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HISTORY of STEAMER, J. C. KERR-CHAPERON-CHOCTAW

1884 1904 1922

By Courtney M. Ellis

Nashville, Tennessee, October 16, 1954

The J. C. KERR-CHAPERON-CHOCTAW was built in 1884 at Chambersburg, Ohio, on the Upper Ohio River. She was operated in short trades along the Upper Ohio until 1892, after which she was purchased by Captain Richard T. Williams of Evansville, Indiana, for operation on the "Green River Route", from Evansville, Indiana to Bowling Green, Kentucky. Captain Williams had entered the Green River trade in 1888, shortly after the United States Government took possession of the Green River system of navigation improvements from the Green and Barren River Navigation Company, which had leased it from the legislature of Kentucky for a thirty-year period beginning in 1868. The company's toll profit had not been great, and finally in 1888 the Government took over all operations, toll-free. Captain Williams entered the Green River trade with two small boats, the MAGGIE BELLE and BLUE WING. These he operated from 1888 to 1892; but, with the fast-developing trade of the river, they proved too small. In 1892, he purchased the J. C. KERR and placed her in the trade to make two round trips each week from Evansville to Bowling Green, a one-way river distance of 189.6 miles.

Captain Williams had five sons, all of whom were officers of the KERR, as follows: Thomas A. and William N. Williams, pilots; J. Edgar and Jeff H. Williams, clerks; and Joseph E. Williams, engineer. Billy Fisher was the other engineer and Joe Carrol was mate. Operated by this group, the little steamer created a strong feeling of dependability, honesty, and integrity among the people of the Green River country by promoting and maintaining fair and reasonable rates in a trade which, prior to Captain Williams' entry, had been in the hands of a monopoly. It was my privilege, as a young man, to know personally Captain Williams, his wife Patience Suddarth Williams, and all of the Captain's sons, except Joseph, and his daughters Minnie, Florence, and Ida. They were a very wonderful family, only two of whom, Minnie and Florence, now survive. The last of the five brothers, J. Edgar, passed away on October 20, 1949, at Evansville, Indiana. Another brother, Joseph, had fallen overboard and drowned in Mason's Bend near Bluff City on the Lower Green River, while he was chief engineer of the KERR. This was, so far as my knowledge goes, the only accident that ever occurred to the J. C. KERR-CHAPERON. It happened at night, between the hours of 6 p.m. and midnight, while the boat was up-bound from Evansville to Bowling Green. The pilot had blown for a landing - a long, a short, and a long blast of the whistle. As the steamer approached the shore, he gave the engine room signal - "Jingle Bells" to stop the engines. There was no response by the engineer. The pilot, being alert, realized his predicament and immediately changed her course, steering the boat out into midstream again.

The "Williams Boys", as they were known in that country, were all very efficient. In steamboat terms, they were "double-enders" - that is to say, each of them could fill any officer's job on the boat. Captains Thomas A.,

* Florence now deceased, last one about Minnie

William N., Jeff H., and J. Edgar were all licensed masters and pilots. Thomas A. and William N. were masters, pilots, and engineers. Therefore, when Chief Engineer Joseph failed to respond to the stopping-bell signal, one of the other Williams Boys rushed to the engine room and brought the machinery under control. It was then learned that Chief Joseph had gone out on the fantail to investigate some part of the mechanism that probably was not functioning properly, and had slipped and fallen into the river while the steamer was under full headway. There were slip marks on the fantail where he had gone overboard. A later search revealed his body.

The J. C. KERR was operated continuously from 1892 to 1904, along with two additional boats, which became necessary as the trade continued to grow. These also made two round trips a week. They were the CRESCENT CITY and GAYSO, later renamed EVANSVILLE and PARK CITY, respectively. As one of these would be leaving Evansville, the other would be leaving Bowling Green. On the down-trip from Bowling Green, their cargo consisted principally of livestock, poultry, some merchandise, and a good list of passengers. The up-trip from Evansville invariably consisted of general merchandise from the Evansville and Louisville wholesale houses, with always a good list of passengers. This same procedure took place with the J. C. KERR. My father, the late Joseph H. Ellis, who was in the general merchandise business at Lock No 4, Woodbury, Kentucky, was a shipper both ways on all of these boats for more than thirty years. In 1904 the steamers CRESCENT CITY, PARK CITY and J. C. KERR were in the Green River trade. The PARK CITY was sold to some Kentucky River parties after the Evansville and Bowling Green Packet Company constructed and brought out a complete new steamer named BOWLING GREEN and changed the name of CRESCENT CITY back to EVANSVILLE. These two latter boats were able to handle the through business. Then, in May or June, 1904, the name of J. C. KERR was changed to CHAPERON and she was placed in what was then known as the "short trade": Bowling Green to Mammoth Cave, connecting with the through boats at U. S. Lock No. 4 or Woodbury, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, the arriving days of these boats at Lock No. 4. In early 1906, U. S. Navigation Lock and Dam No. 6 was completed two miles above Brownsville, Kentucky, which point was until then the head of navigation. Upon completion of this lock and dam, navigable water was made available to Mammoth Cave on Green River and Dismal Rock on Nolin River, which to this date remains the head of navigation.

In those years, there was quite a heavy tourist passenger travel on the Green River boats from Evansville and other points to Mammoth Cave, as well as commercial freight. Usually, when the through boats had a good trip of passengers, they would continue direct to Mammoth Cave from Woodbury or Lock No. 4, which was at the junction of Barren and Green Rivers. Then the CHAPERON would take the passengers and freight destined for Bowling Green on 30 miles to their destination and return to Woodbury to meet the through boat on her return trip to Evansville. The boats to Mammoth Cave always stayed over until passengers had made trips through the Cave, which usually required from 8 to 10 hours. This arrangement was employed during the summer season, June through September. At other times of year, the CHAPERON made special trips and fill-in trips for the through boats, when

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needed, in addition to her regular run in the Bowling Green-Mammoth Cave trade. I have known her to make special charter and excursion trips in certain seasons of the year. For example, one fall about 1908 or 1909, I was a crew member when she was chartered to a group of Bowling Green businessmen to make a 10-day hunting and fishing trip down-river from Bowling Green to U. S. Lock No. 3, Rochester, Kentucky - 75 miles one way.

During the time CHAPERON was in the Bowling Green-Mammoth Cave trade, her masters were Captains William N. Williams, J. Edgar Williams, and sometimes J. Porter Hines. Her pilots were Albert Williams (a cousin) and Billy Allison. Engineers were Elwood Wingfield and yours truly, Courtney M. Ellis. Firemen were Harry and Clarence Simpson. The only living members of this crew today are Captain John Porter Hines of Bowling Green, Kentucky, engineer Courtney M. Ellis, of Nashville, Tennessee, and fireman Clarence Simpson, of Harriston, Mississippi. After business began to drop off in late 1916 and early 1917, the CHAPERON was removed from her Bowling Green-Mammoth Cave trade and used for a brief time as an extra or fill-in boat. Then she was taken to Rumsey, Kentucky, at U. S. Lock No. 2, where Uncle Bob Banfield operated a marine ways. Here she was pulled out and given a thorough and complete repairing and repainting, preparatory to being offered for sale. After the repairs, she was laid up at Rumsey. During this time it was my privilege to go aboard her in June or July of 1917. She was subsequently sold to Captain Gid Montjoy, of Vicksburg and Greenwood, Mississippi, who changed her name to CHOCTAW and operated her in the Yazoo, Sunflower and Tallahatchie River trades as a general packet boat until she burned on May 8, 1922, at Melrose Landing on the Tallahatchie River, Mississippi. Later her wreck was brought to Greenwood on the Yazoo River, where she finally sank.

It was at Greenwood in 1928 that I spied the hull of a steamboat while strolling along the river shore below the bridge across Yazoo River. After making some further investigation by actually climbing aboard the wrecked hull, whose bow, stem, and forward hatches were exposed, I saw plainly visible her tonnage, 95, carved into the hatches, as well as the name CHOCTAW. This was the customary procedure in those days of Western River steamboating.

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The J. G. DERR-CHAPERON was a wooden-hulled sternwheel packet boat. Her hull measured 121' x 27.8' x 4'. She had two horizontal Western River type boilers 38 inches in diameter by 22 feet long. The boilers were operated in battery with connecting steam and mud drums at 190 pounds pressure. Her propelling engines were of the horizontal reciprocating—slide Value poppet cutoff type, with cylinders 10 inches in diameter by 4 feet stroke, and with a normal rpm of 20. The valve mechanism was controlled by means of full-stroke and cutoff cams mounted on the main wheel shaft with connecting cam rods to the respective valve-control mechanisms. Steam was admitted to both cylinders simultaneously through three-inch supply pipes from a central throttle located amidships. Four-inch exhaust pipes extended from each cylinder to a central ten-inch main exhaust line, which ran forward to the

* Captain J. Porter Hines Now Deceased as of June 18-1961.

after end of the boilers, where it branched off to starboard and port into the smokestack breechings and turned upward at right angles under each stack. Nozzles were fitted to the ends of both pipes so that, as exhaust steam was forced through them, they created a forced draft for the boiler furnaces. The feedwater pump was of the usual walking-beam plunger type, known as a doctor. Inside the straight ten-inch section of the exhaust line, provision was made for a series of coils which heated the boiler feedwater to 180° or 190° Fahrenheit before it was discharged into the boilers at the point of distribution near the after end of the boilers above the mud drum connections. This method of preheating feedwater served several purposes, such as easier steaming, smaller consumption of fuel, and elimination of severe stresses in boiler shell, seams and tubes.

So ends the story of the steamer J. C. KERR-CHAPMAN-CHOCTAW, 1884-1922.

Courtney M. Ellis

"Ida Williams" married Jett W. Kines of Morgantown Ky. who was County Court clerk of Butler County Ky. for more than 20 years. "She" Ida Williams Kines, was and is the Mother of the present James R. Kines, Thomas W. Kines and William N. Kines, all of Bowling Green Ky. and now officials of the "James R. Kines Company."
I will try to determine if Daughter" Minnie is still living and so advise you, since this was written some few years ago.

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Sincerely
Courtney M. Ellis
Checked August 5-1963