Schrey recalls days aboard famous riverboat

Editor's note: Today's Louisiana Special is another in a series of features called "Looking Back" in which veterans of politics, law, business, education, law enforcement and other high profile occupations compare the present to those of years past.

By ED CULLEN
Assistant People editor

Handsome young Kurt Schrey stepped aboard the sternwheeler Sprague at Baton Rouge in 1927. It was early summer. Schrey was dashing in cap, leather gloves and a tailor-made suit with wide shoulders. He carried a camera.

With unemployment at 20 percent in Germany, Schrey, who graduated two years earlier from mechanical engineering school in Darmstadt, felt lucky to have a job.

He'd worked as an assistant diesel engineer on a Dutch-American tanker before getting the job on the Sprague. It was Schrey's understanding that he'd been hired as a diesel expert.

There had been a good-bye party for Schrey aboard his old ship the night before. Schrey, anxious and a little hungry, stood alone on the Standard Oil dock as the tanker turned and headed down river.

Schrey eyed his new home.

Built at Dubuque, Iowa, in 1902, the Sprague was a famous riverboat near the end of the sternwheeler era on America's rivers. She was the world's largest sternwheeler, 315 feet long and 62 feet wide. Her paddlewheel was 37 feet in diameter. The Sprague's steering wheel measured 14 feet across and dominated the pilothouse.

Rivermen reached for superlatives to describe the Sprague. She was the "only pipeline running lengthwise of the Mississippi River," a reference to the thousands of barrels of oil in barges she pushed between Baton Rouge and Memphis.

Called towboats because large river vessels once towed barges behind them, these boats later pushed barges lashed together in formations called "tows."

In 1927, the Sprague set a world record for largest tow by showing 56 barges and four coal boats loaded with 67,000 tons of coal from Louisville to New Orleans. The same year, the Sprague pushed empty barges to the town of Greenville, Miss. to rescue thousands of people from the flooded Mississippi Delta.

Schrey's love of the Sprague was diminished when he was handed "a mop and some other equipment" and told his job was that of wiper in the engine room.

Working in 110 degree temperature 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The 27-year-old Schrey lost 20 pounds the first month.

"I didn't mind," he said. "I had a job."

American rivermen liked Schrey. He was 6 feet tall, personable and bore a dashing scar prominently on his left cheek. Schrey fought two saber duels as a college student. His mates on the Sprague laughed at his German sleeping suit.

"They said I looked like Santa Claus," he said. 

"Those first months on the Mississippi River were like waking to find myself in the stories of Mark Twain. He slept on sand bars. He watched as a fisherman beached a 48-pound catfish. His buddies took him on a half-mile trek through the swamp to a honky-tonk, 'a house in the middle of nowhere. We drank homebrew from tin cans.'"

At first, Schrey had trouble understanding the rough English of his shipmates. Once, Schrey worked for hours on more than a dozen giant nuts from "the low pressure steamside of the paddlewheel." 

When the engineer came back, "he was beside himself. I didn't speak English very well and he'd had chewing tobacco in his mouth. He'd told me to tighten the nuts. I had taken them off."

At the end of three months, the captain called Schrey to his office. He told Schrey the engineers were impressed with his work. He laughed as he recalled looking down from the Sprague at Schrey standing on the dock. "You looked like the Prince of Wales," the captain said.

Schrey's time in the engine room had been a test. Schrey had passed, the captain said.

"The captain gave me a desk in his office. He let me rest up. I spent a month learning the (boat's) plant and improving my English," he said.

Before Schrey left Germany, he and his future father-in-law had come to an understanding. Schrey's fiancée, Erna, would not leave for the United States until Schrey was making at least $150 a month. Schrey wrote to his father-in-law that he had been promoted and that he would make $130 a month.

"Erna saw the letter first," Schrey said. "She steamed it open and changed the $130 to $150."
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Schrey’s career in research and development at Standard Oil was spent in Baton Rouge.

“They only sent the smart ones to other places,” he laughed.

Schrey ran a division of the oil company’s Baton Rouge refinery during World War II. Schrey had become an American citizen, but Standard Oil decided he shouldn’t go into the catalyst plant for a while.

“I operated the catalyst plant by telephone for six months from an office on Scenic Highway,” Schrey said.

In 1947, the Schreys bought 130 acres on Harrells Ferry Road where they lived and raised cattle. In 1956, the couple sold 110 acres to the parish for what became Forest Park. The couple moved to St. James Place in 1983, where Schrey, 92, lives. Erna Schrey died two years ago.

Standard Oil sold the Sprague to the city of Vicksburg for $1 in 1948. The sternwheeler was a tourist attraction when it burned at its mooring in 1974.

“It’s in pieces all over the place,” said Nancy Bell, executive director of the Vicksburg Foundation for Historic Preservation.

“The paddlewheel and some of the larger pieces are on U.S. 61 North. Downtown, on Levee and Mulberry streets, there are some stanchions and engine parts. And they’re getting ready to move that for a casino.”