



October, 1994

Vol 2. No. 10

THE BORDER STAR

A Publication of the CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE of
WESTERN MISSOURI 1209 Skyline Dr. Liberty, MO 64068

THE SULTANA DISASTER

by Ed Harris

April, 1865 saw the end of the Civil War. Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln on April 14. The country had been shattered by war and the long process of healing had just begun. A big job was ahead to repatriate the tens of thousands of prisoners of war held by both sides. To facilitate sending the thousands of survivors of Andersonville and Cahaba home in the north, travel to Vicksburg and passage by steamship up the Mississippi was deemed the most practical and humane. Most were suffering from malnutrition and disease. Union soldiers were gathered by the thousands at camp Fisk near Vicksburg, waiting release by the confederates.

The Sultana was launched Feb 4, 1863, in Cincinnati. She plied her trade on the Mississippi and as the war drew to a close plans were made to steam from Cairo to New Orleans and return. The Sultana was one of the first steamers to be equipped with a new marine fire tube boiler. This design was well suited for use on the upper Mississippi but the silt laden lower river created problems with the boilers. Numerous repairs had been made over time but surviving engineers on the Sultana testified at an enquiry after the disaster that the boilers were in good condition and a leak that had occurred near Vicksburg had been repaired by a competent boiler maker.

The Federal prisoners of war were arriving by the thousands under flag of truce. The rebel commissioners in charge of the prisoners had been under orders to only release pows equivalent to southern pows released. The confederate Department of the Trans Mississippi was the last department to lay down their arms and at this time not all of the confederate officers had surrendered. Lacking any new orders the commissioners stubbornly refused to release the prisoners. After negotiations and orders from Colonel Ould, the commissioners were induced to parole the prisoners. Major General Napoleon Dana, US Army, commanding Dept. of Mississippi, wrote in a report

to Brig. Gen. W. Hoffman, Commissary-General of Prisoners, *"I had taken great interest in expediting the departure of these brave fellows to their homes..."*

Rolls of the troops needed to be compiled and the slow process of lining up steamers and loading them began. The Henry Ames steamed north with 1300 passengers. The Olive Branch left with 700. Accusations arose of bribery relating to the use of only steamers under contract to the government. After the fall of Vicksburg in 1863, union troops had been cheated by unscrupulous steamboat captains charging exorbitant fares for passage. General Grant set the cost of passage at five dollars for enlisted men and ten dollars for officers. A four day trip could net the Sultana owners thousands of dollars.

The officers in charge had decided to ship the remaining soldiers on the Sultana, counting and checking as they boarded, intending to assemble the rolls later. Gen. Dana was informed that 1300 passengers, not to exceed 1400, were on board. After the Sultana had left Dana wrote, *"I then inquired as to the exact number of men she had taken, and was astonished to hear that there were 1900. ...I...was assured...that the load was not over large for the boat; that the men were comfortable and not overcrowded, and that there were very few boats which had so much room for troops as the Sultana."* Sultana's legal maximum load was 376, including the crew, but regulations regarding steamboat passenger limits were frequently ignored by the military. It was later determined that 2400 soldiers, 100 civilians and 80 crew were on board.

After months and years in southern prisons, the soldiers were jubilant about returning home. The crowded conditions on board little affected men who had already suffered so much, especially with the prospect of going home.

At two am, on April 27, 7 miles north of Memphis, without warning, the Sultana's boilers burst. The blast instantly killed and maimed hundreds. The sultana was steaming up the middle of a very wide flooded portion of the river and with the swift current, swimming to shore was nearly impossible.

continued on page 4

ELECTION ANNOUNCEMENT

As outlined in the by-laws of our group, the Nominating Committee has submitted its recommendations for nominations for officers and the board, to the editor of the Border Star for publication. Elections shall be held at the November 9 meeting

As chairman of the nominating committee to select candidates for the board of directors, I would like to recommend the following candidates for office for the 1995 calendar year.

Harold "Sonny" Welle for President.
Tim Cox for 1st Vice President.
Connie McQuain for Co-2nd Vice President.
Sue Valentine for Co-2nd Vice President.
Loretta Crump for Secretary.
Beverly Shaw for Treasurer.
Tim Cox for Historian.

There are three 2-year term positions on the board of directors that must be filled. The nominating committee recommends Bob Benson and Kathleen Touhey to fill two spots. Nominations from the floor will be accepted during the November 9th meeting.

Fred George, Chairman, Nominating Committee.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

October 8-9 C.W. re-enactment Washington MO
October 12 general meeting - Battle of Westport
October 15-16 re-enactment - Nebraska City NE
October 19 board meeting
October 22-23 re-enactment Jackson MO
October 29-30 encampment Mine Creek, KS
November 5 Battlefield tour - Loose Park
November 6 C.W. MOH dedication Lincoln NE
November 9 general meeting and election
November 12-13 encampment Ava MO
November 16 board meeting
November 19 Johnson ct Genealogical mtg Lenexa
December 3-4 re-enactment Prairie Grove AR
December 10 CWRTWM Holiday party

ANSWERS TO LAST MONTH'S TRIVIA

- 2) Sappington Cemetery near Arrow Rock
- 3) No battle is recorded on that date
- 4) Dortha Dix
- 5) Ohio
- 6) Rohrbach's Bridge

MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The October meeting will be held Wednesday, October 12, at 7:00 pm at the Truman High School, 3301 S. Noland Road. Sonny will speak on the Battle of Westport.

The November meeting will be Wednesday, November 9. We will elect new officers and Fred George, Ed Harris, and others will present a program on General Blunt.

On Saturday, October 1, Fred George gave a talk at the Friends of the Jackson County archives annual Bushwhacker Picnic at Stephenson's apple orchard. He spoke on the subject of "Bushwhackers and the Lee's Summit Road".

It is an honor that Fred was invited to speak at the meeting and he is to be congratulated for ably furthering the purpose of our group, as stated in our by-laws, "to stimulate interest in and further discussion and study of the War Between The States".

APPOMATTOX COURTHOUSE, VA., APRIL 9, 1865
General R.E. Lee,
Commanding, C.S. Army:

General: In accordance with the substance of my letter to you of the 8th instant, I propose to receive the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia on the following terms, to wit: Rolls of all of the officers and men to be made in duplicate, one copy to be given to an officer designated by me, the other to be retained by such officer or officers as you may designate. The officers to give their individual paroles not to take up arms against the Government of the United States until properly exchanged, and each company or regimental commander to sign a like parole for the men of their commands. The arms, artillery, and public property to be parked and stacked and turned over to the officers appointed by me to receive them. This will not embrace the side arms of the officers, nor their private horses or baggage. This done, each officer and man will be allowed to return to his home and not be disturbed by the U.S. authorities so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside.

Very respectfully,

U.S. Grant,
Lieutenant-General

THE PRESIDENTS CORNER

by Sonny Wells

**The Civil War Round
Table of Western
Missouri, 1209 Skyline
Dr., Liberty, MO 64068
(816) 781-7322 (Sonny)
(816) 363-4072 (Fred)
(913) 345-1853 (Ed)**

Board of Directors

President - Sonny Wells

1st Vice Pres. - Fred George

Co-2nd Vice Pres. - Sue

Valentine and Connie McQuain

Secretary - Karen Wells

Interim Treas - Fred George

Historian - Tim Cox

Dr. Gerald Anderson-Ed Harris-

Robert Benson- Troy Chrisman -

Howard Thompson - Phyllis

Thompson.

Newsletter Staff

Editor- Ed Harris

Contributors-Sonny Wells

Membership

Total Membership - 60

Annual Dues

Individual membership --\$15

Family membership --\$22.50

Student membership -- \$5

The newsletter staff

welcomes suggestions and
contributions of material to
the newsletter.

**Please address all
inquiries for newsletter
to:**

Ed Harris

11508 W. 113th Street

Overland Park,

KS 66210.

**For information about
programs write or call:**

Fred George

5442 Tracy

KCMO 64110

(816) 363-4072

Civil War 101 was super from what I hear, and I have heard it often. Great show gang! Harold Blackburn, Tim Cox, Roger Bomar, Fred George and Ed Harris really put on an interesting, informational and amusing program. Special kudos to Fred for putting it all together.

Now there is another job for Fred. I appointed him Chairperson of the nominating committee at the September board meeting. If any one has a desire to be a board member or serve in an officer's position, please contact Fred before the elections at our November meeting. Fred will be stepping away from the board and as 1st Vice-President because of school and job duties. *(Fred will remain a member of the group. ed.)* Let's all be sure to shake his hand and let him know how much we have appreciated his good work and dedication as a board member and officer.

The board had a very productive September meeting. Every thing from milk and cookies to the Disney theme park situation. The board meets the third Wednesday of the month at the Trails West Library 11401 W. 23 Street at 7:00 pm. The general membership is encouraged to attend. The meeting is usually over by 8:30 but are ALWAYS over by 8:55 when they lock up the place!

The word from Dave Kesinger, President MCWRA, is that there WILL be an encampment at Mine Creek Oct. 29-30. He is hoping for 150 re-enactors and will try to put on a skirmish each afternoon. *(contact Sonny for more details. ed.)* As of this writing we have no plans to set up there. I will be in Kentucky that weekend.

More on the Oct. 15-16 Nebraska City, NE event. Camps will be on the grounds of the Arbor Lodge State Historical Park. To avoid the \$5 state parking fee park at the high school or just to the west of the site and walk less than a block to the site. Self guided tour of the mansion is \$3 per person - WELL WORTH IT! If you have not seen this humongous 52 room mansion, now would be the time. Battles at 3pm Saturday and 2pm Sunday and a period dance Saturday evening. Other sites in the area include the restored Wildwood House, John Brown's Cabin, restored Victorian Post Office, the old GAR Hall, and of course, the Pendelton outlet store.

of special note...

The Monnett Battle of Westport Fund is the tax exempt fund raising arm of the Civil War Round Table of Kansas City, which maintains the Battle of Westport Markers in Kansas City.

Board Chairman Orvis Fitts has invited us to participate in a Byram's Ford clean-up day on Saturday, Oct. 8, 9am to ?. Erv Summers will be in charge at the site. Bring weed cutters, trash bags, wear old cloths and gloves. I realize that this is short notice but the opportunity to work with other Civil War interested folks to help preserve this very special historic site warrants this extra effort to participate. I suggested to Orvis that we plan another project for late April or early May next year. I will be at the Washington Mo re-enactment but some of you may be able to help.

SEE PAGE 2 FOR MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The Sultana carried no lifeboats and in the destruction of the explosion and the ensuing panic, cork life preservers went largely unused. Survivors described the panic of those scalded and burned leaping off of the Sultana on top of those already in the water. One survivor watched the "masses of drowning men clinging together until they were borne down by their own weight to rise no more alive"

75 minutes after the explosion there were no living persons left aboard the Sultana. Hours after the explosion the Bostonia sailed into the area of the disaster, stopping to rescue survivors. In just over an hour the Bostonia steamed for Memphis. Receiving news of the disaster, boats in Memphis were dispatched to the area to pick up survivors. By the next afternoon the search for survivors ended and the grisly task of recovering bodies began. Most of the bodies were buried in the Soldiers Cemetery in unmarked graves. For over a month bodies were found along the Mississippi. News of the Sultana disaster was soon pushed out of the papers by the burial of Abraham Lincoln and the death of John Wilkes Booth. The nation had other pressing concerns.

Secretary of War Stanton ordered a commission to investigate the matter. Major Gen. C. Washburn, commander District of West Tennessee reported to Stanton on May 23, that "the explosion was occasioned by the want of water in the boilers. It is also shown (by testimony) that the boilers were defective and known to be so..." "...all the parties belonging to the boat who were in any wise (sic) responsible for the disaster lost their lives at the time of the explosion or have since died."

Brig. Gen. W. Hoffman, Commissary-General of Prisoners wrote to Stanton on May 19,

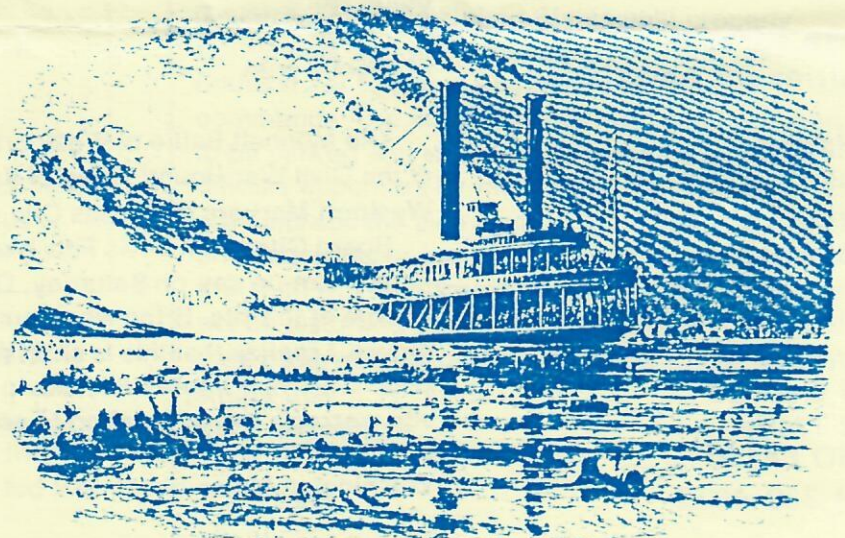
"Upon careful consideration of all the facts as presented in the testimony herewith submitted, I am of the opinion that the shipment of so large a number of troops (1866) on the boat was, under the circumstances, unnecessary, unjustifiable, and a great outrage on the troops."

The blame was placed on Captain Frederic Speed, Assistant-Adjutant General, U.S. Volunteers. Brig. Gen. J. Holt, Judge-Advocate-General reported to the Secretary of War on June 21, 1866, Captain Speed was tried at Vicksburg, terminating June 5, and was found guilty of "...neglect to avail himself of the services of Capt. Hatch, Assistant quartermaster, and Capt. W. Kerns, assistant quartermaster...in procuring the necessary and safe transportation for the said paroled prisoners..." "It is the opinion of this bureau, after a careful study of the record, that Captain Speed took no such part in the transportation of the prisoners in question as should render him amenable to punishment..." "Terrible as was the disaster to the Sultana, there is no evidence that it was caused by the overcrowding of her decks, and it is therefore difficult to say upon whom the

responsibility for the loss of 1100 lives should really rest. The engineer testifies that he considered the boilers well and sufficiently repaired..." "It is recommended that the sentence be disapproved (dismissal from the service) and that Captain Speed be publicly exonerated..." On September 1, 1866 Secretary of War Stanton honorably mustered Capt. Speed out of the service. The stack of documents relating to the Sultana disaster were packaged and delivered to the War Department Archives. No one was ever punished for the Sultana disaster.

Two steamers with similar boilers to the Sultana exploded in the year after the Sultana and the new style boilers were removed from every boat steaming south of Cairo. The estimated loss of life in the Sultana explosion range from 1547 to 1647. No exact count was ever determined. The Sultana disaster was the worst maritime disaster in the history of the United States.

Sources used for this article: Transport to Disaster, James W. Elliott, 1902. Official records of the Rebellion



The Sultana, from a woodcut in Harper's Weekly