

NORTHERN KENTUCKY VIEWS PRESENTS:

---

# An Interview with Otto Smithers

---

August 14, 1961

---

From  
*The Smither Family Papers*  
at  
*The King Library*  
of  
*University of Kentucky*

---

[www.nkyviews.com](http://www.nkyviews.com)

of an interview with Otto Smithers, Star Route, Gratz, Kentucky, August 14, 1961. To be attached to the Smithers Collections.

Otto Smithers was born in 1883. His recollections of the Kentucky river steamboat days begin about 1890 and continue until the activity ceased about the time of the first world war. His father was William George Smithers who owned Pond Branch Landing. This included dock and Warehouse facilities and his father received a fee for each hogshead of tobacco, flour, or pork that was loaded from the landing. The main commodity was tobacco and the next in importance was livestock. The main shipping season was during the summer months and often the steamboat captains would pass by the landing calling "Blocked off!" This meant that the ship was full and there was no room for passage just as we would say a road was blocked.

Another important landing was Monterey or Moore's landing. It was originally called Williamsburg, but the question of a change of name came up shortly after the Battle of Monterey during the Mexican War. The newly suggested name was thought most appropriate since somebody was always fighting there. It was a very busy port in the 1890's and it was the location of lock and dam number 3.

Among the steamboats he recalls the Hibernia, the Lancaster, the Oriole, the Blue Wing, the Dick Brown, the Little Sandy, the Falls City I and II, and the Rescue. The Little Sandy ran in the Monterey-Madison trade. The Dick Brown was on the Cincinnati trade which began to come on rather late. He recalls that the Blue Wing installed what was called a mocking bird whistle and the first time it came up the river afterward it severely frightened many people. It sounded like a woman screaming as she was being strangled and some people actually took to the woods looking for the murderer. The Falls City II was the most popular boat for a long time. It was run by the enterprising and hard boiled Capt. Newt Abrams. His first mate was John Shaw who was even more hard boiled than the Capt. He was known for having the strongest negro deckhands on the river. On one occasion as he was racing down river with the Rescue, the Rescue beat him through the locks at Monterey and seemed certain to contract for all the years crop of tobacco stored in warehouses at Gratz. Abrams put in at the mouth of Severn and landed most of his deckhands and his clerk. They went overland to Gratz and by the time the Rescue arrived the crop was consigned to the Falls City II and the hands were moving it out of the Warehouse.

The Rescue was owned by a group of farmers of the community who were fighting the monopoly of the Falls City II on the trade. Because of this she was very popular and had a good business. Her Capt. was "Black Eyed" Bill Smoot and her head clerk was Willy Smithers.

Joe Jones of Gratz was one of the most famous of the Kentucky River pilots and Noble Hundley was another well known one. One of the other of them always guided the most popular boats.

Smithers admits that there was some selfishness and rivalry between the steamboats and the railroads but he thinks that the real decline of the river traffic did not begin until the coming of trucks. Even after the big boats were gone, the Turner Brothers of Madison, Indiana operated a fleet of small gasoline driven boats. But they too were replaced by trucks by the time of the first world war.

After his landing days, Otto Smithers' father operated a small tobacco factory with Frank Jones. They sold Sweet Owen Twist. Some of the documents in the collection deal with this business.

Some of Otto's proudest memories are of his friendship with Happy Chandler. He met Happy in Happy's first campaign and Happy asked him what the people in his neighborhood needed most. Mr. Smithers told him they needed a road from Monterey to Gratz. Happy promised to build it if elected and Smithers claims that he lined his community up behind Happy on this promise. Happy built the road and has carried the community ever since.