

The Federal Barge Line

The need for a revival of waterways transportation became apparent during World War I and the United States Congress made its intention clear in the general policy contained in Section 500 of the Transportation Act of 1920.

It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to promote, encourage and develop water transportation, service, and facilities in connection with the commerce of the United States, and to foster and preserve in full vigor both rail and water transportation.

In his Annual Report for the calendar year 1926 Major General T. Q. Ashburn described the Inland Waterways Corporation as a "great holding company" made up of all the citizens of the United States, operating "various subsidiary lines of tow-boats, barges, and terminal facilities known as the Upper Mississippi division, the Mississippi-Warrior service (composed of the lower Mississippi division and the Warrior River division), and the Warrior River Terminal Co."

Sketching swiftly the highlights of waterways transportation over the previous quarter century, General Ashburn declared:

The basic fact stands out that in 1900 common water carriage, as it formerly existed on the Mississippi River

had disappeared, its revival began in the twenties, and in 1926 more freight was transported upon the Mississippi River than ever before in its history.

The following rules were laid down to reestablish successful common carriers of national importance on our streams, navigable or semi-navigable.

- (a) There must be a suitable navigable stream.
- (b) There must be specially designed boats for each stream.
- (c) There must be suitable terminals.
- (d) There must be balanced freight, up and down stream, and freight of varying-revenue producing quality. The basic cargo must be bulk, of large quantities, but made profitable by the addition of packet freight.
- (e) In order to extend the benefits of water transportation into the interior there must be cooperation between rail and water carriers.
- (f) In order that rail and water carriers could offer a saving to those not fortunately located on the banks of the stream, the joint railwater rate must be cheaper than the all-rail rate, and the accruing revenue must be divided so that each participant in joint service shall derive a living revenue, and it must be demonstrated by actual operations that such joint service helps the railroads and does not hurt them.

The difficulties of carrying out the mandate as outlined above were so numerous that Major General T. Q. Ashburn, in his Annual Report of 1923, called upon the Secretary of War for remedial legislation.

The 68th Congress hearkened to this plea and passed Public Act No. 185 creating the Inland Waterways Corporation. The results became evident as the following figures of operation of the Mississippi-Warrior Service submitted by General Ashburn for the period from 1920 through 1926 would indicate.

YEAR	TONNAGE	YEAR	TONNAGE
1920	360,719	1924	1,071,848
1921	672,111	1925	1,142,219
1922	860,013	1926	1,341,578
1923	979,772		

Despite this impressive gain in tonnage the average yearly loss up to 1924 was \$973,305. In August of 1924 a complete reorganization of the service was effected with the result that in 1926 the company for the first time showed a profit of \$219,511.96.

It was from this background that the Inland Waterways Corporation inaugurated Federal Barge Line service on the Upper Mississippi in 1927. The *S.S. Thorpe* blazed the trail of what was destined to be a veritable pageant of towboats that completely revitalized waterways transportation on the Upper Mississippi. The *S.S. Thorpe*, like her three sister towboats, the *C.C. Webber*, *John W. Weeks*, and *General Ashburn*, was a 600 hp craft. The 500-ton barges they pushed were loaded light because the 9-foot channel was still a dream and an appropriation had not been made for

the inauguration of the truly great towboat era which was to be ushered in with the completion of the 26 locks and dams between Minneapolis and Alton in 1938.

It will be recalled that one of the requirements for re-establishment of successful common carriers on the Upper Mississippi was the construction of river terminals.

The third and largest River Terminal on the eastern border of Iowa was completed in 1931 at Rock Island at a cost of \$380,000. The city had been proclaimed the choice of the Quad-Cities by the Inland Waterways Corporation, according to Major General T. Q. Ashburn. Unlike Clinton, which had turned down the bond issue, the people of Rock Island gave a majority of 6,450 to 2,077 in favor of building the terminal. The *Rock Island Argus* of May 5, 1931, contained a six-page "Terminal Section" telling the story of the terminal from its inception to its dedication.

Lachlan Macleay, Secretary of the Mississippi Valley Association, noted that the Quad-City Terminal made Rock Island the 22nd port city in the Mississippi Valley—six of them were located on the Upper Mississippi—at Burlington, Rock Island, Dubuque, Stillwater, St. Paul and Minneapolis. According to Macleay:

These municipalities, realizing the advantage of their location on inland waterways, have equipped themselves to become modern gateways of commerce, by installing mod-

ern equipment for transferring and warehousing merchandise safely, efficiently and economically. Shippers are becoming more and more eager to avail themselves of this latest and most modern method of handling the vast commerce, both foreign and domestic, of the Mississippi Valley.

Mayor George Tank of Davenport was high in his praise of the new Rock Island Terminal declaring it "another step forward in the era of progress in the Quad-Cities." He urged the Quad-Cities to work together for the success of the port. "This community is fast becoming the metropolis of the Mississippi Valley," he said, "and the opportunities and advantages presented the terminal are many."

Everyone had high praise for the floating wharf barge which was declared one of the largest of its type in service on the Upper Mississippi. It was longer than the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Dubuque terminals and cost approximately \$58,000. Measuring 230 feet x 40 feet, the barge had been built by Howard Ship of Jeffersonville, Indiana, and, like the Burlington terminal, had been towed to Rock Island during March. A single 16-foot door led to the escalator on the dock side.

From the start General Ashburn strove to have a schedule which shippers could depend upon. In 1928 he already could plan on two boats a week upstream from St. Louis and two downstream. Eight days were required for the northbound trip

and only six days for the southbound voyage. The trip was made when there were only three locks—at Keokuk, Moline and LeClaire. The only hazards were wing dams, sandbars, and bridges, of which there were plenty to keep towboat pilots on the alert. Low water and high wind also presented real problems—particularly when attempting to guide a 600-foot tow of barges through a bridge or around an unusually difficult bend in the channel. Maintaining the following schedule was no simple task during high or low water, and in stormy weather.

UPSTREAM (8 DAYS)	DOWNSTREAM (6 DAYS)
Lv. St. Louis .. Mon. 10 p.m.	Lv. Mpls. Wed. 9 a.m.
Ar. Dubuque Sat. 1 p.m.	Lv. St. Paul. Wed. 1 p.m.
Lv. Dubuque Sat. 10 p.m.	Ar. Dubuque Fri. 4 p.m.
Ar. St. Paul Tues. 6 p.m.	Lv. Dubuque Fri. 8 p.m.
Ar. Mpls. Tues. 10 p.m.	Ar. St. Louis .. Mon. 7 p.m.
Lv. St. Louis .. Thur. 10 p.m.	Lv. Mpls. Sat. 9 a.m.
Ar. Dubuque Tues. 1 p.m.	Lv. St. Paul Sat. 1 p.m.
Lv. Dubuque .. Tues. 10 p.m.	Ar. Dubuque Mon. 4 p.m.
Ar. St. Paul Fri. 6 p.m.	Lv. Dubuque Mon. 8 p.m.
Ar. Mpls. Fri. 10 p.m.	Ar. St. Louis Thur. 7 p.m.

As more towboats and barges were added the Federal Barge Line was able to increase its schedule until daily departures were made from St. Louis and St. Paul.

It was obvious to the founders of the Inland Waterways Corporation that each division of the Federal Barge Line (Lower Mississippi, Warrior,

Upper Mississippi), required towboats and barges of different drafts and horsepower. Because of a channel that might fluctuate from three to six feet the Upper Mississippi Division was assigned the smallest type of towboat of 600 hp. Upper Mississippi barges, in turn, were a mere 500-ton capacity, compared with later barges ranging from 2000 to 3000 tons. Fully loaded, the 500-ton barges might draw 6 feet but there were times during periods of low water, when their load must not draw over three feet. Within a few years the company shifted to the 1000 hp towboat such as the *Mark Twain*, the *Huck Finn*, the *James W. Good*, and the *Patrick J. Hurley*, names that were discussed like bosom friends in almost every household along the river.

On October 13, 1935, the *Davenport Democrat* prophesied the development of a "huge tonnage" that was destined to make the Quad-Cities a "great industrial site." Such firms as Gordon-Van Tine and the International Harvester, the editor noted, were already using the Mississippi and it was expected that water shipments would "grow enormously in the next few years." The Inland Waterways Corporation already had five powerful diesel towboats in service—the *General Ashburn*, the *John W. Weeks*, the *Mark Twain*, the *Patrick J. Hurley*, and the *James W. Good*. In four months—April, May, June, and July—these five boats had pushed 77,506 tons through the Daven-

port locks—18,553 tons of coal, 40,861 tons of coke, and 18,112 tons of merchandise. Unfortunately, the downstream tonnage was not as great—a mere 7,423 tons. If the millennium in towboating was not on hand, the Davenport editor felt it was just around the corner.

It was not until the completion of the 26 locks and dams assured a 9-foot channel in 1939 that the Federal Barge Line fleet, and the numerous other crafts that were entering the trade, were able to bring the tonnage past the million mark. Various oil companies began operating their own boats, such as the *Stanolind A*, the *K. C. Socony*, *St. Louis Socony*, *St. Paul Socony*, and the *La Crosse Socony*, not to mention the towboats of the Pure Oil Company and the Ashland Oil & Refining Company. Other petroleum companies employed common carriers to bring their products upstream to the tank farms that began to dot both banks of the river at strategic points.

General Ashburn was succeeded by Chester C. Thompson who, on November 15, 1939, was appointed president and chairman of the board of the Inland Waterways Corporation, which had just come under the supervision of the Secretary of Commerce. Thompson served in this dual role until August 15, 1944, when he resigned to accept the presidency of the American Waterways Operators, Inc., with offices in Washington, D.C. After having suffered a relatively poor season in

1938, Thompson was able to record an increase of 44% from 348,561 tons in 1939 to 500,746 tons in 1940. In his *Annual Report of the Inland Waterways Corporation* for the calendar year 1940, Thompson recorded:

Because of the comparatively heavy tonnage offered, six boats instead of the scheduled five were operating during most of the season. The total tonnage on the Upper Mississippi River during 1940 shows an increase of 44 percent over the year 1939. Northbound tonnage was increased 53 percent over 1939 and southbound tonnage increased 28 percent. Coal and coke were the principal northbound movement, showing an increase of 56 percent over the previous year. Due to the satisfactory stage of the river, as well as the completion of all locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi, it was possible to attain an average loading of coal and coke of 1,960 tons per barge. This is the heaviest average loading of this commodity that the Corporation has been able to accomplish.

By 1947 the Federal Barge Line had expanded into a veritable giant among the barge line corporations. The following list of boats operating in the Rock Island District in 1947 was compiled by the Control Branch of the Rock Island District, United States Army Engineers.

BOATS	HP	BOATS	HP
<i>Baton Rouge</i>	1800	<i>Kansas City</i>	1000
<i>Boswell</i>	88	<i>Kokoda</i>	2000
<i>Cairo</i>	1800	<i>Mark Twain</i>	1000
<i>Coral Sea</i>	2000	<i>Memphis</i>	1800
<i>Cordova</i>	800	<i>Minnesota</i>	2400
<i>Demopolis</i>	800	<i>Missouri</i>	2400

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<i>Dwight Davis</i>	1000	<i>Mobile</i>	1000
<i>F. D. Roosevelt</i>	1180	<i>Montgomery</i>	800
<i>Helena</i>	1000	<i>Natchez</i>	1800
<i>Herbert Hoover</i>	2200	<i>Patrick J. Hurley</i>	1000
<i>Huck Finn</i>	1000	<i>St. Louis</i>	1800
<i>Illinois</i>	2400	<i>Tom Sawyer</i>	1180
<i>Iowa</i>	2400	<i>Wake Island</i>	2000
<i>James W. Good</i>	1000	<i>C. C. Webber</i>	600
<i>John W. Weeks</i>	600	<i>Vicksburg</i>	1800

The above indicates boats with similar names were equipped with the same horsepower. Thus, the *Mark Twain* and the *Huck Finn*, and the *James W. Good* and the *Patrick J. Hurley* were all 1000 hp that were used on the Upper Mississippi. The state series—the *Illinois*, *Iowa*, *Minnesota*, and *Missouri*—each had 2400 hp and were used on the Lower Mississippi. By 1972, the heyday of towboating appears to have reached its peak. At least this appears so when measured by the 5000 hp towboats that appear fairly commonplace on the Upper Mississippi. The American Commercial Barge Line of Jeffersonville, Indiana, had six towboats—the *J. W. Hershey*, the *Charles E. Peters*, the *Hugh C. Blaske*, the *Dell Butcher*, the *Jack D. Wofford*, and the *Tom Talbert* with 5000 hp each. The Mississippi Valley Barge Line of St. Louis had the *W. S. Rhea* and the *L. Wade Childress* whose horse power had been increased from 3200 to 5000 hp. The Wisconsin Barge Line has the *Kathryn Eckstein*, *Penny of Cassville*, and *Rose Tranchita* each of 5000 hp. In addition to

such powerful towboats, there are a score and more of boats that range from 3200 hp upward.

Preeminent among the faithful boatwatchers on the Upper Mississippi is Thomas Frank, whose home at Pleasant Valley overlooks Lock 14 just below Le Claire, Iowa. During the past five years Thomas Frank has chronicled every new towboat that he has seen passing through Lock 14. He does not record the second and subsequent appearances of a boat, just the first time each season. In 1967, he recorded 111 different towboats, in 1971 he counted 108. During the five seasons there were exactly 500, or an average of 100 different boats a season. In 1972, he had counted 91 different boats by mid-September. While he may have missed a few while asleep, he probably caught most of them either going up or downstream. At any rate, the number of different towboats on the river in 1972 appears to equal the number of steamboats on the Upper Mississippi during the heyday of steamboating. But the tonnage the towboat transports is a different thing when one remembers that 23 steamboats discharged only 2500 tons of freight on the St. Paul levee in 1858. In 1972 an average towboat can discharge seven times that much tonnage in a single trip!

Captain A. C. Ingersoll, Jr., served as president of the Federal Barge Line from 1944 to 1953 when it gave in to the perennial charges of competing unfairly with private companies.

The Federal Barge Line, acquired by private capital in 1953, now forms a part of a conglomerate established by Herman Pott under the title Pott Industries Inc. This firm, whose sales and revenues totaled \$84,605,000 in 1971, had revenues totaling \$24,824,000 from its Federal Barge Line towboats, and \$11,575,000 from its Gulf-Ocean operations, which offered towing services on a world-wide basis. Its St. Louis Ship Division is an equally important part of Pott Industries Inc., reaping \$27,676,000 in sales and revenue. That the company is not standing still is revealed by the following 1971 Annual Report:

In 1971, we built thirty-three covered hopper barges and one 5000 horsepower towboat in our own shipyards for our Inland Waterways Operations. We also purchased two barges and four 1800 horsepower towboats. During 1971, our subsidiary, Gulf Mississippi Marine Corporation, acquired two supply boats, one tug, and one deck barge.

In 1972, we plan to build thirty-three covered hopper barges and three tank barges in our own shipyard for our own operations. In addition, Gulf Mississippi is scheduled to take delivery of five supply boats in 1972 and, while orders have not yet been placed, acquisition in 1972 of two 2400 horsepower tugs and one deck barge has been approved.

The complete story of the Federal Barge Line, covering a half-century of time, would make an interesting and exciting book, one that would be unique in the annals of inland waterways.

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