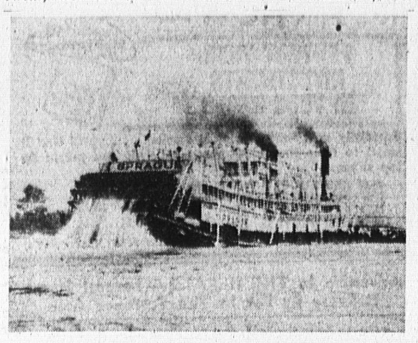


THE "BIG MAMMA" . . . Among the 2000 steamboat pictures in the collection of Hicks Thompson, 1005 Sartori Ave., is this shot of the "Big Mamma," which churned down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for 45 years and is now a museum piece. The local man, a former steamboat machinist, has many pictures and histories of the mighty paddle-wheeled vessels.

Local Man's Hobby Recalls Days Of Steamboat Whistles on Rivers

The romantic days of steamboat whistles and giant paddle wheels churning water, often described by Mark Twain, live still for Hicks Thompson, Torrance resident and collector of all kinds of lore about the steamboat.

A long-time machinist on the giant steamboats which traversed the waters of the Ohio Valley, Thompson has more than 2000 pictures of steamboats of all types, as well as volumes of literature on that old American institution.

Fascinated By Steamboats

Thompson, who lives at 1105 Sartori, has been fascinated by steamboats ever since his boyhood on the Monongahela River near Pittsburg, Pa. Throughout his life, he has eagerly read all articles he could find and gathered pictures of steamboats, together with pictures about them. Every time he sees a new steamboat picture somewhere, he sends for it.

He has furnished considerable information about the boats for historical data at shippers' meetings.

Day Passes

He laments the fact that the day of the steamboat is nearly over. First introduced in 1811, the sturdy paddle wheelers splashed their way up and down the rivers of the Midwest until the last few years. They now have been replaced almost completely by the diesel-powered vessels, which are much cheaper to operate.

Although steamboats were used widely during World War II, because diesel engines were not available, there are only a handful in operation today.

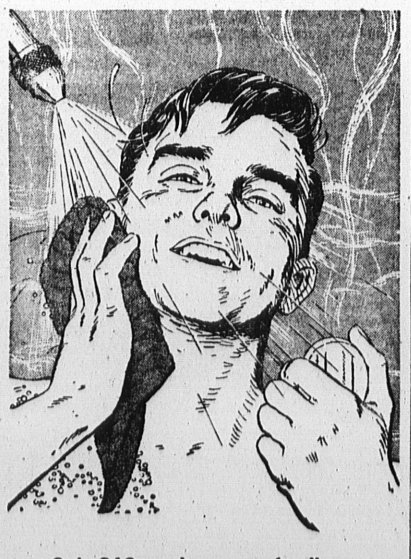
Diesels, Thompson feels, are not nearly as romantic as the steamboats.

His files include many exciting real life stories of the steamers which chugged their way through the pages of American history, including many interviews with the captains of the vessels.

"Big Mamma"

For instance, one of the stories involves the "Big Momma," now a river museum at Vicksburg, Miss., which for 45 years towed coal and oil along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. It set a record still unequalled, pushing 56 coal boats —1,750,000 tons—from Cairo, Ill., to New Orleans, La. Its contents would have filled 1500 railroad cars.

During its long career, the boat had various mishaps—cutting a showboat in two, hitting a dike and losing 45 coal barges which dumped 52,000 tons of coal into the Mississippi, striking a reef and having her cargo of oil explode, and getting caught in a whirlpool to spin like a top.



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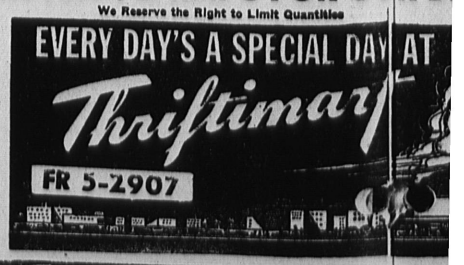

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