

CHAPTER 12

Remember how much each of us wanted to steer, or pilot in the beginning? By now the novelty had completely warren off. It was a constant battle to get some of the guys to take their watch. If they did not sell their watch they would just plain let go of the wheel and let us run aground or hit something. This was the most serious of infractions and these boys were dealt with harshly, not only by the staff, but the crew. Many fistfights broke out. Those who did volunteer to take the helm were rewarded by being excused from other duties. This did not go over well with those who were sloughing off.

During the night two boys decided to head for home. They sneaked out of camp and started to hitchhike home. Jack was furious, we all watched him to see how he would handle this matter. There was an immediate group meeting and we were warned that this was unacceptable behavior. Not to mention how dangerous it could be this far from home and alone.

The boys were picked up the very next day and held in the Helena, Arkansas jail. Jack went there to straighten things out as we continued. You should have seen him when he returned the next day. He was all smiles and alone. We had another meeting and Jack announced that he had made arrangements with the local sheriff to keep those clowns in jail until we finished the trip, no matter how long it took. That was just great. The punishment fit the crime and if there were any ideas of jumping ship they were put to rest then and there.

After the trip I spoke with these boys and to hear of their troubles after they left us was as hilarious as any comedy. Apparently the sheriff picked them up and when he asked them who they were and where they were going, they tried to tell him in a phony southern accent that they were from a little plantation just down the road. I'll bet it was difficult for that man to keep a straight face. Not only was the accent terrible but he knew that the boys were on the run. They spent the next twelve days in the Helena jail and were fed grits and gravy and given Bull Durham to smoke. They said raft food seemed mighty good after all. After their ordeal they were shipped home on a bus.

Somewhere during the next day most of us picked up a virus and it was impossible to move on. We pulled into Greenville, Mississippi and docked at the Greenville Yacht Club and were treated by a local Doctor. We recovered and stayed long enough to pick up provisions and have our motors checked over. The newspaper people came down to river and took our picture and we hit the front page of the Delta Democrat-Times. That was July 16, 1961.

We set sail for Lake Providence and attended church. The Catholic boys went to Mass and the rest of us went to a Protestant church.

In a small town we ran into a flagpole sitter. How odd I remember thinking, to spend your summer, or any time sitting on top of a pole in a box. He said he could see us coming down the river and he thought we were just as odd do to such a thing as we were doing. I hope he broke the record for his deed. I'll never know.

Now for Vicksburg, Mississippi. The largest stern-wheeler ever made was docked there. The Sprague. It could push 64 loaded barges up the river. I was impressed. We were given a tour of this great boat and I could have stayed for another week and poke my nose into every corner of it. We had a tour of Vicksburg and ate a big meal in town. Then we were off to Baton Rouge.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The state capitol. A large crowd was on the banks to greet us and we were given a first class tour of the capitol building. We met the mayor of the city and the governor Jimmy Davis. This is the man who wrote and recorded one of my favorite songs, "You are my sunshine". What an honor to get to spend the day and have lunch with him in the capitol.

While we were in his office I jumped into his chair and declared myself to be the gov. He laughed and said that his Lt. Gov was out of town so I could take his place. So there I was the Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana for 45 minutes. We were given the keys to the city. We presented Mr. Davis with our state flag and he gave us a Louisiana State flag. This flag is still in Jacks family and I hope that as it is passed to the next generations this story will accompany it.

There will be no extra charge for this bit of info. In 1993 I went to Mogilev, Belarus to do some missionary work in the schools. I taught the kids to sing, "You are my sunshine" in English. That was a great thrill for me and I wish that Mr. Davis could have been there.

A large amount of food was donated by local merchants and as we loaded it onboard the news media was there taking pictures and interviewing us.

Not far from our destination now and the best is yet to come.

Dean Felsing, Crewmember of the Unsinkable

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CHAPTER 13

For Colonel Richard Meinertzagen, C.B.E., D.S.O.

We backed into the current and passed under the Huey P. Long Bridge. We headed off to what became my favorite town on the river, White Castle, Louisiana.

Yes, there really is a town called White Castle. We were treated like royalty there. We were taken on tours way back into bayou country and experienced the culture and the food, what great food. We had turtle soup, southern fried chicken, crayfish, and much more. We visited John James Audubon's house and a plantation. It was here that we played with the Spanish moss. I have a neat picture of myself with a mass of moss covering my head. When I took it off and tossed it on the ground a very poisonous cottonmouth snake crawled out of the heap that was on my head just seconds before. How many times do you think I played with Spanish moss after that experience? Another claim to fame that White Castle boasted about was that they had the world's longest street.

It was in this town that a young man asked me if we were freedom riders. In the early 60's people with too much time on their hands from the north would travel to the south and cause trouble. They usually rode the bus and that is how they got the name freedom riders. I didn't know what a freedom rider was then and I told that man so. He believed me and we became friends. He followed us around town and was very interested in our actives. Little did I know he was with the K.K.K. and was watching us to make sure that we didn't cause any trouble. This was my first experience with a bigot and I didn't like it one bit. We had a group meeting later and discussed the way things were in the south back then. It bothered me. How could people who treated us to kindly treat black people so different? This has always bugged me and I have tried to judge people on their actions rather on the color of their skin.

No matter as I said White Castle was still my favorite place and we, at least I, wasn't finished with it yet. We left town and went a little ways down stream and set up camp. Just after bedtime I felt a terrible pain in my gut. I thought that the virus had finally caught up with me but the pain was so great that the staff figured they better get me to a doctor. Two staff and one crewmember, for look out took me back to White Castle. I was taken to the local hospital in the city ambulance. I remember looking out the window and seeing the lettering on the side advertising that it was not only the city ambulance, but also the hearse and laundry truck to boot. When we arrived at the hospital I was still in my sleeping bag. When the doctor asked me to get out I wouldn't and when asked why by my staff member I had to tell him that I didn't have any clothes on. They had to run back to get my pants. How embarrassing. It was decided that I had had an appendix attack. The doctor said I should stay overnight. Merle stayed with me in a small hotel and we relaxed for that day and one more night. The doctors' name was Dr. Percy LaBlanc and several years after the trip I saw his wife on a TV game show, "I've Got a Secret". I don't remember what her secret was but it was fun to see some one I knew on TV

Merle and I took the bus to Donaldsonville, La. and rejoined the crew. It was now that Merle left us and headed home for a wedding, his own. He and Mavis will celebrate their 40th anniversary next year. Three cheers for them. That night we camped near Donaldsonville. Not far downstream from our campsite was a ferry crossing. The ferryboat ran 24 hours and my buddy, Eddie, and I decided to check it out. We went through the woods and went aboard the boat. It was not very big; it only had room for about eight cars. We introduced ourselves to the captain and he said he had heard of us and was honored to have us aboard. The ride was free and as we rode across the river Eddie and I hatched a plan to get out of pitching our mosquito netting for the night. We talked to the captain again and filled him in on our idea and he gave us the go ahead. Eddie and I went back to the raft and got our sleeping bags and rode the ferryboat back and forth across the river all night long. Not many people can say they have ever done that. What fun.

Next stop New Orleans.

Dean Felsing, Crew member of the Unsinkable.

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