

## CHAPTER 10

For my uncle, Machinist's Mate, William Felsing,  
U.S.S. Pennsylvania, Pearl Harbor Dec.7, 1941.

Missouri, land of fireworks, Mark Twain, President Harry S. Truman, The Unsinkable Molly Brown, and don't forget more fireworks. You can't buy fireworks, legally, in Minnesota so we went nuts buying every kind of explosive that you could imagine. Remember we carried up to 140 gallons of gas on board. Well, we didn't blow up the raft but we did almost blow up each other. One boy lit a firecracker and another boy yelled for us to duck. The boy with the firecracker did not realize this warning was for his lit firecracker and he covered his head with his arms and the thing exploded in his ear. So, no more firecrackers on the raft!

The only other close calls we had with fire was when one boy sneaked a cigarette under his sleeping bag while he sat on the gas cans. The punishment was swift. We pulled ashore and formed a line and this guy had to crawl between our legs as we took turns hitting him with sticks that we gleaned from the near by woods. Do you think he quit smoking after that?

One other problem we had was with the wiring. We had a battery for the running lights and the outboards recharged it as we went along. This battery was too close to the gas cans and one day an alert kid jumped for the fire extinguisher and emptied it on the battery, it had shorted out and caught fire. He was our hero for quite some time.

We made camp just above Hannibal Mo. Then we went into town. It was July 3<sup>rd</sup> and there was a large crowd to greet us at the marina. We saw everything. The townspeople and the local Jaycees took us to the Mark Twain house, Molly Browns house and many other sites. We were also taken to the Mark Twain cave a little ways out of town and given a guided tour through it. They gave us a great picnic after our cave tour. We went back to our camp that night and spent the next day seeing more of the town. That night we watched the fireworks display and were mobbed by the townspeople asking questions and shaking our hands. One area kid even wanted our autographs. The mayor came down to the marina to wish us well on our continued journey. It was a very hot day and we sang Jingle Bells for the mayor and the crowd of well-wishers. Once again we hit the newspapers. This was getting to be a habit.

It was time go get under way. St. Louis was the next port of call. 125 miles away. A piece of cake. We sailed all day and camped just above Alton Il. Near Lewis and Clark's first winter camp before they set off for the great west. That was 1804, 157 years before we passed there. The next morning we packed up and went through the Chain of Rocks channel that led to the last lock and dam, #26.

The first thing you notice is how much the current picks up. Upstream the current was 5-6 M.P.H. and now it was 10 – 12 M.P.H. You had to learn how to steer all over. And it took a great deal of strength. Our steering shifts were cut down from two hours to one.

Now we could see the skyline of St. Louis. We gave ourselves three cheers. It was like winning a million bucks. The reality did not sink in right away. We noticed a huge riverboat on the banks. It was a side-wheel paddleboat for tourist named the Admiral. There were other showboats and over all it looked pretty dumpy and seedy. Jack met us at a marina and had made arraignments for us to stay at the Y.M.C.A. in downtown St. Louis. The Chevrolet Company gave us three station wagons to use while we stayed there.

We stayed several days and saw the Zoo, the Transportation museum, a barge manufacturing company and a towboat manufacturing company. We saw the Chevrolet plant in East St. Louis, IL. I remember that they would not let us see the place where the Corvettes were made, top-secret stuff. We were taken to the Busch Gardens and given free passes and food. The

staff had a well-earned rest and a few free beers. We even got a three-hour ride down the river on the Admiral. There was a live band aboard and we danced and ate it was fantastic. We also had an unexpected look at the river we would soon pass on our raft. We saw many historic places and learned much history. We met with the mayor and were in the papers.

During this time of touring and rest, the raft was under going repairs and preventative maintenance. When we left Minneapolis the raft deck was very flat or level. Now it was noticeably bowed. Not sagging, but bending so that the center of the deck looked like a small hill. A railing was added to the rear deck so nothing else would fall overboard and as the river was more wicked, we had to be extra careful. Our props had also been chewed up and needed replacing. These props were very expensive. I don't know how much they cost, but I do remember the staff talking to us about taking it easy and being more careful on lookout duty.

Now it was time to go. What a fantastic time, what nice people. As I watched Jack, Dennis, Ron, and Merle, I think deep down they were impressed and even a little amazed that such a rag tag crew of misfits had got his far.

Dean Felsing, Crew member of the Unsinkable.

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## **CHAPTER 11**

For Henry Morton Stanley and Dr. David Livingston who led Henry to the Lord.

The river has taken on a dramatic change. The bluffs were gone and the towns were fewer. The barges were bigger and the wing dams were visible and the current was fast and strong. We were now into the South and the people and customs and scenery were all new to us. Spanish moss was hanging from the trees and we swung from vines, like Tarzan, in the woods when we camped. We were referred to as Yanks as much as we were called Huck Finns. Back home we called Coke and root beer, pop, down here they call it soda. We said beer was on tap and they, on draught. And of course the ever famous "you all".

As I have mentioned we had some experimental tasks to perform on board. One of them involved the engines that had been given to us. We were using an oil mixture of 40:1. The usual mix was about 10:1. We each learned how clean and gap sparkplugs. We also kept a log of the amount of time that was on each motor. Today most outboard motors use the 40:1 or better mixture and I like to think we had a part in the development of this way to save on fuel. However this was the beginning of this mix and I believe that it took its toll on the motors, that and the pitch of the props. In St Louis we changed props as I said, but later I learned that these new props were of a different pitch to give us more power. That is why they were so expensive. They did not do the trick and soon one of the motors froze. That means it was broken beyond repair. The company sent us a new one and had it in stalled as soon as we hit the next town. We also learned how to file the damaged props back into useable condition.

The first place we pulled into to make camp we were hauling the raft ashore and it got away from us. There were two boys and one staff on board and they went into action immediately. The staff lowered the motors into the water and the boys pulled in the lines. They had to act fast because if they hit a wing dam on this part of the river the raft would break into pieces. The motors were started and they swung the raft around and into the current. They had to continue down stream for a while to gain control and we on shore had a few moments of anxiety as they got out of sight. About five minutes later they returned, a little pale and shaken but in one piece, they received three cheers. From then on there would be no more swimming in the river.

One really neat phenomenon was the wing dams. Up river, as I said they were underwater, here they were made out of telephone poles and rose twenty to thirty feet above the surface of the river. If you lit a firecracker the echo from the wing dam sounded like someone dragging a stick along a picket fence. It was fun to listen to and we used up most of our fireworks just to hear this sound.

Cape Girardeau, Mo. A large city and we got off and goofed around for about ½ day. One of the boys found a wounded pigeon and brought it back to the raft. Our staff told us it would probably die but we pleaded to keep it and they gave in. Well the thing lived and we named him Girardeau, in honor of that city. Girardeau not only lived he stayed with us for some time and he was never confined to a cage. I believe he was waiting to mend completely and knowing we meant him no harm he stayed. He would fly around us on the river and gave us something else to think about rather than just ourselves.

Cairo, IL, and the mouth of the Ohio River. Half way. There was an eight-mile stretch of straight channel ahead and Jack ordered the engines to be shut down. We all gathered in the center of our bowed ship and Jack delivered a speech I will never forget. He told us that this was the half way point and that if we didn't make it one more mile the entire trip was a success and that none of us were failures. He told us how proud he was of each and every one of us. He complimented each one of us on our growth and team effort. For some of these boys it was the first time in their lives they had ever been successful at anything. We felt good about ourselves and were ready to continue. I really feel that Jack didn't think we were going to make it to New Orleans, he knew something that we didn't. Whatever it was he never let on. It could have been a number of things and even some things he may not have known. Like our 55gal drums were taking on water, yes they were leaking and I don't think any of us realized it. In other words the Unsinkable was sinking.

The motors were started and we were again under way. Hickman and other towns, then Memphis, TN. What a magnificent city. My best memory of this place was the wall or dike that guarded the town from river. It was 20-30 feet high and about two feet wide at the top. I had such great sea legs it was tough to walk on land, but I did walk the entire length of that wall. How crazy I was then. I would never allow my kids to climb that wall let alone walk on it.

Back on the raft and Greenville, Ms. then the Arkansas River joined the Mississippi and we were 129 miles from Louisiana.

We were behind schedule. A group meeting was called and we decided to make an all night run. Volunteers for the steering and look out shifts were asked to sign up on the all night roster. The others were told to find a spot and dig in for the night. We did not have lights like the ones on your car. A small red light for the port (left) side and a green for the starboard (right) side. There was also a white light on top. These were not for us to see with, but for others to see us. To see the channel we used a large spotlight. When the spotlight hit a red buoy it would reflect and it looked like a cigar sticking out of the water. The black buoys would reflect flat on top.

For me it was easier to see the buoys at night because I am very colorblind. We also used the blinking lights on the markers. If you let your eyes get accustomed to the dark you would be surprised how much you can see. We picked a great night for this run and the river is completely different in the dark. As I took my turn as lookout I couldn't believe the beauty and might of the river. It was also a great time to just plain talk with each other about home, the river, school, our hopes, and fears, and our futures. It was great to just sit and watch the world from a position that not many people have had the opportunity to be in. I would love to do it again.

Dean Felsing, Crew Member of the Unsinkable.

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