

Do I want to own a Paddlewheel Boat?

by Captain Gary Morton

I'm writing this article in response to a statement that most of us captains have heard many times. It usually comes during a regatta when we have visitors on board. Sometimes it's during a fall foliage or a twilight cruise when there are first time guests riding. The Captain and his wife, being the gracious hosts that we are, have shown everyone around, answered their questions and told them somewhat of how we live when we're on the river. They're seated in our best chairs, drinking our liquor, eating our food and generally having a very good time. Any why not? For those of us who are 'river people', there isn't much better than relaxing on our boats. Then it happens. These new guests start thinking and then, there it comes....."Boy, I wish we owned one of the boats and could enjoy this all the time"!

Well, it's true. We owners of paddlewheelers do enjoy our boats, we enjoy the river, the people we meet and in general, we enjoy most of what goes with life on the river. My wife, Marilyn, and I certainly do because we live on our boat full time. It's our home. However, we and most other owners, know that owning a paddlewheel boat is certainly not for everyone. It does have its downside.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to talk anyone out of owning a paddlewheel riverboat. Quite the contrary. I would like to see many more of these wonderful boats plying the inland waterways of this beautiful country but, it does take a certain type of person to own a paddlewheel boat.

Let's take a moment to look at some of the problems associated with owning a paddlewheel riverboat. I'll start at the end and work my way forward since I usually back up before I go ahead. Suppose you already own a paddlewheeler. Perhaps it's a moderate size one of say 40 or 50 feet. If this vessel is properly designed and constructed to handle the rigors of the river, then it probably weighs in the neighborhood of 20 to 30 tons. That's right, 40,000 to 60,000 pounds. Unless you have access to a terrific landing and have constructed a very special trailer, your vessel will have to stay in the river the year round. Most of them do. This means that you'll have to own your own landing or have a very good friend who owns one. It needs to be a very good landing to handle the high water and floods that usually come in late winter and early spring. You also have to be able to get to your vessel during that high water. Then there's the ice. Even if your river doesn't freeze, there's usually a smaller river or creek up stream that does then, its ice will break and run down on you. Then there's Murphy's Law. Sooner or later your river will freeze and when it breaks and runs, your blood pressure will rise.....guaranteed! Along with the high water or ice, comes the deluge of drift and debris, plastic barrels, boat docks, camping

trailers and about anything else you might imagine that comes slamming into your boat. But, if your boats built well, your lines are good, you're landing superb and your heart strong, you will probably survive.

Okay, all of the above assumes that you already own a boat. If you think you can handle all of that, next is 'how do you get a boat'? One possibility is maybe you can find one that's already built. This is not too promising. Seldom does a really good vessel become available. If one does, it's usually because the owner is very sick, very old or has died. In any case, you need to be right beside the person, or his widow, when the decision to sell is made.....they sell quickly. The few vessels you might find available are usually 'less than satisfactory' and in most cases, will require more to 'make them right' than they are worth. They were either poorly designed and/or constructed when new or they are old and so badly in need of a complete re-work that the end does not justify the means. Where does this leave you? Well, you must 'build your boat from scratch'. This is, to say the least, a sizable task.

One cannot simply go to a 'boat builder' and order a paddlewheel boat even if money is no object. There are no builders that I know of, who have the knowledge and expertise to handle such a project. There are a couple of companies who build large commercial vessels for use as cruise and dinner boats. However, these are very expensive, not set up to be used as 'live-a-boards' and many of the ones I am familiar with, really don't handle or perform very well. They are designed to accommodate large numbers of people, be very stable and only run for 2 or 3 hours around their home dock. So, about your only real alternative is to build it yourself.

Building a paddlewheel boat yourself requires at least a working knowledge of steel fabricating, mechanics, plumbing, wiring, wood working and a multitude of other skills. It's either this or have a bunch of 'very good friends' who have these talents. Next comes planning and design. There are very few designs available. The ones I've seen were for small vessels and were designed by people who knew very little about paddlewheel boats and who certainly had never built one. Much of what I've seen simple will not work. Where does this leave you? Well, you can do what most of us have done. That is, look at as many boats as you can, talk to their builders, try to glean the good and pertinent information from the less important and sometimes erroneous advice, then design your own. It also helps to join the AMERICAN STERNWHEEL ASSOCIATION, attend their meetings and attend as many Sternwheel Regattas as you can. What's a Sternwheel Regatta, you ask? Well, many river towns have realized that the uniqueness of paddlewheel boats will draw a crowd. Therefore, these towns invite captains to bring their boats on a particular date then they have a festival. This festival is usually referred to as a 'regatta'. Now, if all this sounds like a lot of work and a lot of trouble and some expense, it is, but there are

no other alternatives that I am aware of. Not if you really want a paddlewheel riverboat.

One last thing. If you are the kind of person who can handle the rigors of owning a paddlewheeler, and if you have the 'intestinal fortitude' to design and build your own, then you become a member of a rather exclusive club. You will be one of just over a hundred people who have completed the task. That's right. Of the over two hundred and eighty million people in the United States, only a little over a hundred have built a 'personal size paddlewheel boat' and to do this, it took over thirty years. In that same time period, I'm sure there have been thousands and probably tens of thousands of other types of boats built. That, in my opinion, makes the paddlewheel builders group very exclusive!

So, why not get out the camera, a note pad, the car keys and, oh yes, the check book and come joins us. I and I'm sure most of the other captains, will do whatever we can to help you in your endeavor. We'd like to have you as a fellow Sternwheel Captain!