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## Reverend Alvin Zugelter Memoir

**Z83. Zugelter, Reverend Alvin** (1889-1977)

Memoir

9 pp.

### STEAMBOATS AND INLAND RIVERS

Zugelter, riverboat clock puncher, discusses his experiences with Captain Jesse Hughes and his family on the Greene Line and meals served on riverboats.

Interview by John Knoepfle, 1958

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Rev. Alvin Zugelter Memoir

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## Table of Contents

First Working on the River . . . . .	1
Captain Jesse Hughes . . . . .	2
Hughes' Family . . . . .	3
On Board a Steamer . . . . .	4

## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by John Knoepfle on March 22, 1958. 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 Rev. Alvin Zugelter discusses his river experiences as a clock puncher on river boats. He reflects on Captain Jesse Hughes and his family and on meals served on river boats.

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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Rev. Alvin Zugelter, March 22, 1958

John Knoepfle, Interviewer

Q: We are at the Chancery this morning, the 22nd of March and I am talking to Father Alvin Zugelter who was a--now let's see what did Captain Jesse Hughes say you were?

A: Captain Jesse said I was a deckhand, a deck watchman.

Q: A clock puncher or something like Gordon Greene.

A: A clock puncher, yes.

Q: Well Father, maybe it would be best for us to work chronologically and then I will pop questions at you about the background that I know. Can you tell me when you first went on the river?

A: I am not so good on remembering exact dates but It would probably have been about 1929-1930 that I was actually riding on the boats. Before that I had previously taken short trips around the river as a passenger and as a little fellow and used to spend a lot of time on the wharf boats. But as far as actually recalling being on boats for any length of time I suppose it would be 1930-1931, twenty-five, twenty-six years ago. I had started hanging around the Greene Lines wharf boats and Captain Chris Greene was always so very good to me, Chris and Tom both. It was in that way that I used to go aboard as a deadhead I guess you would call it. I was just a kid. (pause in tape)

Q: Alright.

A: Where were we when . . .

Q: You had just mentioned Captain Chris and Tom Greene had . . .

A: Oh yes, well as I say I was just a kid and think I was more in the way than anything, always underfoot on and off their boats when they tied up. Then I used to ride on the Chris Greene quite a bit. Chris was a very good--Chris Greene, his wife--we called her Aunt Willie and her mother Maisie and we used to go to Cincinnati, Louisville, Cincinnati and Huntington I think once or twice a year, even more often I don't recall they would take the trip to Charleston, West Virginia. Well, I was more of a romanticist, I loved the river for what it was and the scenery, the steamboats, the people. Can't say I recognized it as a vanishing part of America because it's pretty much a part of my life at this time. There was something about it that was pretty wonderful. It's a different world certainly than

living on shore. People walked in a different way, talked in a different way, they lived in a different way. That appealed to me very much and every spare moment that I had I would be down on the boats. I used to during the school year sell magazines and various things to save money so that occasionally I made some token offering for my passage when I would be with them for quite a time. Although Chris and Tom were as I say very kind and very good men in regard to me. Eventually when they bought the Gordon Greene, I think I just about aggravated Tom into gray hair to let me have a job for the summer. I think Tom thought he was going to cure me by giving me the most horrible job that was available, as Captain Jesse said, a clock puncher. You start at ten at night until six in the morning, and I had to make the rounds of the boat every, think it was every fifteen minutes or so. There were a certain number of stations and they were numbered and you had to punch them in consecutive order and of course at the time I was a little bit younger and had even a little bit less sense than I have now, and I used to try to be up all day not to miss anything and work all night. With a rather disastrous effect. One time in desperation I bought a large alarm clock and I carried an alarm clock around with me and set it for every fifteen minutes so that I wouldn't fall asleep and would be able to make the rounds, we ran from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh. Oh, it was a great time, it was a wonderful time. Captain Jesse Hughes and his wife, Aunt Telia, we referred to her as Aunt Telia. Her name was Telia Vaughan. Believe she was from Catlettsburg, she certainly was a part of the river too. Perhaps Captain Jesse didn't mention it. I didn't hear all.

Q: No, he didn't.

A: You see Captain Jesse Hughes had gone in with the old Gordon Greene and then eventually his wife Aunt Telia as we referred to her. I remember her first from over on the Gordon, I mean as actually being on the boat with her. She was in charge of the refreshment stand. They had a daughter, they had two daughters, Lillian and Helen. Helen, I think, was the older; Lillian was the younger, and Lillian had, oh, it was even years before I recall Lillian being over on the Tom Greene with Mother Greene. Lillian was the social hostess on the Gordon and Aunt Telia ran the refreshment stand and of course Captain Jesse was the pilot. They were three of the kindest people that I ever remember. I would like to say about Captain Jesse, he will probably laugh about this, you know in a pilot house with a lot of men sitting around, sort of a man's world up there, why things get pretty rough up there once in a while. In all the years I ever worked there around or been with Captain Jesse down the river, Jesse wouldn't say one thing off color even swearing which people on the river were supposed to be notorious, never an uncharitable word did he use. Jesse Hughes was one of the finest men I ever knew.

Q: He is a fine old man.

A: He and his wife and I used to have a lot of fun in the pilot house together and he would sit up there. Captain Jesse would be on watch and Aunt Telia and I. Course Captain Jesse has a way of talking lot of times with his tongue in his cheek, he'll see how far along he can

go on a good story. Course at first when I was just a real young fellow down there, I swallowed several thousand tales of his.

Q: Do you remember any of these tales?

A: Well all the stories were pretty--I did the one that he mentioned there of course went about being on the Cricket and the man driving across the river.

Q: That's not exactly a tall tale.

A: Well, what I mean, Jesse, he can make it very, very interesting, but by golly I can't recall any story as such that would bear repeating--there was so many. There was something about the man that was really terrific. Certainly an ideal friend when he was on the river, and his wife was very well thought of on the boats. His daughter Lillian, now Lillian had a rather a tragic death while she was still active on the river. She contracted some sort of sickness and I know that the last summer when we were on the boat, Gordon Greene, remember it was a constant worry to get news from down at the Marine Hospital in Louisville, how Lillian was coming along. Lillian's death was really the first of a series down there, Lillian, Chris, Tom and then Aunt Telia and Mother Greene. Most of the oldtimers are pretty well gone you know. I do think that the Hughes family certainly deserves mention because they were as much a part of the river that I knew and many of us who rode the boats as the Greenes, of course they were all working for the Greenes and I did myself for a short time. However getting back to the summer that I was on the Gordon, in fact we were paid, we got a dollar a day. Of course Tom, as I said I was a little bit young, Tom had me in a cabin with him. Tom had the lower berth and I had the upper. I think he was trying to keep an eye on me because I managed to get in all sort of mischief one way or the another. We would leave Cincinnati and get up in Pittsburgh, lay overnight, and back to Cincinnati. They used to advertise it as a seven day trip. In the beginning of course on the Gordon, she was a typical packet. We carried freight and passengers. It always attracted in my time that I recall a very fine class of people. The river in itself is a beautiful thing and boat type of transportation, people who enjoyed life and liked leisurely living were always on the passenger list. Met a lot of fine people that way. The freight was still big business in those. In the beginning I can remember when we used to go out of here. We were filled with Proctor and Gamble soap I know for one thing. Sometimes she had so much freight on her she went down in the river, Gordon that is. Tom had a little cannon and quite a celebration everytime she'd leave when we first got her. Fired a little cannon and the roustabouts would dance up on the head of the boat.

Q: They did?

A: That was the thing about it, you know, John. You'd go to the movies, you know, and you'd see "Showboat" and so forth. The wonderful thing in my life is to have actually been on an old steamboat going down river while these roustabouts were singing. Lillian Hughes particularly was very musical and she used to go up on

the top deck with an accordion and a fellow named Dugan, Captain Dugan. Think he was from up around Vanceburg. An Irishman with a very good voice. A lot of times he would come down and they'd get up on the top deck, play the accordion, sing. Dugan, he always sang, "Old Man River", and Lillian's favorite was "Just My Bill", a lot of the old "Showboat" things, you know. That was the part of it that was so nice. The thing that I have always regretted was this that from Louisville to Pittsburgh you have some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. I've been on the Rhine River, quite a distance on it. Except for a few castles here and there I didn't think that you can beat the scenic beauty of the Ohio River from Louisville to Pittsburgh. It's such a part of American life and steamboat travel. I've always hoped in the valley that someone had gone in there and really built the passenger business up. People from Cincinnati--there is another strange thing. People from Cincinnati will go up to the Great Lakes and take a ride on one of the Great Lakes boats which I have been on too. And of course there is beautiful scenery up the Saginaw but we have some in another category just as beautiful.

Q: Speaking of all that, what would the fares be, can you remember that?

A: Back in those days--those ads that I had there before--seven days all expenses on a steamer--that was a little bit before the Gordon came and the General Wood. What was that twenty-eight dollars, thirty dollars, all expenses. You know in those days on the steamboats you really ate. It was one of the big things. I think many years ago originally passengers were spoken of as "gravy", because the freight was really the big income and anything else was "gravy" in a sense. They used to oftentimes put on quite an accommodations, quite a meal and so forth in order to attract prospective shippers for their freight. Your breakfast, my goodness, anything you would want to eat and lunch, then the evening meal.

Q: Could you describe one of those in particular?

A: Well, John, the two things that I recall in my mind, on the Greene Lines in the olden times, the older days it was customary in the evening to have a lunch before the people retired and there was a complete meal. The tables were loaded down with hams and so forth. That would be something that someone who would know more than me; you might get an enjoyable reel on river food. One of the things that I recall, I don't know the reason for it, but at the end, of the meal in regards to the crew, the Texas-tender who waited the tables would ask if--instead of you wished for desert, it would be do you want change. That was just c-h-a-n-g-e. I don't know what came--then there was jambalaya, that was something we used to always enjoy on the steamers. It was cooked with rice and I suppose nowadays we might call it spanish rice, but the river cooks had quite a dish there and that was a favorite among the crew, the jambalaya. I wish I could direct you to someone who might--Chris' widow, Marie would probably be able to give you some of those old main dishes.

Q: We'll find out sooner or later.

A: That would make an interesting reel in itself. What I was, originally my connection was the prices. A week for twenty-eight or thirty dollars and my goodness you ate constantly and it was delicious food, it was good food, it was well cooked. Course was mostly by, was all as far as I recall by the colored folks and there was those old steamboat cooks that really did know how to cook. They used to buy so much of their produce fresh as we would go up the river. I can recall when we would get up around, above Marietta up there, the Greene family comes from up there and they have relatives up there. They had big farms and we always lay in up there and take on corn and things. Of course Tom Greene himself was a gourmet, Tom enjoyed food. Tom and Chris were both quite heavy fellows. Don't know how big they were but I imagine they were two hundred and seventy-five. They were quite big men. They were interested in good food and figured the food and had nice little cabins, everything was neat and clean, it was quite a way to spend a vacation.

Q: Captain Lucas, from the Omaha, once told me that they eat so well on the boats and the fact that they don't move around except in the cabins, they never grow old because they get fat and then die trying to climb the riverbanks.

A: Well there's an expression too that they have on the river speaking of that, John. When you tie up the question was, "Were you going up the hill?" That meant to go into town, go up. They always in the army had the expression "going over the hill" but we just went up the hill whenever we went to town. Someone going up to see the shores and we went up hill. Going up those riverbanks used to be quite a problem there. They were rather steep and I can imagine some of the heavier gentlemen would have a problem.

Q: You were with them when they got the Cape Girardeau, weren't you?

A: I was not on the boat when they brought it around. I got on it right after she came around from St. Louis.

Q: Where did you get on?

A: It was just down around Louisville someplace. I did the same thing when they brought the Delta Queen. I think I went down to Fernbank, just a few miles down, got aboard and came up, Fred Way was in the pilothouse and the Delta Queen came up. The Gordon of course when she was first brought around from St. Louis was a typical Mississippi river boat. She had two stages on her. The Ohio riverboats usually only had one stage. Mississippi riverboats were always two stage and they were more ornate than the Ohio riverboats. One thing they did have on them usually was a dome on the pilothouse, and that was always considered bad luck on the Ohio River. I recall hearing Chris and Marie or someone telling how soon as they got the Cape Girardeau which eventually became the Gordon Greene they got her down to the mouth of Ohio River and they pulled in there at Cairo and Tom went up on the roof with a hatchet, chopped that fancy work off the top. They didn't want to bring her into the Ohio River with a dome on it, it was bad luck. Another thing that they used to have, a

superstition was they were always so opposed to naming the boat Mary Greene, Mary B. Greene, I always felt they should for Mother Greene, but that would go down to the thirteenth letter of the alphabet and they were very very weary about that. Did not, would not under any--they used to speak of those days the Morro Castle and several of the boats whose names began with M. Although, certainly years ago there were some big boats on the river ~~it--~~American Morning Star and so forth but Tom was one of those superstitious guys, he chopped the dome off the old Cape Girardeau before they'd start up the Ohio River and he never would name a boat Mary B. Greene. We thought they should. Of course that's in the past now.

End of Tape