

OLD TIMES IN DIXIE.

STORIES OF THE BIG RIVER BOATS IN BYGONE DAYS.

Benton's Duel in 1817—Bloody Days and Rough and Tumble Times Up and Down the River.

[Kansas City Star:] It is almost sundown when the big bell on top of the pilot-house clangs violently, the signal that in five minutes the trip down the Mississippi will begin. The mate, an old-time river man with a harsh voice, stands by the gangplank at the bow, and yells at the string of negroes that for an hour has been carrying and rolling freight aboard. He has in his hand a thin, narrow barrel stave and once in a while he slaps one of the negroes upon the back with it and sings out:

"Bring me that freight there."

Another slap with the stave at a big negro with a sack on his back, who dodges as he runs to avoid it.

"Get a move on you. Get that freight in there."

On the upper deck there is a scurrying up and down of parting friends, some of whom are going on the boat and others who are to go ashore before the boat starts. A middle-aged woman, a pretty girl and a young man who seems devoted to her, stand in a group at the bow and wave handkerchiefs at another group standing on the levee. The swift current rushes past and gurgles loudly. The bartender is busy at a large ice box in a corner of the upper deck, putting fresh bottles of beer on the ice and humming a song as he does it. Already three old fellows, who look as if they might be southern planters, are clearing off a table in the long cabin, preparing for a game of cards.

The bell rings again. The five minutes are up. The mate bellows:

"All-ashore who are going ashore."

There is a quick rush for the gangplank. The last man leaps off it just as it starts to swing inboard. The lines are cast off. The big wheel at the stem begins to churn the water which flows off the paddles in muddy cascades, and the voyage is begun. The boat goes stem first out into the middle of the river and swings slowly around, and then the puff-puff of the exhaust pipes and the chug-chug of the revolving wheel begins steadily. The spires and domes and square-corned roofs of the city of St. Louis make a jagged sky line for miles on the shore to the right as the steamer slides past. By this time the passengers have selected their splint-bottomed easy chairs and comfortable places to sit on the forward deck. A hundred feet are cocked up on the rail, cigars are going, the bartender is getting his lamps ready to light, the card game is in full swing, and the pretty girl and the young man are cuddled into a corner whispering together and watching the Illinois shore, a fringe of great trees that seems to slide upstream an endless panorama of green foliage.

The pilot in the wheelhouse which is perched up above the hurricane deck, between the two big smokestacks, and has on top of it a huge Cherokee Indian made of sheet iron which stands forever balancing on one precarious foot and pointing a bow and arrow, tells the newspaper reporter beside him that over there, near the Illinois shore, is where Bloody Island was. The river has washed away now. Years ago, when most men thought it not dishonorable to kill a man in a duel, many a duel was fought in this island.

"It was called Bloody Island because so many duels were fought there. Maybe that is why the old Mississippi washed 'er away," the pilot says.

It was on this island that Senator Thomas H. Benton killed Charles Lucas in a duel in 1817. Benton challenged Lucas because Lucas questioned his right to vote at an election.

The duel was fought at sunrise. The bullet from Benton's pistol cut a vein in the neck of Lucas so that he was unable to stand up for a second fire. Lucas was carried from the field, and as soon as he was able to get around, at the end of three months, Benton challenged him a second time. They met again at sunrise on Bloody Island and this time Benton killed him.

Another famous duel fought on Bloody Island was in 1831, between Maj. Thomas Biddle and the Hon. Spencer Pettis. This was as horrible and sickening an "affair of honor" as ever happened. The two men hated each other and this hatred extended to their seconds, who were prominent men, too. They met at sunrise. Biddle and Pettis, their eyes gleaming with hate, stood only five feet apart, the muzzles of the pistols in each other's hands overlapping as they were aimed. The seconds stood at right angles to them, six feet apart, with loaded pistols pointed at each other, too, ready to kill if an unfair advantage was taken by any one of the four. The seconds cried: "Are you ready?" Biddle and Pettis answered together: "We are." The seconds counted, "One, two, three!" Both pistols were fired at once and both Biddle and Pettis fell dead, shot through the heart.

Those old days were bloody days, and "rough and tumble" times up and down the river.

The pilot, with a long stretch of river and clear sailing before him, talks of these old times. He tells of Mike Fink, the notorious boatman, who was six feet, two inches tall and as strong as a horse. Mike Fink and another boatman named Carpenter were friends. Both were splendid shots with a rifle. Each used to put a tin cup full of whiskey on his hand, and with rifles would stand seventy yards apart and shoot holes in the tin cups. Once when Fink's boat was passing St. Louis he shot off the heel of a negro standing on the levee. For this he was arrested. He told the judge that the negro's heels stuck out too far behind, and that is why he shot one of them off. Fink was the "best" whiskey drinker on the river, and could guzzle a gallon in a day. Fink finally drifted to Montana and was killed there.

Below Jefferson Barracks the steamer tacks across from one shore to another, putting off freight and passengers at landings. At some of these landings there is not even a house in sight. At others there are little clusters of houses, with always a group of people on the river bank.

The broad river surface lies as smooth as glass, shimmering in the twilight, with not a ripple on it. A faint breeze blows up river and is sweet with the perfume of blossoming dogwood and locust trees. Away in the distance the river bends around a headland, where the skyline is hazy and indistinct. The steamer pounds along in midstream, and the passengers talk little, but gaze at the landscape. As the night falls, all along the shore on either side, stretching away in curving lines, twinkling lights appear. They are the government lights on every point and headland for the guidance of pilots. The steamer heads for the Missouri shore, and her whistle gives three long blasts. It is very dark and the peculiar, marshy odor of the dank and muddy river bank smells strongly. Then from the electric searchlight on the bow a long shaft of brilliant light shoots out and moves around among the trunks of giant sycamores and elms. The man at the light turns it this way and that till it strikes a long white house with a broad veranda its whole length and a front door wide enough to drive a team and wagon through, and big square windows with green shutters, and great stone chimneys at each end of the house. It is a typical Mississippi River house, standing in a grove of trees, a steep wooded hill rising behind it. On its veranda is seated a group of men and women, who put their hands up to shield their eyes as the electric light reaches them. The steamboat swings slowly around, with her bow up stream, and sags in to the bank, the donkey engine whizzing as the long and heavy gangplank swings around and dips

down. A negro deck hand with a rope goes onto the gangplank to its end and stands there. As it swings over the bank he leaps down into the rank growth of joint grass, and scampers up the bank, the electric light following him as he runs; and makes a double turn of the rope around an elm tree as big as a hoghead. Then the finger of light moves down to the freighthouse. A man with a lantern in his hands, wearing slippers, his bare ankles shining white, waits to receipt for the freight. The mate roars and jaws again at the string of negroes scurrying ashore with boxes and bags. It is over in a few minutes. The line is cast loose, the gangplank lifts up and swings in over the bow, and the boat backs off and turns down stream in a great circling sweep.

The boat churns on again. Below the negroes are shooting dice or sleeping stretched out beneath the hot boilers. Most of the passengers have gone inside the cabin, where the pretty girl is at the piano singing a sentimental song while her lover stands half-behind her and turns the sheets of music. On the forward deck a few lovers of nature sit and talk. The iron rods that reach upward rattle with the vibrations of the engines. Around a bend of the river ahead comes a steamer bound up river. She is one of the New Orleans packets, a great long boat all agleam with lights that shine through rows of windows. She is puffing heavily against the strong current. She looks like a lighted palace afloat.

The next landing is on the Illinois side of the river. Here the river current has cut in and eaten away acres and acres of rich bottom land. The steamer has to go slowly and feel her way here, aided by the electric light that sweeps up and down the jagged shore of black mud. A man on the bank halloos and waves his lantern. At last the landing is made, and the freight goes ashore and is loaded in wagons waiting to receive it, for the freight house has been washed away. The boat lies her whole length against the bank. Ashore the frogs are making shrill music. The water rushes past in swirling white bubbles, and with a loud dismal jangle against the shore. Every little while a huge section of the brown bank breaks loose and falls into the water with a great splash. Here there are seven hogs to be put aboard, and they squeal shrilly as the negroes clasp them in a chain and pole contrivance and lug them in the gangplanks feet upward. The boat has trouble in backing out from this landing. The swift current forces her against the bank. The pilot curses and spits tobacco juice vigorously overboard and yanks viciously at his signal pull and backs up and goes ahead and swings around and about, and at last gets out into the river, when the boat is once more pointed fair down river he takes a fresh chew of plug tobacco and talks again of things that were and that are along the river.

He tells that the times are not as they used to be on the river. Where now there is one boat there were ten before the war. The railroads have almost ruined the river business. He points out the spot opposite Herculaneum where Lionel Browne, nephew of Aaron Burr, lived. He was killed in a duel by the notorious John T. Smith. He pointed out Turkey Island, where the steamer "Doctor Franklin No. 2" burst her boilers in the year 1852, and nearly all the passengers and crew were scalded to death. Both the steamer's engineers were blown into the river. Ned Buntline, the story-writer, was on the boat. This wreck of the Doctor Franklin was one of the great river disasters. The pilot points out the site of Fort Chartres, which stood in 1718, and is in all the histories of early America. This was a most important fort in the French and English war. This fort was abandoned in 1772, but the old walls and some of the old rusty cannon are there yet.

[New York Weekly:] He. Are you sure I am the only man you ever really and truly loved? She. Perfectly sure. I went over the whole list only yesterday."