High Rollin'

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 gambling. This spanking new fleet of paddle wheelers offers truly floating crap games, roulette, slot machines, and even dice.

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 raisings 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 decade 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 yard along the Atchafalaya River in Morgan City.

'We're delivering eight boats a week. We're going for between $12 million and $16 million.'

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 platform forms, 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 1901.

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

Inspired by the J.M. White, but almost a third again as long, the 412-foot American Queen is a genuine steamboat.

Two steam engines taken from the steam dredge Kennedy, c.1930, turn her 60-ton paddle wheel.

Her Victorian decor features gilt mirrors, marbeltop tables and overstuffed chairs in staterooms opening onto promenade decks and a grand salon including a theater with private boxes modeled after a 19th-century opera house in a small river town.

A wide staircase under a stained-glass skylight sweeps down to a dining saloon lit by chandeliers, each in Mark Twain's words: 'an April shower of glittering glass drops.' Cap'n Mary's Parlor, re-creating the 'no cussin' or swearin' ladies lounge of the steamboat gothic era will have 'carpets soft as mush' to meet Mark Twain's specifications.

'There'll be some amenities Mark Twain never dreamed of,' says Tom Carman, a naval architect and vice president of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. which has scheduled the newcomer to join her 'pure steamboat' sisters, the Delta Queen and the Mississippi Queen, in plying the Mississippi and Ohio early next year. 'Like elevators, a swimming pool, telephones and climate controls in every stateroom, and an exercise room for the physically obsessed.'