superstructure on the dance floor being supported by steel so as to remove the posts and other obstructions from the dance floor.

Q: All the previous excursion boats had been constructed of wood I suppose?

A: Yes, wood posts in the ballroom. The J. S. had that, too. Operated her in the upper Mississippi River and Illinois River until 1921. Tim Ward brought her over to the Ohio River in 22 and operated her from points along the Ohio between Cairo and Pittsburgh. I purchased the packet steamer Keystone State, at Peoria and converted her from a packet to an excursion steamer, operated her for thirteen days on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers and renamed her the steamer Majestic. Operated the moonlight excursions out of Alton for the employees of the telephone company. She was on her way to St.

Louis to come over and operate on the Ohio River between Cairo and Pittsburgh. She sank in thirty feet of water on what was being constructed as an intake tower for the city. This tower had no light on it and was right in what had been the channel for fifty-seven years. The steamer sank but the lifeboats floated on the roof. The intake tower was being constructed at what is known as the Chain of Rocks above St. Louis.

Q: Was anybody hurt?

A: There was no lives lost. My brother Edgar Wisherd and my nephew Roland were employed on the steamer and when I got the word at my home over in Quincy, Illinois, I endeavored to get a train or some service to get down there to see if they were safe. I finally arrived about seven p.m. and found that they were safe on the boat. Endeavored to raise the steamer but the hull was so badly damaged we couldn't do it successfully. Continued to try it at different times until the fall of that year. Finally abandoned it. (pause)

I purchased a half interest in the Rees Lee, a steel steamer from the Lee Line Company at Memphis. Remodeled her for an excursion steamer and named her Majestic. After completing the reconstruction, brought her up to the upper Mississippi River and operated her on the upper Mississippi, the Missouri and Illinois. She had a capacity of three thousand passengers.

Q: A pretty big boat?

A: Yes and we continued to operate her out of Kansas City as the business was very profitable but the river got down so low that we could only operate between the two bridges. This was hardly fair to the patrons of the boat. At the lower bridge there was only three feet of water and the steamer drew four and a half. I said to the pilot and the captain of the boat, "I believe if I went down there some evening and cut that chunk of sand and mud out of there we could make the trip down the river." This was my first experience on the Missouri River and the pilot said there would be less water there in the morning. However, I went down and dug it out and had seven feet of water when we left. Next morning went down to make the trip, had two and a half feet. So I finally decided to abandon operating out of Kansas City and came back down to Missouri, to go up the Mississippi and the Illinois. Closed the season at Peoria in the fall of 1921. When preparing to get her ready for the 1922 season, moved her down to Havana, Illinois. (pause)

I was on the G. W. Hill on the Ohio River. When I got the word I went over to see to what extent the boat had been destroyed. I found that although she was a steel superstructure the heat had destroyed her upper works, in fact everything down to the hull. The hull was sold to some parties in St. Louis, no, in Memphis. Don't know what they used it for later. I was told by my friend Captain Henry Leyhe that when I lost the wooden hull Majestic I should have known better than to name another boat by the same name beginning with the thirteenth letter of the alphabet and furthermore, what caused the fire was the

red carpet in the captain's room. I admit I learned a lesson not to name anything Majestic from now on. (pause)

I had drawn plans to build a steel hull excursion steamer and was considering equipping it with diesel electric machinery. I was in Pittsburgh to call on the Westinghouse Electric people to complete the deal for the machinery, came in to see John W. Hubbard, told him what I was going to do and he said, "Don't do it. I'll sell you what was to be the Louisville." He had completed the sister ship Cincinnati and he had decided he didn't want to spend that amount of money on another one, the Louisville. He decided he would sell it to me and I bought what would have been the Louisville. Her hull was being constructed or finished in Midland, Pennsylvania, where boat hulls had been built. Her machinery had been bought from the Barnes Machine Company at Cincinnati and the boilers from the Acme Boiler Company at Gallipolis, Ohio. I was going to construct a boat for the Wisherd Line Steamers and in the meantime Hubbard had decided to sell Coney Island to a new corporation in Cincinnati headed by Rudolph Hynicka as president, George Schott, Vice President and General Manager and other leading men from Cincinnati. They did not have any boats to operate.

End of Side One, Tape One

A: He come over to Cincinnati to see if I couldn't arrange for them to have boats to operate to the island. In meeting with them we sold them what was to have been the Louisville as I purchased it; also the G. W. Hill with the understanding that I would come here as their River Traffic Manager and complete the construction of what was to be the new Island Queen. After the hull had been completed I had it towed down here to Cincinnati, the landing at the foot of Broadway. Proceeded to lay the plans for the superstructure, the hull of steel, hook up the boilers and machinery and other equipment. Originally she was to have been a coal burner but I decided to change it from coal to oil so as to avoid the smoke that comes from a coal operating boat. She originally was to have five boilers; I added another, making it six so that she could be operated with three of the boilers while cleaning the other set. I did this to avoid having what is known as a "donkey boiler" for cleaning, to raise steam for cleaning boilers. I completed her and had her equipped for four thousand passengers in 1924. She opened her season April 1, 1925.

We brought the steamer G. W. Hill here from the Mississippi River and changed her name from G. W. Hill to Island Maid and she operated with the Island Queen in the Coney Island trade. I told Freddy Dickow who was the chief engineer that I wanted to take her out the following morning and operate up and down the river with full stroke to make all sorts of tests such as turning around shortly, come ahead and so forth. So if there were any defects of any kind we want to discover them before we started carrying human cargo, meaning the passengers. Freddy said he wouldn't do it. He didn't want to take a chance, those great big wheels was on there, he was afraid something might happen. I said, "That's it, if anything would happen I want it to happen now with just us aboard." He said he wouldn't do it. I said, "All right,

I'll have the second engineer do it." So I called the second engineer and told him what I wanted to do and we went out moving down between these two locks and dams. We had her going twelve or fourteen mile an hour, stopped her real quick and turned around. Freddy Dickow was sitting out on the bow of the boat and we brought it back and landed her. I said, "Well, Freddie, the wheels are still on and we didn't crack a bolt." "That's all right, I wouldn't do it." I said, "That's what you said, now I'm all ready to carry everybody I can carry on this boat." So that's the way the thing took on. While Freddie Dickow was the best engineer I ever had on a steamboat, he would take care of everything very carefully and I didn't censor him too much for not wanting to make this. So he was on her up until the time that she was destroyed at Pittsburgh. (pause)

I was traffic manager for Coney Island until late 1925.

Q: And you resigned as traffic manager. I'm mentioning this because we didn't pick it up.

A: Went with the Streckfus Steamers of St. Louis. Bought the steamer Washington and operated her on the Ohio River for a season out to Pittsburgh, operated her out of there. During the summer season we played the cities all the way down the river trip to Paducah. Until 1931 when we moved to Pittsburgh. I was operating out of there the rear portion of the season. In 19-- bought the steamer Senator, the steamer Saint Paul, over to operate out of Pittsburgh in 1937. Operated the Washington at points along the river between Pittsburgh and Cairo. In the fall of 1937 we took the Saint Paul to Paducah, Kentucky, remodeled and made her more modern and named her the steamer Senator. She had the capacity for three thousand passengers. Operated her at Pittsburgh until 1941. Had her booked for 1942 with a full crew employed, pilots, engineers, musicians and so forth and the government took our pilots, engineers and other licensed officers on towboats for towing between Pittsburgh and New Orleans. So we were compelled to close the season and lay her up at Paducah until the war was over. In the meantime Captain Streckfus took her over to St. Louis. Opened the season when the war was over but decided later to abandon operating on the Ohio River.

Q: Is the Senator still over there?

A: No, she was finally abandoned and destroyed by sinking her below St. Louis about 1953.

Was with Neare, Gibbs and Co. as surveyor in salvage business. I had a number of barges that sank, some with as much as a thousand tons of coal. Removed the coal and raised the barges and had them repaired so as to be in use again. It wasn't possible to get new steel at that time to build barges. So it was necessary to repair these so that they could be used at least until the war was over. I had barges to survey and move from Marietta, Ohio to southern rivers, on the Mississippi as low as Memphis. This was rather a cold job out in the middle of the river when it is five and six above zero but we were successful in salvaging practically everyone of these damaged barges and boats. In 1944 Neare, Gibbs had an inquiry for covering or

insuring sixty government houses from Gallipolis to Uniontown. The houses were four rooms, twenty-four feet wide and fifty-six feet long and fifteen feet high. I checked with the people who had agreed to move them, found that what they were preparing to do, at the barges could not deliver the houses successfully. I arranged to have them put two barges, thirty feet wide, anchored them together by braces and cables so there would be one hull. Placed the houses across the barges and loaded thirty on ten barges. The first trip was in March 1944 and the towboat was the Arthur Hider which is owned by Kirschner. The houses were, the second trip was a short time later. The houses were delivered in perfect condition. When the U. S. government man came aboard down at Uniontown before they were unloaded said there wasn't even a scratch on any of them. This was a job that took all the strength and nerve you could have and I wouldn't care to be a Noah's ark again soon.

I retired from active service in 1946 but made special trips up until 1948. I would be very happy if I had a boat equal to the Island Queen that was operating between here and Coney Island if to do nothing more than ring the bells a few times. So I still hope that can be done someday.

Q: I hope so too, Captain.

End of Side Two, Tape One