

Fayetteville Belle

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Occasionally, I leave out some of the facts from the story but I can never forget the reality of what happen on that rare warm evening in mid February. Even now as I try to recall the details, my heart is filled with a strange cold feeling that tries to displace every memory of that night.

I had made many trips to the various industrial landings up the Cape Fear river from Wilmington aboard the tug, Captain Jimmy. The 30 mile trip to Federal Paper on February 13, was just another typical delivery of eighty five hundred barrels number six fuel oil. It seems we always load in the morning and finish unloading at one o'clock the next morning. Right up until we finished pumping off our cargo the wind had been light and the air temperature was around 42 degrees. Because the humidity was also high I knew that there was a very strong probability I would run into fog on the trip home in those early morning hours. But, I had run the river in fog many times before.

We stowed our cargo handling equip-ment, carefully turned the rig around and started down river for home. Scarcely a mile had gone by when a thick wet fog dropped down from the woods on the high banks of the river and rapped its blinding veil around the spotlights on the tug. Of course that was the time the radar also decided to shut itself off, never to work again. I turned off the spot light and could make out the tree tops that lined both sides of the river. Since I knew that thirty mile stretch pretty well I would be able to slowly but safely bring the boat, barge, and crew down river.

At one time there were about twenty river boat landings along that stretch. But, through time less commerce was carried on the waters, and the landings were reclaimed by forest. Today, thick hard woods, cypress, and pines grow in tight thickets right down to the waters edge. And, the water is deep. Most any-where I want to tie up to the bank there is nine to twelve feet of water, even during a dry spell. Stopping along the bank is not a good idea though. Tall trees lean wearily over the banks and during this foggy winter night their upper limbs looked like a congregation of boney skeleton hands reaching up in some perpetual prayer. Should some unthinking tug captain let his boat get too close to shore these ghostly hands would swoop down and remove antennas, masts, spot-lights, or maybe even a whole pilot house. Yes, I fully intended to stay clear of the shore.

Staying clear of the shore is not an easy task however. The river is only about three hundred to four hundred fifty feet wide most of the way back to Wilmington. There are many tight "S" turns and bends which are bad enough when taking a fully loaded barge up river. A light barge together with a roaring current coming down river is enough to make a cap-tain feel like a jet pilot. But, it was all working fine this night.

As I rounded Twenty Six Mile Bend and lined up on the mile long cut, I could see a very faint orange glow that seemed far in the distance. It came out of the fog without beginning, like a dream that has no start, but whose end is remembered after waking. Only a few seconds passed when I was aware that it was growing brighter. And, in the thick wet air like I could just hear the sound of a rag time piano melody gaily coming from the light. I picked up the VHF microphone and called, "Captain Jimmy calling the north bound passenger vessel at the twenty five mile board, Cape Fear River." I released the push button but all that returned to the speaker was a quick burst of static. Then silence. I called again, but there was still no reply.

While our two vessels slowly moved together greater detail cut through the mist and I could see the vessel was a two decked boat with a pair of fluted stacks on each side of its wheel house. The music was louder now and I thought several times that I heard a woman's distant laugh. It was definitely a river boat. "Carl must have a rare February charter," I wondered. The vessel was similar to the Henrietta II, but not quite the same. If he did have a charter he wouldn't have been in the 25 mile cut at 3 o'clock on this February morning. No, this was not the Henrietta II.

I reached up to the horn lanyard and pulled a long low primordial sound from the fixture. Almost at once I heard the likewise low growl of the other boats klaxon. "At least it will be a routine port to port pass in this straight cut", I thought, but the other vessel held her course in the middle of the river.

We were drawing together and she was close enough for me to see the detail work on her hand rails. If one of us did not give way there would be a tragedy in the river that night. Despite the thick stand of trees on the starboard bank I pulled the throttles back on the Captain Jimmy and started easing her over to the shore. The tug and barge had almost stopped when the barge eased up to the bank with a lot of popping and snapping of limbs. The tug stopped just a few feet from a very large oak limb that would have taken the pilot house and me right off the boat. Getting free from all that mess of brush would be a problem for later, but for now, at least, a collision had been avoided.

I stood trembling in the pilot house watching the lights of the river boat grow larger and its image greater in detail. There were many human sounds coming from the vessel. Clearly this was a raucous party. Perhaps that was the reason the captain had not heard my radio call but had heard my horn. The lights glowed with an antique luminance. And, there was a more staccato tinkling sound of glass and silverware.

But, underneath it all there was a low chug-a chug-a chug-a that throbbed in time to a twinkle of embers flitting from the stacks.

The fog was thickening as the vessel drew closer, and I strained to see a human image standing at the wheel in the other boat's pilot house. But, it was dark, as it should have been, just as mine was. The vessel drew abeam of me and I could see down into her main salon. The lights were bright, the sounds were loud. Silver, crystal and fine china

sat precisely in front of each chair on a gleaming white table cloth. And, a chill slithered through my soul as I looked into an empty dining room.

The two vessels were close enough for the deck lights of my tug cast a faint glow over the other boat. She was a stern wheeler of the old style. In the fog I could see the regular rotation of a huge wheel. Near her deck line I could see the to and fro motion of a great push rod connecting her paddle wheel with unknown machinery in her hull.

I stared in horror, needing to catch a glimpse of a human form in her pilot house. But, only darkness surrounded the unseen wheelman. Below the wheel house windows her name was painted in gold on a bright work board, Fayette-ville Belle.

Steadily, with certain power against the flowing current, the boat pulled on past my position. The collage of sound included the rapid swish swish swish of the paddle wheel as it beat the living river. Just as the image had manifest from a faint glow, it steadily degraded, losing sharpness, as it moved away from me into the fog. In a moment I could barely make out the motion of the wheel on the stern. Then, in a few breaths it was just a faint orange glow nearly gone in the fog. I can't say when the light really stopped and my imagination began.

For a long while I stood, my eyes turned in the direction of the dead light. Like waking from a bad dream, I was suddenly aware of my heart throbbing against my chest and a single trickle of sweat rolling down my temple. Sound within my own boat seemed to turn on as if some mysterious hand had thrown a master switch. For the first time since the barge laid against the bank, I was aware of the high pitched sound of the steering gear motor. From below, the low steady vibrating rumble of the main engines waited for desire to flow through my hand to the throttles and then to the fuel pumps.

Slowly, I moved the port throttle ahead and starboard throttle astern to start working the stern of the rig out into the stream. The ghostly fingers on the shore reluctantly gave up their catch. Then, like a well trained and devoted pet, the Captain Jimmy moved her stern out to meet the natural force of the on coming current. When the tug was in position I started to shift the throttles when I heard a muffled yet defiant explosion in the direction of the invisible river boat. I did not know what had happened, but from the sound I knew they were in trouble.

Barely clearing the other shore, I let the Captain Jimmy swing her stern all the way around to head back up stream in the direction of the blast. Running full speed up river in the fog I knew that the survival of souls depended on quick action. As I rounded Twenty Six Miles Bend once again, I slowed the tug and barge down to mere steerageway.

Dexter, my watch mate, came in the pilot house inquiring about what was going on. He had been in the engine room tinkering with the fresh water pump and missed the whole thing. I filled him in on what had happened and sent him down on the bow of the barge with a hand held radio to look for wreckage and survivors. For the next two miles we slowly look for some sign of the explosion.

We found no wreckage. We saw no place along the river where the trees had been burned. There was no sound or light in the river except that from our boat. Four times I turned around to search the dark foggy river, but no sign of the Fayetteville Belle could be found. I tried to call the Coast Guard to report the events but on this part of the river trees and banks reduce the range of all electronics to a few miles.

Finally, exhausted from the tension and emotion of the night, I resumed the trip back to our home dock. The fog lifted a few miles from the Navassa bridge and the rest of the trip was just a joy ride.

I had never seen that boat before, still the name was vaguely familiar. I reported the event to the authorities in as much detail as I dared. I was told later that enquiries made at farms near the Twenty Six Mile Bend yielded no one who heard an explosion.

Filled with true curiosity and determination, I made a check of the tax records and found a listing for a stern wheeler, Fayetteville Belle, owned by a John Harrington Smith of Castle Hayne. The date of the recording was December 2, 1867. Fire flew through my very spirit as I read the words. Perhaps there was a news article in the Star News about this vessel.

With complete determination and nervous expectation I asked the news paper historian for the microfiche from 1867. Nothing! I asked for 1868. And, there it was. The February 13, 1868 front page story. Riverboat Destroyed In Explosion, Complete Loss of Life.

I have not spoken of this event since the initial report. Nor have I tried to rationalize the thing. Ghosts were never a part of my life, but that rare warm Feb-ruary night on the Cape Fear River brought physical and metaphysical powers together for me. Perhaps some February 13th, you will be at the Twenty Six Mile Bend when a thick wet fog rolls down from the banks of the river. If antique orange lights appear, stay clear.