

Steamboat Navigation on the Tennessee and Holston Rivers in the 1830s As Recollected by Marcus Parrott

by Paula Gammell

Did you ever wonder what steamboats looked like? How they worked? What the crew did and how they did it? Gee, its too bad someone who actually worked on them can't tell us all about it.

Oh, wait... they *can*. Read on:

The Knoxville was a very substantial little boat, ... a bluff bow and stern, hull about 120 feet long, about 18 feet wide and 5 feet depth of hull. She was a single engine, side-wheel boat, with two boilers, about 30 inches in diameter and about 20 feet long, two flues in each boiler, perhaps. Her cabin was built after the style of the day – berths arranged on each side of the cabin, enclosed by curtains alone: she had two state-rooms in the ladies' cabin. She carried a bar on board....

The Knoxville was a clumsy, sluggish boat, compared with boats of her size of the present day [in the 1870s]: she drew two feet light, was hard to handle, steered badly because she had such a drag-water stern and but one rudder. She made the round trip from Knoxville to head of Muscle Shoals and back in about two weeks, and carried about seventy-five tons of freight. At certain stages of the river, and, in fact, nearly all stages, it took the Knoxville two and three days to come up through the mountains....

Being a side wheel, half of one wheel had to be taken down to prevent its being torn to pieces on the sloped wall or projecting rocks, while "warping" through. It was a great task to come through those mountain passes at that day. Our pilots were afraid to approach the shore, when it was necessary to come to, to lay lines, until a deck hand or two swam ashore and some expert would perch himself away out upon the stageplank and "throw a rope"....

[W]hen the boat got within about a quarter of a mile of the place to be "warped," the man who was to take water and get ashore as best he could took the position on the outer end of the plank and plunged into the river. Then, just as he was off, the line-thrower walked to the outer end of the plank, with the line coiled in his hand. He made a great pitch towards the shore, the line uncoiled as it went, and it was a lucky throw if the man in the water could stand and catch it the first time. It frequently took several throws to make it.

When, however, the man ashore succeeded in securing the line, he ran to the nearest tree or rock and made it fast, and those on board hauled in very gently indeed....But amid all this scene of confusion, tumult and uproar, the boat is landed, a small [hawser?] is taken ahead and made fast at the foot of the shoal, a spring line is kept tied back, a line is kept tied abreast, so the boat may be considered in complete hand – one line holding her up, one holding her down, and one holding her in.

But as soon as the boat touched the shore she was quickly boarded by a small brigade of as hungry a set of mountaineers as ever wore moccasins, all wanting to hire to help "warp through the mountains." It was a god-send to them as we paid them about seventy-five cents a day and fed them all the time, and if we were several days going through they got several dollars and had eaten enough to do them until the next boat came along....

Now, can't you just *see* the steamboat? Hear the sounds it made? Feel the waves? Experience the ride? Marcus Parrott worked on steamboats about five years, back in the 1830s, and shared these and many more of his experiences with us. Read all of them in *East Tennessee Roots* Volume 10, Number 3.