Memories of the old "Rex" recalled

(EDITOR'S NOTE--Archie S. Hollister, who wrote a column on Cameron parish history, folklore and anecdotes for the Pilot for almost ten years, died recently. Because much of his material was untimely and some of our newer readers may have missed some of his columns, we will be reprinting some of them from time to time. The following article appeared in the Feb. 26, 1960 issue.)

By ARCHIE S. HOLLISTER

Anyone who deals with the history of Cameron, even as I do in this column, must sooner or later get around to making some mention of the old stern-wheeled steamer, the BOREALIS "REX." That resounding name is quite a mouthful, and it took a conscious effort on the part of the speaker to pronounce it. As was to be expected, the full name was seldom used and the old boat was known simply as the Rex. Nor was there any need for further identification; when you said "Rex" you were in immediate communication with your hearers. Everyone from Johnson Bayou to Cow Island knew what you were talking about.

The name, Borealis Rex, when translated from the sonorous Latin, comes out as King of the North. Few people, I am sure, felt the lack of it. After all, a name was a name, and was about all there was to it.

TO ONE ACCUSTOMED to the wind driven schooners with their intermittent delays, and the gasoline powered boats with their noisy engines and excessive vibration, a ride on the Rex was an enlightening experience.

Here was smooth, quiet, apparently effortless transportation. Here were spacious decks and comfortable seats and room for one to move about. A person could usually be sure of having friends and acquaintances as fellow passengers, and there was ample time for the exchange of news and reminiscences, for the trip was a leisurely one, taking five or six hours.

Coffee was usually available at all times, and the cook served dinner to those affluent persons who did not balk at the high price of fifty cents for meals that could not have been surpassed in any of the Lake Charles restaurants at that time. (They can't do it either today, for that matter.)

Remember the schedule correctly, the Rex ran from Lake Charles to Cameron on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and returned on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

The old stern-wheeler had a contract to carry the United States Mail; in addition she transported passengers, freight, groceries, bales of cotton, cattle, firewood, building materials, and the thousand and one articles of commerce and trade which the community had to buy and sell.

Her passenger list was always larger on any one trip than likely to be at least a dozen or two, and often seventy-five or a hundred people engaged passage at once. The river was the highway to the world, and the Rex the means whereby they came and went.

Ordinary citizens merely going to Lake Charles for an overflow of any description took the travelling salesmen of that day, recruits teeing for the army and those same recruits returned later as veterans, the public officials of the parish going about their duties, canes-buyers, cotton-buyers, the judge of the district court and his following of lawyers, peddlers, a deputy and his posse, the breather of the cloth, school teachers, insurance salesmen, solicitors of magazine subscriptions, an indifferent dentist or a fitter of eye glasses, the doctor with a critically ill patient on the way to a hospital in Lake Charles or New Orleans, mon-

..."whole new breed of men, sportsmen, horse riders, the world at large. The Rex carried a fair cross-sampling of all humanity on her broad decks and a student of human life and behavior would have been in his element there."

... I HAVE NO clear idea of the size of the Rex—I would say that perhaps she was a hundred feet and more in length and possibly thirty in breadth. She was the typical old Mississippi stern-wheeler with multiple decks and tall smoke-stacks. In fact, it is my understanding that she was actively engaged in commerce on that river when the new owners acquired her for the run on the Calcasieu.

They had to bring her around the Gulf—there was no Intracoastal Canal then—and a ticklish enough job it was to do it too. Mississippi steamers are not built for rough water, and even the minor swells on the Gulf could have proved disastrous.

A framed picture of the Rex hung in my mother's living room for years. I searched in vain for it after Hurricane Audrey.

It would be impossible to estimate the influence that this one boat—and she had no rivals—exerted upon the lives of the inhabitants of Cameron. She was their one link with the outside world, and her coming and departure were moments of importance.

It was the accepted order of the day for people to "go down to meet the Rex," as they expressed it. Some had legitimate business reasons, others were expecting friends or relatives, and others went for no reason at all, except perhaps the force of habit and the chance to get in on a little excitement. Even solid citizens, not otherwise given to foolishness, would saddle a horse and ride ten miles merely to be on hand when the boat docked.

OLD AGE, AND hurricanes, and fires finally put the Rex out of commission. Even before the first highway was opened in 1931, she had ceased making her runs, and by the time the opening of the road only a few miles away, it was not worth considering.

Her day is gone, and she herself is gone, and with them went a goodly company of men, genuine interest in the special educational requirements of their exceptional children," Dodd said. "The schools are doing their part to carry out the state's policy of providing equal educational opportunity for all children, regardless of their handicaps."