

THEIR CARGO RANGED FROM PIGS TO PRESIDENTS

Steamboats Once Linked Rural Areas On Cape Fear Waterways

BY SUSAN USHER

The first steamboat on the Cape Fear River, the *Prometheus*, had been in operation about a year when it carried what was to be its most prestigious passenger.

Constructed by Otway Burns at Swansborough, the *Prometheus* had arrived at the Cape Fear in 1817, and was used as a packet boat between Wilmington and Smithville. Carrying freight, mail and passengers, the boat went into regular service June 20, 1818.

On April 17, 1819, its complement was anything but usual, including the president of the United States, Wilmington researcher Bill Reaves notes in Volume I of his *Southport: A Chronology*.

James Monroe, serving his first term as the nation's fifth president, traveled from Wilmington to Smithville, now Southport, aboard the *Prometheus*. From Smithville, he proceeded to Georgetown, S.C., by other means.

One hundred feet long and flat-bottomed, it was said the paddle-wheel steamer "could run on a heavy dew," though her career was a short-lived seven years, notes Bonita Dale Brown of Currie.

Mrs. Brown has spent the past 10 years researching the steamers that once ran the Cape Fear River and its tributaries. She spoke recently about river boats on the Cape Fear to the William Gause Chapter, National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Mrs. Brown's interest in steamboating was piqued by Olivia Pridgen, grandmother of her husband, Teddy Brown. "She told us stories of riding to Wilmington on the *Alice* and the *Whitlock*. She would then take the train to Enfield where her husband's family lived."

Hooked On River Lore

Other older people in the community also had memories of the steamers; soon she was hooked on the stories they told. Armed with a basic text, F. Roy Johnson's *Riverboating in Lower Carolina*, Mrs. Brown began her continuing pursuit of factual details, oral histories and photographs relating to the steamers.

But all the pleasure isn't in the finding; it's also in the sharing, as when she was able to link another local researcher, Jerry Dunn of Wilmington, with a photograph of his grandfather and his farm-to-market steamer, the *Black River*.

"That's what makes it fun to me," she said. "I would do it every day if I didn't have anything else to do."

When she started collecting, Mrs. Brown found there were more than 100 of the boats and they ran these rivers from 1817 until 1939.

All of the larger steamboats had a cook who cooked for the captain and crew, she said. Meals were served to passengers on long trips such as from Wilmington to Fayetteville. Some of the boats were elaborately furnished, especially the captain's quarters. Some guests dined with the captain, a special privilege.

A few boats even had saloons. These were usually on the upper decks, away from the majority of the passengers. Many of the boats had as many as 30 berths for the passengers who made long trips.

The *Thelma*, built in 1914, ran between Wilmington and Fayetteville, then Wilmington and Elizabethtown, finally sinking at the bridge in Elizabethtown. It had 10 staterooms on the second deck, said Mrs. Brown, and the fare from Kelly's Cove (near Currie) to Wilmington was 75 cents one-way, including lodging and two meals.

The steamboats made stops along the river at springs or artesian wells to bring drinking water on board. They also stopped for firewood stacked along the river for

that purpose, leaving the name of the boat and the company that owned it and how much wood was taken, said Mrs. Brown.

"If there were no woodpiles along the way and wood was needed, the crew would go into the river swamps and cut what was needed," she said. "The river swamps were considered common property."

Stopped On Demand

While there were about 115 official landings between Wilmington and Elizabethtown alone, as a rule the boats didn't stop at every landing on each trip. Rather, they watched for signals—a white flag tied out or, at night, the glow of a lantern.

Upon arrival the boat would blow its whistle three times and people living around would all run to the landing, she said.

Of all the steamers that plied area waters, only two

remained, such as the *Elizabeth*, came into service as primarily mail carriers.

The *Elizabeth*, owned by Capt. Joseph Bisbee, carried mail and passengers until its sale in 1882 to a Capt. Nelson, of Charleston, S.C.

In 1882 two other steamers, the *Minnehaha*, owned by Capt. Joseph Bisbee and commanded by Capt. Ed Burriss, and the *Passport*, under the charge of Capt. J.W. Harper, began plying the Wilmington-Southport run. Harper in 1884 bought the *Louise*, to run on the winter schedule as the regular mail and passenger boat between Wilmington and Smithville.

While freight was the main purpose of the steamers, most also carried passengers, said Mrs. Brown.

Some, however, were "very elaborate" and designed as excursion boats. In June 1871, the steamer *Waccamaw* took excursionists on a tour of Civil War sites,



THE "ALICE," captained by John Lewis, was among the steamers that in their heyday ran regularly along the lower Cape Fear River, Town Creek and Black River. This photo was taken at Long Creek.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BONITA DALE BROWN

were paddlewheelers, the *Prometheus* and the side-wheeler *Henrietta*, which was built in Fayetteville and ran between there and Wilmington.

She made her first trip in July 1818, and had a lot of mechanical problems, said Mrs. Brown. "On the sharp turns in the river she had to be 'dropped around.' Several of the men had to secure a line to a tree on the bank so she could be hand pulled around the bend."

Still, in her old age, the *Henrietta* was called the fastest boat on the river because she made the 115-mile trip in less than 10 hours. She logged more than a million and a half miles on the river during her 40-year career.

Service Slow To Expand

While commercial and excursion steamers became a matter of course along the Cape Fear River and on the river between Wilmington and Smithville, it was 50 or more years later before steamboat services came up Town Creek and other tributaries of the Cape Fear.

"It was not because people didn't want a more effi-

Black River.

The *Whitlock*, which was supposedly named for a popular missionary Baptist minister in Wilmington, operated on the Cape Fear River, Black River and Town Creek.

She was built at Point Caswell, at the time a bustling town off Black River that boasted saloons, warehouses, boatworks, banks and post office. But, said Mrs. Brown, "When the boats quit operating the town just disappeared."

The *Whitlock* was among the last of the steamers, retiring from service in 1926.

Plying Area Waters

Other steamers include the *Buck*, which operated on Town Creek and Black River; the *C.F.D.*, with Capt. W. Taft, which operated on Town Creek; the *City of Wilmington*, which ran the Wilmington to Southport route; the *Cynthia*, which ran the lower Cape Fear; and the *Eik*, which operated from Wilmington to Town Creek.

Running between Wilmington and Southport, several

was declining as the region's pine forests were exhausted. Railroads were growing in popularity.

In fact, said Mrs. Brown, the steamboats carried the cross-ties and other supplies upriver to build the railroads that eventually led to their own demise.

Wants Memories Preserved

While steamboats may have disappeared from the Cape Fear River and its tributaries, Mrs. Brown doesn't want them forgotten.

Her aim, collaborating with other area researchers and interested residents, is to collect data on and photographs of as many of the steamers as possible and to eventually donate the collection to an area museum.

So far she has photographs of about 30 steamers and is looking for more.

"If anyone has a picture, if they would just let me come copy it with my camera at their home," she said. "I don't need to borrow it."

Mrs. Brown can be contacted at (919) 283-7423, or at Route 1, Box 10, Currie, N.C. 28435.

Steamboating Safe, But... Overall, steamboating was safe. But it did have its hazards. On an outing to Fort Caswell in 1875, the *Governor Worth* became stuck in the mud flats for four hours and was pulled free by the government vessel *Easton*.

Mrs. Brown said boiler explosions and sinkings were also potential hazards. The first such disaster was the *John Walker*, which exploded in 1830 near the Dram Tree, a river landmark at Wilmington, killing the captain and the engineer.

Over a period of 100 years, only 36 lives were lost to disasters on the Cape Fear River. That figure, though, doesn't include the victims of "other accidents that were not so highly publicized," she said. The crews of the steamers consisted mostly of blacks and many could not swim. If a man fell overboard it usually meant he drowned.

The steamboat era began coming to a close soon after the turn of the century. The naval stores industry was declining as the region's pine forests were exhausted. Railroads were growing in popularity.

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