

The River Steamboat *Belle of Louisville*

A little Bit of History

The *Belle of Louisville* was built at Pittsburgh by James Rees & Sons for the West Memphis Packet Company in 1914. Her original name was the *Idlewild*, and her sturdy, well-built frame sat atop a steel hull that needed only five feet of water to float. Such a shallow draft allowed her passage on practically every navigable waterway in the eastern half of the country.

The *Idlewild* first operated as a ferry between Memphis, Tennessee, and West Memphis, Arkansas. She was also built for packet trade and hauled cargo like livestock, cotton, lumber, and grain, and she was outfitted for excursion work too. During the 1920s, she took on a vagabond's life, traveling from town to town offering excursion cruises to the public. For most of the next two decades, the *Idlewild* tramped the Ohio, Illinois, Mississippi, and Missouri River systems.

Because of the loss of Louisville's excursion boat, the *America*, just after Labor Day, the *Idlewild* arrived at Louisville in 1931. For the 1931-32 season she was chartered to run trips between two amusement parks – Fontaine Ferry near downtown and Rose Island, about 14 miles upriver from Louisville. After tramping for two more years, she returned to Louisville in 1934 and operated a regular seasonal excursion schedule through World War II.

During World War II, the *Idlewild* was outfitted with special equipment (tow knees) to push oil barges in the off-season. She also served as a floating USO nightclub for troops stationed at military bases along the Mississippi River.

In 1947 the *Idlewild* was sold, and due to a deathbed wish of the boat's master, Captain Ben Winters, whose career had started aboard a different steamboat of the same name, she became the *Avalon* the following year.

A group of Cincinnati-based investors bought the *Avalon* in 1949. Over the next 13 years she became the most widely traveled river steamer in the country. Among many others, the *Avalon* pulled into ports along the Mississippi, Missouri, St. Croix, Illinois, Kanawha, Ohio, Tennessee, and Cumberland Rivers.

By 1962 the *Avalon* was in desperate need of major repairs and improvements, and was literally days away from the scrap yard. When the boat was put up on the auction block instead, Judge Executive Marlow Cook of Jefferson County, KY, with assistance from Louisville Mayor Charles Farnsley, bought the boat with \$34,000 of county funds.

Along with her new life on the Louisville waterfront came a new name – the *Belle of Louisville*. Many hours went into repairing and restoring the boat. On April 30, 1963, the *Belle* made her first cruise in a race against the steamboat *Delta Queen* as one of that year's Derby Festival events. It was the beginning of an unparalleled river tradition which continued until 2008 as the Great Steamboat Race, traditionally taking place every year on the Wednesday before the world-famous horse race, the Kentucky Derby.

The *Belle* is now recognized as the oldest operating Mississippi River-style steamboat in the world. She was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989 and is on the National Register of Historic Places. She will celebrate her 100th birthday in October, 2014. The *Belle* continues to be owned and operated by the Louisville Metro government.

No other river steamboat in American history has lasted as long, been to as many places, or traveled as many miles as the *Belle of Louisville*. Her name and outward appearance have changed over the years, but her steam-powered soul and structure are pure turn-of-the-century paddlewheeler.

