Telling the story of the steamboats

Journey of the New Orleans also unfolds in West Baton Rouge Museum exhibition

BY ROBIN MILLER
Art writer

William Howard Taft parked his bateau along the river bank in Natchez, Miss., in 1909, and you have to wonder if the steamboat on which he traveled was as elegant as the J.M. White.

Taft was president of the United States, after all. Air Force One was nonexistent, and though he probably often traveled by train, he chose a steamboat for this trip. No, he chose a bateau.

Seems that's always been the way of presidents, traveling in big boats. And this boat was captured by Henry C. Norman's camera.

It seems frozen in time, on the newly-painted lavender walls of the West Baton Rouge Museum's main gallery.

And was the president's personal steamboat as extravagant as the J.M. White? The photographer label doesn't say, and the photo only shows the bateau from a distance.

But it's a safe bet that Taft's steamboat didn't fully measure up to the "Mistress of the Mississippi." No steamboat of that era could.

Backtrack along the wall from the bateau photo and see for yourself. Photos of the J.M. White document a floating palace, as a floating staircase entrance to its luxurious decks to its gilded ballroom.

It was designed so that every passenger felt as if he or she were royalty. Or president.

And Norman also immortalized it in photographs, just as he did most of the steamboats that traveled the Mississippi River.

Better yet, he recorded daily life on these vessels, from the working crew to the passengers to the cotton that was transported up river to the gamblers. Yes, gambling was rampant on these boats, and women often tried their hand at poker.

Want proof? Norman's photo of gamblers on the J.M. White shows it all.

The photographer's work now is part of the Tom and Joan Gandy Collection titled "Kings of the River at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas.

More than 30 photos from that collection are hanging in the West Baton Rouge Museum's exhibit, "Two Hundred Years of Steamboats on the Mighty Mississippi," through Oct. 28. In addition, the museum also is commemorating the bicentennial of the steamboat New Orleans' journey to Louisiana as featured in the display, Steamboat a Comin': The Legacy of the New Orleans, from the Rivers Institute at Hanover College.

The New Orleans' journey is documented through a series of panels. It was the first steamboat to successfully navigate America's western inland rivers, and its journey forever changed American life by hastening the opening of the American West and transforming the country's landscape, economy and culture.

"So much happened to them on this trip," said Lauren Davis, the museum's curator. "It's amazing that they made it through to New Orleans."

She's right. The panels take visitors on a journey that began in October 1811 and traveled the Ohio and Mississippi rivers while Halley's Comet flew overhead and an earthquake shook the ground below.

Suspicious Native Americans mistook the boat as something created by the comet, and there was a time when there was only six inches of water between the New Orleans' hull and the river bottom.

"There were people who didn't believe the boat would make it, and they turned out to see it," Davis said. "If it was going to sink, they were going to be there. And if it made it through, they could say they saw it."

And along the way, Captain Nicholas Roosevelt's wife, Lydia, gave birth to the couple's son, Henry Latham Roosevelt.

"She was pregnant, but she wasn't going to leave her husband's side," Davis said. "She didn't think twice about boarding that boat."

The New Orleans finally docked in its namesake city in January 1812. It not only was the first steamboat to make this trip, but it also was the first steamboat to make this trip, but it also was the first steamboat to make this trip, but the first to come to Louisiana, ushering in the era of steamboat transportation along the Mississippi and spurring Louisiana's economy before the Civil War.

And that part of the story is told through Norman's photographs, along with paintings and historical artifacts on steamboats, including a set of dishes.

"And we have the wheel that is said to have been used in the pilot house on the ferry that ran between Port Allen and Baton Rouge," said Julie Rose, the museum's director. "It was donated to us by Z. David DeLoach, who had the wheel on display in his office at DeLoach Marine Services."

The wheel has been mounted on a platform, and visitors are allowed to step up and try their hand at guiding the wheel. It's big, and it takes a little muscle power to turn it.

Two Hundred Years of Steamboats on the Mighty Mississippi

WHAT: An exhibit of photographs and historical artifacts that tell the story of steamboats on the Mississippi River as they passed through Louisiana.


ADMISSION: $4, adults; $2, seniors and children. West Baton Rouge Parish residents and members of the West Baton Rouge Historical Society are admitted free.

INFORMATION: Call (225) 336-2422 or visit http://www.westbatonrougemuseum.com.

"Part of the wheel extended below the pilot house," Rose explained. "Only the top was in the pilot house. The pilot wouldn't be able to look over the top of the wheel, otherwise."

Now, take this hands-on experience and walk along the gallery walls. Think about the strength and skill it would have taken to man the wheel of the Betsy Ann, the Guiding Star, the Concordia, the T.P. Leather, the Lula Prince and the J.M. White along the Mississippi River.

Norman took photos of all of these boats. He was 20 years old in 1870, when he took over Henry D. Garner's photography studio in Natchez. He lived and worked 45 years in the city, and his son, Earl, ran the studio after Norman's death.

And Norman clearly was fascinated by the J.M. White. The steamboat was 320 feet long and 91 feet wide. It secured the grandest steamboat to travel the Mississippi.

It was a boat that made passengers feel as if they were kings and queens. Or, at least, a U.S. president.