

THE GREAT STEAMBOAT RACE

A Story of Revival

By: Robert Hadley

In his novel, "The Last Tycoon," F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the line, "there are no second acts in American lives," but the Belle of Louisville would beg to differ. From its maiden voyage in 1914 as a packet liner, to its showing in the inaugural 1963 Great Steamboat Race and almost sinking in 1997, the Belle has embodied resilience, reinvention and recovery.

If you had boarded the Belle back in its heydays as a cruiser on the Allegheny River, you would have seen it under a different name: the Idlewild, a product of Pittsburgh's own James Rees & Sons Co. The company, with roots dating to 1845, was known for the quality of its boilers and steam engines for both commercial and passenger vessels.

The Idlewild conveyed travelers between Memphis, Tennessee and West Memphis, Arkansas, before making its first appearance in Louisville in 1931 as a joy-ride between the city's famed Fontaine Ferry Park and its counterpart 14 miles upriver, Rose Island. During the three decades between the Great Depression and the first Great Steamboat Race, Idlewild served as a floating USO nightclub for WWII soldiers and a helper vessel for oil barges, until it was reinvented as the Avalon in 1947. From then on it served as a passenger cruiser for discerning travelers on the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and other rivers.

"It was purchased and renamed the Avalon, and served as a tramp steamer," said Kentucky Derby Festival President Mike Berry. "It just went up and down the river from city to city, doing excursions."

Until this point in time, the Idlewild/Avalon had been an amusement park shuttle, a river cruiser at least twice, and a military nightclub and oil barge assistant once. But its next incarnation was to be its most famous by far: as the city of Louisville's namesake steamboat, the Belle of Louisville.

50 Kentucky Derby Festival & The Fillies, Inc. 2018 Official Program

Total Wins 1963 - 2017

Belle of Louisville – 27
Delta Queen – 20
Belle of Cincinnati – 4
Julia Belle Swain – 1
Natchez – 1
Spirit of Jefferson – 1



According to Berry, it was actually Jefferson County Fiscal Court (pre-merger days) that purchased the Belle. At that point in time, Judge-Executive Marlow Cook acquired the vessel in 1962, rescuing it from the scrapyards.

“People knew it around here,” he said. “It had a life as a working steamboat, and that’s what people knew it from.”

As Berry pointed out, the purchase was not without controversy. Previously, the boat was viewed along the lines of the infamous Falls Fountain, a gift from the Bingham family (of Courier-Journal and WHAS fame) that eventually became too expensive to maintain and found its way to the scrapyards.

“There were a lot of people who said, ‘Why would you spend that kind of money?’” Berry explained. “But anyway, they spent the money and Marlow Cook, the county judge, put together a board for this steamboat, now named the Belle of Louisville.”

One board member was a gentleman named W. Clyde Glass, who also happened to be heavily involved in the Derby Festival, which itself had re-launched in 1956. Glass owned an ice company and was a pleasure boater, Berry said, who instantly took an interest in restoring the nearly 50-year-old vessel.

Since the price of the boat had exhausted the city’s coffers, a fundraising effort was immediately launched to pay for renovations.

“That’s where the idea of the steamboat race was born,” Berry recalled.

Louisiana Weekly, the 1966 SOLAS Act (short for Safety of Life at Sea) prohibits wooden vessels such as the Delta Queen from serving as a passenger ship for overnight trips when carrying more than 50 passengers. The Queen’s last exemption expired in the fall of 2008, and it has been sidelined ever since.

However, a new crop of contenders has emerged. Namely, the *Belle of Cincinnati*, the main competitor since 2009, which has won about half the races in which it has opposed the Belle. A couple of other newcomers are also involved: the *American Queen* and the *American Duchess*. Both boats are owned by Hornblower Marine Services of New Albany, Ind.

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That first year’s challenger was Cincinnati’s Delta Queen, a 1927 California-built boat weighing 1,650 tons and boasting 2,000 horsepower. Compared to the 450-horsepower Belle, you would think the race would be a given for the Queen, and, indeed, it won the first year. But as Captain Mark Doty, who has been with the Belle since 1981 (2008 as captain), there’s more to the battle than brute force.

“The Delta Queen was a bigger boat, and it had more horsepower,” Doty said. “But it took that horsepower to push that boat. Our top speeds back then — for both of them — were about 12 miles an hour.”

During the 45 years the Belle competed with the Queen, the latter only won 20 times, with the Belle taking the top position 19 times during the same period. Competitors the Julia Belle Swain and the Natchez each took a victory, and the Spirit of Jefferson won once when the Belle was sidelined.

The Delta Queen last raced against the Belle in 2008 when an act of Congress literally prevented the Queen from racing. According to the

To address the power discrepancy between the Belle of Louisville and its post-Delta Queen competitors (some of which are hybrid powered craft that use diesel engines), Berry said the race has evolved over the past decade into a contest, rather than just a speed race up 14 miles of river and back. A committee met to determine what tasks the boats could complete that would make the race a more fair competition. Some tasks include picking up either the UK or U of L mascot or pulling flag off of a buoy in the river.

Captain Doty said that even though the race has changed over the years, it still offers unmatched excitement for the captain and crew.

“It’s pretty exciting knowing you’ve got a 104-year-old steamboat cruising up and down the river on a daily basis,” Doty said. “But on the day of the Steamboat Race, you know that’s our day, the Belle’s day, to shine.”

The 2018 Great Steamboat Race will be a three-way battle between the Belle of Cincinnati, the American Duchess and the Belle of Louisville. The race on the Ohio River is set for Wednesday, May 2.