

## River Pilot on the Mississippi River

by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

Having grown up on the upper Mississippi River, our family home was less than 2 miles from the river ... I spent much time as a youth fishing on the shores of the river and watching the river barge traffic and seeing the barges go through the process of passing through the local lock and dam #16 ... in order to bypass the many rapids in the river, there are many locks/dams the entire length of the river, from New Orleans to Minneapolis.

The barges carry all sorts of commodities: corn, wheat, cotton, soy beans, oil, gas, etc. One single barge unit holds as much as 15 semi truck loads ... and the powerful towboats (called such even though they push, don't pull/tow the barges) are capable of pushing 10 or more barge units all linked together by heavy cables.

The towboats fly flags from the pilot house that indicate what product(s) they are transporting. There was a time when I could 'read' those flags.

Being a river pilot is a very difficult task ... as the currents are fast and risky ... and the river passages/channels are subject to frequent change due to high/low water levels, currents, and constant heavy silt deposits.

Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain was a river pilot ... and he took the Mark Twain 'pen name' from his time as a pilot ... the depth of the river, in his time, was measured regularly with a weighted twine dropped over the side of the boat ... the crew member would shout the depth measurement up to the pilot with, for example ... "Mark twine (or, with a southern accent, 'twain'), 5 fathoms on the starboard bow!" ... Hence, Clemens pen name ... Mark Twain.

The Mississippi River looks 'lazy' ... but it isn't ... it moves at an average of 4 mph, or more ... on pleasure boats anchored in the mainstream ... if a person dives into the river for a swim ... they will surface far past the rear of the craft ... an inner tube on a very long rope is therefore hung in the water at the rear of the craft ... after diving in and surfacing, one must grab the rope and inner tube and pull yourself back up river to the boat to get back to the boat and out of the water ... if you miss the rope and inner tube ... you'll be 'picked up in New Orleans', if you're lucky.

If one lowers oneself into the main current of water from the side of a boat, one must swim with all one's strength just to stay even with where one got into the river ... doing this is not advisable, as maintaining that position by swimming for more than a few seconds is near impossible.

I worked playing music on a number of tourist riverboats/sternwheelers ... and in my off time on board, I enjoyed sitting up in the pilot house with the captain ... where I listened to facts, stories, and lore of the river that the captain(s) would share with the tourists who visited him in the pilot house to witness the operation of the vessel.

I was 'given the wheel' once by a captain ... it is not at all like driving a car and steering by following the road/river ahead ... under my control the big sternwheeler riverboat went (sometimes lurched) from one side of the river to the other ... so much so that many of the passengers/tourists on board came out on the deck to see why the boat was reeling from one side of the river to the other, rough water? high winds? ... the captain was having a very good long laugh as I wrestled with the wheel, and the tourists perhaps started to think about making for the lifeboats ... at long last, the captain stopped laughing long enough to explain to me to not steer the boat/wheel according to the lay of the river ahead of us, but to pick a spot on the shoreline, well ahead of the boat, and aim the boat toward that spot ... and then keep adjusting/ changing the onshore spot ahead as the boat progressed staying in the mid-channel ... employing this advice, I was then able to then keep the boat in the correct consistent position in the river channel/lane, without swinging so dramatically from one side of the river to the other ... and the passengers/tourists, now 'in on' the captain's (heartless) 'prank' being played on the obviously frustrated and struggling musician, went back to enjoying the scenery, playing bingo, and taking advantage of the mid-afternoon snack buffet.

I can tell you, I was much relieved when the captain, still chuckling, motioned me aside, and took the wheel back well in-hand.

I'm no river pilot, nor a riverboat captain.  
I never will be.

I'll stick to 'steering' and 'navigating' my way through life on the guitar.

- Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

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