

Chapter Two: Exit Stage Right

By 1840, there were more than 190 steamers in service on the Lakes and points South to the Gulf of Mexico. Most were less than eight years old. About 40 operated as ferries or on short local routes out of the larger ports. The remainder, mostly larger boats, ran from Toronto to the lower Lakes or St. Lawrence River destinations. By the 1840s, the Erie Canal brought tens of thousands of settlers to Buffalo each year in search of passage to the West. The short time just prior to the Civil War was a grand and opulent time along the Mississippi and its' tributaries. Passenger and merchandise business was booming. The popularity of riverboat travel spawned the lifestyle of the river gambler. With it came an unwanted element preying on trappers, miners, pioneers, and ordinary citizens alike.

Steamboat technology developed quickly in the 1840s. The steamers Illinois (1837) and Great Western (1838) were the largest and finest of their day. The 185-foot Great Western was the first steamer on the Lakes to be fitted with a spacious upper cabin. The entire hull was occupied by the boilers, with holds for freight and wood. On the main deck aft was the ladies' cabin and staterooms, while on the hurricane deck the main cabin extended almost the entire length of the boat. On this deck there was also a ladies' saloon aft, the dining room, and the saloon or barroom forward. Staterooms, 60 in number, were arranged on either side of these cabins, the whole length, with three berths in each, making in all about 300 berths.

Improvements in steamboat machinery resulted in increased speed, efficiency, and safety. Some vessels had crosshead or "square" engines, easily identified by the towering gallows which stood high over the superstructure, with a crosshead moving up and down in a slide. Other ships had horizontal engines, with the machinery entirely contained below decks. Steamboats offered fast, efficient, and predictable delivery for passengers and freight. The cost was considerable, however, as steamers were more expensive to build and operate than contemporary sailing craft. The riverboat "Mistress of New Orleans" was built in 1867 for \$28,500, but its machinery cost an additional \$54,000. A large contemporary schooner cost between \$6,000 and \$10,000. Because boilers and engines were so costly, they were often reused, sometimes serving in three or more different hulls before they were worn out and useless. Such was the case with 'The Mistress'. The previous year the steamboat W.R. Arthur's boilers exploded and the engines were refitted to the 'Mistress'. Steamers also required fuel, which cost \$80 to \$125 per day. They required larger crews than sailing craft, as well. A large steamer carried a crew of up to 40 men, while sailing vessels, even square-rigged, seldom needed more than ten or twelve.

With the advances in shipbuilding technology came dramatic changes to the steamboat fleet. The first 1,000-ton steamer in the nation, the 260-foot 'Empire', was built in 1844. This lavish vessel ushered in the era of "Palace Steamers," which was to last until late 1855. Construction of such large craft was possible with the development of new fastenings for wooden hulls, the expanded use of ironwork for strengthening, and the introduction of "hogging-frames" and trusses. The magnificent palace steamers of the later 1850s were the most beautifully appointed craft ever built. In all, there were 25 of them. Most were between 1,000 and 1,600 tons. The City of Buffalo, built in 1857, was the last and largest of them, until the ship was reborn under ownership of the Atlantic and Mississippi Steamship company of St. Louis in 1870 as the "Mistress of New Orleans". It measured 350 feet in length and was 2,026 tons. A young

journalist writing for the Buffalo Morning Express, July 25, 1870, described his impressions of this fine 'floating palace';

"The grand cabin is lighted by skylights and a splendid stained-glass dome. On either hand the doors open into the staterooms. The cabin has an arched ceiling, which together with the panels, are ornamented by gilt mouldings, the white and gold appointments making a very rich appearance. Splendid chandeliers light it by night, the center one being double. The furniture is of the richest rosewood, with damask and plush upholstery; the carpets are costly brussels, and the whole scene magnificent. The fairy palaces of the imagination were never so gorgeously furnished, nor could the famous barge of Cleopatra, with its silken sails, rival this noblest of steamers."

Most of the palace steamers ran from Buffalo to Detroit or Chicago to New Orleans. Only the smallest could fit through the Salt Locks when they were opened in 1855. The Panic of 1857 ruined the passenger business on the Lakes. The entire fleet of palace style steamers was withdrawn from service. Few ever operated again. When the country recovered from the depression in 1861 and 1862, most ships were no longer worth repairing, and they were too expensive to compete with newer, more efficient craft. Still, the allure of the plush lifestyle of the rich and famous allowed many of the ships along the Mississippi to flourish, relying on the slave trade and later emancipated slaves for cheap labor, and the lucrative business of smuggling these same 'workers' to safe havens in the North and Canada. Many however, only made it as far as Superior and Duluth Minnesota before being delivered to a watery grave. The passenger business revived after the Civil War, but it was never again able to sustain ships as luxurious as the 'Mistress of New Orleans'. The steamers built for the postwar passenger trade were more modest in size and furnishings. As time passed cost was a determining factor with the burgeoning number of pioneers looking for an inexpensive way West for a new life. 'The Mistress' had a short life despite its popularity on the river. On the night of July 7, 1871 at Liberty Island below St. Louis she hit a stump which tore down her entire hull causing her to sink within 1 1/2 min. 79 souls were lost that warm summer night. Among those lost were Stoker and his gang of mercenaries who finally met face to face with the many they had themselves sent to the "Runaways graveyard".

Youngblood lit a cigar as he watched the workers at the dock down below. A slight breeze had begun from the South, another warm breeze on what should have been a brisk Spring night, or morning rather. He heard footsteps and the jiggle-bobs on the deck and friendly voice. "They made me pay for the damned shot glasses too!" said Jittery Jim Jonah as he walked up to the railing next to Youngblood. Both heard a noise and turned at the same time to the gangway along the wheel house. Nothing there, but now they changed positions and walked to the boom hoist near the front bow overlooking the Hurricane deck and the revelers below. Standing at opposing angles the entire deck around them was in view by at least one man. "Here's ta dumb luck", said Jittery as he handed a shot glass of Belvanie to Youngblood. "Seems ta me nothing I saw at the table was dumb or luck", said Youngblood as he sipped the scotch and took a long draw on his cigar. "I been traveling these parts for almost a year now, and I've seen more than my share of card sharks and bunko artists. Most don't get their come 'upins like Stoker did tonight. I expect we haven't seen the last of him or his 'yes' men".

Jittery started to back up slowly as he replied, "Well, I've had just about all I want of this port,

perhaps I'll just..." he spun and bolted for the doorway just ahead of the wheel house as Youngblood moved around the other side. The quick movement startled Chester and Herman, two of the three men Stoker had sent after them. Chester turned to run but forgot the door behind him was closed. He smacked into the door and saw bright stars as he lost consciousness due to his own stupidity. Herman reached down to retrieve his boot dagger only to find it not there. "Looking for this?" came a voice from behind him. Herman turned and was met with a hand over his mouth and his own dagger in his chest. As Herman began to slump Youngblood said, "Here, hold this" and pushed Herman toward Jittery. Jittery stepped back and Herman fell to the deck. "Damn, he fell on his own knife", said Jittery Jim. He looked toward Youngblood and winked. "Nice night for a swim doncha think?" A moment later there was splash as the body hit the Mississippi and sank from view in the cold murky water.

"Looks like we knocked into a cocked hat this time", said Youngblood. "We?" replied Jittery as both made their way to the lower deck. "Like it or not our dance cards are full for this shindig, we're partners by fate. We need ta get ourselves to safer territory before that one wakes up, and the other that made like a ghost reappears." As the two men began down the staircase to the next deck, Jittery froze. He tapped Youngblood on the shoulder and said, "Forgot something, I'll meet ya by the paddlewheel in about 15 minutes." "I'll be ready, don't be late pard." Youngblood disappeared into the night as Jittery Jim turned and went back to the wheel house for his bottle of scotch.

It took a few minutes for Jittery Jim Jonah to make it back to his cabin on the crew deck. He entered the small sparse cabin and grabbed his oilskin duffel. He decided he should tone down his clothing to blend better with the locals. He quickly changed into his old Cavalry Scout uniform, pausing to look at the several more flashy shirts he would leave behind. "I really liked that one shirt" he thought to himself, knowing there would be more shirts down the trail. He retrieved both of his Walkers, checked their loads, and slipped them into their cradles. He wrapped his bedroll and an ornately carved wood box with a silver padlock. Jittery caressed the box lightly as if it were a lover, then wrapped it inside the bedroll followed by the oilskin. He bound the package tightly and checked his money belt. The gold coins from the nights winnings were heavy around his waist. It was a good weight.

He quickly made his way aft toward the boiler room and the maintenance door on the port side. As he passed the boiler engine he was startled by a large rat scampering across the gangway ahead of him. He jumped to the left striking the hull as a shot rang out. Jittery threw himself forward and rolled to his right. Drawing one of his walkers he fired as he turned toward the bow. Finding its mark, the bullet struck square in the chest a figure standing on the gangway behind him. As the figure fell forward the pistol in the mans right hand went off. There was loud clanging sound, and as Jittery stood upright the dredge anchor swung down catching him square in the chest, propelling him through the hatch onto the transom deck and over the side into the muddy cold swirling Mississippi. The cold of the water shocked Jittery clearing his mind and creating an instantly crystal clear perception of events. As he struggled to the surface gasping for air he heard a splash and a voice. "Give my regards to the 'Runaways', Take your wealth to your grave". Jittery grabbed the oilskin bundle and tried desperately to stay afloat. The gold around his waist was dragging him under along with the swirling current of the frigid spring waters. He could see lights from the buildings on shore and struggled to focus on them as he knew he had make it to shore before the cold water sapped his strength.

He tried to swim toward shore but the harder he tried the more he realized he was losing. The current was dragging him to the bay and ultimately a watery grave in lake Superior. Just as panic began to take over he was bumped from behind. "Nice night for a swim" said Youngblood as he brought his canoe alongside Jittery Jim. 'Throw yer bundle into the canoe and grab the tether behind me. DON'T try ta get in, the canoe will overturn and we'll both be lost. Keep your legs moving so ya won't freeze too quick, we'll have ya on dry land in about 10 minutes." Youngblood threaded the canoe between the ships in the harbor towing his cargo, talking about everything and nothing just to keep Jittery awake and moving. As they reached the Western bank of the river, Jittery found his legs did in fact still work when he touched the river bottom. As he hoisted himself from the water, a breeze sent new chills through his soggy body. "Ya damn well better have a HUGE fire at your campsite or I'll burn this canoe of yours". Youngblood just smiled and took another long draw on his cigar, and said, "Coffee?".

to be continued....