Charlie and His Houseboat

Charlie Schlegel lives on Mt. Troy, a hilly North Side neighborhood of Pittsburgh, "Where the water can't get me," he says, but he swears that the best years of his life were from 1935 through 1938, when he lived with his parents and siblings on a houseboat under the Fort Wayne Bridge along the Allegheny River.

While eating breakfast in the Victory Cafe on East Ohio Street—"the waitress starts my eggs when she sees my car come down the street"—as he does every day, Charlie reminisced back 70 years to those blissful times on the river.

Swimming in the Summer, skating in the Winter. That's how Charlie remembers it, but he admits that the flood in March 1936, when the three rivers crested 46 feet at the Point, the highest ever recorded, was the most memorable moment of his life.

"All three bridges, on the Allegheny River, the 6th, 7th and 9th were under water, except for the middle portion," Charlie recalls:

Boats broke into splinters when they hit those bridges. We were tied up good to the railroad tracks, so we were steady, but the water raised us up to the top of the telephone poles. When it got that high, the police made us leave the boat for one night, and go up to St. Mary's Church on Lockhart Street. We climbed out between the telephone wires, and got into a rowboat, my mother, my brother, and sister and me.

Charlie doesn't remember being afraid, just excited.

His father, also Charlie, and a riverboat captain of a sternwheeler, was not there during the flood. Captain Schlegel, employed by Dravo, took barges from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. "I was the man of the house," Charlie says, "because my brother was working, and my dad was on the river all the time, but he provided very well for us."

Captain Schlegel had obtained the houseboat for the family by borrowing $100 from Virginia Zubik, the daughter of Charlie Zubik, who had a fleet of boats along the river. He paid her back at the rate of $5 a month. "He bought this houseboat in West Virginia and towed it up here behind the barges," says Charlie. "That was an exciting moment for the family. He slowed the sternwheeler down and shoved the houseboat to the riverbank, and my brother tied it up to the railroad tracks."

It was a cozy place, as Charlie remembers: "There were three rooms, a kitchen, living room, and one bedroom. I guess we all slept in that one bedroom. We had a coal stove for heat, and another for cooking. We ran wires for electricity from the nearby pole on the river bank. And as years went by, we got telephone service." He shivers when he recalls the toilet, built out over the railing, encased in wood. "It emptied out into the river, and boy, in the winter, when that cold water splashed up on you, you knew it!"

There were chores for each member of the family, and Charlie was the water boy. Every day, with one of his buddies, he carried two five-gallon cans to a railroad roundhouse located between the 7th and 9th Street bridges to get water.

Charlie explained how his older brother took care of securing coal:
Champion Coal Company was one block from our house, on Madison Avenue and their barges, filled with coal, were tied up there. My brother would take our rowboat up there late at night and give Julius, the night watchman a dollar, and he would let my brother load up his rowboat until just the top of the boat was above water. Then he’d row it down, and in the daytime, we’d unload it on the river bank, and we’d take it by the bucketful when we needed it.

The family got their groceries by walking up the gangplank to the river bank, then on to some of the small shops along Madison Avenue and East Ohio Street. “We never got a whole big bag, because we didn’t have that much money,” Charlie admits. “When my Dad was home, I would go up to Gruber’s Saloon on the corner of Madison and Progress and get him a little bucket of beer with a handle on it.”

To do the laundry, Charlie’s mother heated the water from those five-gallon tanks over the coal stove, rubbed the dirty clothes on a washboard, rinsed and wrung them out, then carried them up the gangplank to hang them on a line strung from the telegraph poles. “She was a strong woman,” Charlie says. And it would seem she was fearless. “She loved to play bingo in the evenings, and would walk down the gangplank and along River Avenue to Stockton Avenue.” Charlie laments that his mother died too young, at the age of 49. “She died playing Bingo. She just put her head down and died.”

Charlie didn’t mind the hard work, but remembering the good times makes his eyes smile: “All my friends who lived on land liked to come down to the houseboat. They called us “river rats” but they didn’t mean anything bad by it. We had one pair of ice skates among us, and we’d take turns skating on the ice close to the boat.”

But surely summer was the best, with the river as their playground. “My dad bought a 20 foot flatboat, and my cousin, who was a little older than me, bought a 1931 Chevy for $25,” Charlie recalls.

We took the motor out of it, and put it on this boat, and ran the drive shaft through a box, filled with cotton to keep the water from coming in, down through the bottom of the boat, and attached a propeller to it. We kept the transmission, too, and all you had to do was push that gear shift to go forward and reverse. It was so much fun. Like I say, we never thought we were poor.

There was no end to the fun. One of the neighbors, Jimmy Zubik, had an aluminum rowboat with flotation tanks. The children found something better to do than ride in it: “We would take the boat to the middle of the river,” Charlie says, “and shove it down under the water, and get out of the way, and it would shoot up like a torpedo. We’d bail the water out, and do it all over again.”

In the 1930s, there were houseboats, according to Charlie, every five feet along the Allegheny, all the way up to New Kensington. “It was another world,” he says, finishing up his eggs.

Unlike Charlie’s, some houseboats near the 7th Street Bridge along the Allegheny River were sunk in the 1936 flood. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Bette McDevitt previously wrote the feature articles “Love Letters from a Chauffeur,” “The Thomas Merton Center: Changing Lives One at a Time,” and “Showstoppers” for this magazine.