



# A Tale of Two Showboats

Story and photos by Capt. Bob Deck

Two iterations of the University of Minnesota Centennial Showboat served as icons on the Twin Cities riverfront. The first was moored in Minneapolis along the river flats below the main campus of the University of Minnesota. Years later, the second was docked directly across the Mississippi River from downtown St. Paul. Then on September 16, 2019, it disappeared downriver, bound for a new life.

The first incarnation of the showboat began in 1957, when the U. of M. bought the *General John Newton* from the Army Corps of Engineers. The 175-foot-long sternwheeler had been built in 1899. In those early years this showboat toured up and down the Mississippi, delivering performances in other Minnesota ports, including St. Paul, Stillwater, Hastings, Red Wing, Wabasha and Winona. The first play was “Under the Gaslight,” by Augustin Daly.

My first memory of that showboat was buying tickets to see “The Importance of Being Earnest” in the summer of 1974, just before my senior year of high school. I missed the show, but a classmate, my future wife Jean, did attend. Later as a U. of M. student, she

attended a summer class in costume design on the showboat. She remembers the large organ, which played for the stage shows.

Years later, after becoming a local harbor pilot, I was sent to the riverfront below the campus to pick up the old showboat and haul it down

We watched for three summers as the old boat sat waiting for someone to come up with a business plan to reopen it.

to South St. Paul for dry-dock work. While I never did see a play aboard the old boat, I did get a chance to play around on it that day in 1990. After Brian Brezinka had faced the *Lois E* up to the stern for the trip, I hopped aboard to do a little exploring. I entered through the stage door on the starboard side and almost immediately fell through the floor walking up the aisle on the main floor. I curtailed my exploration of the old boat at that point, and we pushed it down to the

marine ways in Pigs Eye Lake.

Ten years later it was again dry-docked in Pigs Eye Lake for work, when a hot welding rod was inadvertently knocked onto the wood deck at quitting time. The wooden hull caught fire, and it burned up — a total loss.

The second showboat was built in Greenville, Miss., for Capt. Bill Bowell partnering with the U. of M. Having been christened the *Frank M. Whiting*, the new Minnesota Centennial Showboat was delivered to Harriet Island in 2002. That July, it hosted a melodrama based on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Audience members were encouraged to cheer the good guys, and boo and hiss the villains.

Capt. Bowell’s Padelford Riverboat Company crewed and maintained the second showboat for summer and winter U. of M. student productions. We also used it in between seasons for weddings and private parties. The yearly dinner gathering of U. of M. physicists was always odd and interesting.

There were some memorable New Years Eve soirées, too. A party for the Portable Barge Construction Company turned into a local river rat memo-

*(Showboats continues on page 46)*

Above: The showboat on its way to Winona, being pushed by Barbara B.

# Ad Index

All Energy Solar .....	4	Inn on the River.....	38	River Nest Bed & Breakfast.....	10
Alma Marina .....	41	Kann Imports.....	47	River Stop.....	38
Alma, Wis.....	41	La Belle Porte B&B.....	11	River Trail Cycles.....	40
Bellevue, Iowa .....	14	La Crescent, Minn.....	9	River View Inn .....	10
Big River Bookstore .....	back cover	La Crosse County, Wis.....	40	Riverboat Twilight.....	14
Big River eNewsletter & Travel Map .....	2	Lake City Marina.....	16	Seven Hawks Vineyards.....	47
Blue Heron Coffeehouse .....	39	Lake City, Minn. ....	inside front cover	Silver Star Saloon & Grill.....	45
Bluff Country Co-op .....	39	Lake House Restaurant .....	45	Simple Abundance.....	42
Buffalo Bill Museum.....	13	Libertys Restaurant.....	42	Slippery's Bar & Grill .....	44
Business Card Gallery .....	47	Little Bluff Inn.....	38	Smith Brothers Landing .....	37
Cassville Ferry.....	4	Living Lands & Waters.....	2	Spasha .....	41
Chocolate Escape.....	44	Lodging Page.....	10-11	Staghead Gastropub .....	42
Clements Fishing Barge.....	47	National Eagle Center.....	44	Sturdiwheat .....	42
Clinton, Iowa .....	inside back cover	Old Mill Guest House .....	11	Sullivan's Supper Club .....	38
Danzinger Vineyards .....	41	Ole Miss Marina.....	43	Swan Jewelers .....	8
Driftless Area Inn & Event Center.....	10	Oliver's Wine Bar.....	42	T & C Latane .....	37
Driftless Books.....	44	Outside the Lines Gallery.....	47	Trempealeau, Wis.....	38
Eagle View Motel & Retreat.....	11	Paddleboat Pizzeria.....	45	Trout Unlimited .....	4
Ferryville, Wis. ....	9	People's Food Co-op.....	40	Valley Fish & Cheese .....	8
Front Porch Bar & Grill .....	44	Pepin, Wis. ....	37	Wabasha, Minn. ....	45-46
Galena Brewing Co.....	47	Pickle Factory.....	37	Waterways Journal .....	4
Great River Rd. Visitor Center .....	47	Powerhouse Marine .....	40	Wings Over Alma .....	41
Harbor View Cafe.....	37	Pride of the Nations.....	44	Winona County Historical Society.....	39
Harbor View Suites .....	10	Reads Landing Brewing Co.....	45	Winona Feed Seed & More.....	39
Hastings, Minn.....	13	Red Pines Bar & Grill.....	40	Winona, Minn.....	39
Hawks View Cottages .....	10	Red Wing, Minn.....	42-43	Wisconsin Public Radio.....	16
Holmen Locker & Meat Market .....	40	Richards House.....	11	WVIK Radio .....	12
In The Making .....	38	Rick's Italian Restaurant.....	45		

(Showboats continued from page 48)

rial after Pat “Tip-Over” Tuttle passed away. Those kinds of gatherings always morphed into early morning drinking and storytelling sessions, as we remembered fallen comrades.

Another run of “Under the Gaslight” in the summer of 2016 was the last performance by the U. of M. theater department on the showboat. After

a couple seasons with no plays, the city found the university in abeyance of its agreement, so the university surrendered the boat to St. Paul for a dollar.

We watched for three summers as the old boat sat waiting for someone to come up with a business plan to reopen it. My boss, Gus Gaspardo, fielded dozens of calls from St. Paulites who were disheartened to see the showboat sit-

ting idle and slowly falling into disrepair. He always advised them to lobby the city.

On Monday morning, September 16, 2019, the showboat ended its residency in St. Paul, when two towboats, the *Barbara B* pushing and the *John J Manning* faced up to the bow for visibility and maneuverability, departed for its new home near Winona, Minn. I followed downriver from Harriet Island to Dayton’s Bluff taking photos and saying goodbye as they cleared the bridges of St. Paul and headed out of sight. 🚤 🌊

*Capt. Bob Deck is a contributing editor for Big River and a pilot for Padel-ford Riverboats. His last story for Big River was “The Birth of a Museum,” January-February 2020.*

*Editor's note: As of this spring, the showboat was docked in Wisconsin just downstream from Lock & Dam 5.*



The helper boat John J Manning faces up to the bow to assist the Barbara B (hidden) push the showboat downriver.

🚤 Visit [BigRiverMagazine.com](http://BigRiverMagazine.com) for links to more information.