

Julia Belle Hits a Snag

By John Gabbert

The *Julia Belle Swain*, famed excursion paddleboat, previously owned by a foundation of the same name and undergoing an extended restoration at its mooring in La Crosse, Wis., apparently hit a metaphorical snag — financial, bureaucratic and administrative.

The crew members were dismissed abruptly in September and the boat's ownership was transferred in late September to a new owner.

Reports of thin operating margins, limited funds and slow payments, coupled with a commitment to quality work and expensive equipment, together with ponderous U.S. Coast Guard inspection procedures, plus unrealistic expectations, seem to have steered the project into a snag. At



Partially shrouded and without its paddlewheel, the *Julia Belle Swain* is moored on the Black River in La Crosse, Wis. (Reggie McLeod)



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a number that may include the value of the vessel at the time.

The *Julia Belle Swain*, a 103 foot-by-26-foot steam-powered paddlewheeler, was designed and built in 1971 in Dubuque, Iowa, by Dennis Trone at the Dubuque Boat and Boiler Works. It ran excursions out of Peoria, Ill., then Chattanooga, Tenn., where the late musician John Hartford piloted it and helped make it famous in song.

Madison, Wis., crane magnate Bob Kalhagen bought the boat in 1994, and ran it from La Crosse until the recession of 2008, when it was retired to moorings on the Black River, just upstream of downtown La Crosse. It languished there in limbo until the foundation was formed to purchase and restore it.

Whether the new owners of the *Julia Belle* will continue its restoration in La Crosse remains an open question. Applying an earlier projection of \$1,000-an-hour operating costs and a

full complement of 135 paying passengers (149 capacity), that's a breakeven operation at \$15 a ticket for a two-hour ride, not including a catered meal. Those numbers would suggest about a \$40 fare, including a meal with cash bar. A new owner will need to decide whether the La Crosse area can support the *Julia Belle* with those numbers.

Many steamboats in their heyday survived encounters with snags. However, many did not. ❧

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press time the Coast Guard had not posted the identity of the new owners.

On November 28, Libby Spiner, a member of the *Julia Belle Swain* Foundation board and managing director of The Weber Group, confirmed that the boat was sold but declined to name the new owner.

The foundation bought the boat in 2013 for \$250,000. Its IRS non-profit Form 990 filings for 2014 and 2015, the latest available, show initial contributions in 2014 at \$508,999 against expenses of \$155,349 and liabilities of \$40,106, with a net income (and net assets) of \$353,650. Then, in 2015, contributions increased to \$1,026,382, with expenses of \$109,578, liabilities of \$85,252 and a net income of \$918,870. Net assets were \$1,272,521,