

## William Kletner

### *Riverboats Along the Ohio: A History in Slides for Wheeling Historical Society*

William Kletner: Actually, you know, the difference between a public speaker and an audience is an audience suffers in silence while a public speaker suffers from silence. So for the next several minutes my suffering's over and yours is about to begin. But before I get started, I'd like to thank Mr. Evan Marshall over there for this program. Because if it wasn't for him back in around 1985 or '86 this show may have never have been. He got me interested in some riverboat history here in Wheeling and also down in Moundsville. And unfortunately, Evan, I didn't bring the Moundsville history with me. So maybe that's an invitation, I hope, for Moundsville! So if any--If you don't like the show, you can blame it on Evan, okay. Charles Kuralt of TV

(010)

fame that just recently retired from that *On the Road* series, said, "That if we stop thinking of America as highways and start thinking of, of it as rivers, we'd get a little closer to the country." And he also said that he, what he loved and enjoyed most that America had to give him came from the rivers. Things like the Grand Canyon, jazz, catfish, blue herring, ferryboats and steamboats. And that's what, that's what we're here to talk about this evening, the steamboats. Someone did some calculations not too long ago and determined that during the era of the steamboat, which started back in the early 1800s and ran up through the mid 1930s, that seventy-five percent of the boats that traveled the inland waters of America were built along the shores of the Ohio. Built at Pittsburgh. Some built, not very many, but some were built at Steubenville. They were built here in Wheeling. A small number were built down in Moundsville. A large number were built down in Marietta. Some

(024)

were built in Parkersburg. Some were built in Huntington. And a good, good amount were built down in Cincinnati. Marietta was probably the capital of, of the boat building industry for a, for a long time. In fact, they built three-masted schooners, ... riggers, and brigantines that actually plied the waters of the North Atlantic and the West Indies. And they've tried to take claim to building the first steamboat on the Ohio River. And they called it the *Enterprise*. The only problem was they only built the superstructure, they had it towed up to Pittsburgh. And Robert Fulton supposedly put the boat, the steam engine and the, all the other parts on it, renamed it the *New Orleans* for the city it was destined to go to, and it did become the first boat on the Ohio River. Now the problem is they claim that they have the first riverboat, most historians say no. Most historians, they don't, they don't contest the fact that

(036)

the first boat on the Ohio River was the *New Orleans*, what they contest is that Marietta didn't build it; it was built in Pittsburgh. Well, Wheeling was the second city to have a riverboat on the Ohio. Originally it was called *George Washington*. It was later shortened to just *Washington*. Now with the coming of those two boats a new era began here in this valley. I'd like to call it maybe an industrial age. And this, this era, this age was filled with, you know, war, strife, successes and failures, just like any other age. But there's one distinct difference. And that was with the coming of the steamboat on the river, the river became an extension of the National Road and it helped in the westward expansion. Now by the 1840s there were nearly two million people traveling by steamboat on the rivers and flush times had come to this area. And the steamboat was the wonder of the frontier west. Now not everybody was

(050)

impressed with these steamboats. For example, in 1842 Charles Dickens was traveling in America with his wife, and he was going from Pittsburgh to St. Louis. And he kept a journal of his travels. And these have later, they later became known as his *American Notes*. But in his notes he had some interesting things to say about riverboats. He said that, "Western riverboats exploded on a regular basis every week." He also said that, "The, they were as cheerless as the dark, tangled shores that they passed," and that, "the only sociability that they had onboard a ship after dinner, or onboard the boat after dinner was the men stood around and spit on the stove." (laughter) So we know, you know, those of us that are familiar with Dickens writings, you know he, he was always on a sort of depressing side of life. But he was right about one thing. The life expectancy of a riverboat usually was no more than five or six years. Fire, collisions, explosions, they all took their tolls. And if you--

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(063)

WK: Well, we'll get to that. And because of that, riverboat men developed a lot of superstitions. For example, we probably all know this one, accidents always come in threes. A white horse, a black cat was an ill omen. Rats were always welcome. And horseshoes were good luck as long as the points were pointed upward. Pointing down, it all ran out. Now the river also took its toll. Snags, as the gentleman back there said, we'll, you'll see more of this in, in a slide show about the snags. It was a very harsh river, like the Mississippi. It was unpredictable. And probably the best description came from an old riverboat captain who once said that the Ohio River was too thick to navigate and not thick enough to cultivate, and if you drank a quart of its water and stood in the sun it would come out of your pore, every pore filtered beautifully. Except your stomach was turned into a sandbag and, and the, the gravel would rattle when you walked. (laughter) And the river was a dangerous place. It took

(078)

many men's lives. In fact, there's a story of a little old lady who was, when, when ... boats first started running here in Wheeling she wanted to visit her sister down in Cincinnati. So she got brave and she went onboard one of these new contraptions. She wasn't quite sure she had done the right thing because as she walked the decks she saw, saw the billowing black smoke coming out of the funnels of this, this boat and the ash and cinder, you know, flying down, hitting the deck and splattering and hissing as it hit the cold

water of the Ohio. And walked to the back and she could hear the chuffing and the, the clanging and the klunking of the engine hard at work turning the big paddle wheel. And then the frothy, muddy, you know, Ohio River being churned up behind the boat. She didn't feel too good about this. But she noticed every day that the captain came out on the main deck. So this one day she waited for him. She

(088)

walked up to the captain, she says, she was rather nervous, and she says, "Captain," she says, "they, they say that a lot of men have died in, in this here river." And the captain noted the anxiety in her voice, tried to give her her, his best reassuring smile. And he looked down at her and he says, "Madam," he says, "you shouldn't believe everything you hear." He says, "Well, I can assure you that I have never yet met a man who drowned in the Ohio." (laughter) In fact, there's an old Russian proverb that says that drowning is impossible if man perseveres in praying to God, and can swim. When the riverboats came to this area, many men made their fortunes. Walt, Ralph Waldo Emerson was one. But we had some notables here in Wheeling such as the Phillips, the Sweeneys, the Masons, the McLures, the Shrivvers, just to name a few. They made their fortunes on the river. And when they made their

(100)

fortune on the river they also had rivalries between themselves. But one of the biggest rivalries was the rivalry between the city of Wheeling and the city of Pittsburgh. And it manifested itself through the, the actions of the riverboat men. And it, and it also came out in a story, an interesting story that I found when I was doing research for this program. It seems that in 1839 the packet *Valley Forge* was finished, they finished construction of this thing up in Pittsburgh. And the owners came up with an innovation. They named the various rooms and compartments onboard the boat after the towns and cities that this boat was going to visit. Well, when the packet arrived in Wheeling, the city fathers were delighted to come onboard and very anxious to see the room that held the proud name of Wheeling. And so they were hustled to the back of the boat, and there in gold leaf on this mahogany door, bright and

(113)

shining, was the word 'Wheeling.' The only problem, the door was on the room that was normally reserved for the word 'men.' (laughter) Well, they got insulted at the enormity of this, this thing and they started to rip the offending door from its hinges. And before they could do that the crew from the boat came, unceremoniously dumped them on the wharf, and they went back uptown here and got some of their friends and came back to the wharf. And they were determined to burn this thing down to its waterline. The captain knew what was going to happen so he had safely got the boat out in the midstream, was heading down river. Well, needless to say, the next time the boat came to Wheeling the offending word and door was gone. However, I have it on good authority that even today when mother nature makes her call on the riverboat, whether it be a man or a woman, and they answer the call, they usually saw they're going to Wheeling. (laughter) Now Captain Henry

(124)

Shreve, one of Wheeling's natives, he was the father, known as the father of riverboats. He, Shreveport, Louisiana, was named after him, he was also the inventor of the snag boat which the Corps of Engineers,

by the way, still uses, came up with a similar idea. He had some friends that owned ocean-going passenger vessels. And he convinced them to name their important rooms onboard their vessels after the states in the United States. And even to this day, if you take a ride on one of those ocean-going vessels, they still refer to those rooms as staterooms. It started up with him. Have you ever wondered why we always name boats after ladies, why we always call them she. Not just steamboats, but I mean just about any boat. I got into a little bit of this, I got into a little bit of research and I found some, what I thought, I think is amusing, I hope the ladies do. I'll give them to you. It says, "a boat is

(139)

called she because it takes a smart man to manage her. A boat is called she because no two are alike. A boat is called she because they all need a little touching up with paint now and then to look good."

(laughter) And my favorite, "it moves with such grace and quiet, she moves with such grace and quiet dignity." Now since the coming of the riverboat, people have had, have had love affairs with that strange beast. And in my research I found what I think is one of the best descriptions of such an affair. And I'm not going to read the whole thing to you, but I'd like to read just a portion of what, what this fellow wrote. This fellow was a fellow by the name of J. B. Bowen, and in 1839 he wrote for the *Wheeling City Directory*. And this is what he had to say. He says, "The steamboat, how grand is her appearance, how imposing. I pause when I look up and down the river and view the steamboats approaching

(153)

with their usual display and advancing as if by magic with proud magnificence in their appearance. Then rounding to with graceful sweep and majesty in their approach, I am insensibly attracted and I'm always in a measure lost in admiration and view them again, again, and again with renewed delight." Speaking of delightful situations, it was a year or so ago there was an excursion boat that was coming up through, through Wheeling going on its way up to Pittsburgh. And the weather had turned cold and a little bit nasty, but some of the, the tourists onboard were reluctant to go inside and get warm. And they stayed along the deck rail. And the captain of the boat came out of the pilot house and he looked down and he saw several of these passengers huddled together for warmth. And he decided to do something about it. So he went into the, the pilot house and called to the deck, or to the

(166)

crew in the lower decks below. And he says, "Is there a mackintosh down there large enough to keep three young ladies warm?" And without any hesitancy a booming reply came back, "No, sir, but there's a McPhearson down here that sure would like to try." (laughter) Today the steamboat is no more. Oh, there's excursion boats on the, on the river, but they're not the true steamboat. They run by--They don't run by coal anymore; they usually run by diesel. The true steamboats have been relegated to either floating museums, showboats, we have one in Marietta, or restaurants like down in Cincinnati with a ... We have a lot of boats that try to mimic steamboats. We have our own *Valley Voyager*. You got the *Valley Gem* in Marietta. You got two or three up in Pittsburgh. You have one down in Kentucky. There's one down around Natchez on the Mississippi. And every year if you're interested in seeing

(182)

sternwheelers you can go down to Marietta and see the steamboat, or the sternwheeler regatta. I think it's in September. You can go down to Charleston September, October and see the steamboat regatta down there. But the true steamboat has slipped away, and it's gone. And too often things happen like that. Our railroads have disappeared around here the same way. You know, we just kind of let it slip by and we don't notice it. One day we wake up and they're no more. And I find that extremely interesting how quickly things change. It kind of reminds me that, of fashions. The ladies back at the turn of the century wore swimming suits down to their ankles. And a little bit later they wore them down to their knees. Then in the '30s, and I'm sure you can remember this, '30s, '40s and '50s started wearing them down to the hips. Nowadays some of them don't even wear them down to the water. (laughter)

(194)

Okay, with that your suffering's still going to continue and mine is going to begin. I'd like to get into the slide portion of the show. And as most of you know, if I, once I get up here I can talk forever if you'll let me. I kind of feel like the old, the woman who came home from her club party one night and told her husband that she was so tired she couldn't keep her mouth open anymore. I'm beginning to feel that way myself, a long, hard day for me. So I, I thank you for coming this evening, and I hope you enjoy the program. I'll try to answer any questions afterwards if you have any. And I hope I didn't offend any of the young ladies here in the audience.