

1-1
Janice Holt Giles

Spout Springs

Knifley, Kentucky

February 12, 1963

Mrs. Wm. F. Barr
Rochester
Kentucky

Dear Mrs. Barr:

It is wonderful of you to make the contact with "Colonel" May for me and the things he suggests, and the time, spring, seem to be very sensible.

I think you had better have a little background of what I plan to do in these Green River books. I hope to write three of them, beginning with the very early days, and through three generations of the same family, cover the most exciting and interesting days of the steamboats on the river. They will be novels, of course. The first book, which I am currently working on, is set in the late 1850s and early 1860s. This goes back beyond word-of-mouth history or even much written history. There are several diaries and journals of trips made by various people on one or another of the boats at the Kentucky Building Library. There are the lock records at the Corps of Engineers office in Louisville. There is some mention of the Green in that period in Gould's fabulous History of Navigation! This is before the days of the Green River companies. Some of the boats were independently owned, some were Ohio trade boats sent up the Green. It was the period, 1842-1868, when the state owned and operated the locks. Then from 1868 to 1888, the Green and Barren River Navigation Company had a lease on them (from the state) and practically controlled the river. The final period, when steamboating on the Green was in its greatest glory, was from 1888 to 1932. And that is the period when the Williams and Hines families were at the helm. You see how naturally the history of navigation on the river falls into the three periods for three books.

I will be much interested to see all the present improvements and all the modern plants and the barges and shipping, but my books will end with the end of steamboats. However, you can't talk to too many people, see too much of the river, be on too many boats. I have, as I told you, had access to the Hines Towing Company's fabulous collection of scrapbooks, which provides the most authentic source I know for the 1888-1932 period. Mrs. Harralson's information parallels that of the scrapbooks, but from her own observation and knowledge of the river, she can add much color. I'd like to talk to Capt. Westerfield, anybody at all who knows the river - shantyboat people, fishermen. Each has his own slant and his own particular knowledge. The ferryman, for instance, knows one river, the towboat man knows another.

I have, as I told you, talked extensively to Captain Thomas and Captain Wallace, both of Bowling Green. From Captain Thomas I got much precise, factual information. From Captain Wallace I got a salty vocabulary, color, excitement, the feel a riverman has for his boat and the river. From Mrs. Thomas, I got some of the romance of the steamboats. As a woman, the captain's wife, she loved the passengers, their sense of easy and luxury, the orchestra and dancing every night, the good food. She could give me every detail of the housekeeping on the Evansville. A woman's view was so different, and so necessary for a total understanding.

Mrs. Jane Morningstar talked to me at length about Capt. J. Porter Hines, who first ran a mail boat between Calhoun and Livermore, and later had two towboats in the lumber trade. She also loaned me a copy of his Memoirs. More color, you see.

For this first book, however, there are few factual details. Nobody knows how it was on the Green in 1859 --- except certainly the old locks and dams were there. Here I am depending largely on records, and on general history. The boats were smaller and nearly all stern-wheelers, because of the narrowness of the locks. I don't write a word without consulting Gould, believe me. It would be so easy to come a cropper. For instance, I needed to know when it became necessary for pilots, masters and engineers to be licensed. Nobody knew that. Nobody had ever wondered about it. It was just a fact. Well, Gould, who is an encyclopedia of data about navigation history on all rivers, furnished the information. By Act of Congress in 1842 it became necessary for all officers to pass examinations for licenses and it became necessary for all officers to hold licenses.

I needed to know when steam whistles were invented and first used. The first steamboats had no whistles. Gould again - 1846 the first steam whistle was used, on the Mississippi. It was one of the greatest pieces of luck to be able to buy a copy of his History of Navigation, for it was published in 1880 and has long been out of print. But my marvelous librarian friend tracked down a most expensive copy for me.

I needed to know about bells - did you know the first ones were made in Belgium? I needed to know about engines --- when did the first high-pressure engines come into general use? What was the difference between a low-pressure engine and a high pressure one? Nobody knew. Men like Capt. Thomas and Capt. Wallace had had experience only with high-pressure engines. When did the double use of steam by condensation come into general use? Nobody knew! Everybody I talked to could tell me fascinating stories about the days from 1906 to 1932 on the river. They could remember them, they had been on the packets. But not one of them knew a thing about the general history of navigation. I've dug that out for myself. Captain Wallace paid me the tremendous compliment, in his own salty way and with his marvelously twinkling sharp eyes, of saying, "What the hell you want from me? You know more than I do." I know more history. But I've got to know the river.

1-3
=

Just the other day I needed to know how much water there would have to be before you could chute, say, the Shrewsbury Bend. It has been done, in the old days. I got on the phone and called the Hines people. They had no idea. Mr. Courteney Ellis, they said, was the last man to do it, and he left the Green in 1910. And as you know, Mr. Ellis is reluctant to give me any help because he means to write his memoirs. An educated guess is going to be the best I can do. But your Bill can give me that!

My plots will be fictional, but I'd like the boats on the river to be factual, and more than anything else I don't want to pull any bloopers about tonnages, water stages, channels, bends, etc. In this first book, which I call temporarily, RUN ME A RIVER, I've got my young steamboatman an independent operator, with an old beat-up boat he has gone to the boneyard to get. He runs from Bowling Green to Evansville, port-to-port trade. He can't even carry first-class passengers, his boat is so small. The time, as I said, is in the early stage of the Civil War. The old Rochester and Woodbury locks were then very much as they are now, which is why it was so important to me to make the run from Bowling Green to Rochester. Nothing has changed much on that upper run.

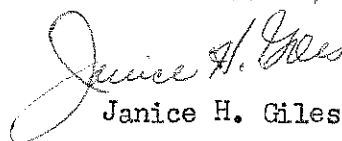
The next book will cover the period 1868-1888, the time of the Green and Barren River Navigation Company, and the third and last one will cover the heyday period which everybody remembers so vividly.

When you talk to Mrs. Harralson about seeing me, perhaps you could give her a general idea of what I want to do. She may have some ideas of additional sources for me for the two early books.

I'll be fascinated and interested by anything Colonel May can show me and I'll be everlastingly grateful for a run down the river. I've been all up and down it by small boat, but you don't get the feel of navigating it except in a pilothouse. And it certainly might turn out that a fourth book, about modern-day Green River, could come out of what I'd learn on such a trip.

Many thanks again for all you're doing. I look forward so much to meeting you and your husband. I will write Colonel May and give him my telephone number so that he can get in touch with me easily when the time comes.

Sincerely,


Janice H. Giles

2

Janice Holt Giles
Spout Springs
Knifley, Kentucky

April 15, 1964

Dear Mrs. Barr:

It was so nice of you to write me about the river book and the interview.

Reporters always get many things mixed up in an interview. It happens that I did not say I had had to realize long ago I was no Jesse Stuart or Harriet Arnow. Early in the interview Mrs. Williams had asked me who I thought Kentucky's best writers were. I said among the men, Jesse Stuart - among the women, Harriet Arnow.

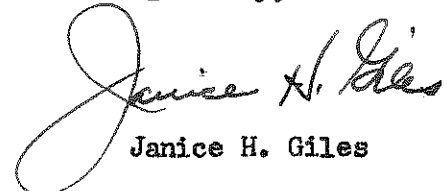
Later, at lunch, I said I had long held Willa Cather as an ideal, but had had long ago to realize I was no Willa Cather. It makes a difference, you see. But there's nothing you can do about it. They just get mixed up and there's no time - you do the best you can to answer them, and you never know until the interview comes out what they are going to have you saying! Even the facts in this interview are not straight. I haven't even written 16 books, much less 16 historical novels!

And, of course, I did not say I written what my publishers wanted me to write. I said that by doing the Frontier Series, I had stamped myself with the historical-fiction image and that both my publishers and I felt it was going to be difficult to break out of the mold - but that I had several different books in mind to do and meant to do them before I quit writing. Sometimes I think it would be better if I never granted an interview - but I did think Mrs. Williams did a nice job on her trip to Bowling Green and her judgment of the book.

But, I had a little chuckle at your estimate of Jesse Stuart. I've heard so many people say the same thing.

Every good wish to you.

Sincerely,


Janice H. Giles