Mrs. Snyder Recalls Riding Ferries

By Ethel Holloman
Town Talk Staff Writer

Editor’s Note: A three-part series on the opening of the Murray Street bridge, published earlier this month, conjured up memories for a number of old-timers who were on hand for the celebration April 12, 1902.

Riding the ferries that plied Red River between Alexandria and Pineville until 1902 was fun for many youngsters, and Mrs. Joe Snyder, now 86, was one of them.

“I wasn’t too excited about the bridge opening,” she chuckled. “I had it better the other way.”

No doubt it was more fun for the 13-year-old girl to cross on the ferry than to walk across the bridge. Her father, Joseph Spotten, was pilot on the “G.W. Bolton,” the last ferry to make regular runs between the twin cities before the bridge opened April 12, 1902.

Rode in Pilot House

Daily as Maggie Spotten went to and from Alexandria, where she attended St. Francis Xavier Academy, she rode in the pilot house with her dad.

On the Pineville side she boarded the ferry at the loading dock between Main and Lakeview Streets; on the Alexandria side the dock was between Murray and Washington Streets.

Her father was an Alexandria native and had been a pilot on the “Sentell” from New Orleans to Shreveport for many years.

After the bridge opened here he served as day tollman but he continued to keep his pilot license valid. A license issued Oct. 30, 1907, hangs in the office of his grandson, Mayor John K. Snyder of Alexandria.

Boats Used Wood

Nearly all the boats operating in this area used wood, mostly pine, for fuel.

“Papa’s log lists every landing on both sides of the river though many were merely woodyards,” Mrs. Snyder said.

She recalled some of the landings between Alexandria and Boyce, or Cotille, as it was known in early steamboat days: E.J. Barrett’s, Mossum Trot, China Grove, New Hope, Marye’s, Omega and Smith’s Village.

Some of the landings below Alexandria included David’s Woodyard, Sam Henarie, Sandy Bayou, Cutoff Bayou, Gum Point and Pearl’s Woodyard.

One of the best known steamers on Red River was the “Peminah.”

While she wasn’t a very large boat, she had a wildcat whistle that “would wake the dead.” When she came into view about midnight with her electric lights burning and the wildcat whistle going, some people thought judgement day had arrived.

Several years later the “Peminah” wrecked en route to New Orleans, sinking at the head of Bayou Rapides. Her whistle was dismantled and used for many years on the power plant here.

Early Entertainment

Alexandria and Pineville may have been small towns in the early years of the 20th century but youngsters growing up found a lot of entertainment.

“The new bridge made it much easier for us to take part in the social functions of both towns,” Mrs. Snyder said.

AL G. Field marched his minstrels through the streets of Alexandria; the great Minnie Madden Fiske appeared behind footlights; Jennie Holman starred with her noted company; and the Paul English Players were formed in Alexandria.

Three of the most popular places of entertainment were the Ice House Hotel, Holcomb’s Opera House and Livery Stable and the Rapides Theatre.

Two of them are gone — the Ice House on Front Street fell victim to a fire even before the river encroached upon its neighbors. The Opera House was located on the corner of Fourth and DeSoto Streets, now occupied by a portion of Rapides Bank and Trust Co. The theatre became the Paramount more than 40 years ago.

Its first billing was the Famous Four Cohans.

Vaudeville reached its heyday here just before World War I and continued for almost 10 years. There were also tent shows and chautauquas.

Pineville also had its attractions. The National Cemetery not only brought mourners, but young people with their cameras. There was also the summer house, long since demolished, which was a popular courting place.

Youths from the two towns attended dances held in a hall at Alexandria Lumber Co., then located on the old Marksville highway in Pineville. The lumber company was owned by Ed Band, who later moved to San Antonio, Tex., and W. D. Wadley. They built the hall to provide entertainment for employees’ families.

Cyclones

Mrs. Snyder recalled cyclones that hit Alexandria and Pineville the early part of the century. Perhaps at no other time in the history of the bridge was its link stronger between the two communities.

Physicians were able to reach the injured quicker than by ferry and others were able to administer to those who had lost members of their families and their homes.

The first cyclone hit Alexandria April 5, 1907. Four were killed; 15 injured and damages estimated at $130 thousand.

A cyclone on April 4, 1923 struck both towns though Pineville was hit harder.

The Town Talk April 5 reported that 13 had been killed, 60 injured and 142 houses and stores damaged or destroyed at a loss estimated at $500 thousand.

The twister damaged the Alexandria power plant which threw the twin cities into darkness adding confusion to the tragedy.

The home of Mrs. Snyder’s parents on Main Street, the Ice House on Front Street fell victim to a fire even before the river encroached upon its neighbors.

“My home at 605 Lakeview wasn’t damaged,” Mrs. Snyder said.

For many years she was Pineville’s social correspondent, working with Mrs. George Whitney, “society” editor of The Town Talk. In the column Pineville Notes she reported weddings, visitors and social events.

Mrs. Joe Snyder of Pineville remembers the festivities for the Red River bridge opening April 12, 1902. But she wasn’t too excited about it for she had more fun crossing on the ferry and riding in the pilot house with her dad, Joseph Spotten. (Town Talk Staff Photo)