Ferries ‘brought people together,’ says son of engineer

Ferries have long history in Baton Rouge area

HAROLD C. HILL JR. researched the history of ferries at Baton Rouge for a talk he gives. The following is excerpted from Hill’s history.

“The Flying Bridge” was one of the earliest ferries operating between Baton Rouge and the west bank. Attached by chain to a buoy anchored in midstream, the ferry, little more than a barge, was carried to the opposite bank by the river’s current.

In 1850, Robert Fulton built the “Clarmont,” the first practical steamboat. By 1820, the ferries at Baton Rouge were likely powered by steam. Some prices for crossing: foot passengers, 25 cents; horse riders, $1.25; two-wheeled carriage, horse and driver, $5; four-wheeled carriage, two horses and driver, $6; cows and horses, 75 cents each; sheep and pigs, 12 and a half cents each.

H.B. Faverot obtained a 10-year ferry lease in 1832 for $500 and $25 a year for Baton Rouge and West Baton Rouge Parish. In 1840, Faverot signed another contract that stipulated that a steamboat be used. In all probability he was already using a steamboat and wanted to get it in writing.

The ferry lease changed hands many times during the 1850s and 1860s. The city of Baton Rouge went into the ferry business in 1865, right after the Civil War. The city operated the ferry for a few months before awarding the lease to Frederick Arbour and Alfred Delahaye, a five-year contract for $2,200 on Nov. 6, 1865.

C.C. Gibbons bought the franchise in 1870 and added a new steamboat, the “Irene.” She was built in Memphis for $3,000 and arrived at Baton Rouge in January 1880. The 90-foot-long “Irene” carried 15 wagons and teams.

The “John J. Brown” was the first boat built especially for the Baton Rouge ferry. Constructed in Jeffersonville, Ind., it arrived Sept. 11, 1888.

Older Baton Rougeans remember George West who invited ferry riders down to the river to be baptized.

Residents share their memories

By ED CULLEN

We asked readers for their recollections of the ferries. Here are a few of their memories.

As a child, George Hill, no relation to Harold C. Hill Jr., the subject of our feature story, was fascinated by the workings of the ferries’ engine rooms.

Born in West Baton Rouge Parish in 1907, Hill remembers “the larger ferry, the Louisiana, which had two smoke stacks, and the smaller ferry, the ‘Baton Rouge,’ which had one smoke stack.

At first, the ferries burned coal. The furnaces would have been in the doors of the firebox under the boiler so one could stand there and look at the tremendous fire that perpetually raged under the boiler.

Later, the ferry masters used gas, which was cheaper than coal. Hill recalled the firemen being filled with a gas, a mixture of oil and gas, which was then ignited with matches. The flames would have been a foot or two tall and could be seen from 50 or 60 miles away.

In 1944, Hill also worked at the ferry dock. He would cut the string on the steamboat to prepare it for departure and also watch the ferries as they crossed to West Baton Rouge.

Hill said he was very proud of the ferries and enjoyed spending his summers working at the dock. He also enjoyed the community atmosphere and would often take his children to the ferry to watch the boats come and go.

We hope this article inspires readers to dig deep into their memories and share stories of their own.

See FERRIES, Page 6H

See MEMORIES, Page 6H
when he was 43. The Hills married in 1970.

"Harry was in the Pacific war," "Bobby," they said, "he was in the Pacific war and over there in Korea. He's a hero, you know."

After the war, "Bobby" became a teacher at the State Normal School and then a professor of history at the University of Illinois.

"He was a very popular man at the university," "Bobby" said. "He was always full of stories and had an infectious smile."