

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Tales from the
Barges
on the
Kentucky River

By Charles A. Eberhart

From his column
They Say & Do in the Country

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THE "THEY SAY & DO IN THE COUNTRY" COLUMN BY CHARLES E. EBERHART.

this column

Two or three times in the last year ^{has} printed stories of the past of the old timers, now living, who served many months or years on the Ohio River steam boats in the days of their glory. Today, the story that follows is from the lips of a man, now in his seventies, who spent several years of his life in steamboats that, as a rule, plied within a hundred miles or so of Madison and who, more important still to Madisonians, had something to do with the river front in the days of its closing activities.

It has been the custom of those with long memories to hark back to the time when the levee was alive with freight carriers, drays, passengers and hundreds of just plain sightseers. In Thomas Gavin, for some time in charge of the red wharf of the mail line, who was vested with the authority of receiving and moving of this freight from the boats to the land and from the levee to the boats themselves, from his recollections, some picture of the volume of business that was done on this levee in the 1880's and in the 1890's is obtainable.

Yesterday, Mr. Gavin described the typical proceeding back in 1882 when the packet bound for Cincinnati was about to pull out. The boat had been loaded at the wharf with the freight there. "The whistle on the boat would blow long and loud from the starch factory," said Mr. Gavin. "There would be an interval of silence and then the whistle on the starch works would respond with a blast or two. Then the steam boat would move down to the wharf of the Johnson factory. There they would take on a thousand or more packages or barrels of starch. This was a regular procedure so one can gather what a business was done by the

factory in those days."

But before this Mr. Gavin gave some idea what had been loaded to the down or up boats to the levee. "I have seen as high as 5,000 to 15,000 pieces of furniture on the levee from the McKinn furniture factory, for shipment up or down on the river. Most of this went south to New Orleans way points. There would be tons and tons of other freight.

The Red and White wharves were both owned by the mail line. On the Red wharf, I was in charge of discharge of the cargo. I not only looked after unloading but it was my business to trail uptown after the freight began to move and collect the freight bills from the person to whom delivered. On the White there was Jim Cochran and Andy Henry and Jim Barton.

The General Pike and the Lewis A. Shirley were the boats in the Cincinnati to Louisville trade that operated from the Red wharf. The boat for Cincinnati would start, in the morning, for that city and at Prestonville would take on from 800 to 900 head of sheep or cattle, as the case might be and a couple of hundred barrels of whiskey."

"Also, both the down and up boats would have around two hundred or more passengers. Everybody on both sides of the river used the boats to the two great cities and to points in between. The meals were fine, the best that could be prepared and every boat took pride in its table service."

Mr. Gavin spent a couple of years with the wharf boat before he went into service on the river as second clerk with Captain Jim Kirby on the Lewis A. Shirley. Soon after that he went aboard the City of Frankfort in the Kentucky River trade.

"Those were the days when the movement of tobacco, whiskey and farm products, down the Kentucky, were almost unbelievably large," said Mr. Gavin. "At that time the sale of tobacco in Louisville was conducted under what was known as the rotation system. Each warehouse in turn had its sale. All tobacco was shipped into Louisville in hogsheads and the bidding was on the hogsheads."

"The Kentucky River boats would bring down as many as 220 hogsheads of tobacco at a time. Also, the City of Frankfort would bring down 400 to 500 barrels of whiskey from McBrides Elevator and from Tyrone. This whiskey would be transferred from the Kentucky River boats to the mail boats at Prestonville to go to Cincinnati or Louisville as the shipper designated"

"One of the jobs of the clerk on the Kentucky River boats was to keep straight the toll levied by each lock. The tolls at each of the four locks were 10¢ to 25¢ for a hogshead of tobacco, 10¢ for each head of cattle and 5¢ for each bale of hay. These tolls had to be satisfied before the boat cleared each lock. We had to carry nine to ten thousand dollars in cash on every trip. Each lock would have the same charge and a hogshead starting at Tyrone would have 40¢ in tolls by the time it cleared the last lock."

"In addition, the clerk of the boat had to keep a complete and instantly available record of the tonnage, usually approximate, carried by each boat. It called for a lot of fine bookkeeping subject to challenge at any time."

"I was on the Hornet, as clerk, when it hit the pier of lock number

one just above Carrollton. The boat sank in eight feet of water. There were between fifty and seventy-five passengers aboard but none were injured. I saved the books but, as much of the shipment was insured, our boat loss was not crippling. The Hornet was later raised and wrecked at Carrollton."

"For a while after that I worked on the George Anderson, owned and operated by a man of that name. Being in the Kentucky River trade, we had the same procedures to go through of settling each lock toll with the cashier before the boat could be released from the lock. I left the Anderson to make a couple of trips as third clerk on the Guiding Star to New Orleans. These were interesting trips. The boats from New Orleans made no stops except at the most important cities. They carried enormous loads of freight and 200 to 300 passengers. Nothing was too good in the way of food or treatment for the passengers. On the Guiding Star, professional gamblers and card sharks were absolutely forbidden. If discovered aboard, they were warned and then put off the boat after being pulled from any game they might be engaged in. As a rule, they shunned this boat which was commanded by Captain George Hagar with young George and Hagar as first and second clerks."

"Some idea of the boat load of freight can be gathered from these figures. In Madison, they took on 5,000 packages or barrels of starch; at Louisville, 2,000 barrels of pickles and 1,000 trunks, in addition to hundreds of pounds of matting and other manufactured goods. This I checked on and off and recorded in our manifests."

"In New Orleans, they had a great system. A man by the name of

Henderson took over our unloading there. They had a system of flags they used to classify the freight on the levee. In our case, it took over a hundred flags to take care of our shipments which were piled up on the levee and covered with tarpaulins. Each flag had a different decoration. There was a red star and a blue one, blue moon and so on."

When the goods started ashore a representative of the unloaders stood at the end of the loading stage and assigned a bearers load to one of those flags. The Negro workers could not read but they knew all the bags and never made a mistake as I recall. One was stunned when he saw all the contents of the boat stacked up on the levee, it took such an enormous amount of space."

"For a short time I worked on the Louisville and Evansville trade and then came back to Madison and went aboard the Hattie Brown where I served for eleven years as a clerk and unofficial captain. On one of the trips of this boat, I was in at its death."

"Captain Kirby was at the wheel as pilot when we got in a big blow above Carrollton. It was during high water. He tried to hold off the Kentucky shore but a gust of wind swept us back into some sycamore trees along the bank and the crash carried away the stacks and the stays and fantail and left the wheel in the river."

"Naturally, the passengers, about thirty, were in a panic. I locked the door of the cabin to keep them from jumping overboard. Later things quieted down and I managed to get off on a rail fence, that seemed to be holding, and after struggling along that for a quarter of a mile, reached a road. From there I walked to Ghent and got word to Commodore Laidley.

During my life on the river, I fell into the water three times and came out without a scratch. The worst experience was at midnight, one rainy night, at the mouth of the Kentucky River when we were transferring some whiskey to one of the mail boats. I had only five more barrels to clear when one of the deck hands lost control of a barrel and before I knew what was happening, the rolling barrel knocked me into the river. I lost the discharge book I was keeping the records in but somehow managed to keep hold of the lantern."

"When I fell into the water my rain coat ballooned out and helped me a bit. Men on the docks say that the light kept burning all the time and bobbing around like a floating light as I struggled until I reached shallow water on the Prestonville side of the river. From there they picked me up on the stage."

"On another occasion at Frankfurt, I slipped on the mud on the landing stage and fell into the water and drifted under the hull of the boat, where Luke James, a fireman on the boat, reached down, as I came up, grabbed my hand and pulled me out. "

"I was fortunate enough to save one white boy and one colored lad, the latter living in Madison, from drowning. I see the colored lad every now and then."

More recollections of Mr. Gavin will appear at a later date.

(Note: we searched the paper for several months after this article appeared but could not find the second part mentioned.)

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