

Delta Queen steamboat may have made its final voyage

Published: Thursday, November 06, 2008, 10:29 PM Updated: Friday, November 07, 2008, 11:35 AM

By **Millie Ball**



Chris Granger / The Times-Picayune The Delta Queen travels down the Mississippi River between the two spans of the Crescent City Connection in New Orleans on Thursday.

The 82-year-old Delta Queen steamboat, the country's only **floating National Historic Landmark** and a vestige of New Orleans' glory days as a port city, docked for what was likely the last time Thursday night at the Julia Street Wharf.

In her prime, the 174-passenger steamboat with the sassy red paddlewheel and ear-splitting, water-spitting calliope welcomed three U.S. presidents: Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter. In 1979, the boat temporarily was named "Steamboat One," when Carter campaigned on it from St. Louis to St. Paul, Minn.

Other passengers over the years have included Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, Lady Bird Johnson, astronaut Michael Collins, Britain's Princess Margaret, boxer George Foreman, TV personalities Phil Donahue and Charles Kuralt, writers Shelby Foote and Alex Haley and entertainers Tammy Wynette, Miles Davis, Helen Hayes and Jim Nabors.

Built in 1926, the paddlewheeler was rescued six times by Congress after the passage in 1966 of the Safety of Life at Sea Act, which declared vessels with wooden structures unsafe for overnight passengers. In fact, a steel hull was constructed over the wooden one, making exemptions almost automatic.

Built in California, the Delta Queen originally carried passengers between Sacramento and San Francisco. Bought by Greene Lines steamboats in the 1940s, she became part of that company, founded 118 years ago by Gordon Greene of Ohio. The company was eventually renamed Delta Queen after its most famous steamboat.

Greene was a steamboat captain, as was his wife, Mary, which was unusual for that time. Mary Greene lived aboard the Delta Queen, and died on the boat in 1949 -- "right in this cabin," said Clarke "Doc" Hawley, patting a white door on the main deck.

Hawley, 73, was among those saying farewell Thursday to the old vessel, still gleaming with brass and white paint. He began sailing as a first mate in 1959, working up to captain and pilot, and making 82 voyages on the river.

"This is what brought me to New Orleans, " said Hawley, who moved here in 1974 to be captain of the Natchez steamboat, a day excursion boat that also runs on a steam engine.

"She's the real thing, " Hawley said of the Delta Queen. "I had some wonderful adventures on this boat. It's living history. I'm very sad tonight."

Sailing on the Delta Queen was a throwback to earlier times. Passengers sat on the decks, often right outside their cabins.

They looked out over the river, at the oaks and cottonwood trees, the plantations, the industrial plants, and listened to "riverlorians" telling stories of the river and the places the boat was passing. They dressed for dinner, and were entertained by ever-present banjo players and 1890s-era theme shows. And they flew kites and played the calliope on the deck.

Patti Young, who was vice president for public relations for 12 years in the 1980s and 1990s, recalled the day Princess Margaret boarded the old boat at Houmas House Plantation in Darrow. It was in 1986, and the staff was told they couldn't speak to the sister of Queen Elizabeth II unless she spoke first to them. They certainly could not take her photo.

"The first thing she did when she got out of her helicopter was to take a picture of us, " Young said.

Young said she'll never forget her first day working for the Delta Queen. Hired in Ohio in 1985, she said she came to New Orleans and stepped onboard the Delta Queen.

"I felt like someone gave me a hug, and tears came down my cheeks, " she recalled. "The captain gave me a hug and he said that was Mary Greene."