Riverboat building springs to life as gaming industry picks up steam

EDITOR'S NOTE — Not since the years just following the Civil War has there been such a boom in the building of riverboats. Credit the riverboat gamblers. This spanking new fleet of paddlewheelers offers truly floating crap games, roulette on the run, the jingle of slot machines drowned out by the steam whistles of the calliope.

By Hugh A. Mulligan

AP Special Correspondent

MORGAN CITY (AP) — "Steamboating's dead," former pilot Mark Twain decreed in 1882 when he returned to the river after an absence of 21 years as a passenger aboard the Gold Dust and hailed only a handful of other packets chugging down to New Orleans.

But in the words of the cable he sent 15 years later to The Associated Press about reports of his own demise, the celebrated author's obituary for riverboats was "greatly exaggerated."

Now more than a century later, shipyards all over south Louisiana, along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and as far north as Elgin, Ill., are raising ornamented smokestacks, hanging paddle wheels and affixing curlicue railings and gingerbread pilothouses on boats being launched at a frantic pace to accommodate the roll of the dice more than the roll of the river.

In Louisiana alone, 31 riverboats are either under construction or have been delivered in the past year as a result of legalized riverboat gambling along the mighty Mississippi and its tributaries.

Gaming experts predict 90 or more will be afloat before the century is out.

"This is the biggest boom in riverboat building since right after the Civil War," said Larry Hairston, senior vice president of Service Marine, watching a huge crane lift the twin smokestacks onto the purple and gold trimmed Shreveport Rose at the sprawling boatyard along the Atchafalaya River in Morgan City.

"We're delivering eight boats a week, working two 10-hour shifts six days a week. We got six under way here now. Boats we built or converted are in Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Iowa and Illinois. Indiana will be next.

"I've had quite a few inquiries from overseas. The latest was from the People's Republic of China for a 300-foot stern-wheeler on the Yangtze. Donald Trump has been here a couple of times looking around. The Donald has an application in for a boat at the foot of Canal Street in New Orleans and another in Gary, Ind."

But gambling is not the sole reason why all of a sudden there is a demand for calliope players, frosted-glass etchers, experts in the hydraulics of paddle wheel buckets and other rare artisans who have been in decline since the J.M. White in 1878 was deemed the epitome of elegance afloat.

She dazzled the river trade with monogrammed linen napery, walnut-and rosewood-paneled staterooms boasting double beds instead of bunks, two bridal suites and brass spittoons every six feet along her hurricane deck.

Just a mile or so up the river at McDermott's yard, known worldwide for its offshore oil platforms, shipwrights are adding deck upon deck to the all-steel hull of the American Queen, the largest overnight passenger vessel to be built in an American yard since the liner United States in 1951.

"Now there's a boat," concedes Hairston in almost reverential awe. "She carries a price tag of over $60 million, while ours is for between $12 million and $16 million."

"Like elevators, a swimming pool, telephones and climate controls in every stateroom, and an exercise room for the physically obsessed."