

Maneuvering an Elephant In A Bathtub



The American Queen docks in Dubuque, Iowa, in 2015. (Wikimedia Benroethig)

By Capt. Lee Hendrix

In the summer of 1996, Winona's Capt. Dick Karnath and I were the first pilots to take the *American Queen* up the Mississippi to St. Paul. On the trip up from St. Louis, we were greeted by throngs of curious and enthusiastic spectators at most of the locks we transited. I assume they were enthralled by the size and splendor of the *AQ* (420 feet long and 95 feet wide), but at times the notoriety made me uneasy. Fame can be a fleeting friend.

Some of the company's older pilots had predicted disaster from taking the huge boat on the narrow Upper Mississippi with pilots too "green" for the task. I did have some concerns about the former, but not at all the latter. We were both well out of yellow dia-

pers and, thanks to z-drives and bow thrusters the boat handled well enough to make pilots look good even if they weren't.

We arrived in downtown St. Paul on a sticky morning, a bit late due to the weather. Norm Coleman, the mayor of St. Paul then, was waiting with his entourage at Lambert's Landing to officially welcome us. We normally landed at St. Paul with the bow pointed downstream to allow a more expeditious departure later in the day, but this was the first time we had to turn the *AQ*'s massive length around in such a confined space. In fact, there was less than 100 feet of wiggle room, with a concrete wall on one side and fleets of barges on the other.

The barge fleeing folks helped us

by narrowing up their strings of barges, which at least made the maneuver possible. However, we had to turn without being able to see the bow or stern of our boat, and how close we were to the shore. This necessitated putting a trusted crew member with a walkie-talkie on both ends to let us know how close we were to the concrete wall on the stern or the barges on the head.

Capt. Adrian Hargrove was on watch with me and, in his west-Kentucky drawl, he suggested, "Son, let me turn it around. I've done it more times here, and the mayor looks like he's getting hot and sweaty out there."

Lesser men have put up better fights than I did that morning. I quickly grabbed a walkie-talkie and headed for the stern without giving him time to

change his mind.

With his usual grace and aplomb, Adrian gently put the boat into the landing and got the mayor out of the weather.

Low Bridge, Everybody Down

We had made it up to St. Paul unscathed, but now we faced the challenge of bringing the behemoth down the river — a trickier feat. I was on watch when we departed and steamed down toward Pig's Eye Bridge. Daytons Bluff, overlooking that stretch of river, was a multi-hued mass of parked cars and humanity. The bridges ahead were too low to pass under without hitting the pilot house, so I was standing outside piloting the boat from the bridge wing — a set of controls on each side of the top deck that we use when the pilot house has to be lowered into the deck to clear low bridges and electrical lines.

When the captain purposefully strode out to the bridge wing, I figured he was going to provide me with some tactical wisdom concerning that narrow little railroad swing bridge we were headed toward.

"Don't hit it," he advised. "You've got too many witnesses."

With this priceless bit of advice firmly wrapped around my brain, I wondered if anyone on the bluff had binoculars powerful enough to identify me if I planted the boat around a bridge pier or put the bridge turntable out of commission for a few weeks.

Thankfully, I didn't generate any breaking news that night. However, it launched us into a series of adventures of the sort that we encountered taking the AQ anywhere other than the Lower Mississippi River.

Duck!

The stacks on the AQ at that time were about 115 feet above the water level. Even with the pilot house sunk into its cubbyhole beneath the upper deck and all the other accoutrements — such as stacks, radar, radio antennae, etc. — pulled down, we couldn't get much lower than 56 feet above water level — 59 or so if you counted our heads and shoulders while we stood at the bridge wings.

The unimaginative builders of most bridges on the Upper Miss, Ohio, Tennessee, Illinois and Cumberland rivers had failed to foresee our existence and recklessly built their projects with clearances of 60 to 65 feet in "pool water."

At this point, I should explain the term "pool water." It is, at best, a subjective metric used to anticipate the vertical clearance between the water and the "low steel" of a particular bridge. However, pool water can mean

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different things at different parts in a pool. For example, when the river is rapidly rising and dam gates are completely opened to flush excess water out of the system, the area right below a dam can be several feet or more above "pool," while right above the dam water can be a few feet below "pool."

On a vessel as tall as the AQ, the mathematical gymnastics for bridges and power lines are never-ending. Often, we just had to ease up or down on a bridge and eyeball it to see if we could clear it. I remember Capt. Dick and I exposed out on the bridge wing coming down on the Hastings railroad lift bridge one dark-ass night — maybe a bit too fast — thinking we had several feet of clearance. The meaning of "low steel" is a vivid concept when you are suddenly at eye level with that steel and your toes start to curl as you realize there is no immediate escape other than to scream "DUCK!" and you "do the ostrich" to avoid decapitation.

Probably one of us had calculated incorrectly, and it must have been me, since he used to teach math. I prefer to blame it on the bridge tender, who obviously didn't raise the trestle quite high enough.

On another occasion, I was not aware that they were painting the Prairie du Chien, Wis., bridge — a par-

ticularly low one. We approached it at night, so no workers were under the bridge, but their scaffolding sure was. Fortunately, I was going slowly enough that I could back up and just float down through with my head in the "full duck" position while hanging onto the railing and nearly scraping my knuckles on the scaffolding planks just above.

Reverse Logic

We were once "trapped" between low bridges in Cincinnati for over two weeks waiting for the river to fall. This cut deeply into company profits, because tours had to be canceled and refunds made to disappointed passengers. On the bright side, it did reduce fuel costs.

A year or so later during a rainy period on the Ohio, with that event still fresh in mind, we sat in Maysville, Ky., upriver of Cincinnati, waiting for shore tours to return. We were moored between two bridges — a newer one about two miles downstream and an older one just upstream of our landing. I watched the river rising on the ice breakers that sat below the old bridge. All day it poured like "piss from a boot," with dire predictions of tornadoes later in the day.

When I came on watch that evening, tornado sirens were wailing and the sky was green and yellow. I have never again seen a sky that pale, week-old bruise color. I expected Auntie Em and Toto to come cartwheeling across the decks as I ducked into the pilot house. Let the casualties be damned, we were heading to Cincinnati! Maybe.

The rain continued and the only water level data I had on the "Big Mac," Purple People and Taylor-Southgate bridges downriver at Cincinnati had been issued by the National Weather Service earlier that morning. Clearances on Ohio River bridges are more precise than the Upper Miss, but this data was old. So how good was it? If it was good, we would have a couple feet of clearance. There are gages painted on some bridge piers, but at night they are impossible to read until you are right on top of them.

As I approached Cincinnati, I

(American Queen continues on page 34)



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(American Queen continued from page 23)

decided that the safe course of action was to turn the AQ around and float backwards through these three bridges. My reasoning was that, if I got down to the bridges and saw we wouldn't fit under one, I could shove back up the river and come up with a Plan B. As an airplane pilot lands his craft into the wind, a pilot has better control of a boat shoving into the current rather than backing against it. The last thing I wanted to risk on a fast-rising river was to "lose my stern" in between those bridges — the stuff nightmares are made of!

It was 10 at night as the lights on the two yellow arches of the "Big Mac" bridge came into view. There was a fashionable restaurant a quarter mile or so upstream of the bridge and, it being a Saturday night, it was busy. The rain had stopped, and men in polo shirts and women in black dresses and high heels were out on the deck balancing their wine glasses provocatively between their fingers as our float-

ing palace came down the river. Abruptly, the bow of the boat swung around toward them as I began the turn. I wonder how many of them contemplated dropping their glasses and fleeing as our gangplanks approached them like jousting spears. "What manner of madman is driving this boat?"

As I completed the turn and pointed the bow of the AQ upriver, their fears turned to curiosity. I believe that they were even toasting the magnificent boat as it floated past them backwards. They were shouting and screeching at us. I couldn't really make most of it out, but they were certainly attentive witnesses.

The data turned out to be fairly precise. We squeezed under the bridges and made it to our landing only to find



The American Queen docks in St. Louis in 2008, near the Eads Bridge. (Thegreenj, Wikimedia)

the dumpster that had been left for us had been swept away by the river. Due to the rising water, we couldn't stay long enough for land tours and didn't want to get trapped between bridges again, so like water-borne gypsies, we fled down to Louisville. 🌊

Capt. Lee Hendrix has piloted numerous passenger vessels and towboats, and served as captain on the Army Corps of Engineers' tow Mississippi. His last story for Big River was "The Lock and Dam that Never Was," May-June 2003.