

## LIFE ON THE OHIO

### **Patriot and the River**

HISTORIC PATRIOT

By Dan Back

Since it's founding Patriot has had a close link with the river. The river can be credited with both the growth and decline of the town. This love/hate relationship will be a featured display of the Historic Patriot exhibits.

To understand Patriots relationship with the river you need to realize the Ohio River of 1812 was a very different river than it is today. There were no dams so the water level varied greatly. In the spring the river would be a raging torrent of water, in the summer it would be almost dry and in the winter it would freeze solid.

The land on which the village of Patriot is now located was farmed by Elisha Wade in 1812. He was a resident of Kentucky at the time and it was necessary for him to cross the river to perform the usual routine of farm work. At this time many Indians were roaming around the Indiana side and for that reason he deemed inadvisable to move his family here. In the fall of that year however, he and his family and some others settled on this side, the circumstances being such that they could do so with comparative safety.

The town continued to grow as settlers arrived from the east via flatboat. The family would often use the wood from the flatboat to construct their first house.

To accommodate those traveling by land a ferryboat operated between Patriot and Steele Bottom for many years.

As more and more businesses opened a thriving river trade developed at Patriot. Merchandise needed for daily living arrived by flatboat and steamboat. In return products and produce such as livestock, corn, hay, wine, whiskey and flour were shipped to market. The Patriot Wharf boat was the hub for all of this activity. It would be common for 5-10 steamboats to visit Patriot each day.

Patriot was a stop for most steamboats going up and down the river and home to many riverboat owners, captains and crew. Famous boats of the Louisville-Cincinnati Line such as the *Indiana*, *United States*, *America*, *Cincinnati*, *Louisville*, *City of Cincinnati* and *City of Louisville* called on the port of Patriot on a daily basis. The steamer *United States* had stopped at Patriot shortly before heading down river to ultimately collide with the *America*. Boats such as the *Swan* and the *Carolyn* provided local transportation between Patriot, Florence, Vevay, Warsaw, Ghent and Carrollton.

Patriot was also a stop for the many showboats traveling the rivers. Boats such as *Bryant's*, *French's New Sensation* and the *Majestic* brought entertainment to town.

The river changed in the early 1900's when the government completed the project to install 52 locks and dams on the Ohio. The normal river level at Patriot was raised about 9 feet. This had the effect of providing a year-round navigation pool for Patriot. Patriot became even more active as a port of call for the steamboats.

The 1930's and 40's saw the decline in steamboat transportation across the nation. The railroads had taken most of the freight and passenger business. America's love affair with automobiles was in full swing. With improved roads most local travel was done by auto. Patriot found itself in an unenviable position. That is, the nearest railroad was at least 30 miles away and the roads were narrow and winding. Patriot no longer had any form of major transportation. Because of the difficulty in getting products to markets the industry in Patriot began to decline.

In the 1940's and 50's the excursion boats occasionally stopped in Patriot. Boats such as the *Island Queen*, *Princess*, *Delta Queen*, and *Cincinnati* would run day trips out of Patriot.

In the 1950's and 60's the Corps of Engineers installed a series of high lift lock and dams on the Ohio River. Construction began on a replacement for the Markland Dam in 1956 which was completed in 1963. The new Markland dam raised the river level another 30 feet, flooding the bottomland and putting the river right at Patriots front door.

The river was being promoted as a recreation river. A Corps of Engineers boat ramp was developed just above town. It was a popular place, with the parking lot full almost every weekend. To accommodate boaters Patriot installed a boat dock.

Big Bone Island, which was just above Patriot at the mouth of Big Bone Creek, was a popular picnic and swimming spot for town residents. It was common to see large crowds on the island every weekend. When the river level was raised most of the Island was submerged. In 1977 and 1978 the Ohio River froze solid. When the ice broke up and came down stream it scoured the Island off below the water line. Because it was now a hazard to navigation the Corps of Engineers dredged the remainder of the Island away.

The Corps of Engineers maintained the Patriot boat ramp until the 1990's. Because of budget cuts the Corps was forced to abandon all projects not directly impacting navigation. The boat ramp silted in and became un-usable. The town of Patriot was also impacted by this lack of river maintenance. The riverbank in front of Patriot continued to wash away putting Front Street and the homes along it in danger of falling in the river.

The Patriot, Posey Park board is working on two projects to remedy these problems.

First, as was reported in the paper a few weeks ago, we are working on a bank stabilization project for the town of Patriot. This project will secure the river bank, and enhance the appearance with a walking path, seating area, boat dock and Elwood Mead Memorial.

The second project will involve the Patriot Boat Ramp. The ramp property now belongs to the county and will be developed into a county park. It will feature an improved ramp, boat dock, picnic pavilions, restrooms, walking trail and a fishing pier. You will be hearing more about this project in the near future.

If you have photographs of river activity, shipping records from Patriot, or any items or artifacts associated with Patriot and the river please contact me (Dan Back 594-2628) or Pam Hutchinson at the Patriot Town Hall.