Worst ferry disaster in U.S. history remembered

77 people died in 1976 collision in St. Charles

BY MATT SCALLAN
The Times-Picayune

NEW ORLEANS – Thirty years ago this month, the ferryboat George Prince, packed with construction and chemical plant workers, pushed off from a Destrehan dock into the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Norwegian tanker ship Frosta.

It was just after 6 a.m. on Oct. 20, 1976.

Ferry pilot Egidio "Gene" Auletta, whose half-empty bottle of whiskey was later found in the pilot house, ginned the ferry's engines into the current. As the 120-foot ferry turned toward the Luling dock, Auletta seduced oblivious to frantic horn blips and radio calls from the 665-foot-long tanker that towered over the ferry's port side.

A few minutes later, when the ferry was only 800 feet from its destination, the Frosta ran over the George Prince like a bathtub toy, flipping it and spilling cars and people into the water. Of the 95 people who boarded the ferry on that clear early morning, 77 died, including Auletta and the four members of his crew.

Today, less than a mile from the site of the tragedy, the massive Hale Boggs Bridge spans the river, enabling people to travel between the east and west banks of St. Charles Parish in moments. But there is nothing to mark the spot of the worst ferry disaster in U.S. history.

"People seem to have forgotten about it," said Royd Anderson, a Hahnville High School teacher who wrote and produced a 22-minute documentary about the disaster.

Anderson, 35, produced the film as the final project for his master's degree in communications at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He started teaching television production at Hahnville High this year.

"When I started working on this two years ago, I had no idea I'd be working in St. Charles Parish," he said.

The only monument to the victims sits 15 miles away near the St. John the Baptist Parish Courthouse in Edgard. It was placed there in 1979 after St. Charles Parish officials refused an offer to place it on the grounds of their courthouse in Hahnville. Anderson and some of the victims' families said a memorial in St. Charles Parish is long overdue.

One idea is to place it at the public playground built under the bridge, whose foundations were rising out of the river when the collision occurred.

"There should be a memorial here, and it should be on the east bank," said Thomas Pritchett, whose brother, Kevin, died in the collision. Kevin, who lived a few blocks away from the landing, had lied about his age to get a construction job at the Monsanto plant in Luling, his brother said.

Pritchett said he was running late that morning and missed the deadly voyage by a few minutes.

A dozen St. John Parish residents died in the collision. Nineteen of the victims, including all of the crew, were from St. Charles Parish, and 18 were from Jefferson Parish. Another 17 victims were from Hammond, Tickfaw and Ponchatoula in Tangipahoa Parish.

As the recovery operation began, the banks of the river were lined with relatives awaiting the fate of their loved ones.

Pritchett said he and his mother, Dolores, scuffled with a sheriff's deputy as they tried to get closer to the riverbank. They were beaten with public intimidation, but the charges were dropped.

Boats were stacked in the Knights of Columbus hall in Norco and overflown into the community's fire station.

While the years have dulled the memory of the disaster for some, questions remain as to why parish officials didn't want the monument.

News reports at the time attributed St. Charles' refusal to accept the monument to a variety of reasons, including politics and embarrassment by St. Charles officials about the disaster. However, Pucheaux said it was just too painful.

"A lot of people died. It's just not something that we wanted to memorialize," he said.

Anderson mentions the controversy in his documentary, and, for that reason, St. Charles officials said they wouldn't show it on the government access channel.

"We want the channel to be nonpolitical," said parish public information officer Steve Sinamon, who oversees its content. "The last thing we want is to have people say we're taking shots at somebody."

A Coast Guard investigation into the disaster concluded in 1977 that the death toll was so high because the tanker quickly flipped the ferry over.

A glancing blow, or a collision at a slower speed, might have allowed the George Prince to remain upright, it said.