

Kline's

Lockmaster At #13

Lucian Beckett            6/24/94            #39A

Lucian Beckett: This is what I used to run. This is the way the river bank used to look before the dams went in. See how far down it is. These are apple barrels; your packet boats would come and pick them up. I bet you could put ten cars on the head of that boat.

MK: Why don't you start out by saying my name is . . . ?

LB: My name is Lucian Beckett.

MK: We aren't getting off to a very good start here.

LB: You will have to tell me where you want to go.

MK: Okay. Start again with your name, please.

LB: Okay.

I am Lucian Beckett from, of course, Wheeling now. I used to be in Huntington, West Virginia. Our home was in Athalia, Ohio; that was before the dams went in. Before the dams went in, in the summertime, the river would get so low that you could walk across the river. See, steamboats used to start out from Pittsburgh with 30 or 40 barges of coal going south, before the dams went in; and, by the time they would get south to Cairo, if they got south with 10 or 12 barges they were lucky, because the river fell out. The barges were, of course, all wooden barges, and they hit rocks which would knock a hole in them. There was no way of pumping them. They just cut them lose and left them. All of your old people along the river, with the lump coal in all of those barges, would take their boats out. They never bought coal. They got it out of the barges. Barges were strewn from one end of the river to another. Barges were torn up. But, then after the dams went in, then they had good sailing. Your dams to start with--oh my, that would date way back in 1854--I think, the first one was in Pittsburgh, which was Herr Island; but you had, from there to Cairo, 154 old moveable-type dams.

MK: Moveable-type?

LB: Moveable-type, which when you talk about moveable-type dams, it is when the river came up, you would go out with a boat, a maneuvering boat we called it, and take all the top of the dam wickets. At Lock 12, especially where I worked, there were 175 wickets across the river, and two bear traps which were 94 feet wide.

MK: A bear trap is?

LB: That is something that was adjustable. I mean you could let them down for excess water. When you got too much water and the bear traps wouldn't take care it, then we would take the boat out and start tripping wickets. But, when you tripped a wicket, it fell flat on the bottom of the river. You got them all down, and the boats went straight down the river. No lock, or no nothing. And so, there were 154 of them from Pittsburgh to Cairo. Of

course, now your new type, your high lift dams, there are only 19. Our dams, the old type dam, was only 600 feet long and 110 feet wide, and you could take--at that time because you barges were 27 feet wide and 190-195 feet long--so you could get 12 of them, actually you could get 14 by running a barge down each side of the boat, in one locking. If you got more than that, we had what you called "double locking". You pulled out a section, tied up on the upper wall, whichever way you were taking them, and then bring a towboat and the rest of the barges down, and then they would hook them up. It took us from one hour to one hour and a half to lock them. With your new type dams, of course, they have a 1,200 foot chamber and a 600 foot chamber, so they can take . . . Of course, now the barges are different. They are 35 feet wide and 200 feet long, so they can take five sections of barges plus a towboat straight through. They can do it in 20 minutes where it used to take us an hour and a half. So they have saved a lot of time. Of course, Pike Island, I think, went in in 1954, from there up, then all the dams were high lift dams. They took out all your moveable dams. Then in 1964, Hannibal went in which took out the dam that I worked on. So now we have high lift dams from one end of the Ohio River to the other, 19 takes care of it. But the river is cheap transportation. I loved it. I spent 40 years on it.

MK: Forty?

LB: Forty. So, I thought, well, I would have to stay home and work for my wife the rest of the time.

MK: Could we start back with, what was the date of your birth?

LB: August 21, 1912. She is as old as I am now. I will be older on August 21.

MK: Tell us a little bit about your people and where you were raised. I saw a picture of your father. Was he a river man too?

LB: Yes. My father and grandfather had a ferryboat at Athalia which was 12 miles above Huntington, and we had a gas boat, two barges. We towed apples and things like that from there to Cincinnati and Gallipolis and places like that. We had the ferryboat up until 1927, and then we sold that out, and my dad came to Wheeling in September 1930.

MK: Did your grandfather start the ferryboat?

LB: My grandfather started it way back. I don't remember just when.

MK: When would you think, roughly? Before the turn of the century?

LB: Oh, yes. At one time, of course, the river was so low, that they started out ferrying by just pulling a little flat, with a spike pole across the river. Of course, then when the river got higher, at one time they ran a cable across the river. There were very few towboats at that time, and at night you would lower the cable, and you could run across the cable with your hands pulling a ferry flat. Then we went to a gas motorboat that shoved it, and then later on we bought this ferryboat which was 78 feet long and would carry 10 cars, and we had that until 1923, I believe, and it sank, and then we built a new one. Then, that boat ran until, I guess 1927, and we sold it, and they brought it up here to Wellsburg. It ran at Wellsburg for several years before the bridges took everything out.

MK: What do you mean, you built it?

LB: We built all of our boats. We would go up to Pomeroy, Ohio, where they sawed lumber, float your lumber down in a raft, put in on the bank, cut it up, nail it all together, and make a boat out of it. So, no, we didn't have them built. We built them ourselves. The river used to be, you know, before the dams . . . See, the only way you got down the river beginning with us . . . In the springtime when you had rains that raised the river, they would start on flat boats which drew only a foot, a foot and one-half of water, and they didn't always get down unless they dragged them across the sandbars when the river got dry. Until your dams went in, the Ohio River wasn't too big a creek. People this day and age don't really think. They think the river was always like this. No, the river wasn't always like this. The river was dry in the summertime and dry spells. No, we used to walk across the Ohio River up until 1927, when Lock 27 went in right above Huntington. In the summertime, it would get dry. You know, they talk about the good old days, how the river used to freeze. Sure, the river used to freeze. It wasn't bigger than a good-size creek, and at that time, your river, the water was pure. We drank out of it. When we were on the boat, we drank out of the river. But then, I know when we came to Wheeling in 1930, around 1936, there was so much detergent in the river that we would have five and six feet of soapsuds below the dam. All of your cities dumped all of their sewage in the river. All of your big mills dumped all of the acid. Now, it is cleaned up. It got to the place where nothing lived in the river but old carp and catfish. But, today, all the cities have . . . Nothing goes in the river that is not good, water. So you have good game fishing in the Ohio River now. There are places like below Pike Island that they built for fisherman, and they get a lot of good fish, but the river is a great place for transportation now and a great place for pleasure boating. You get the same kind of service with a pleasure boat as you would with a big steamboat with 20 barges. So enjoy it. You pay for it. It is all free. Well, when I say free, they don't charge you anything, although you pay for it in taxes, sure. But, it is pleasure.

MK: When you were a boy coming up with this life on the river, what sort of people were river people? What was the nature of those people?

LB: Well, I guess they were just like us common people. Things have changed so much. Different towns. Point Pleasant, West Virginia. I suppose everybody that lived in Point Pleasant ended up on the river. Everybody

you talked to on the river came from Point Pleasant. But, they were great people. I think you mentioned some people that you had talked to that were on the river. There was nobody that lived any better, as far as eating and sleeping and taking care of, than people on the river. Now, they worked six on and six off, 365 days a year. A lot of people didn't like that, but they got used to it. It wasn't much of a life for a married person. You didn't get home very often, but they enjoyed it and had a great time at it. There were great people on the river. I wish I could go back with a lot of those people now. You couldn't beat them. You couldn't beat them.

MK: What was it about the river that attracted this sort of people?

LB: I don't know. Steamboating in those days was a good paying job, and you know, in my days farming was about all there was around the country, and we had one good farmer at our home that paid \$1 a day or 10 cents an hour. When I started with the government, I made \$93.50 a month, and that wasn't eight hours a day. If we had to work on the dam, we worked as many as 36 straight hours never off the river. You didn't get paid for that. It is different nowadays. But, I don't know. Where did we go?

MK: Did you grow up in a large family or . . . ?

LB: No. I had two sisters. I was the baby. Of course, I was a little angel. But, we had a great life. I still have a sister living. She will be 85 Christmas Day. We had a great family.

MK: By the time you were nine, you said that you were operating this ferryboat.

LB: Oh yes. By the time I was nine, I was an old hand at it then. My grandfather, grandmother, and I would go, well, it was only about 18 mile above our home, to get a bargeload of coal. Of course, I did all the steering. Grandfather took the machinery. Grandmother did all the cooking, and we would lay for a solid week. They brought the coal from the coal mine by horse and wagon, shoveled it onto the barge for about 4,000 tons of coal. It took all week. Now we have progressed since then. My Dad and I, the last gas boat we had, we were taking some gas drums to Ironton, Ohio. We always cooked on the boat, an old kerosene stove. We were up in the pilot house, Dad and I, and the belt started slipping that ran the wheel, and dad ran down. I knew something was wrong, and he opened the cabin door--we cooked right in the cabin in front of the engine--and that old kerosene stove caught on fire and caught the side of the wall on fire, and he just ran through the fire and said to get off of that thing, and in a couple of minutes, it burned up and sank. We just cut the barges loose, and that got us out of the towing business .

MK: And that was in 1927?

LB: That was in 1925. Right on the river from Isom, Kentucky.

MK: Was that a stern-wheeler?

LB: Yes. Everything was stern-wheelers in those days. See, your stern-wheel boats, in those days--if you had your big tow boats from Pittsburgh, 400 horsepower stern-wheel boat--now you are talking about your big screw-boats, 8,000-9,000 horsepower, and see they could run any fleet under. They have enough power they could run any barges under. When they first started out with them, they ran an awful lot of them under, because they pushed them too hard. They could only push them so hard or they would dive under. Now they learned that they hold back. But, in your stern-wheel boats in some of the bends in the Ohio River, were so sharp that they couldn't steer head-on or they would have to back up and throw the rudders to back the stern around to get in the bends. Of course, your screw-boats now, they can turn around on a dime. So, there is a big change in the boating business. When I first started at Lock 12, if we had 160,000 tons a month, that was a big month. Now you are running two million. So there is a big change in the Ohio River. Good, cheap transportation for the companies.

MK: When your family built these boats, they built the wheel as well?

LB: Oh yes.

MK: I can't imagine that.

LB: You know, back in my days, the only . . . we had packet boats. All of your farmers had apple barrels at that time, which held three bushels of apples, and they would bring all of their apples to the river bank, and your packet boats, when they saw apples laying there, they would come in and pick them up and take them to Cincinnati for storage. Oh, they would, if two of them saw them at the same time . . . Listen, they would run together trying to get there first. And, at nighttime, some of your old farmers up on the river, they would hang up a lantern, and the packet boats knew to come in and pick up what they had. You see, all of your old grocery stores . . . My grandfather had a grocery store in Athalia, Ohio, and all of their groceries came from Kroger's big warehouse in Cincinnati, Ohio. They either came by train or on boat. All the bottom of your packet boats was for livestock. The next floor was, of course, your passengers. Of course, then you had your deck hands, and they were treated like animals, really. I have seen the old mate stand down on the end of the boat with a black snake whip, and if they didn't move fast enough, he could just peel the hide off of them. He was good at it with that whip. So, . . .

MK: Peel the hide off the deck hands?

LB: Oh yes, if they didn't move fast enough. They would have two out on the bank, and they would run at a trot. Those fellows would come along and those two guys would take those apple barrels and lay them right across the back of the neck. That was the way they carried them. They fed them with scraps from the passengers on the boat. Things have improved. I'm glad I wasn't one of the deck hands. You talked about the stern-wheel boat, a lot of times. We had one old pilot, the captain on the boat, if he didn't like one of them, he would get them in the wheel. You had to tighten the wheels up every once in a while to keep the bucket blanks from rattling, and he would get them in there and they couldn't swim, and he would just turn the wheel on and drown them, and that was in my days. We have progressed some, I think. Sometimes I think now I don't know whether we have or not. But, we had wharf boat at our place. You talk about high waters. We have had it and our boats clear up on Route 7 in Athalia, Ohio, in the 1913 flood. That is how high it was. You had like the 1936 flood here in Wheeling. Let me, let me say one thing. I think a lot of people won't like this. Your government throws a lot of your money away, literally. But, never complain on your government building flood control dams. Flood control dams will take 14 feet off of any high water, and when you look, since we came to Wheeling, it would take two to three inches of rain for us to put down Lock #12, which has only raised the river 8.4 feet. But now . .

MK: You put the dam down?

LB: Yes. When you have that much rain, you have all of your tributaries and everything coming into the Ohio River, see the Ohio River drains. The Allegheny River drains clear up in New York State, which is one fork of the Ohio. Of course, your Mon from Fairmont on, the Mon River falls the other direction towards Kanawha, but from Fairmont, comes around to Pittsburgh. You think that since 1930, all of your superhighways have been built; all of your big cities, malls, blacktopped. That used to be timber that absorbed all of this water. Now it sheds straight into the river. So, your flood control dams can take 14 feet off of that high water which is a blessing. If it weren't for that, Wheeling Island would be flooded half of the time. So we have come a long way in that too. I realize that we are killing ourselves cutting off all of the timber, but you are getting flood control dams that help store that water.

MK: Going back again to your childhood, how did you find time to go to school with all of this activity on the river?

LB: Well, I did that after school hours. My dad wasn't hard on me. He believed that I should work, and I don't think work hurt anybody. It hasn't hurt me. Of course, I wouldn't want to involve my wife, you know. But, anyway we still work and enjoy it. My grandfather and grandmother, they would rather have me working with them than all the rest of the family. I don't know why. We would do all of our working together in the towing line.

MK: It sounds like they spent all of their time together, your grandmother and grandfather?

LB: Yes. Of course, you know back in those days, people didn't live as long as they are now. I had no one in my family who lived beyond--my mother would have been 78 a few months before she died, and she was the oldest one

in our family. As I say my older sister will be 85 Christmas Day. All of my family died young, in their 60's, 64. So I guess we are the old fogies of the family. We made it to . . . soon be 82. I guess it is because my wife keeps me straight and going.

MK: I'd say it had a lot to do with it.

LB: Yes, I have to work for her twenty-four hours a day.

MK: When did you . . .? You went through school and then you finished your schooling up and then you went to work on the river?

LB: We started going together, my wife and I, when we were five years old. We would have started sooner, but she didn't move into our town until she was five. Never went with anybody else. We started sending each other Valentines when we were five years old. Of course, I was 18, she hadn't quite made it, but we have 64 years together.

MK: You got married when you were 18?

LB: I was 18.

MK: You were 18, and she was 17?

LB: That is right. She was a little bit shy of 18, yes.

MK: That is a wonderful story.

LB: She has been the boss ever since. We lived in such a small town, that I was the only boy there, and she thought, "Well, that is all there is", and she better take me. So that is how she got me. We came to Wheeling in 1930, and of course, Wheeling has been our home since then. We got married and came to Wheeling.

MK: Is that when you went to work on the lock?

LB: The dam?

MK: The dam.

LB: Well, my dad came, I guess, in September. I said 1930, but I think it was 1929. When our school year finished, we came to Wheeling, and I started in July 1930 at Lock 12 and worked there until 1962, and then we moved to Pittsburgh and worked out of the area office in charge of dams down as far as the new one at Hannibal. Then we had eight locks on the Allegheny River from East Brady to Pittsburgh. So, I ended up my time there in October 1969 and retired.

MK: You were the overseer of all of those dams at that time?

LB: Well, I was an assistant then. Mr. Shields was the area chief at that time. All of your dams on the Allegheny River are solid concrete. You have one solid concrete on the Ohio River, which is Dashields, which is about 14 miles below Pittsburgh. You know, it is hard to understand it, but the river was so dry, and when they built Route 40, it was because that Wheeling said that well if you ran Route 40 through Wheeling (they were talking about Pittsburgh), if you ran through Wheeling, they could truck stuff to Wheeling because about where Dashields dam is below Pittsburgh, there was an eight foot water fall across the river, and boats couldn't get by there very long; so if you would truck stuff to Wheeling, you could get south on boats a whole lot longer, and that is the reason you Route 40 was through Wheeling instead of Pittsburgh. So, there was a lot of politicking in those days to get things. All of your steamboats were, of course, against your highway bridges, because steamboats in those days came out on high water and had such high smokestacks. Well, they couldn't get under the bridges in high water. Then they started making their stacks hinged so that they could put the stacks down as far as the top of the pilot house, and then of course, you had to start building your bridges high enough to clear all of that. Your high lift dams now, boats always lock, they never have open river like they did with the old moveable dams. You have to always lock. Now your high lift dams, the gates on them are of course, push-button, you just set it where you want it, push the button, and it goes up there and stops; but they are built so that you can get the rollers out of the river five or six feet above the highest flood we have had, which was 1936 here, 1937 from Parkersburg on down.

MK: You can get the rollers out of the river?

LB: They clear. You would have to, because if the water still hit them when you'd high, you'd still build the water up that much more. See, you still got about nine piers across the river, and the piers are, I suppose, they're at least 20 feet thick. Your piers, your rollers on your dams, your lock chambers, are all 110 feet wide, so if you have heavy damage done to the lock gates, they have bulkheads they can drop in front of them and work on them. The same way clear across the dam. If any one of the rollers goes bad and they want to work on them, they can put these bulkheads in, so everything is made uniform clear across the river.

MK: And a roller is?

LB: Well, your high lift dams are 22 feet lift, raise the river 22 feet. See, when they started out, they were just talking about three to four feet, to dam the river up three to four feet. They got nine feet. And then when the new high lift dams went in, you are guaranteed a 12 foot river all the time. And the lowest spot, of course, is your gate where you go over the gate going upstream. That is your lowest point. Of course you have places in the river that are 30 or 40 feet deep, but you have a 12 foot channel any place on the Ohio River, Pittsburgh to Cairo. The Allegheny River, they are all high lift dams which are concrete, with 22 feet lifts with the exceptions of #4 and #5; #4 and #5 are, I think, a 14 foot lift. But see, from Pittsburgh to Cairo, you are talking about 486 feet of a drop from Pittsburgh to Cairo. When you get further south, take from Gallipolis down to Greenup Dam, you have a pool there of 78 miles between locks. The river is so much flatter down there than it is up here. Up here, if we get 30 miles, say from Pike Island to New Cumberland, because the fall of the river bed, so the further down you get, the flatter it gets. Your high lift dams on the Allegheny are treacherous because the water goes over top of them for motor boaters. We used to go out there and put what we called a "donut". Those dams were made with a place that you could put two inch pipe in the top of the dam about every 12-14 feet, so if they wanted to raise the pool some more, they could go out there and put those pins in and put 2 X 12 above them, and build the dam higher. They didn't, but that is the way they made them. You see, when you are above one of those dams, if these donuts, which have reflectors on them so motor boats can see them (you couldn't see them)--we have had a lot of people drowned. We had one young couple that were going to get married and wanted to put their motor boat in, and none of the motor boat clubs would put them in because the river was too high, and they put it in some place by themselves, and the motor conked out on them, and the fellows at Lock 2 Allegheny saw them and ran up the end of the wall and tried to throw them a line, but couldn't reach them. Never did find them. There are places below those dams that are 40-60 feet deep, where it is dug out, and they just assumed that they just shoved to the bottom, and the sand and stuff shifted over them, and they never did find the boat or anything. So it was treacherous. Of course now, they have buoys across the river, about 600-800 feet above the dams now to keep people off. Of course a boat stops, and they can grab the line and hold their boat. We have been fortunate at Lock 12. We had one fellow drowned, and never too many on the old moveable dams then. We have been fortunate on the high lift dams. They are a whole lot safer now. Working conditions are much better.

MK: It is amazing to me to think that in 1930, after the stock market had crashed and the country was careening into a Depression, that there was a budget for the development of dams. Can you talk about that?

LB: Well, of course before 1930, the history was so. When they first started, the government didn't think they had any business in the river part of it, because they weren't running it. This belonged to somebody else. Of course now, they have taken complete charge of the river, but money was always hard to come by, until they finally saw where river transportation-- You see when they first started out with their flat bottom boats, well then your railroads came along, and all of your coal was shipped by rail, and that took about all of your business away from the river. So for years and years it was a struggle to get the government to start cleaning the river up enough so that boats

could run. They could finally see the idea that you couldn't beat that type of transportation, and then they started appropriating money. It is the same way with flood control dams. Grafton, West Virginia, was your first flood control dam, built in 1936, and when they saw what a great job it did--because millions and millions of dollars every high flood, look at Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is a good example of how things were torn up from flash floods, and it took years to get your flood control dams so that it could handle excess water, because you fought everybody. Nobody wanted to move, and you know, you covered hundreds of thousands of acres of valleys for this, which meant the government had to relocate so many people, the roads, everything. It was like Pike Island. I think Pike Island was supposed to cost about 74 million, but actual cost of Pike Island was 37 million dollars, but you relocated city sewers, a lot of the roads, all of that was in on the cost. That is the reason things cost so much. But, your flood control dams now, in Pennsylvania, and even in New York, will distribute the water now, all year through. You don't have the dry spells. If we had had flood control dams, even before the old-fashioned dam was built, they could have run them a whole lot longer by dumping excess water. So it has made a good situation all the way around.

MK: Regulated the flow of water all year round?

LB: Right. And all your flood control dams have motorboat seasons. In the Fall, they start, I think it is in October, they start pulling your flood control dams down, take the motorboats off, pull them down low, and then they start building them up in May, the first of May. And, . . . I am leaving out an awful lot.

CK: Don't leave out anything. We want all the details.

MK: You were talking about the Depression.

LB: Yes. Of course, and we had stopped on the idea of your flood control dams as they pulled down in the fall to get ready for spring rains. Then, of course, your motorboat season was over. So, they pulled the dams down to be able to store for your spring rains. And then, of course, they built the pools back up starting in May. If you remember, oh, my . . . Was it 1957, dear, when they had the flood on the Island? Anyhow, they shouldn't have had a flood, which was in June. But see, your flood controls were built back up, and then you had that eight or nine inches over east. Didn't have any place for the water to be stored, so we had high water off of that, but normally your flood control dams are pulled down low to take care of all of your spring rains. We talked about the Depression, and it was hard for the government to come by money. It is easier now. But it was hard then, and they had a struggle of trying to get your dams built, really. It was for our own good. We couldn't see it, but it really was for our own good. But you know, as I mentioned way back when I first started at Lock 12, in the Depression days, we would draw a \$93.50 net a month. But, still you could get a loaf of bread for 12 cents, a gallon of milk for 30 cents, an automobile for \$800. Now I pay five times for an automobile what I bought a house for in 1942. So, but the Depression was good for us. We appreciate what we have now. I think everybody should go through a

Depression to appreciate what we really have. People talk about the good old days. I lived in them. I like these good old days better. You know, kerosene light back in the good old days, and heat roller for heating the whole house or grate, freeze to death. So, just leave them buried back there, I'll take these.

MK: The song says the good old days when times were bad.

LB: Yes, yes. We were all poor, and we didn't realize it. We had three meals a day. And, you know, in the good old days now--if a person worked then, one in the family worked, you lived good. Well, I don't say good, but you lived. Now, these good old days, everybody in the family has to work to make ends meet. So, we are living high on the hog. I feel sorry, really, for young people today, because everything is so high. You know, if you want a house. Well the difference in this house that was \$21,900. Twenty-four years from then till now, \$125,000. It is ridiculous. So I feel sorry for young people.

693 MK: What did you do when you went to work in 1930? What was your first?

LB: Operating a dam, keeping it spit and polished. We made a trip to Washington, D.C. When was that, dear? Way back. I was never so discouraged of any place I went when I went to Washington, D.C., because, government installations on our locks, everything was brass, door knobs, all the piping, all the machinery, and you polished it everyday. I mean, you could walk in and eat off the floor. We went to Washington, D.C. I should have taken our crew and cleaned that place up, because it wasn't like that, and we were used to that. They expected that, and now we have lost it--either the initiative to make things look good or something along that line, I don't know just what. Though we operated the dams. Of course, a lot of times when it was raining, and as I mentioned, the bear traps were lowered 94 . . .

MK: . . . trap is, and why it is called that?

LB: It is 94 feet wide, and it lowers about sixteen feet to the bottom of the river to get rid of excess water when it rains, we would operate them. We had two of them.

MK: One at either end?

LB: Side by side, clear across the river from the lock chamber to try to keep the current from pulling so hard on the end of the wall where if you had double-lock to pull the tows out, so it wouldn't break away from the wall. In the rainy season we could operate them by hand until we had them both down. Then, if the river was still raised, we would take a maneuvering boat out and your wickets were four feet wide, and you would lower what you thought you needed. When it rained some more, many times I have gone out 10 or 12 times throughout the night putting down a few wickets till we got the whole dam down, and then when we got the whole dam down,

then the boats would lay flat on the bottom of the river, the boats would ride straight over top of them, no locking, no nothing. Just from Pittsburgh to Cairo straight through. Of course, in 1936, Gallipolis had a lower lift dam there, but that was the only one, otherwise straight down the river. Steamboats liked that. They could go from Pittsburgh to Cairo in seven days. Straight down.

MK: How many miles?

LB: I think it was 986 miles from Pittsburgh to Cairo, and as I said there are 486, or in that neighborhood, of drop in the river from there.

MK: Where did the bear trap get its name?

LB: You know these dams on the Ohio River, the old wicket dams, were French. They went over, and they tried things here, and the French had a good setup, and they went over and copied them and brought them over. I don't know where the bear traps, where it come from, but somebody came up with that name. It didn't sound very much like it should be a bear trap on the river, does it?

MK: Well, I guess some bears like to swim.

LB: But it would take us about, if we were just putting the dam straight down, about 45 minutes; you could put it down. It would take you three or four hours to put it up. You usually started putting the wickets up, and you had about 12 feet of water over them. Then they had a handle on the end of them, about one foot square, so you had a 16 foot steel rod with a cable running from the maneuvering boat, get in this hand hold, and you would pull it up, and you would hear the prop drop in the herder. When that dropped in, then you let loose of it, and it just changed ends, just set up and changed ends, until you got them all up.

MK: You heard the prop drop in the herder?

LB: Yes. The prop is a big steel--See your wickets were made of white oak and would last forever. The dams were 50 years old, and they were as good as new. Now up at the top where the air hit them a good bit, they had started rotting, but all the rest of them were perfect. Then you had a steel, what they called, a horse to fasten the wicket at the bottom of the river. In the middle of this horse, was what they called a prop, a big four inch steel rod that run down the bottom of the river, and this herder was a track. One track would come straight up and go over this notch, and you would hear it drop. Of course, after we knew where it was, we would just tie a rope on her, a string on her cable, so the fellow running the engine, he could see where it was, and he knew where to stop it. But to trip it to let

the wicket down, you just pulled it ahead six inches, and there was another track that sheared it off, and dropped straight down another track, and fell to the bottom of the river. To put them up took a little more time.

MK: You were pulling against the water to put them up?

LB: Well yes, but that didn't amount to too much only when you got to close the dam the last 12-14 wickets. You have a pretty swift current there, but not too much trouble. Then when you got all the dams up and kept getting drier, and you finally got your bear traps up, and if it kept drying up, we had what we called the needle which was 6 X 6 timbers 18 feet long, and when you shoved them down the spike pole on these cracks between each wicket, there is a four inch crack between each wicket. And if it kept getting drier, we would take cinders, and in those days you could get cinders anywhere. It is hard to get cinders these days. We would take out in what we called our needle flat, and throw three or four shovel-fulls on each one of the needles, and as it went down, it sealed off tight; and then if it still got drier, we would go along the river bank and cut horse weeds, a tall weed about eight or nine feet tall, but we would try to get them when they were five or six, and we would tie a string around the middle of them and take a spike pole, and there was a hole at the bottom of these needles, shove them down and the current draw that in on that hole, and we could seal them off pretty tight.

MK: With weeds from along the bank?

LB: Yes. Yes. You had to, or your pool would go down in dry weather. Oh yes, in dry weather we worked out every day, cutting weeds and plugging them off. Which makes me think. You know, one time when they built old Lock 26? In those days all of your piling was made out of 2 X 12 with a 4 inch sheet lapped over it to seal it off, and they couldn't get this pumped out where they wanted to build a new lock chamber. This was a huge place, and they had called all the engineers from all over the country to help them. They couldn't get it pumped out. And then a friend of ours was an engineer, one of the government engineers on at that time, and he said there was an old farmer right below there, which would have been Glenwood, West Virginia, came up there every day in his horse and wagon, and he had watched them for a long time. They had spent weeks. "Why", he said, "I can cork that off for them." Well, they were desperate, they would try anything. Well, "I will be up tomorrow." So when he came up, he brought his wagon full of grain, and he said, "Okay, you fellows help me, get shovels." And they started out along that, pouring the grain down on this batten, and as soon as that grain swelled up, it shut it off tight, and they got it pumped out, and one little old pump kept it dry after that. But see, never underestimate anybody. That is the reason why I always liked to work in front of a bunch of young people. I am talking about eight, nine, or ten years old, because I have done some jobs that I was beating my brains out trying to get done, and some of these kids say, "Mister, I can tell you how to do that." I say, "Well you tell me, and I will do it." They always had an answer. It would work. Now you may want to improve on it, but they would give you the idea. So never downgrade a kid whenever he is standing around. I liked to have them around me when I

was working, because if I were working myself to death, they could straighten me out. I had more sense when I was a kid than I do now. I could do things when I was a kid on the river. I know when I came to Wheeling, they thought I was the stupidest white boy they ever saw, because my dad taught me that way. The rougher it got, is when we liked it. My dad was never known to shut down the ferryboat in wind waves. All the rest of the ferryboats did. Dad wouldn't. That is the way I was raised. The rougher it got on the river, the better I liked it. Our crew, at that time, when it got rough they wanted to bank. They saw me out there, and thought, he is stupid enough and he is getting by with it. So I ended up with the best crew on the Ohio River. They could do anything. They could outmaneuver on the dams, they could put them up and down hours, three hours, before anybody else. They were something. So, it is just what you get used to. There are jobs--when I see these electrical people out here and lightening flashing around and they are working on those poles, that is not for me. They would say the same thing about what I was doing, I guess, but I liked it.

MK: So, from a very young age you became a crew chief?

LB: Well, I started during the War, 1942. I was dam tender and ran the crew. I always felt like the better you treated the crew, the more you got done. My crew, they knew I worked. The government paid us for a day's work, and we were going to do a day's work, but they always did more work than I ever laid out. They worked, and I am sorry to say that we don't do that today. I guess maybe they all didn't then. But, I had a great bunch of men. In fact, I had a great bunch of bosses. I never had a bad boss. I didn't always agree with them, but they were at it more than I was, longer at the job. Maybe I thought I could improve, but I didn't. They were the bosses. I enjoyed the river, and I enjoyed everybody I worked with. Put 40 years in with it, and enjoyed every minute of it. When I retired, we came back to Wheeling, and I worked for my son for 17 years landscaping, so now I am putting in my last five or six years working full-time for my wife.

MK: We were talking to Harry Snyder yesterday, and he showed us something that he has in his yard. It is an approach sign for the lock. He said that the stern-wheelers going up the river used to race to try to get-- Whoever got to that sign first got to go through the lock first, and it might mean several hours difference.

CK: He said that he had #13 in fact.

LB: Yes. Used to, whoever blew one time--of course you blew a whistle, two whistles for the lock, and the lock would answer you. As you say, whoever got to the sign whistled first and got it. Of course, with this day and age, all of your boats have your radios. Everything is radio now. So when they come to the approach sign, they just say I'm here. Of course, your chambers, your locks, are so much different now. All of your big lift dams, high lift dams, with exceptions of Emsworth, which is six miles below Pittsburgh, they have a 600 foot chamber and a small chamber of 35, no wait a minute, 55 foot wide, and 350 or 380 feet long, small chamber which they can lock small

boats. If your big chamber is down, then you've got all that tow to try to get through that little chamber, and it could take--well they have had boats tied up for three or four weeks waiting to get through. That is probably the trouble you had at Gallipolis, Ohio. Gallipolis has your 600 foot chamber and your small chamber. Of course, now they have the canal and they have the big lock down there now, so the only bottlenecks that we have on the river is Emsworth right below Pittsburgh, and then you have Dashields about 14 miles below, and the old Montgomery dam, which is, I suppose, 22 miles, something like that, below Pittsburgh. Otherwise all the rest of them now are 1200 foot chambers and a 600 foot chamber. Your 600 foot chamber--of course it will lock, if you have a small boat, and it will lock most of your motor boats through the 600 foot chamber. It takes you about 20 minutes to get through your high lift dams for even your big tows. Of course now they are wanting to make a bigger tow, so they will have to pull them out, and they have permission to do it. They haven't gone that far yet, because you have some bends in this river. You take 20 links of barges and try to get around some of these bends, well Moundsville is a good example. Moundsville is a real short bend there, Moundsville. But some day they will do it, they will have 20 or 30 barges stuck out there, and they will make a double lock out of them.

MK: You must have seen some really good races in your time. Fellows trying to beat each other to the lock.

LB: Yes, and we have had, not where I was, but we have had accounts of them, especially in the packer boat days--that one wouldn't shut down, and they would come in to the approach of the lock, and wedge trying to get in. Listen, they fought for business in those days. In our days, the only real transportation that we had was boats. The only entertainment we had were your old showboats that travelled from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh. There were about five or six of them that put on live plays, and they would go to Pittsburgh and spend the night in each little village, and then they would go to Pittsburgh, and then they would change, and have another play coming back down. That was the only entertainment we had. The packet boats, as I said, delivered groceries to all the little country stores. Now at our place, we had the train, and we carried the mail across the river. Of course, the letter mail was hung up on an expansion, and the trains never stopped for them, they had a hook on their mail car, and they would go 60 miles a hour. They would just put that hook out, jerk it off of there, and they did the sorting their mail right there, and in the next town, if it were a town 15 or 20 miles up from us, letters would go up there. They had it sorted, and they would throw it off. It was much different. Parcel post, then they would have to stop and throw those sacks off. Otherwise. No, we have had eggs, flour, you name it, everything for the grocery stores come up by train and, of course, on your packet boats, and we would ferry them across the river, and take them to the grocery stores. That is the way we were supplied in those day. So, I don't think I want to go back to those days. I will stay with these.

959 MK: Tell me more about the show boats.

LB: Well, . . .

MK: Do you remember the names of any of them?

LB: Well, the old Water Queen, the Majestic. What were some of the rest of them, dear? We . . .

CK: Names of the showboats?

LB: I don't know

LB: Goldenrod. There were five or six of them. Billy Brian's, that was the Majestic. At my age, I have forgotten. You know, it is like your packet boats. The original packet boats that we had was the Greenline, and the only woman pilot was old Mary Green, which her and her husband, Tom, owned the outfit. She was a good pilot And they had, well let's see, the Chris Green, the Tom Green, the Evergreen, and the Gordon. They had five or six of their own boats, which eventually went into the company that bought them out, the Delta Queen, and the Mississippi Queen that run up in this section now. Of course in those days, when they first brought the Gordon out, they used her more for an excursion boat until the brought the Delta Queen. Back in the 30's, you could go from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh in a round trip which took you a week, and I mean you were treated royally on those boats. Eight-six dollars. I would be afraid to say what the price would be now, but it is a nice trip. If anybody wants to take a nice trip . . . And they stop different places. The Delta Queen and the Mississippi Queen, I guess it is, they always stop at Wellsburg and they stop at Moundsville. They have stopped here a time or two. But, I don't know why they don't stop at Wheeling too much. They still ply the river through the summer. They still make three or four trips from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh. But that is a big business from Cincinnati on down the Mississippi, your excursion boats. Of course, we have, what is our small boat here that takes people at night?

CK: Valley Voyager?

LB: Valley Voyager. Of course Pittsburgh has a big fleet there. But my suggestions to anybody that has a motor boat is that they should take one trip up the Allegheny River, especially in the Fall, a beautiful river. The Allegheny River has always been pure water. It wasn't contaminated like the Mon and the Ohio. I know when we were kids at home in the '20s, we have had the Ohio River iced, and the Mon River ice would be mushy. The Allegheny River ice, traveling that far, would be just ringing like a bell, pure. So, it is a beautiful river to travel. My advice to anybody who has a motor boat and wants to take one pretty trip, especially in the fall. The Allegheny River from #7 up, #7, #8, and #9, really hasn't had commercial traffic since 1954, but they keep them open for pleasure boats. They have hundreds of pleasure boats on the Allegheny River where we have one on the Ohio. It is a beautiful river. You get good service.

MK: Talking about Wheeling itself, I guess you have seen a few changes in the river front at Wheeling?

LB: Yes. You know, when we first came to Wheeling, did you know that all of your streets in the wintertime, the snow was put in trucks and dumped in the river at the wharf. That used to be all open, where the Wharf Parking Garage is now. That used to be the landing for all of your packet boats. All of your streets were cleaned and dumped in the river, with the snow. Couldn't afford to do it now. But, yes, there has been a big change. Wheeling, at one time, built an awful lot of boats.

MK: Really?

LB: Oh, yes. Wheeling, of course before my days coming up here, but they built an awful lot of boats. Listen, they rivaled Pittsburgh. Of course, Pittsburgh kept on going. I never could understand why Wheeling quit building boats. I suppose the size of them, I don't know. But they did a lot of that.

MK: Who were some of the boat building companies here?

LB: I don't recall. That was before my time. But, just from everything I could read on Wheeling . . . and did a nice job. They still have, I think, in Bellaire, a way to pull out and repair smaller boats now. But Pittsburgh, Devoes, don't do them anymore. I guess barges and stuff last much longer. See, during the war, Devoes built an awful lot of boats for the Navy, mine sweepers and landing crafts and a lot of your dry docks went down through here, so it was a big help during the war. And of course, your steel--See, at one time--oh, everything was brought up the river. We have had molasses, sugar, flour, salt, in bargeloads going up river. Of course you got down to coal and your gas and oil products and your steel products are the main things this day and age. But, yes, they have even ferried a big bargeload of horses up to, I think, . . . Where was Lock 5? Dear, do you remember where Lock 5 was? But, they took them up there. They have shipped everything. Bargeloads of nails, of course kegs, you name it, have been on the river.

MK: How did you feel when they built the parking garage?

LB: Well, it made a lot of changes. It didn't make that much difference as far as I was concerned, but that is where you always got your river gauge. You know, come to the wharf, wharf river gauge, that is what we went by. And, of course, Pike Island has the same elevation as far as that goes, and that is where you usually get your temperature and your river from Pike Island. See your temperature, they have a gauge that goes down to the low point and stays there, and then you have another thermometer that goes to the high point and stays there. Then of course, you have another one that just fluctuates with the temperature. Then, around 7 o'clock in the morning, they run them down and shake them down to what the temperature is now, and then they start over another day. That

is where you get the high and low every day. It is the same way with your rainfall. They usually come to Pike Island. I do think they have a gauge at the airport.

MK: Did there used to be a gauge where the garage is now?

LB: Yes. It was on the bridge pier. See, at one time, where the Capital Music Hall is, was, below the suspension Bridge, was the steel bridge, and there was a gauge fastened on the side of that and they got it. Of course, that bridge is gone. The old railroad bridge to Martins Ferry is gone. A big change.

MK: Do you know that they are planning to tear the garage down. I guess you know that.

LB: Yes.

MK: I have just been hearing about it myself, and they want to redo that waterfront. What would you like to see done with that, if you could be in on the planning of that? You probably ought to be.

LB: No.

MK: Your planning days are over?

LB: Yes. Of course they are talking about, I think, hotels, motels, something like that and different stores.

MK: They want to try to recreate some sense of the old waterfront.

LB: Well, I think it would be great. The only thing is we have let--all of our big mills and everything have left Wheeling. See, when we first came to Wheeling, we never saw the sun for the smoke from all these old stacks. It was always as hazy as it is today, or more so, and I never heard of anybody dying from breathing that smoke, but we are about to starve to death breathing fresh air. I don't know, I think Wheeling has hit . . . I think Wheeling is on the raise. . . They're raising after years of losing. Of course, I realize they are losing the high price jobs in your coal and steel and that we are getting more into services. But, a lot of other cities are going through what Wheeling went through 30 or 40 years ago. But I think Wheeling is improving. I think everything that we can bring into Wheeling, whether it is small business or large, is going to be an improvement. Yes, if they can create something that is going to bring people to this town, I am for it.

MK: What would you--How would you lay it out if you were going to do it?

LB: Oh my.

MK: Making a waterfront park, let's say?

LB: I wouldn't have the slightest idea. You know, we had on fellow, old Brooks Wigginton, and they never . . . they should have used him when they put all the stuff in Wheeling streets. We landscaped all that for them. But, Brooks Wigginton was a great architect. He did more architectural designs in Ireland than most people did in the United States here. He was a great guy. Bill always like to work for Brooks Wigginton, because he wanted the best. He wanted it to look good right now. Now, if you had somebody like him to design it, it would be something. I wouldn't know what in the world to design. Now, my son, Bill, is great at that. You know, he did all the landscaping for the Deerhunter, you know, the movie, the Deerhunter?

MK: Really?

LB: Oh, yes. He was all over the country with them. He has ideas. . . . I could turn him loose on them. I wouldn't have sense enough to do it, but Bill could do it. I just raised a good family. So, in spite of me, he does pretty good. No, I wouldn't have the slightest idea what would draw people, but I know there are a lot of good people in this town. And, personally, I think we ought to use the people we got in this town, because people they bring in, of course pay a big sum of money, but they don't know Wheeling. People who live here know Wheeling, and we have a lot of good architects in Wheeling. Tell them what you want. Let them do it.

CK: Who would you suggest? Who should be in on this project?

LB: I don't know that many people, but all that I know are dead. But I am sure that there are a lot of people in this town who could really fill you in on good people that could make this town boom if we would let them and not bring somebody in. So, maybe you could get that job.

MK: I think it could go to somebody local too. I would like to see Mr. Wigginton have a crack at it.

LB: Yes. He is a great guy.

MK: Well, let's take a little stretch here.

MK: What you just said about the difference in lumber?

LB: Well, your lumber, your lumber back when it was sawed was land-dried for sometimes, oh, months to years, before it was used. Of course, lumber today is used so fast, they call it kiln-dried, and it will twist into all kinds of shapes if you don't get it nailed up pretty quick. But back then, before you used it, it was good and dry. It stayed straight, and underwater, it would last forever. Now when we made our boats, the edge of the board was what they called chamfer, and used oakum and caulked it, caulked all seams. That is all there was to it. Nailed together and caulk it. A lot of times, we would--if our gas boat was laying above water, that thing would dry out--and we would start out and get a lot of water in it, and we could feel it rocking back and forth, it would soon seal up. We didn't go and caulk it tighter. We just let it swell up and seal. I remember one time we had gone to Swan Creek, from Athalia to Swan Creek. They'd come down from the Water Queen showboat, and Swan Creek was right below old 26, and they put the dam up that night, and here the boat was beached out, so they came down to get my dad to pull them off. So we started up, my Dad and I and the fellow that ran this boat, towed the showboat, and of course, before it swelled up, water got into the hull. Dad went down to pump it out, and he told me go ahead. Well, the fellow that was on the boat, the showboat, you know, he had steered it all of his life, so he wanted to steer it. I was just a 9-year-old boy. Who was I to tell him no? Well, when that water started rocking back and forth in the hull, he'd steer it trying to catch up with it; and boy, my dad came up those steps flying, and talk about a fellow getting talked over, he got talked over. Don't you never take that wheel away from that boy." He said, "Hey, you are used to shoving a showboat, you don't have anything out here to steady this boat, and when you are cutting, you are just making it rock that much more. You keep it straight." So he finally got it pumped out, but wood lasted forever, cause you were underwater. Above water, you still didn't paint it, but we had boats for years and years, and they never rotted.

CK: What would you use to caulk it with?

LB: They called it oakum, which came in big bales that weighed about two or three hundred pounds. It would leaf, and you'd pull it apart and roll it in your hands, and make . . . oh, two or three times the size of a pencil, and just roll it. You could just roll it for miles. Just put it together and keep rolling it, and you could caulk and chisel. The first time we built a boat, we built it upside down, so we could caulk it easy. We pulled that thing all over the river trying to upset it. We would get it behind the ferryboat, and we'd lay rocks on the side we wanted to flip, so it would start down. Well, a lot of times it would start down, and then it would make the complete turn. So, after we had so much trouble upsetting them to get them upright, we just built them upright, and got underneath of them and caulked them, and put them up on blocks, so we could get underneath there and caulk them. I didn't caulk. I was too young to caulk, but we had some old fellows, old farmers, man, they were neat at that caulking boats. So, that was the way you kept them dry. The boats in those days--the barges we had, oh, I guess, six feet high, and you wouldn't load them four feet down, you would have a couple feet of free board. Of course, after the dams went in, then you could . . . Your barges now are ten feet, and they load then eight or nine feet deep where you had . . . Oh, when you had 800 tons in some of your barges, now you are talking about 14,000.

MK: Fourteen thousand tons?

LB: One big tow of 20 barges is about three train loads. Oh yes, they shove a lot of material that way. See, we had one old boat in Pittsburgh, the biggest boat in Pittsburgh, that was ever built in Pittsburgh, was the Spragg; and it was a huge boat, and they would start down the river with 60-80 barges. Of course, your coal barges in those days were wood and a whole lot smaller, but that is several acres out there. But you have nothing like that today. I think the old boat is still in St. Louis, some place. It is still going, a show place. Great big boat, nothing like that today. Of course now, as far as horsepower, all of the boats today--you can take a little old boat, and it wouldn't shove anything, and they will be eight or ten coal barges-- but your bigger ones, eight and nine thousand horsepower, so there is a big change in river traffic.

MK: The stern-wheeler, with less horsepower, could generate as much power, couldn't it?

LB: No. No. To start with, some of your--When they start out your propeller, screw-boats they call them, then they had what they called a court nozzle over some of them, especially your southern boats, which confined that water, shot it through like your jet, and gave them so much more power. And you had a few, Charles R. Stevenson, was a triple screw-boat, and when that thing came up the Ohio river, if they had all those three engines exactly revved up the same, it would shake plaster off the houses, off the walls, so they had to regulate it. They made several trips, and people complained, and they had to regulate engines so they never came up the same, that much vibration. You think it would sink the boat, but it didn't bother the boat. The vibration . . . I guess it is like they talk about people walking across the bridge, or horses walking across the bridge. If they were all on the same step, it would tear the thing down by the time you got a big herd across, if they weren't out of step. It was something.

MK: That's a lot to think about. Are there any more pictures of old boats?

CK: They are having a big festival.

LB: Back, when you are talking about the older pilots, they had no radar. The only way they knew another boat was out there was that they blew the whistle every so often, so you knew somebody was out there in the fog. But those fellows knew the river. Why they weren't on the bank all the time, I don't know, but they could run in fog. Of course, now you have radar, it helps all of your boats now. But the old pilots, all they had was your river lights, the government river lights, and very few of them, and they're knowledge of the river.

MK: And they would put somebody out on the head, wouldn't they?

LB: No, no. They wouldn't put anybody out on the head. Those guys knew . . . The only time they put somebody on the head, was when your boats got more powerful, and they were afraid to shove them under or something like that, or big wind waves splashing over top, but those fellows were something. I never could figure out how they could do it in the fog, but they could do it, and as I say, whistle signals were all they had to know each other was in the river. Of course, now you got radar and you got your radios that everybody talks. No problem today.

MK: Back then, you really had to know what you were doing.

LB: They knew the river. They knew every sand bar, I think they knew every rock in the bottom of the river. They knew it. So it is much easier for them today. And of course, your river is a whole lot wider today. Plus, erosion the river, and your high lift dams have made your river wider. Normally, when we were at 12, about 1,400 feet wide, that was it from one bank to another. I don't know how wide it is now, but it is considerably wider. So they still have their problems, but they had a whole lot more problems then. Plus the wooden barges would hit something, and you lost it. Now, these steel barges take a pretty good beating. When my Dad and I were making a trip towing a bargeload of gas barrels, and as I said we always cooked in this front cabin, and the belt turns the wheel was slipping, and dad went down to see what it was, and opened the door to the cabin, and there was this wall of fire. The old kerosene stove had blazed up and caught the wall on fire. So dad ran on out and jumped on the barge and told me to get out of there, so I ran around the guard and jumped on a barge and cut the boat loose. Well, in two or three minutes, it had burned up and sunk. You know, it was all oil soaked and gas and everything, We had our clothes, and we stopped at Ironton. We had everything, not everything we owned, but clothes that we could clean up for the show; and after it sank, the one thing I could think of, I said, "Dad, we lost our old alarm clock." And you know the alarm clock face was broken, wouldn't run, only on its face. If you set it upright, it would stop. That is the only thing I could think of that we had lost, so everybody got a charge out of my saying we lost our old alarm clock.

MK: What show were you aiming to see that night in Ironton?

LB: That is so far back, that I wouldn't have the slightest idea. We would just spend the night, go to the show, and then come back to the boat and bed down. You see, we had our bed in the pilot house, a double bed in the pilot house, so if we were out overnight, we would just tie up to a wheel and go to sleep and sleep till morning. Same way with the ferryboats. See, we didn't run after dark. But now if somebody wanted across, there was a bell on the other side of the river, and they could ring a bell, and we would go get them. But, normally we were shut down at dark. Unless, somebody didn't know what they were doing and was late getting there, we would go get them.

LB: Tell them about taking . . .

NOTE: I was unable to verify the spelling of Isson, Kentucky, Glenwood, West Virginia, and Devoes. Also, I did not know the initial of Mrs. Beckett's first name. Thanks. jcs

D: 6/24/94

T: 7/24/94 jcs