

Paddleboats provided floating luxury

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Travel by water proved the easiest and often most comfortable transportation method before the advent of automobiles, paved roads and easy river crossings.

Some of the most picturesque boats were the paddle-wheelers which traveled from San Francisco up the Sacramento River to Sacramento, on the Sacramento River up to Red Bluff, or down the San Joaquin all the way to Fresno.

During the Gold Rush, flat-bottomed paddle-wheelers, usually with side wheels, either came from the East Coast under their own steam around South America, were brought dismantled on other ships, or were built in San Francisco.

Famous names include the Antelope, who arrived from the East Coast in 1850. It was she who carried the first Pony Express rider, William Hamilton, from Sacramento to San Francisco on April 14, 1860.

The most luxurious steamer during the 19th century was the Chrysopolis, a San Francisco-built side wheeler who set the still unbroken record for steamboats traveling between Sacramento and San Francisco at 5 hours and 19 minutes. She was later converted into the ferryboat Oakland, plying the San Francisco Bay until 1940.

Several different transportation companies formed over the years and operated steamboats. Among the earliest operators were Capt. Nels Anderson and Andrew Nelson, who transported freight up to Sacramento during the Gold Rush years. In 1875, they formed a new company, the California Transportation Company. Capt. Anderson's son, Alfred E. Anderson eventually took the company over and expanded its service ports to include San Francisco, Sacramento and Stockton.

By the 1880s, railroads began to have an impact on freight transportation on the water.

The advent of the automobile in the early 20th century further threatened the steamboat business. Although surely aware of these odds, Alfred E. Anderson pursued his idea of building two of the finest and largest riverboats to operate an overnight service between San Francisco and Sacramento. They would replace earlier, smaller vessels.

Despite heavy opposition by some of the partners involved, construction of the two boats began at the port of Stockton in 1924.

Each new boat was 285-feet long, including the rear paddle wheel, and featured four steel rudder, four decks, and one smokestack. The hulls were constructed from galvanized steel plates fabricated in Scotland. The boats could carry approximately 1,000 tons of cargo each. Ninety-six cabins were fitted out with hot and cold running water, electric lights, and call buttons; 28 of these cabins also boasted communicating or even private baths.

The four decks included a freight deck for cargo and automobiles; the saloon deck with staterooms, dining room, a barber shop, and the lounge; the observation deck with lounge, cocktail bar and passenger cabins; and the so called Texas deck, which housed the pilothouse and officer's quarters. Below the freight deck was another level, which housed machinery, the galley where all the food was prepared, crew quarters, and simple multiberth cabins for male passengers only.

Passengers would board at either ports, dine on delicious food in the large dining room, dance to music in the elegant social halls, admire the Delta landscape and night sky from the observation deck and spend a restful night. After a hearty breakfast the next morning, they would arrive rested and refreshed at their destination.

The California Transportation Company had advertised its route for years as the Delta Route. The two new steamers received the names Delta King and Delta Queen respectively. The Delta King was launched in Stockton on May 9, 1925, the Delta Queen followed on December 12, 1925. It took another year and a half before both were completely fitted out for their maiden voyage. The cost was astronomical, with \$1,000,000 spent for each boat.

Early advertising promised a journey "Through the Heart of California - Comfort and Luxury Afloat" and called the boats "Steamers De Luxe." They were scheduled to leave San Francisco/Sacramento at 6:30 p.m. and reach Sacramento/San Francisco at 5:30 a.m. Connections at Sacramento included the Sacramento Northern Railway, or passengers could bring their own automobile and continue on to Lake Tahoe and other scenic destinations.

Fares were \$1.80 one way or \$3 round trip. Transporting a car cost \$3.50. A cabin added another \$1 to \$3 to the trip.

The grand day arrived on June 1, 1927, when the Delta King set out on its first official run to Sacramento. The Delta Queen followed the next day.

But already the future of the two boats was overshadowed. Only a few days earlier, on May 21, 1927, the Carquinez Bridge had officially opened.

On May 20, 1927, the Vacaville Reporter printed this terse note about the dedication of the two boats in the section "Facts of All Kinds Gathered From Many Points in the State and Boiled Down": "Dedication of the Delta King and Delta Queen, million-dollar passenger boats for the run between Sacramento and San Francisco on the Sacramento River, was held in Stockton last week."

The opening of the Carquinez Bridge on the other hand rated first page headlines and two long articles.

And on June 3, 1927, two days after the boats maiden voyage, the Vacaville Reporter reported on the Memorial Day traffic: "Holiday Traffic Breaks Records

"All previous records for holiday traffic were broken last Saturday, Sunday and Monday during the peak of the rush Monday between fifteen and nineteen autos were counted as passing every minute through Vacaville ...

"The grand total of vehicles crossing the Carquinez Bridge Saturday, Sunday and Monday was 34,331, according to figures announced by J. K. De Young, resident manager of the bridge.

"On the basis of two and one-half persons to one machine, the number of persons to cross the bridge is estimated at nearly 86,000"

Clearly, the days of leisurely traveling by boat from San Francisco to Sacramento were numbered.

Nonetheless, for the next 13 years, until September 1940, both boats made the trips between the two ports every night without fail, whether the weather was calm and beautiful, windy, or plagued by dense tule fogs.

Navigating in tule fog presented its own challenges. Pilots often couldn't see the water in front of their bow, let alone any landmarks along the way. A navigational chart called a Pathfinder helped find the way. On this scroll, 318 compass changes were marked down, with the time in minutes and seconds it took to get from one point to the next. Yet these times were estimates, depending on the wind, tide, current speeds and other factors.

The depression and its aftermath struck the California Transportation Company hard. They went bankrupt in late 1935. The company reorganized and the boats resumed their schedule after a nine-month layoff.

The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Oakland Bridge further cut down into

their business.

On June 26, 1938, the Delta Queen, representing Sacramento, took part in a steamboat race against another paddle-wheeler, Port of Stockton. The finish was extremely close, with the Delta Queen losing. Sacramento's mayor immediately called for a rematch.

This race took place on April 22, 1939, and was sponsored by the California State Chamber of Commerce, the Sacramento Golden Empire Centennial and the Golden Gate International Exposition. The race, proclaimed "Inland Steamboat Day" by Gov. Olson, pitted the Delta Queen against the Delta King. The Delta King started in Stockton, the Queen in Sacramento. Both boats met outside Pittsburg and then raced on to Treasure Island, where the Golden Gate International Exposition was located.

The Sacramento Bee reported on the following day: "The Queen spurred into an early lead and held it as far as Port Costa, where the King overtook and passed her. The Queen caught up again at Rodeo, and from there to Richmond the rivals churned furiously, white water trailing their stern-wheels, with not a boat length between them at any moment. A final burst of speed in the bay stretch brought the King in the winner."

This was to be their last public glory. Both boats were chartered by the Navy in September 1940 and served to ferry troops across the San Francisco Bay, often transporting nearly 3,000 passengers at a time.

After the war, both ships became part of the Suisun Bay mothball fleet in the summer of 1946. The ships were auctioned off to private companies by the end of that year. The Delta Queen moved on to navigate the Mississippi.

The Delta King was sold to a company in Canada. After many tribulations, the boat was brought back to California in 1959 and, after some strange twist and turns, such as being sunk, pirated, and finally seized by the U.S. government, came home to Sacramento. Today, the restored boat can be visited docked at the Old Sacramento waterfront.

The adventures of the Delta King and Queen are fascinatingly detailed in Stan Garvey's book "King & Queen of the River. The legendary paddle-wheel steamboats Delta King and Delta Queen from the Roaring Twenties to the 1990s," published in 1995. I'd like to thank Bill Alonzo who brought this story and his wonderful photograph to my attention.

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