

LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

Presented to  
The Athenaeum Society

December 2, 1982

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## LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

When I first began contemplating the authoring of this paper, my desire was to produce a treatise on the life of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a decendent of Seleucus, one of the generals of Alexander the Great who ruled Syria in the second century B.C. and who, in his attempt to Hellenize the Jews, produced the first great holocaust that has been copied in both small and great measure through the centuries since, and who is considered the antitype of the Man of Sin who will appear in the great tribulation period at the close of this age, and further I felt an urge to correlate current events with the classical pre-millennial view of eschatology, but remembering the proscriptions of our constitution, I wisely deferred. It seemed prudent, therefore, to cast my thoughts backward to the time of my youth, and like many of my colleagues in this honorable society, engage in a little nostalgia. The title of my paper is "Life on the Mississippi."

In the cold early spring of 1953, while grinding my way through the second semester of my freshman year in Medical School at the University of Louisville, I wearied of confinement and books, and along with my classmate and fraternity brother, George Beard, went down the riverfront to get a breath of fresh air and relax. Although we shuttered with the cold, the snappy breeze was refreshing and the wide expanse of the Ohio was a relief to eyes that

had been encompassed by books and microscope slides and walls. The great steel girders of the George Rogers Clark bridge were on our right. Across the river was the large clock with the lighted Palmolive advertisement that I could remember shining across the dark water at night from my childhood. Immediately before us was the huge permanently partially sunken barge that was used for a dock. Tied up to it was a beautiful ship - not the usual snub-nosed tow boat with large square towknees, but a graceful seagoing vessel that had towknees attached to her bow, as out of place as a hat on a bouquet. Her gang plank was down, and on an impulse, although we knew we had no right to, we rapidly climbed aboard. No one was in sight and after wandering about the deck, we went down a companion way to the interior. Several crew men were in the large ward room, and instead of demanding that we leave, welcomed us with coarse courtesy and learning that we were medical students, were almost as inquisitive of us as we were of their vessel. We were escorted about the ship and shown her wonders. She was a mine sweeper that had been purchased by the Commercial Barge Line after World War II and had been converted to a tow boat to push great barges of new cars stacked double deck from Louisville to ports on the Mississippi and her navigable tributaries. The life of the deck hand seemed enticing and romantic to two professional students who had spent little time in the

out of doors, and when we learned that short term workers were sometimes employed on the boats, we determined then and there we would work on the river during summer vacation.

As soon as school was out, George and I packed a few belongings and went to the National Maritime Union hall on North Second street not far from the river. The union hall was a half flight down from the sidewalk level. It consisted of a large bare room with a desk near the center of one long wall, and scattered small tables and folding chairs. Behind the desk sat a short squat balding man in dungarees and an open collared polo shirt. His demeanor left no doubt that he was in charge. Scattered about the room were an assortment of human males, mostly past middle age and showing evidence of physical dissipation. The majority were playing cards and the mingled conversations were laced with river language and river anecdotes. One got the impression they were all waiting for berths on the boats. There were one or two younger, healthier men, but they were definitely a minority group. Our appearance made no impression on anyone as we entered. We approached the desk and stood for a painfully long time as the union agent continued his conversation with a crony. After awhile, we attracted his attention and advised him we were interested in signing on a boat.

"You got a card?" he growled.



"No, we have never been out before."

The card was the proof of union membership necessary for employment.

"You'll have to go out on a trip ticket," he said.

"If you decide to stay on, you will have to join the union."

"Fine," I said. I was willing to do whatever it took to get on.

"Do you think we have much chance getting on - There are a lot of men here?"

The Squat man leaned over and muttered "stick around - Most of these men are union hall bums - They act like they are waiting for a job, but they are really just bumming around."

George and I signed for the trip tickets and split up to find seats and amalgamate ourselves with the group. I browsed through several old magazines and tried to stike up a conversation or two, but had little luck. The union hall devotees were primarily interested in the nickle and dime ante poker games.

We sat around all day. From time to time, someone would get up to get a drink from the water dispenser. It was a great uncooled inverted carboy with the prominent sign.

"Rivo Water"

"as nature intended it, two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen."

It was dispensed in flat paper cups resembling

notebook paper..

Occasionally the din in the union hall was punctuated by the shrill telephone bell. The union steward would answer, post with chalk the available job on the call board and announce the job.

Basically there were two kinds of crew jobs on the river - engine room and deck. The card carrier with the longest longevity had first option for the job. The bald squat man was right - very few people moved when the call came, and it gave me hope. By nightfall, however, no call came that was not filled and we went home for the night.

Next day we arrived bright and early. The union hall regulars seemed to accept our presence a little since they had seen us before. Conversations were a little easier and I managed to piece together a crude idea of how the system worked on the river. There were basically three large commercial barge lines on the river. The American Barge Line, The Commercial Barge Line and The Federal Barge Line. These lines had fleets of large tow boats that pushed commercial tows on the Ohio and Mississippi. There were myriads of smaller companies that had one or a few boats most of which plied shorter routes. The Ashland Oil Company had a large fleet, but it pushed only Ashland Oil barges and was a fleet apart from the regular commercial companies.

Every boat had to have more than one person for each slot as the men would work three to six weeks at a stint and then take off for a period of time to be with their families. Each boat had a captain, a pilot, and a first and second mate. Their reliefs frequently would go from boat to boat as the permanent officers spent more time on the water than at home and relief captains and mates spent only short stints. The crewmen had a tendency to rotate from boat to boat. A man might stay with a boat for several months, but not uncommonly when he was ready to return to work from a time at home his slot would be filled and he would find a berth on another boat. Many of the older river men knew each other, having worked together, one time or another.

About 1:00 in the afternoon, the phone rang and the call came for a deck hand and an engine room man to board in Evansville, Indiana. An older engine room man, a veteran probably sixty years old whose name I have long forgotten, but whom I shall call Will, responded. No one answered the call for a deck hand. My heart pounded. George and I both went to the desk. The man glanced at us and said we would have to be certain there was no regular man who wanted the job before he could consider a man with a trip ticket. A search of the union hall was unsuccessful and he allowed that one of us could have it. George lost the toss of the coin and I was on. There was one hitch. We had to get to Evansville

urgently and would have to fly - great!! I had never flown commercially before. The man told me I would have to pay for the ticket, but I would be reimbursed by the captain of the boat.

I did not know at the time that he was to pay for the ticket. Later, he, rather than I, was reimbursed and I never got my money back.

We caught the first plane to Evansville, a Delta Airline Martin 202. I was thrilled at the ride and amazed at its brevity. Will and I caught a cab to the riverfront and found the Mead-Johnson Company port where we were to be picked up. It was about 3:30 p.m. when we got there and we had been given the impression by the union steward that the boat would be there soon afterward. It had a romantic name - The Java Sea - a large tow boat belonging to the American Barge Line.

Will and I waited around all afternoon - no boat for us. Other tows went up the river and our hopes rose with the sight of each, but no Java Sea. Night fell. It got cooler in our short sleeves. Will went off to get some cigarettes. When he came back, he informed me that he had called the boat on ship to shore long distance and found that the boat with its tow was not due until 2:00 a.m. Then he muttered something about the fact that he had given my name rather than his to the captain as the person calling. I recall sternly reprimanding the old man for that.



It seemed an eternity before 2:00 came. In the far distance, we could see the slow swing of the great twin flood lights playing back and forth on the water. The great hulking tow was marked only by a green light on the right, an amber light in the middle and a red light on the left of the leading edge of the tow. Three football field lengths back was the boat. It was white with a black hull, standing three stories out of the water. All the deck lights were on. In addition, yellow globe lamps adjacent to each doorway seemed to give the appearance of strings of yellow beads encircling the bulkheads.

The entire tow moved silently with majestic grace. The carbon arc searchlights moved back and forth like great luminous antennae. From time to time, the night air was pierced by the scream of her great horn. On the black water, she looked to me like something from a different planet.

When the boat came even with us, she came to a halt and with her engines throbbing at low throttle against the current, she sat still in the water. She was in midstream. Over the side, a small boat was launched containing two dark men in life preservers. They picked us up and with mighty heaves on the oars swiftly returned to the boat.

I'm sure my pupils were dilated with excitement as we climbed on board. There stood three other men barefoot and stripped to the waist. They were brown as acorns from the sun. The thing that struck me most forcefully was the slender waists and the masculinely muscled chests and arms. My heart fell - How could I live with such men - I, who was two years out of the TB sanatorium, who had had no real exercise for three years. As I watched their exquisite muscles ripple under their brown skin, I was scared.

I was shown to the forward port crew cabin and given the right upper berth. I was advised I was to be a member of the forward watch and would go on duty at 6:00 a.m.

Next morning I was shaken awake by the mate. After downing my dungarees and shirt, I was shown to the galley. Steamboats have wonderful galley's. Our watch ate together at one table, the after watch at another with the "under sea devils" at two other tables. The food was magnificent - eggs, canadian bacon, sausage, french toast, coffee, milk, ~~fruit~~ - all you could eat.

After breakfast, the work began. We were under the second mate, a physical Greek God of a man named Doug Hammers. It was an apropos name - He was made of steel. He introduced me to the boat.

The Java Sea was one of the biggest steamboats on the river. She had been built during World War II along with twenty other identical tow boats under government commission by the Defense Plant Corporation. The waterways were crucial for bulk transportation during the War, especially since coastal shipping during the early years of the war suffered so heavily from submarine attack. A crash program had resulted in the launching of these boats. Each boat was named for a battle in which the United States had been engaged - Hence the "Java Sea." She had been built and launched at the Jeffersonville Boat and Machine Company across from Louisville and assigned to the American Barge Line. She was only ten years old when I boarded her.

She was 180 feet 10 1/2 inches long with a beam of 52 feet. Her hull was 11 feet deep. Her draft depended on her fuel load. When she was nearly empty, she stood with her gunnel five or six feet out of the water and she was almost awash when she was full. She was powered by twin 2000 horsepower <sup>steam</sup> engines and she sported twin nine foot propellers. She had four rudders individually operated allowing her to move sideways while facing the current. I found our boat had a crew of twenty-five. This consisted of the captain, the pilot, the steersmen (in our case the captain's son was training to be a pilot), the two mates, four forward watch deckhands, four after watch deckhands, four forward watch engine room men, four after watch engine room men, the engineer, the cook and

two maids.

The deck crew had two rooms with four berths each stacked two by two with an electric fan over each berth. Between the two rooms were a latrine with the showers and a ward room. The engine crew had a similar arrangement. The engineer had a room with the officers and the cook and maids had rooms adjacent to the galley. The maids made the beds, kept the rooms clean, and helped the cook.

On the blunt nose of the boat were mounted two gigantic towknees - great triangles of steel with flat faces forward to which the tow was hitched. A tow boat did not "tow" (pull) - it pushed.

Stretched out before the boat was the tow. It consisted of multiple barges hooked together in geometric formation so as to produce a rigid figure. The boat and tow were one with power and mobility produced by the great engines and rudders aided by the current.

I had to be introduced to our equipment and tools. The steel post like structures protruding from the deck were "timber heads." They were placed in pairs so the friction of the hawsers thrown about them could be used as a brake. The massive cleats attached to the deck were kevels. . They were used for making the boat or tow fast. The heavy cables were "wires," the chains were "sets of



links." The steel bars placed through the sets of links to keep them from rotating when the heavy ratchets were tightened were called "toothpicks."

The barges were ingeniously hooked together by forming triangles about timberheads and cleats with wires that were attached to sets of lengths attached to ratchets. When the toothpicks were placed through the sets of lengths so that they could not rotate the ratchets were tightened, the wires became taught and the multiple barges were fixed into one rigid form. The barges were of several sizes, and putting a tow together resembled working a jigsaw puzzle. In fact, the captain had a set of toy barges of various relative sizes he would use to set the pattern before making tow. The varied sizes resulted in some odd shaped open spaces between barges called "duck ponds." These were dangerous. If one fell into a "duck pond", he was dead.

That first morning on the tow was beautiful. The air was clear and the sun was bright. I worked without my shirt, my white skin and soft muscles in sharp contrast to my fellows. They were basically untutored men with simple views and I think my speech and vocabulary awed them. They were very kind and considerate of me. One thing they knew and I didn't was the ways of the river and steamboating, and I made sure they knew I appreciated anything they could do to help me learn.

Our first responsibility first thing in the morning was to inspect the tow and pump the bilges. We removed the lanterns from the nose of the tow and opened the bilge hatches in the foot-wide catwalk along the margins of the barges. It took a little getting used to to walk those catwalks. If the bilges contained water, we dropped twelve foot long pipes with electric pumps on top into the bilges and pumped the water over the side.

My first disaster occurred near the end of that first watch. We were coming into the first lock above Evansville. A lock is a long narrow channel along the bank adjacent to a dam with gates at each end. The boat and tow enter at one end. The gate is closed, water is let <sup>out</sup> in or out to lower or raise the tow which then passes out the other end. There is a technique used to get into a lock. The tow is brought alongside the pier on the shore side and held adjacent to the pier with slipping hawsers until the front end or nose of the tow has passed the "bullnose", or the projecting end of the wall that makes up the other side of the lock. When the nose has entered the lock, the lines are loosened and the tow is allowed to drift, striking the opposite pier and sliding into the lock. When the tow is too long for the lock, it is "double locked" - that is after the tow is in as far as it can go, it is broken in half and the boat backs the back half out of the lock. After the lock has been appropriately flooded or emptied, as the case may be, the front half of the tow is drawn

out the other end by a donkey engine and cable. Subsequently, the boat with the back half of the tow is brought through. The tow is then fastened together and the boat proceeds.

This morning the mate placed me on the outside lead timberhead with a microphone. I was instructed to call out "all clear the bullnose" when the front of the barge had cleared the bullnose and entered the lock. In my unsophisticated state, I did not notice that I was riding on an empty barge that stood almost eleven feet out of the water. The bullnose was half that height. There was a long bevel or "rake" backward from the leading edge of the barge to the water line. As I sat on the lead timberhead I called out "all clear the bullnose" as soon as I had passed the bullnose. The hands handling the lines holding the tow next to the pier let go and the tow drifted toward the opposite side of the lock. The underside of the lead barge struck the top of the bullnose, careened up breaking wires and throwing ratchets back in the tow. We had to stop and put things right again before proceeding. I heard that the captain was furious with the mate for giving that job to a greenhorn the first day. I never had that problem again.

We proceeded up the river and the next night came to <sup>the</sup> big lock below Louisville. It was over thirty feet from the water to the top of the lock. A ladder had been fashioned by forming an inset about two feet wide in the

concrete wall in which transverse pipes had been set. I got an extra shot of adrenalin climbing that ladder with a four inch hawser on my shoulder to make fast the tow.

We tied up in Louisville. I had been on the river two days and was loving it. I had to force myself to keep doing the heavy physical work, but somehow I did it. I was working stripped to the waist and was getting brown and proud of it. Nancy, who was a senior in nurses training and to whom I was to be married in two months was appalled when she saw my tan. At that time, sun was thought to be detrimental to tuberculosis and she called my old chest physician, Dr. Oscar Miller, and complained. She got back to me with his order to get my shirt on. Regretfully I complied.

We make our way on up the Ohio past Cincinnati. There were all kinds of interesting craft on the river. The Green Line had a beautiful white stern wheeler, The Delta Queen, docked there. At Ashland, I was intrigued by a man in a tiny boat with an outboard motor who tied up alongside our tow as we progressed up the river and sold razor blades, pencils, stamps and the like. We regularly were met by boats with mail.

Just below Pittsburg we were "turned." That is, we passed our tow to a smaller boat with a shallower draft and took a tow from her and started down the river again.



We picked up additional barges as we went. At one point, we added a sister steamboat to our tow.

Making up tow was interesting. Some of the barges had twenty five hundred tons of cargo each and it was amazing to see four men with nothing but four inch hawsers, the current and the steamboat, turn these monstrosities to any desirable position and tie them in place. One had to have just the right tension on the line that was wrapped figure of eight fashion around the timberheads or the line would break. It was a real art and I developed great respect for the men who did it.

Down river was much faster than up river by the amount of speed of the current - Sometimes ten or twelve miles per hour. I learned that if a steamboat went slower than two miles an hour or more than four miles an hour up river, it was losing money. The reason for the two miles an hour was obvious. The loss if over four miles an hour was due to the fact that the tow was too light to produce adequate revenue. I was amazed to find we were moving materials for a fraction of a cent per ton mile.

We sped down river to Cairo. The Ohio made a long green tongue out into the muddy Mississippi. By now we had a monstrous tow of twenty-four barges strung out four

wide and six long. We picked up a great behemoth of a man named "Tiny Thomas" from Scopus, Missouri. Tiny weighed about three hundred pounds, a mixture of fat and muscle. He was in his sixties with an unruly shock of white hair and a constant grin. His claim to fame was that he could carry all that you could load on him the length of the tow and early on he demonstrated this, staggering under the burden of a few hundred pounds of ratchets, wires and hawsers the nine hundred feet of which he had boasted. Tiny was a "young preacher." He had recently been converted and joined a Baptist church and had begun preaching. Like essentially all river men, however, his reproductive urge remained unregenerate and he boasted mightedly of his prowess with graphic descriptions.

We passed Memphis and the river continued to widen. At times at night, the sky would be unobscured and one could see myriads of stars, brighter than ever before. It was great to lie on one's back on the boiler deck and have a totally unobscured view of the heavens. At times the nights were foggy. The tow would slow down. The moving search lights would be frustrated by the light dispersion of the fog and the captain couldn't tell where we were. On more than one occasion, we slowly inched toward the shore and tied the multimillion pound tow to the trees along the bank. On one particularly foggy night when we had gotten into it deeper than usual, the seasoned deck hands became tense and began to recount frightening

stories of running aground with boiler explosions and loss of life. They discussed the merits of jumping overboard and swimming. The brute force packed by that massive tow is awesome when out of control. We scraped on an occasional sandbar, but never sustained damage. One night the mate advised me the captain wanted me, rather than the "galley hoss," to bring him his coffee. When I entered the wheel house, I was impressed with the deep darkness. The only light was the dim glow of the radios and instruments. The captain had to retain his night vision. It happened that the captain had heard I was a medical student. His hemorrhoids were bothering him. He didn't call them hemorrhoids. I had, in the past, observed the ability of the mess sargeant at Fort Sam Houston to describe anatomy and physiology accurately in gutter language, but he spoke Elizabethan English when compared to the captain. He gave me the most complete, verbally graphic description of anal anatomy, pathology and physiology that I have ever heard before or since and did not use one repeatable term. I stood in the dark with tears streaming down my cheeks. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud. Unfortunately, I had had no pathology or medicine and could give only condolences.

South of Memphis, I got an emergency call from my bunk. The captain had seen a plane come low overhead and he was sure it had crashed behind us. The motor launch was lowered and I was dispensed with a first mate

and two crew men with a first aid kit to see what we could do. We found debris from the crash, but no pilots. We learned later they had parachuted to safety.

Down around Natchez, it got hot. To stand on a steel deck at noon making up tow with the sun blistering down and no breeze was enough to make a Christian of any man. The cotton you spit could be woven into cloth. Further south, the river continued to widen. We passed under the magnificent Huey P. Long Bridge at Baton Rouge. We twisted and turned through lower Louisiana and finally tied up at Algiers across from New Orleans.

Algiers was a place for rivermen to howl. It is interesting about river men - There is a rule on the river that no one argues on the river. Someone might get killed. One false move and someone is in a "duck pond" or under the boat in a screw. If anyone causes trouble on the river, he is put ashore.

You also didn't make noise in Memphis, Tennessee - "Crumpville" on the river. The old hands would say "It's o.k., boy to get a little drunk in Cairo or Algiers, but when you get to Memphis, Tennessee, don't look cross-eyed at a cop, don't whistle, don't jay walk, don't do nothing, because they have a "P" (penal) farm there and they will keep you all summer." (Rivermen believe penalty is a deterrent to crime).



Algiers was different. It was at that time a dirty rundown smelly decaying riverfront town studded with dirty rundown, smelly, decaying dives.

Our captain's wife and his son's wife were beautiful, cultured appearing women who drove down the river meeting their husbands at stop over places. While in Algiers, there was a need to get an emergency message to the captain. The mate dispensed me with it. I found the captain and the steersman with their wives in one of the most disreputable places of entertainment I have ever seen. The people around them looked positively dangerous, but they seemed perfectly at ease in the place.

Algiers always reminds me of one deckhand on the after watch. I don't recall his name, but I recall him because of his consummate simplicity. He once described to me his concept of anatomy as being a triple layer of air, groceries and the vernacular for feces. This man enjoyed fishing for "shrimps" as he called them, while in Algiers. He would fill a pail half full of rocks and garbage, hang it over the stern and then pull in a mess of crawdads which he had the cook prepare for him.

The mate, Doug Hammers, also stands out in my mind in Algiers. Doug had had the unfortunate experience of having "waked up married" three times. He had, in each

instance, gotten off the boat, gotten drunk, and on awakening had looked beside him and found a female with a "deleted" smile on her face and a marriage license in her hand. The last of these unhappy matches was to a maid on one of the Federal Barge Line State boats. We had passed the boat one day. Doug stood in the shadows where he couldn't be seen and said - "There she is, look at her" and uttered a stream of unrepeatable blasphemies.

He had learned that it was my intention to get married when I got off the boat. He was absolutely dumbfounded to find I had never had sexual relations. I carefully explained to him the Biblical position on this subject. He had never heard of such. He was, at that time, living with a woman to whom he was not married.

One night in Algiers, Doug came back to the boat drunk. He was pleased as punch and grinning from ear to ear. He woke me up to tell me the news. He had called his woman long distance and cussed her out for being so low as to live with a man like him. He beamed with newfound piety.

After leaving Algiers we inched our way back up Mississippi. I could swear that I saw the same bend ahead when I awoke that was there when I went to sleep. In the mornings, we painted the boat. The mast was hard

to get at. One of the men shimmied up it with the paintbucket attached to his belt and painted it with his bare hand. I was feeling good. I could do the work fairly well and I was saving money to get married on. I made eighty cents an hour, but when one considered time and a half for overtime, double time for everything over sixty hours, Sundays and holidays, it was better than anything I could do in 1953. I hadn't spent a cent. My shoe soles came loose, but I cut them off and walked on the linings. I watched the foolish men lose what they made in poker games and learned a valuable lesson. I had warm feelings for these academically ignorant, river wise, rough, kind, lecherous men. They took care of me like a mascot.

We worked our way up to St. Louis and started south.

Memphis again - The lines of tied up barges, the smell of oil. The captain comes up, "Sorry, son, one of my regular men is coming back and I'll have to bump you." Me, sorry? I haven't seen Nancy for five weeks and I'll see her tonight. A shower, a shave, a taxi ride to the airport in my soleless shoes. Two hours later, I am back in Louisville, happy to be home, happy to see Nancy, happy to have had the rare chance to get at least a thin slice of life on the river.