

LIFE ON THE OHIO
Switzerland County Historical Society
Dan Back

THE DELTA QUEENS LONG VOYAGE TO CINCINNATI

Since the "Delta Queen" is the featured exhibit at the Life On The Ohio Museum this month, I thought you might be interested in how the "Delta Queen" came to the Ohio River.

The "Delta Queen" and "Delta King" were built in California to run in the Sacramento to San Francisco trade. They ran opposite each other for 14 years carrying passengers and freight.

In 1944, Captain Chris Greene died of a heart attack at age 43 and Captain Tom stepped in to run the company. He was the visionary and a dreamer and his goal for the Greene Lines was to provide the finest passenger steamboat ever to ply the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. No such boat existed on the Mississippi system. Building a new one was an extremely expensive prospect, so Tom peeked over the Rocky Mountains and developed this instant urge to have either the "Delta Queen" or the "Delta King", maybe both...The bug in the ointment, so to speak, was the five thousand-odd miles of blue Pacific, Panama Canal and Gulf of Mexico separating these fabulous boats from the Mississippi River.

Capt Tom sent his long time friend Capt. Fred Way to California to check out the boats.

The "Delta Queen's" steel parts were originally fabricated on the River Clyde at the Isherwood yard in Glasgow, Scotland. The parts were marked then knocked down and shipped to Stockton, California, where hull and superstructure construction were completed in 1926.

The machinery was built in Dumbarten, Scotland; the wheel shafts and cranks were forged at the Krupp plant in Germany; and the four decks of cabins were built-largely of oak, teak, mahogany and Oregon cedar-by American shipbuilders.

The "Delta Queen" weathered the Great Depression and traveled the Sacramento River for 14 years. In 1940, during World War II, she was chartered by the U.S. Navy, Painted drab gray, the former pleasure craft served gallantly, ferrying troops to and from ocean vessels in San Francisco Bay and taking wounded men from ships to hospitals.

In August 1946, the "Delta Queen" was deactivated by the Navy and turned over to the Maritime Commission for sale. She went to the highest-and only-bidder. Captain Tom, for the astonishing sum of \$46,250 for this most elegant lady

Having purchased his dream boat. Captain Tom then had to figure out how to get a flat-bottomed riverboat from San Francisco through an open sea, an arduous and tricky task, to its new Home Port in Cincinnati. He again called upon his friend Capt Way to travel back to California to supervise the preparation of the "Delta Queen" for transport to the Ohio River.

For this voyage, the "Delta Queen" had to be secured against waves breaking over the guards, certain to swamp her. The venerable boat was to be boarded up to withstand the seas of the open ocean. Later Capt. Way said she "looked like a

huge piano box, cased two decks high with unpainted lumber, some 50,000 board feet of it." A two deck tall ladder was the only way one could come aboard.

The voyage to Cincinnati began on April 19, 1947, with the skipper of the tugboat Osage deciding to tow the "Delta Queen" down the Sacramento River stern-first. This method proved to be unsatisfactory, for the "Delta Queen" began to roll and was unable to follow the tug.

The line to the stem was dropped and the tugboat came around to get a bowline. Free from any lines, the "Delta Queen" drifted quietly to shore and ran aground on a mud flat. By sheer coincidence, the Queen Elizabeth also went aground on a mud flat the same day, near Southampton, England. News pictures of the two "queens" on mud flats appeared all over the world. Not exactly an auspicious beginning for what would turn out to be a history-making voyage.

But three weeks later, on May 11, 1947, the "Delta Queen" made the newspapers again, this time as the first and only paddlewheel steamboat to pass through the Panama Canal, and 10 days after that, she reached New Orleans, having covered an incredible 5,378 miles.

At Avondale Shipyard, near New Orleans, the "Delta Queen" was reassembled. For the upriver trip, Captain Tom Greene gathered a crew of Cincinnati businessmen, with Captain Fred Way, Jr., in command.

After paddling 859 miles of the Mississippi and 511 miles of the Ohio under her own steam, the "Delta Queen" arrived in Cincinnati on July 27, 1947. The flags of every nation she had passed by on her journey from California-Mexico, Guatemala, San Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama-waved in the warm river breeze.

After her triumphant voyage to Cincinnati, the "Delta Queen" steamed to Dravo Marine Ways, near Pittsburgh, for an extensive, \$750,000 remodeling and refitting. Her dark gray paint was stripped to expose shiny brass fittings, polished teak and stained glass windows. She was given new cabins and baths, a new Dining Room and an addition to the Promenade Deck.

Captain Fred piloted the gleaming, "new" Queen of the Rivers back to Cincinnati, where Captain Tom and his wife, Letha, furnished the luxurious staterooms and public areas with exquisite taste during the following months. On June 30, 1948, the "Delta Queen" made her maiden passenger voyage on the Ohio River, roundtrip from Cincinnati to Cairo, Illinois.

Material for this story obtained from the "Delta Queen" Steamboat in Times.