Reminiscences of the Rivers

By JAMES A. HENDERSON

When my very good friend, Mr. John E. Potter, asked me to talk to the Historical Society concerning the rivers, I was at a loss for an answer, because so much has been said and written on the subject that I did not think I could add much, if anything, to the subject. Of course, Pittsburgh can always point with pride and talk about the enormous tonnage of the port of Pittsburgh which it is claimed, exceeds any other port in the world. But I was asked to say something about my personal experience on the rivers, which I am happy to do and trust my effort will not bore you.

My first recollection of the Monongahela Wharf was a landing crowded with boats from the Smithfield Street Bridge down to Ferry Street, so crowded together, in fact that it was almost impossible for an incoming boat to get into landing to unload her cargo. I remember the Steamer “Bayard” coming from Parkersburg trying to nose in between two boats. Her Captain after trying for sometime, decided to run a line from his boat to a ring bolt fastened in the wharf. (Ring bolts are placed at proper distance the length of the wharf. They were used to tie the boats securely to the landing.) Too heavy a strain on the line however, pulled the ring bolt out. The Captain ordered his men to take the line to another ring bolt. It also came out. Captain Forsythe, an Irishman of wit and wharfmaster, called up to Captain Moore on the roof of the “Bayard” saying, “I say Captain, I say Captain, there are a few more ring bolts at the lower end of the wharf.”

In those days freight and passenger boats were arriving and departing daily for all points on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and their tributaries. There also was a fine line of freight and passenger boats operating on the Monongahela River.

The up-stream boats brought from the South large consignments of sugar, molasses and cotton. New Orleans’ molasses was very largely used by families as a spread on bread in those days. I recall distinctly when school was out in the afternoon I would rush home and get a large slice of bread and saturate it with molasses. I imagined then that nothing could be better. The sugar and molasses was con-

*Read before the Society, April 30, 1929.

230
signed to the wholesale grocers. None of this tonnage now comes to Pittsburgh as your President, Mr. Stevenson, will testify. His father, then in the grocery business, handled many barrels of molasses and hogsheads of sugar.

The cotton was consigned to local cotton mills, mostly located in the old city of Allegheny. I remember some of them by name. The Hope, Eagle, Union, Penn Banner, and Franklin. They employed over fourteen hundred people. The Hope seemed to be the largest, employing about three hundred seventy-five. The girls employed by these cotton mills were called "cotton bumpers." The girls in each mill had a rhyme about the other mill girls. I remember one about the girls in the Penn which ran something like this—

"Cotton Bumpers in the Penn
Don't get out till nine or ten.
When they get out,
They gad about like a pack of Fools."

That great industry has passed from our midst.

The river seemed to naturally attract me as a boy. My first employment was to deliver bills of lading to the Pittsburgh consignees for incoming freight, and to receive shipments destined for points down the river. I recall the first drayload I received was from a drug concern named Henderson Bros. consigned to A. C. Henderson at Hendersonville. I signed the dray book, James A. Henderson, quite a lot and perhaps too many Hendersons in that transaction.

In the summer time, the low stage of water in the rivers compelled the larger draught boats to lay up and only very small or light draught boats were operated. I was later employed as Mud Clerk on a boat named the "Advance." She was used in the Allegheny River trade, and in the Ohio when the river was very low. We left Pittsburgh loaded for Wheeling, with all the freight the boat could take, considering the stage of water in the river. We proceeded along in fine shape until we came to the Sisters Island, a few miles above Wheeling, and there we grounded on a sand bar. We tried to spar off but could not. The Captain decided to run a line down to the island and make fast to a large forest tree. He sent a yawl in charge of a very competent mate and two deck hands to row the yawl and handle the line. The line was fastened to the tree. When the yawl returned I was on the forecastle watching the proceedings. The mate said to
me, "Holy Moses, James, there is more hoppaws down on that island than you could eat in a month." About that time we heard an awful splash in the water and looking over the guards we found a big German deckhand had fallen overboard. He was yelling, "Save me, save me; I am drowning." The Irish mate said to him, "You Dutch Dunderhead, why don't you stand up?" When he did the water only reached to his knees. I have found there is a good deal of humor in the average deckhand. I remember another occasion coming up the river to Pittsburgh. A boat that operated between Evansville and Louisville was aground on a bar. Her name was the "Fannie Dugan," so named after the Captain's daughter, Captain Duggan. As our boat approached the Duggan, the Negro deck hands all assembled on her forecastle and commenced to sing—

"Captain Duggan is on the Duggan,  
And the Duggan is on the bar."

repeating this a number of times. We fortunately were able to pass around the Duggan and come on to Pittsburgh.

On another trip the "Glasgon" left Pittsburgh for St. Paul, Minn., loaded with an assorted cargo of Pittsburgh's products. Most of the freight was for various cities between St. Louis and St. Paul. We employed at St. Louis a second mate who was familiar with all the landings between St. Louis and St. Paul. It was my duty, with the assistance of Mike, the mate, who was a typical Hibernian, and the deck crew, to get out on deck the freight for the various landings before reaching them so the boat would not be delayed. At the moment we were assembling the freight for Rock Island, also Davenport, which was on the other side of the river. I asked Mike which he liked the best, Rock Island or Davenport. "Well, James," he replied, "I like Rock Island better than I do Davenport because Rock Island is more compact and Davenport is too scattery."

On another occasion we left New Orleans for Pittsburgh with a full crew of Negro deck hands. We had orders to stop at a plantation up the river and take aboard for Pittsburgh a large consignment of barreled molasses. Approaching the plantation we blew the landing whistle to notify the shipper. When we landed there was on the bank a large number of Negroes from the various plantations in the neighbor-
hood. Most of them children (piccaninnys) with nothing on them for clothing but a gunny sack. A hole was cut in the bottom of the sack for their heads to go through and a slit on both sides for their arms and all seemed as happy as any of our children were when dressed in their best. As soon as we commenced to load the molasses the Negro deck hands commenced to sing—

"Last night I was working on the levee
Cotton bales rolled mighty heavy,
Now I's working on a steamboat,
Getting duff for my dinner every day."

That was continued until the boat was loaded.

I have been on boats that made trips from Pittsburgh to Nashville, St. Louis, St. Paul, and New Orleans, going to each port direct, loaded with commodities manufactured in this district. I recall several incidents after I became President of the Pittsburgh & Cincinnati Packet Line, about mates on our boats. One named John Sweeney, an Irishman, and as good a mate as we ever had. He was known as a fast one and a good Negro driver. He always carried a heavy cane made of hickory and he frequently used it with telling effect on the Negro deck hands. But strange to say with all his driving, he always was able to get a good crew of deck hands. One night when unloading at the wharf here one of the Negro deck hands did not do his work to suit Sweeney. He hit him on the head with his cane making a very bad cut from which blood flowed freely. The Negro was induced to sue him before Squire McKenna on Penn Avenue. Sweeney was arrested. I was called to go to his bail. At the hearing the Negro and witnesses told the story of the brutal attack. The squire asked Sweeney to tell his story. He said, "Your Honor, I had a thin bit of a lath in my hand not thicker than your little finger. I gave him a wee tap that wouldn’t kill a fly on your back." The evidence was otherwise. We interviewed the colored gentleman in a corner of the office and for a financial consideration had him withdraw the suit. We paid the costs and Squire McKenna set Sweeney free to go back to the boat and hit another Negro with his thin bit of a lath.

Another mate was a slow talking man. When the deck hands were not going as fast as he wanted them he always said, "Hurry up, you would think you fellows were going to a burying."
We had another outstanding mate, Jim Conlin, who won everlasting fame from the Negro deck hands all along the river. Our boat was backing out from the wharf at Portsmouth. One of the Negro deck hands tripped on a line and fell overboard. When a Negro falls into the river it is ten to one that he never comes to the surface as he goes to the bottom like a pig of lead. Conlin without a moment's hesitation jumped into the river and got him to shore. After that Conlin was a hero in the eyes of the Negro deck hands.

Our boats carried as freight a large amount of cheap candy put up in buckets, with wooden tops. Every trip we would lose candy out of the buckets. In order to protect the candy from being stolen we put the candy in the hold of the boat, where none of the crew was allowed except the watchman. Still the candy was stolen. Conlin hid himself in the hold to ascertain the thief. Soon one of the Negro deck hands came down, broke the top off a bucket and commenced eating the candy. Conlin jumped on him and ordered him on deck and to bring the bucket of candy with him. When on deck Conlin pulled a revolver and pointed it at him and said, "Nigger, eat all the candy in that bucket or I will kill you." The poor Negro ate and ate until he could eat no more. The Negro pleaded with him, saying, "Master Jim, deed I can't eat another piece, please Master Jim take that gun away before I drop dead." It is needless to say no more candy was stolen on the boat thereafter.

On another occasion when the boat was leaving Parkersburg, W. Va., Conlin discovered a Negro had stolen a case of eggs from the boat and was running up the wharf with it. Conlin commanded the Negro to stop but he kept going. Jim pulled his revolver and shot him in the heel. The eggs were recovered and the Negro sent to jail. Conlin was exonerated.

On another occasion when the boat was leaving Parkersburg, W. Va., Conlin discovered a Negro had stolen a case of eggs from the boat and was running up the wharf with it. Conlin commanded the Negro to stop but he kept going. Jim pulled his revolver and shot him in the heel. The eggs were recovered and the Negro sent to jail. Conlin was exonerated.
defense and that he had no knife. A long time afterwards he admitted to me he had had a knife and used it. He resigned from the river and accepted a position in a large grocery house at Cincinnati. One night he discerned a Negro robbing the place. The Negro was quicker than Jim. Before he could get his revolver in play the Negro hit him over the head with a heavy club fracturing his skull and he died a few hours later.

We had another outstanding mate on our boats that gained notoriety but in a different way from Conlin. He was not on our boat when this incident occurred. He was first mate on a boat operating between Cincinnati and Memphis. The boat he was on was coming up the river to Cincinnati. A few miles below Paducah, Ky., the Negro deck hands quarreled with the cooks about something they wanted for breakfast which the cooks refused. The deck hands said they would throw the cooks overboard if they did not get it. The deck hands started for the cook house to carry out their threats. The cooks closed the door and barricaded it. But the Negroes broke it down, entering the cook house. They seized butcher knives and cleavers and started after the cooks who ran up to the boiler deck for refuge. The cooks met the mate and hurriedly explained the situation. When the Negroes approached he ordered them to stop, instead they started to attack him. He drew his revolver and killed four of them before they were subdued. The mate was arrested at Paducah and tried for murder but proved he acted in self-defense and in addition it was an act of mutiny and under the marine laws which is the same on the inland waters of the United States as it is on the high seas, he was acquitted. Ever afterwards he was known as the mate who one morning killed four Negro deck hands before breakfast.

Many of you no doubt remember the controversy which arose regarding the location and the building of Davis Island Dam. The government sent Colonel Merrell, Chief of the United States Engineers to Europe for the purpose "of investigating and studying the various systems of improved rivers and canals," with a view to adopting the best system for improving our inland waterways to assist navigation during the low water periods which usually occurred each year during the summer months. Colonel Merrell on his return made a report to the Department that the chanoine system of
Reminiscences of the Rivers

dams used in France was the best suited for the Ohio River. The dam was made by placing wooden wickets side by side across the river, securely fastened at the bottom. Each wicket was thirteen feet high, three feet nine inches wide, and nine inches at the bottom tapering to six inches thick at the top. They could be raised and lowered easily, according to the rise and fall of the river. If a freshet came all the wickets could be lowered and laid on the bottom of the river and boats could pass over them just as though no Dam existed. When the water got low the wickets were raised and thus made a full pool above the Dam, and six feet of water by the marks, at the foot of Market Street.

Harry Oliver, one of our keen, bright, iron manufacturers, had a mill located at Manchester. During the summer months he was unable to get cheap river coal to his plant, due to the low water. When Colonel Merrell made his report Mr. Oliver had a bill introduced in Congress for an appropriation to make a survey and purchase suitable property for a Dam. When it became known that Davis Island had been selected for the site, there was great indignation from every side, as it was claimed that it would create a stagnant pool of filth in the harbor resulting from the sewers in Pittsburgh and Allegheny discharging into the pool and that out of it would come all kinds of disease and pestilence, and in all probability would cause an epidemic and no one could forecast the ultimate result. Nearly all of the Civic and Medical Societies protested and held indignation meetings all contending that it was the worst thing that could possibly happen to Pittsburgh and Allegheny.

The people that opposed it with the greatest vigor were the coal operators who sent large tows of coal to the southern markets. Their argument was that Mr. Oliver was an iron manufacturer and he was in league with the other manufacturers. They wanted to place an obstruction in the river that would be forever a menace to safe navigation and they would keep the coal here and they would always have cheap fuel. But notwithstanding all this opposition, the Dam was built.

During the construction of the Dam, investigation developed that the pool in the harbor would be of inestimable benefit because the sewage that was discharged into the rivers, much of it formerly lay and decayed along the shores,
whereas with the pool full it was submerged, and because of that fact no odors were noticeable. Instead of being a menace to the coal men as claimed it was of the greatest benefit to them. Before Davis Island Dam was in operation all southern coal had to be held above Dam No. 1 on the Monongahela River. Many times when a coal boat stage was reached in the Ohio River it was impossible to lock through No. 1 all the coal intended for shipment South because of the short time and inadequate facilities at the Lock. When Davis Island Dam was completed, coal was dropped down to landings the coal men established between Lock No. 1 and Davis Island Dam. So perfect was this arrangement that tows were made up in the harbor at leisure with tow boats hitched to the tows and as soon as there was sufficient water in the Ohio, the boats and tows were ready to depart.

Another valuable asset to Pittsburgh, through the pool, was because it enabled all kinds of craft to use the harbor to receive and deliver traffic of every description to mills and factories located in the pool, to say nothing of the benefits to those having to use river water in their industrial plants.

Davis Island Dam was officially opened in October, 1885, with a great demonstration in which boats of every description took part in a parade from Pittsburgh to the Dam and return, which was viewed by thousands of people. Davis Island was later removed and replaced by a large permanent Dam built at Emsworth. That Dam now gives a depth of water in the Pittsburgh harbor of nine feet as compared to six feet when Davis Island Dam was in use.

It may be surprising to some, to know that our Historical Society at one time embarked in the steamboat business. In 1811, there was built at Pittsburgh about where the Baltimore and Ohio Depot now stands, the first boat propelled by steam on western and southern waters, named the “New Orleans.”

The idea of celebrating the Centennial of the beginning of Steam Navigation on the western rivers was strongly advocated by your President, Mr. Wm. H. Stevenson, who induced the Historical Society to build a replica of the first “New Orleans” and to use her to duplicate the trip from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. A number of meetings were held to consider and devise ways and means to obtain the necessary funds, which of necessity, would consist of a con-
siderable sum to build the boat and finance the trip. The question was, “Where would the money come from?” Mr. Stevenson said he thought he could secure it and he did. He asked me if I could build a replica of the original “New Orleans.” That was a big question, as I afterwards found. I replied, “Give me time to make an investigation and I will advise you.” The first question to be settled was whether the original “New Orleans” was a stern wheelboat or a side wheelboat. Most of the western authorities said she was a stern wheelboat. My investigations carried me to New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and New York. All records of steam vessels are kept at Washington but in 1811 there were no records. At New York I found that the “Clermont” was built by Robert Fulton and was successfully operated on the Hudson River, that she was a side wheel boat, and that Fulton, Nicholas J. Roosevelt and Robert R. Livingston, our Minister to France, were the owners of the “New Orleans,” and that Fulton held a number of patents on his boat the “Clermont.” I also found that the plans of the “New Orleans” were taken from the “Clermont” but were considerably enlarged in size. That settled the question with me and from other data I found the details, had plans made and submitted them to the Historical Society, which plans were approved, with the exception that the proposed “New Orleans” must conform with the government rules and regulations now in effect, to safeguard lives and property aboard of her. In 1811 there were no rules to govern steam navigation. In all other respects the replica, looking at her out in the river would be a reproduction of the original.

I was authorized to make a contract for the boat which I did with the Elizabeth Marine Ways Co. at Elizabeth, Pa., and the boat was launched on August 31st, 1911. She was christened by Mrs. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, a great grandniece of Nicholas J. Roosevelt, in the presence of President William H. Taft and other distinguished men and women and several direct descendants of Fulton and Livingston.

In honor of the “New Orleans,” a great marine pageant was had on the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh to Davis Island Dam and return. The pageant was viewed by thousands. President Taft and party were on the Flagship and all were much pleased with the great interest manifested by
the people in the celebration.

The Steamer "New Orleans" left Pittsburgh November 2nd, 1911, for New Orleans to duplicate the trip of the original. Many ladies and gentlemen were in the party representing the Historical Society, the city, state and nation.

The trip from start to finish was a great triumph. The newspapers published columns about the boat and the trip. Every city, town and hamlet poured out thousands of people all along the route. There never was a trip made by any boat that attracted the interest the "New Orleans" did all the way to New Orleans. Our trip was so scheduled that we would spend the night at the largest cities where their officials received and entertained the party.

The original "New Orleans" it seems caught fire en route and it was only proper that the replica should do likewise. A great windstorm with hail and sleet compelled us to seek shelter. We landed at Concordia, Kentucky, and remained all night due to the high winds. Some of the people on board were drenched by the heavy rains. On retiring for the night they hung their wet garments on the back of chairs, close to the large common stove in the aftercabin. In the morning the man in charge found the cabin cold and the fire low. He filled the stove with coal and went about his business. Soon the stove got red hot. The heat ignited the clothing, which filled the cabin with smoke. A fire alarm was sounded and all the party rushed out on the afterdeck in their nightclothes, with the wind still blowing a gale. One of the ladies had on a beautiful silk nightrobe and when the wind struck that nightrobe the flag in Schenley Park would be amazed too, to see what the wind did to that beautiful nightrobe. The fire was soon extinguished but the event gave us all plenty to talk about the balance of the trip.

When we reached the lower Ohio River which widens out, we saw large flocks of wild ducks. Our sportsmen on board said, "If we only had a shotgun we would have ducks for our meals all the way to New Orleans." That evening we landed at Cairo and a great reception was given us by the city officials and others.

We left in the morning with plenty of shotguns. Soon we entered the great wide Mississippi River and saw many flocks of ducks. Our pilot ran the boat close to the ducks. Our sportsmen fired and fired at the ducks but never shot
one. Our ship carpenter was leaning up against the bulkhead watching them shoot. I was close by him. He said, “Captain, them ducks are just as safe out there as if they were locked up in the Allegheny County Jail.” We ate no ducks shot by our sportsmen on the trip.

Great receptions were extended the party all the way down the Mississippi River at Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Baton Rouge. When we landed at New Orleans November 27th, 1911, the city officials and members of the New Orleans Historical Society greeted us cordially, entertained us splendidly, and gave all the party cards to their social clubs, tickets to the theaters, and the French Opera. Our party was much impressed with New Orleans because it is so unlike any other American City. In the old French quarters there still remains many of the quaint old Spanish and French buildings. Of course our party visited Jackson Square, the Place-d'Arms and the St. Louis Cathedral built by the Spanish and the building next to it is the Cabildo. Our party was much interested in this building. There a mighty empire was signed away by Napoleon’s representatives to this country, known as the Louisiana Purchase. When all the agreements were signed and ratified and all the money paid to France by United States, Napoleon said the joke was on us. France was able to hand over to the United States a domain not in her possession and which she had no right to sell. But be that as it may, we still have that domain and I do not think any one would question our title. The signing of those papers was the inspiration that led to the building of the “New Orleans.” Chancellor Robert R. Livingston was the American Minister to France at the time. He was instrumental in bringing about the Louisiana purchase and was much interested in the development of that purchase. The Americans at that time were in possession of what was known as the Mississippi territory and Natchez was the seat of government. The distance from New Orleans to Natchez was about 250 miles. The roads were very bad because of the many swamps, marshes and bayous. The means of communication and transportation were very slow between these two very important points.

Fulton’s Steamboat, the “Clermont,” was a success on the Hudson River. Chancellor Livingston conceived the idea to build a boat as a means of rapid transportation be-
tween New Orleans and Natchez. He prevailed upon Fulton and Roosevelt to join in the scheme and Livingston's dream came true. The "New Orleans" was built. The boat was a financial success during her lifetime.

Many people are of the opinion that the glory of the rivers has departed with the decline of the freight and passenger boats. If you were on Water Street or could see fifteen or twenty steamboats departing you would say the steamboat business is good. But looking out in the river you see a towboat with eight or ten barges moving along. You don't think much about it. That boat with the ten barges contains more tonnage than fifteen or twenty of the old-time steamboats. Instead of a decline in the River tonnage it is far greater today than ever before. When a freshet came and we saw the great fleets of coal boats leaving Pittsburgh for the South, and today none go South. Many are of the opinion that the coal business is ruined. There is one industrial concern that brings more coal into the Pittsburgh harbor in one year than ever went down the Ohio River in any single year. When the last two dams are finished this year making fifty dams in the Ohio River chain, Pittsburgh manufacturers will be able to ship their products every day in the year down the Ohio into the Mississippi River to New Orleans, to seagoing vessels that reach all the markets of the world.