The Nomad’s Journey

In September 1923, William “Bill” Hartman, along with his younger brother Paul, embarked on a nautical journey from Homestead, Pennsylvania, to New Orleans, Louisiana, on a boat he designed and built in the backyard of his parents’ home. Much of his story unfolds in a handwritten travel log that documents the trip and provides insights into life on the rivers. The travel log is part of the William Hartman Papers and Photographs (MSS803), an archival collection recently donated to the Detre Library and Archives.

Bill’s sailing story began a few years prior to his maiden voyage. As a boy, he became interested in riverboating and sailing, and acquired the skills needed to navigate a nautical vessel from a riverboat captain who was his father’s friend. At age 17, Bill decided to build a boat and sail it to New Orleans. He drew up plans and began construction in his backyard at 113 Camp Avenue in Braddock. It took approximately two years to complete. Named The Nomad, the boat was 28 feet in length, with cypress planking and oak ribs. It contained a galley with a coal stove and sink, and sleeping quarters for six. In the bow of the boat there was a water closet, linen closet, and a 50-gallon water tank.

The voyage of the Hartman brothers began at 10:50 on the morning of September 6, 1923. Bill captained the boat and Paul acted as the cabin boy and cook. Bill began the log, “10:50 Up anchor and started from Giles boat house in Homestead.” He continued to document the first day of the trip from Homestead to Sewickley. The next entry chronicled the following day from Sewickley into Ohio, ending at Steubenville. Since this was a leisure trip, the Hartman brothers took their time travelling down the river. Each night they would dock and explore the surrounding area. They encountered a variety of people along the river, including fishermen (even a mussel fisherman) and cotton pickers. Both Bill and Paul contributed to the log, signing the end of an entry either “Bill” or “P.H.,” respectively.

The brothers documented their experiences on the river, the weather, changes in the landscape, the people they encountered, and the everyday mechanics of navigating a boat through locks, whirlpools, and waterways on their journey to New Orleans.
One such example is the entry on September 10. While travelling from New Martinsville, West Virginia, to Marietta, Ohio, Bill wrote, “We are being locked through Dam No. 15, with the Ohio unfolding before us each new view like a turned page of a picture book one more lovely than the other.”

On September 21, Paul wrote, “Travelled 72 miles today, the most we ever travelled in one day.” By September 27, The Nomad entered the Mississippi River and began to average approximately 90 miles per day, despite becoming trapped on sandbars.

Bill observed multiple times in his entries the changing landscape and climate as they travelled further south. He noted houses slowing falling into the Mississippi River, the shift from cotton fields to sugar cane, and the difference between northern and southern mosquitoes.

It was an endangered way of life. Bill mused on October 7, 1923, that “the passing steamboat era a grand and gracious way of traveling on our rivers, is slowing running out.”

Six days later on October 13, 1923, Bill and Paul arrived in New Orleans at one o’clock in the afternoon. Approximately one month later, near Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana, The Nomad was battered by a storm and sadly lost. Bill remained in New Orleans for about a year before returning home and finishing his education in architecture at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. He never lost his love for adventure and would continue sailing worldwide into his 90s.