

Burning of Sultana Was Most Costly of Marine Disasters

Court Set Death Toll at 1,443 After Probe of Accident—Eye-Witness Describes in Letter to Commercial Appeal—Boiler Exploded.

At 2 o'clock on the morning of April 27, 1865, the Sultana left the Memphis wharf northbound. Two hours later the Sultana was burning, the result of a terrific explosion near Island 40. Most of the passengers were paroled federal prisoners. There were 2,172 passengers and crew aboard. For weeks the river was littered with the dead. First reports were that the death list was around 1,700. A court-martial conducted at Vicksburg finally fixed the number at 1,443. This was, by far, the most disastrous marine disaster of the century, and even now stands as a record. The Titanic death list was 1,277 and the Lusitania was 1,198.

The Commercial Appeal is indebted to Judge L. P. Berry, one of Crittenden County's oldest and most prominent citizens, for the eye-witness account which appears below.

To The Commercial Appeal:

I note this morning in a dispatch from Etowah, Tenn., that Mr. Leslie, one of the survivors of the Sultana, died at Etowah about March 17. There was evidently an error in the dispatch, which said that he was one of the three survivors of the Sultana catastrophe, when it must have meant to say that he was one of the three remaining survivors.

The twenty-seventh day of April, 1865, was just such a day as today, March 19, 1929. The Mississippi River was bank full, but not overflowed. Between 4 and 5 o'clock of that memorable morning, my father awakened to find the whole premises lightened to almost the brightness of midday. Going out, he called back to my mother that a steamboat was afire up the river and a thousand people were drowning. My mother and I dressed, and going to the bank of the river, which was lighted, as it seemed to me for miles in all directions. We saw, about a mile up the river, the burning boat. The flames were leaping and plunging and breaking like the waves of the ocean. We could see what looked like hundreds of men on the main deck for'd, and as the flames, wafted by the morning breeze, reached forward, those near the flames would push away, forcing those in front to either fall or jump into the water, and I saw numbers and numbers and numbers of men either crowded off or pushed off into the river.

Standing on the bank of the river, at what was formerly known as Mound City Landing, I could hear the screams, prayers and cries of a thousand men all at once, more than a hundred of whom were drowned in plain view of my mother and me.

The willows along the banks supported others. My father, a discharged Confederate soldier, and Capt. George Malone, afterwards connected with the Cheek Line of Steamers, rescued more than 100, for whom a cousin and I built fires to warm and dry as they came out of the water.

Our cook brought a big boiler of coffee and everyone did what he or she could to relieve the suffering. Many of the rescued were Germans and could not speak English.

The steamboat was, of course, the Sultana, at that time the largest packet on the river. The disaster was caused from an explosion of a boiler at or near Hollybush Landing, four miles by river from the point where she finally set-

dridge's account was accurate from his point of view.

Later in the day the picket boat, Federal Petrol, came to the rescue with several tugs and other boats and the survivors were taken to Memphis. The federal authorities in Memphis extended to the rescuers the freedom of the city and a permit to take with them any necessities to the health and happiness of their families. One thing we got was an ounce of our very much to my disgust.

I suppose that the two who give Mr. Leslie and I are the only living witnesses to the great disaster.

The victims were paroled Federal prisoners, who having survived the hardships and dangers of the war, lost their lives just as peace dawned.

This thing is like a nightmare to me. I can close my eyes and see the long tongues of flames reaching for victims and I can hear the poor drowning wretches shrieking and pushing away from the flames. I can even hear the agonizing prayers and cries of a thousand men at once, and can vision those giving up hope and sinking down into the yellow waters of the mighty river, but these impressions I received as a boy, and are not such as that time can wash away or eradicate.

L. P. BERRY.

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Floating down the river, the burning wreck drifted to the Arkansas side of the river and the wind blowing inshore, came close enough to be reached by improvised boats handled by John Fogleman and his sons, Dallas and Leroy. A small rope was thrown on deck, which the men fastened to the cable. Mr. Fogleman with a great deal of difficulty made fast to the willows, thus stopping the further drifting of the boat. Many crawled out on the cable, but the weight soon submerged that in such a way as to render it unavailable as an avenue of escape. A great number were rescued by Mr. Fogleman and his boys.

Mr. Frank Barton, father of R. B. Barton, now with the Bank of Commerce, was also very active in rescuing the frightened and distressed people. Several women were saved by Mr. Fogleman and Mr. Barton.

The Sultana disaster is among the greatest in the loss of lives in the history of marine disasters, the three greatest being the Titanic, the Sultana and the Louisiana. The hull, or what is left of the Sultana lies just about a mile from Mound City Landing, but is now covered with silt and sand to the depth of eight or ten feet. I have been on the old wreck a number of times.

Some time ago, four or five years, perhaps, a Mr. Wooldridge wrote an article on the Sultana catastrophe. He saw it from the Tennessee side of the river and I, from the Arkansas side. He was about two and a half miles away and I was about one mile away. Mr. Wooldridge stated that he was the only surviving witness, but I am still living. Mr. Wool-