

# Historic River Steamer Belle of Louisville

## A Brief History

### The Beginning

Though we know her today as the *Belle of Louisville*, she was originally named the *Idlewild* when she was built in 1914 at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the West Memphis Packet Company.

Her owners had designed her to be a ferry and day packet vessel (for moving cargo), and she was well-suited for her later career as an excursion boat. After arriving in her first home port of Memphis, Tennessee, she operated as a ferry boat between Memphis and West Memphis, Arkansas, while approach roads to a new bridge spanning the Mississippi River were constructed.

### Her Early Years

The *Idlewild* entered service at a time when river cargo handling and travel seemed to be in their prime; but she was to enjoy only a brief career as a day packet whose decks were laden with bales of cotton; barrels and crates of farm, household, and construction goods; lumber; and sacks of grain. She carried passengers as well, she was solid and well-built, and with a steel hull that required little water to keep afloat (she draws only 5' of water) was able to travel on virtually every navigable waterway.

In the early 1920's, however, all-weather road surfaces paved the way for a then-infant trucking industry, and the demand for packet boats decreased dramatically. In search of a new type of passenger trade, the *Idlewild* was converted to service as an excursion boat, and she "tramped" her way along the Ohio, Illinois, Mississippi, and Missouri river systems - stopping at a town along the banks, running short trips for a few days, then moving on up or down the river to another town. To add income for her owners, she often carried cargo picked up in one town and delivered to another.

Sometime during this decade, and to make her more visually appealing for the excursion trade, the *Idlewild's* Texas cabin (on the third deck) was lengthened to accommodate more crew members, awnings were added to cover the exterior decks, and Victorian "gingerbread" trim decorated the newly-enlarged Texas deck roof.

A notable turn of events came in 1930 after Louisville's excursion boat, the *America*, burned beyond use just after Labor Day. Under charter to the Rose Island Company, the *Idlewild* made her first trip to the area in 1931 to spend that season running trips between Louisville's Fontaine Ferry Amusement Park and Rose Island, about 14 miles upriver from Louisville. A few independent businessmen had built a thriving entertainment area on a small section of land just above Fourteen Mile Creek on the Indiana shoreline, and fun-loving passengers traveled back and forth between the two amusement parks just as young people today move mercurially from one source of entertainment to another.

That charter was the beginning of a long-standing association between the boat and the "Derby City;" and though she traveled a vagabond's life for another three years, in 1934, ready to settle down and looking for a home port, the *Idlewild* returned to Louisville to operate regular excursion trips through World War II.

### A Brief "Military Career"

During the 1940's when everyone's help was needed to aid the war effort, though the *Idlewild* continued her excursion trade during the summer, she towed oil barges (an affectionate misnomer, as barges on the river are "pushed," not "pulled") up and down the Mississippi River during the off season. She had to be specially-rigged for the work, since her sloping and pointed bow was not designed for pushing boats ahead of her; so she was fitted out with a set of "tow knees" - two 4'-long vertical steel beams attached to either side of the bow - that provided a surface for pressing against the flat ends of the barges and making them easier to propel and control.

Not one to miss any chance to "show off," the boat was also used by the U.S.O. as a floating nightspot for troops stationed at military bases along the Mississippi.

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## She Takes On A New Name

The *Idlewild* served 33 years under her original name, but change was in store for her when she was sold in 1947 to J. Herod Gorsage. Though the *Idlewild* was destined to remain under that ownership only a short two years, during 1948 she was renamed the *Avalon* to honor the deathbed wish of the man who was then her Master, Ben Winters. Captain Winters had begun his long river career aboard a steamer with that name, and he hoped the *Avalon* would be remembered.

She was sold in 1949 to a group of investors in Cincinnati, Ohio, and during the next 13 years the *Avalon* became the most widely-traveled river steamer of her size on the country's vast river system. Her's was an exciting life - visiting ports such as Omaha, Nebraska, on the Missouri River; Stillwater, Minnesota, on the St. Croix River; Peoria, Illinois, on the Illinois River; Montgomery, West Virginia, on the Kanawha River; and Nashville, Tennessee, on the Cumberland River.

This stalwart boat was an old hand on the Tennessee River from Knoxville to Chattanooga. She knew well the Mississippi between St. Paul, Minnesota, and New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Ohio River between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Cairo, Illinois. The *Avalon* visited people from all segments of urban and rural society in at least 16 states and carried in her steel and wood the ever-flowing history of our constantly-changing nation.

## Time For A Facelift

In the late 1950's, the *Avalon* underwent extensive restoration. The main deck (the first deck just above the hull) and the ballroom deck (the second and open-floor deck) were enclosed to lengthen the boat's operating season. Her smoke stacks were shortened so she could more easily clear low bridges over shallow rivers, and her pilot house dome was removed and replaced with a flatter, less wind-resistant roof.

## And Then...

In a sadly decrepit state and in need of loving hands, the *Avalon* was sold at auction in Cincinnati in 1962. With the encouragement and support of Louisville Mayor Charles Farnsley, the highest bid was offered by Jefferson County Judge Marlow Cook, a far-dreaming man with an affection for the boat, a vision for its future as a Louisville landmark, and \$34,000 of county funds.

Her name was changed to the *Belle of Louisville*, and under the care and restoration skill of a few dedicated volunteers, the boat began a new life on the south shore of the Ohio River. It took immeasurable hours of constructing, rebuilding, painting, patching, putting up and taking down, testing, wiring, and polishing to make her look and act like a paddlewheel steamer ready for excursion service again; but with the perseverance of those who believed in the project and the "never-say-die" scrounging of pieces and parts, she finally found her home and rightful place at the foot of Fourth Street - just in time to turn her bow upriver for her first time-honored and traditional Derby Festival Great Steamboat Race against the river steamer *Delta Queen* on April 30, 1963.

Today she is recognized as the oldest operating Mississippi River-style (shallow hull) steamboat in the world. In 1989 she was named a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of Interior and is now also on the National Register of Historic Places. She is proud to be the legendary lady of a very small and elite group of steam-powered boats still operating on our country's inland rivers today.

As the *Belle* steams into the 21st century, the vigil for her well-being is constant, and those who have watched her change over the years know without question the place she holds in American history and in the hearts of the people of Louisville, Kentucky.



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