Last pilot of largest towboat dies

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He was the last living commissioned captain of the Sprague, the world's largest river towboat that set the world record for towing during its life on the river.

Capt. Reuben Ruiz Sr., a native of Baton Rouge, died Friday. A master pilot, he was the last to have piloted the stern-wheeler Sprague before its retirement in 1948. But he left behind stories of what it was like to have manned the largest river craft.

"He always said it was the most exciting life," Gladys Andrews Ruiz said. "He was a pilot before they had radar, and it took an experienced person to do that."

Ruiz's son, Reuben Ruiz Jr., said he remembered going aboard the Sprague when it was docked at Baton Rouge and eating dinner with his father and the crew of 65 men.

"They'd tell me stories of how people waited for them religiously onshore --- they knew the Sprague's schedule as well as the crew did," he said. "He was always proud of the Sprague, especially her whistle, because when it blew, the people onshore would stop to look at them going down the river."

Ruiz, born in 1909, began his career with Exxon — then Standard Oil — at the age of 18 as a water boy at the plant, the younger Ruiz said. After three years, he worked as a deck hand on the boats and worked his way up to captain of the paddlewheel boats, hauling mostly aviation fuel and coal, Ruiz said.

Because of his experience on other Standard Oil paddlewheel boats, he became captain of the 318-foot long Sprague in the late '40s and piloted her until the boat was retired in 1948.

"During the Depression, people would wait on the river, hoping the Sprague would come ashore so they could see if there was work to do on the boat so they could eat," Ruiz said.

During the 1927 Mississippi River flood while Ruiz was a crew member, the Sprague evacuated 29,000 people from Greenville, Miss., to Vicksburg on empty barges. It left the river and went inland over flood waters to rescue people.

"They would find mules submerged in the water, and on top there would be chickens and ducks standing on the mule," Ruiz said.

Mrs. Ruiz said.

While owned by Standard Oil, the Sprague made several month-long trips to Memphis and Louisville, Ky., to haul aviation fuel and coal, the younger Ruiz said.

After the Sprague was retired, Ruiz piloted other Standard Oil boats, including the Esoo and the Baton Rouge. During a trip to Memphis, while hauling aviation fuel, one of the nozzles slipped off a barge and ignited.

"He had to push the barges out in the middle of the river while everyone of them exploded," Ruiz said. "He lost some men --- he had to watch some of them die."

Ruiz retired about 1958, not only because of the accident, but that he felt he had reached a certain turning point in his life, Ruiz said.

"He felt he had reached a pinnacle in his life," Ruiz said. "The pressures of that accident were tough on him."

During his career, he also piloted the ferry Louisiana that made the run across the river from Baton Rouge to Port Allen, "just because he enjoyed it," Mrs. Ruiz said.

The Sprague was launched in 1901 by Iowa Iron Works of Dubuque, Iowa. Standard Oil bought the Sprague in 1925 for $1.4 million and it ran between Memphis and Baton Rouge.

The 61-foot wide Sprague set a world record in 1937 when it pushed 67,000 tons of barges on the Mississippi River. It is also credited with moving more tonnage on the Mississippi River than any other towboat.

The wood in the paddlewheel was enough to build a three-bedroom house, and it was longer than a football field, the younger Ruiz said.

The city of Vicksburg bought the Sprague in 1948 to use as a floating theater and museum. It was gutted by a fire in 1974, and in 1989, the state earmarked $1.2 million for its restoration.

Vicksburg officials are still undecided when they will begin restoration.

Ruiz's family is planning to take his books and memorabilia to be shown in a museum in Memphis.

"It was the dream of all the captains and river pilots to captain the Sprague," the younger Ruiz said.

"He loved the river and he knew it real well," he said of his father. "He saw the river change course several times, and when he heard that some engineers were going to try to alter the river, he said, 'That won't work. When the Mississippi River decides to do something, she does it.'"