I must get a job on the river again. Lead a river rat’s vagrant life…

John Hartford, *Headin’ Down Into the Mystery Below*¹

The subtitle to Dick Bissell’s memoir *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain* is too delicious to pass up. As we have seen, Bissell was from Dubuque, Iowa, a Harvard graduate who spent much of his life towboating, houseboating, writing a Broadway musical about his family’s pajama factory, and writing fiction and nonfiction books about the Mississippi Valley. In the first chapter of *My Life on the Mississippi*, he explains, “Because I myself write books about the Mississippi River, because I used to be a pilot on the Mississippi River and hold a pilot’s license today, the critics for twenty-three years have been calling me ‘a modern Mark Twain.’ Now is that fair?” He continues, quoting several reviews of his towboat novels *A Stretch on the River* (1950) and *High Water* (1954) that gush, “…not since Mark Twain…,” “…in the tradition of Mark Twain…,” and “…takes its place with Mark Twain,” etc., etc. Innocently wandering into the grocery store in a neighboring town, Bissell is confronted by the store lady, who says “Say—I seen you someplace in the paper already. Ain’t you that modern Mark Twain from over at Dubuque?”²

---

Any artist or writer who tackles a Mississippi theme is vulnerable to the “modern Mark Twain” reference, mainly due to journalists looking for a quick lead and an early end to their day’s work. Yet this cliché did not faze another “modern-day Mark Twain,” John Hartford, a Grammy Award–winning singer, songwriter, instrumentalist, and licensed western rivers towboat pilot. Born in Saint Louis in 1937, Hartford had as his fourth-grade teacher Miss Ruth Ferris, who introduced him to the world of river history. “I was a pretty bad boy, but she called my bluff / With her great big collection of steamboat stuff,” he later sang in his tune “Miss Ferris.” A parallel interest in folk, country, and bluegrass music led to a musical career that skyrocketed in 1967 when Glenn Campbell charted at number one with Hartford’s composition “Gentle on My Mind.” Hartford next helped pioneer an important experimental bluegrass music subgenre dubbed newgrass. Yet throughout this time, Hartford also worked as a deckhand, mate, and towboat pilot, shipping on diesel towboats on the Ohio, Cumberland, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers. He was especially drawn to the Illinois River, where he used his record royalties to restore and sail the steam-powered Julia Belle Swain as an overnight excursion and showboat.3

John Hartford carried on Richard Bissell’s work. While Bissell’s novels High Water and A Stretch on the River are the only literature to accurately, and evocatively, tell the story of modern diesel towboatmen, Hartford is the only musician to tell that story on sound recordings. That Bissell and he stand alone is remarkable, because, by all rights, the towboatmen who crew the nation’s western rivers fleet ought to belong to the elite group of modern American folk heroes that includes truck drivers,

File, and chapter 6 and 7, this work, for a discussion of The Pajama Game and Bissell’s houseboating experiences.

NASCAR drivers, SEC football players, astronauts, rodeo cowboys and cowgirls, and military commandoes. Yet they do not. Think, for example, of all the popular songs written about truck drivers. Why not diesel towboatmen? Perhaps modern rivermen are literally and figuratively invisible, removed from the shore (“the bank,” as they call it) for weeks and months at a time, sailing in a river world largely unknown to their land-locked countrymen. Two of Hartford’s record albums give the Mississippi towboatmen their due.

John Hartford recorded the Grammy-winning *Mark Twang* on the Flying Fish folk label in Nashville in 1976. He wrote all the songs and is the only musician on the album: singing, playing each acoustic instrument (fiddle, banjo, and guitar), making percussive mouth noises (akin to the traditional Black patting juba form), and performing the primary percussion by clogging (tap dancing) with his feet on an amplified floorboard. Unlike dedicated truck driver–song performers (e.g., Dave Dudley, Red Sovine, Dick Curless, Red Simpson, and Dale Watson), Hartford includes non-towboat songs and sings about steamboats, but his spotlight is on diesel towboatmen.4

“Skippin’ in the Mississippi Dew” introduces the set in a minimalist style, with vocal, fiddle, and clogging. Recalling his early days as a towboat deckhand, Hartford sings, “It used to be spring. I’d ship on the river / 35 days on a Valley Line boat” and paints a romantic portrait of towboating in the “Mississippi dew.” The song “Let Him Go On, Mama” is a tribute to “an engineer over on the Ohio River / Runnin’ in the Pittsburgh trade.” Hartford tells of an old fellow who worked on towboats throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century and still walks “down to the fleet” in the morning and cooks up a “pot of gumbo” on Friday night. “Long Hot Summer’s Day” is a memorable tune in which Hartford sings, plays banjo, and clogs a

---

4. John Hartford, *Mark Twang*, 1976, Flying Fish Records, No.020, LP. Patting juba and tap dancing are discussed in chapter 2, this work. For tap dancing, see Brian Seibert, *What the Eye Hears* (New York, 2015). The only comparable recording about rivermen—Cathy Barton and Dave Para’s *Living on the River*—is cited above and in chapter 2, this work. Barton and Para sing about presteam and steamboat men, not diesel towboatmen.
syncopated rhythm. The song tells of a riverman’s workday, with a chorus that references the traditional towboat schedule of one month on, and a half month off: “For every day I work on the Illinois River / get a half a day off with pay / A towboat makin’ up barges / on a long hot summer’s day.” On the *Mark Twang* album jacket is a dedication to the late towboat man Bob Burtnett of Chillicothe, Illinois, who “will be missed by all of his friends up and down the Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee rivers. A move is under way to name a navigation light after him on the Illinois River.”\(^5\)

Following *Mark Twang* in 1978 was *Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below*, also produced by Michael Melford on Flying Fish Records. Hartford wrote all the songs and plays all instruments, but he adds a small vocal ensemble (including Jeannie Seeley) for backup, harmony, and a call-and-response sequence. As on *Mark Twang*, Hartford dances the percussion, wearing running shoes with metal taps on a “3/4″ 4′ x 8′ sheet of new Grade A unfinished plywood” with a “piano pickup” (microphone) attached. “Miss Ferris” sets the tone on track one, as Hartford recalls his childhood discovery of the river world. When he sings, “I started readin’ the *Waterways Journal* and all / following Captain Fred Way and C. W. Stoll,” he is referring to a well-known towboat industry magazine and two venerated captains and river historians.\(^6\)

In *Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below*, Hartford devotes two songs to the difficulties of towboat piloting. “In Plain View of Town” is about a pilot running barges aground and the embarrassment he feels trying to push them off with an audience of locals following his every move. “Kentucky Pool” is set on the lower Tennessee River in southwest Kentucky, where a lock and dam have turned the river into a lake. The listener hears a tale of woe from a pilot running on a dark, rainy night. The pilot has unknowingly turned his towboat around; he thinks he is heading upstream when he is instead going down. “Kentucky pool made a fool out of me,” he laments. Near song’s end, Hartford dubs

---

6. Hartford, *Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below*. Clogging quote is on album jacket.
in a live recorded marine radio track with the actual voice of a confused towboat pilot lost at night querying a nearby pilot, who cannot contain his amusement at the other’s plight. The first pilot at last concludes, “I’ll catch you on the one whistle, Cap,” using river slang that denotes the side of the other’s tow he will pass in going downstream.7

Although Mark Twang won a Grammy, Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below is Hartford’s most significant telling of the towboatmen’s story. This is largely because of two powerful songs. The title song, Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below, is discussed at the end of this epilog. “On Christmas Eve” is set “on the lower Mississippi / Full moon tonight / Where the Spanish moss hangs from the trees / Down in Louisiana, on Christmas Eve.” The song tells a story common among career diesel towboatmen. Towboats run day and night, three hundred sixty-five days a year. They may tie up for Christmas, but only if they happen to be at the port of destination; otherwise, they sail towards that destination. In this tale, Hartford recalls his feelings in finding himself hundreds of miles away from home on a sacred holiday. He reflects on the motivations that led him to seek a career on the river, and his conclusions are ambiguous. “That muddy water, never quite comes clear,” he sings, “When I try to explain, give a reason why I’m down here.” And he asks a question: “Ain’t you got no family? / No place to be? / Out on the river, on Christmas Eve.”8

Hartford’s short poem on the album jacket of Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below provides a less melancholy coda:

I must get a job on the river again Lead a river rat’s vagrant life Paintin’ stairs, movin’ chairs Sleep on deck sometimes Stories heard on the Lazy Bench Fixin’ the search lite’s arc Carryin’ coffee up to the old man Stumblin’ in the dark.9

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. The “lazy bench” is a small seating area in the pilothouse where off-duty crewmen often congregate, especially after supper.
The author of the book you are reading is not a “modern-day Mark Twain,” but he did have a life on the Mississippi.

I was born in 1950 and raised in the town of Ellensburg, where the foothills of the Cascade Mountains turn into the semiarid plains of eastern Washington State. If, during my youth, I ever saw a Columbia River towboat pushing barges, I do not remember it. All my early knowledge of the eastern United States, especially the history of the American Revolution and early Mississippi Valley frontier, came from wonderful Walt Disney television shows and movies. To a boy growing up on the Columbia Plateau in the 1950s, Disney movies provided a view of a green Mississippi Valley world of deciduous mountain forests and prairies, home to Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Big Mike Fink, Jim Bowie, and Johnny Shiloh. Much of Disney’s classic *Old Yeller* was filmed east of the 98th meridian, and the opening scene to *Davy Crockett and the River Pirates*, with a sweeping vista of the Ohio River, made a big impression on me. Walt Disney movies showed me that, twelve hundred miles away, there was a humid world that teemed with exotic things called fireflies and turtles and alligators and was alive with stories from American history. I yearned to see the Mississippi Valley and learn more about its history.

One summer, the Ellensburg Public Library sponsored a program in which children were to read books about the different states of the union. We were given black-and-white maps of the United States, and each time we read a book about a state, the librarian would give us a colored sticker of that state to paste onto the map. It was like a jigsaw puzzle. I filled in the map that summer, and I vividly recall sticking Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Tennessee, and all the Mississippi Valley states onto the map in contrasting blues, greens, reds, and yellows.

As a teenager, I continued my study with library books and schoolwork. When I graduated from Ellensburg High School in 1968, I joined the U.S. Marine Corps and, returning from Vietnam, I was given GI Bill benefits and the economic means to become a professional student. As a history major, I learned about the Mississippi Valley at Central Washington State College.
(my senior thesis was “The Federalists and the West, 1783–1803”) and the University of Montana (my MA thesis was “The Confederation Congress and the Creation of the First American Western Policy, 1783–87”). During my first year in Missoula, Montana, I decided it was time I saw the Mississippi River. I hitchhiked east in 1975 and crossed the river on I-80 at Davenport, Iowa, the same place where Jack Kerouac had first viewed his “beloved Mississippi” three decades earlier. Hitching into Illinois, I was stopped by a state policeman who informed me I was breaking the law; then he did me a huge favor by pointing me back to Iowa via Moline. I found myself walking on a road marked with green signs decorated with steamboat steering wheels and the designation “U.S. Highway 61: The Great River Road.” I had somehow managed to find my way into the heart of the Promised Land.

We Americans have always liked to move around. The Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic, Boone and his pioneer brethren crossed the Appalachians, and the Forty-niners, Mormons, and Oregon Trail trekkers crossed the Great Plains. When Americans could no longer travel due west, they began to traverse the country aboard railroad trains and, later, to drive the back roads in automobiles. Jack Kerouac drove U.S. Highway 6, and he was succeeded by hippies in VW buses, traveling the two-lanes in the spirit of Peter Fonda’s and Dennis Hopper’s Easy Rider. All these Americans—from the Pilgrims to the hippies—were looking for America.

In Muscatine, Iowa, I teamed up with a runaway teenager named Billy, and we hitched Highway 61 south. We slept in the brush on the Missouri state line, and I saw my first firefly, another sign of Zion. Billy’s family caught up with him in Hannibal, and I caught a ride to Memphis with two guys from Macalester College who were on a graduation trip to New Orleans. I took the Greyhound bus back to Montana and learned about a wondrous thing called a bus pass. The cost was just $165.00 for thirty days; you got on the bus and rode anywhere in

North America you wanted to go. Included in the price was the ambience of Greyhound bus depots and their staffs and clientele. It was a low culture Eurail pass.

The next summer, I came east on the Greyhound across lower Canada, entering the United States via Thunder Bay, Ontario. I followed Highway 61 along Lake Superior to Duluth, Bob Dylan’s birthplace. On that trip, I traveled 61 from the Twin Cities to Saint Louis, combining the bus with hitchhiking when I wanted to visit off-route locales. Later, I figured out there are alternate Great River Roads that are not numbered 61, and that the Wisconsin and Illinois roads are a lot closer to the river than those on the Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri side. In Wabasha, Minnesota, I slept under a picnic table (I had no tent) at the river park, swam in the Mississippi for the first time, and walked to Wisconsin on the steep-arched highway bridge. In Dubuque, Iowa, there was a cable car to the hilltop and an old river hotel (and what appeared to be a lively prostitution trade). By the time I got to Canton, Missouri, I had perfected the arts of picnic table camping and waiting in laundromats with only a swimsuit for cover. Canton also had a car ferry crossing to Illinois, and for $1.80 Captain Allen Blackmore took me on two round trips. That whetted my appetite to travel on the river as well as drive alongside it.

In 1977, after earning an MA degree in history from the University of Montana, I headed east again on the Greyhound bus. I had begun to savor the four- to five-hour transition that slowly takes place in the Dakotas around the 98th meridian, when the Great Plains change into the lower Missouri and Mississippi Valleys. Hitchhiking near Bagley, Minnesota, I mistakenly left my bus pass in a woman’s car, retrieved it, but then failed to catch a ride to the Mississippi headwaters at Lake Itasca. Although the fall colors were spectacular, I had to see the Delta, and so I headed south (not until five years later did I finally see the headwaters). On the Continental Trailways bus from Saint Louis to New Orleans, a talkative driver told me many stories, some of which might have been (mostly) true. I learned about kudzu (which grows a “foot a night”), panthers,
wild hogs, gator tail stew, and water moccasins. Hitching on the Arkansas side, I caught a ride with an eighty-eight-year-old man named London England Tillman. He had a brother named Paris France Tillman, and they had grown up in northwest Tennessee, near Reelfoot Lake. London took me across the Greenville, Mississippi, bridge, and I saw the Mississipians’ Winterville Mounds. I was at last in the Delta blues country. I crossed the river again to pick up the Greyhound in Helena, Arkansas.

My three-year career as a Mississippi towboatman began in jail in Helena, but it’s not as bad as it sounds. I met a fireman who introduced me to his brother, a policeman and Vietnam veteran. This guy was a real entrepreneur. In addition to his police job, he subcontracted appliance delivery for Sears and Roebuck and ran a downtown business security service (I helped him check alley door locks that night). He and his brother were also students in an automotive repair program at the local community college. He took me there, and it turned out all the other students were also military vets, drawing monthly GI Bill checks while keeping their day jobs. On week nights, they used the college shop to work on their own cars and feast from huge deep-fat fryers they had constructed for fish fries that accompanied each “class.” That is where I ate my first catfish.

I told the policeman I needed a shower and a place to stay, and he told me I could stay in the holding tank at the jail. He seemed to think I would be perfectly safe, so I spent the night there (in retrospect, it was a bad decision that turned out okay). In the Helena jail, I talked to a guy who worked off and on as a deckhand on lower Mississippi River towboats. I asked him how I could get a job, and he told me there were nearly two dozen towboat companies downriver in Greenville, and that if I went around knocking on doors someone might hire me. To my amazement, he was right. I went to work for Valley Towing as a deckhand on the M/V Ole Miss in late spring of 1978.

As a far westerner, I had a lot to learn about inland rivers navigation. To begin, “towboat” is a misnomer because the boats actually push barges in front of them. Twin-screw, internal combustion engine, diesel-powered river craft evolved in the
middle decades of the twentieth century as the Army Corps of Engineers built elaborate locks and dams on the western rivers to ensure year-round navigation depths. Towboats vary in size from 600-700–horsepower harbor tugs to huge 10,000-horsepower boats that can push twenty, thirty, or more loaded barges upstream against the strong current of the lower Mississippi River. The boats I worked on ranged from 1800 to 3500 horsepower and pushed up to ten barge tows of gasoline, petroleum, hot oil (asphalt), and anhydrous ammonia (for making fertilizer).\footnote{For towboat technology evolution, see Charles Edwin Ward File, National Rivers Hall of Fame, National Rivers Museum, Dubuque, Iowa; George P. Parkinson, Jr., and Brooks F. McCabe, Jr., “Charles Ward and the James V. Rumsey: Regional Innovation in Steam Technology on the Western Rivers,” \textit{West Virginia History} 39 (January–April 1978), 143–80; Michael C. Robinson, \textit{History of Navigation of the Ohio River Basin}, National Waterways Study NWS-83-5 (Washington, D.C., 1983), 28–33. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, development of Z-drive propulsion units further improved towboat power and efficiency.}

The largest of my crews were twelve men; I worked with only two women, both of whom were cooks. My smallest crew was six men. Everyone but the cooks worked six hours on and six off each day for a month and then took two weeks off before restarting the cycle; cooks designed their own daily schedules but also worked thirty days on, fifteen off. All of us thus spent eight months on the boat and four months on the bank each year (in a thirty-year career, that would be twenty years on the boat, ten years on the bank). The crew was divided into ranks. A captain and pilot did the navigating, engineers maintained the engines and boat infrastructure, and the mates and their deck crews “made tow”—connecting barges together with steel wires and hand winches, constructing huge cargo units to push to market destinations. The cook fed the crew three times a day and left out midnight snacks.

I started on the river as a nonunion deckhand in Greenville earning $1,200 a month plus 10 percent “vacation pay”; I finished as a Seafarer’s International Union (SIU) cook working out of the port of Saint Louis for $2,000 a month plus 10 percent vacation pay. When on the boat, I spent next to nothing, so this was a lot
of money in the late ’70s and early ’80s. My union classification was “utility tankerman,” which meant that I was a cook licensed to work as a deckhand and oil tankerman (loading and unloading petroleum products). In fact, I was the world’s worst deckhand and tankerman, and my captains all had the sense to keep me in the galley, where I showed promise. On my Valley Towing Company (Greenville) job, we worked the lower Mississippi River, mainly between Memphis and Baton Rouge. But my National Marine Service (Saint Louis) job took me up and down most of the western rivers—to the head of navigation on the upper Mississippi, up the Saint Croix as far as Stillwater, Minnesota, to Joliet on the Illinois River, Monroe, Louisiana, on the Ouachita, Catoosa, Oklahoma, on the Arkansas River, and across the Louisiana bayous and Gulf of Mexico on the Intracoastal Waterway, from Mobile, Alabama, to Galveston Bay. I was blessed to begin my career on a converted steamboat (the Ole Miss), and during my three years on western rivers I worked aboard the M/Vs (Motor Vessels) City of Greenville, Mama Lere, National Enterprise, National Glory, National Gateway, and National Progress.

It is hard to generalize about life aboard a towboat, but I will give it a try. It is both a good life and a bad life. The racket of diesel engine noise was, for me, disturbing, and I never got used to it; river men jokingly call twin General Motors (GM) towboat engines “Screamin’ Jimmies.” I wore ear muffs when moving through the engine room and around the boat, but some men at that time just slowly lost some of their hearing. Making conversation around all that noise (and with folks who could not hear well) was difficult; so too was deciphering marine radio banter. Television reception (by antenna on the galley TV) was often bad. It was okay when we tied up in port and when sailing near towns. But a bend in the river could change everything in the course of one television show and, when combined with engine noise, made watching TV on a towboat a finely honed skill. There was a lot of staring at the screen and guesswork about what was going on.

Yet the head of the tow, often a hundred yards from the bow
of the boat, was amazingly quiet and peaceful. Leaning or sitting back against a barge bulkhead, and out of the captain’s sight, deckhands sometimes took their breaks there, talking and staring out at the shore (and smoking marijuana). It was so quiet on the head of the tow I could sometimes hear cicadas chirping ashore. The stern, though noisy, was a good place too. While engineers took their breaks sitting on a crate astride a port or starboard engine room hatch, cooks often took their breaks on the stern. I have good memories of evenings spent sitting there on a plastic milk crate, watching the wheel wash (propeller turbulence) and huge red sunsets and full moons that were pumpkin orange (a cook, Nan Hodges, told me these were “hog killing moons”). Below Memphis, and between Natchez and Baton Rouge, the lower Mississippi was a huge, swampy wilderness. We saw ducks and geese and hundreds of deer grazing and drinking along the flood plain; at one point, far off in the distance, shone the lights of Louisiana’s Angola prison. Further south lay the bayous and the Gulf Coast. I recall pushing tows across the Mississippi Sound and Galveston Bay as the sun set over the Caribbean Sea.

But the smell of ammonia and hot oil, combined with engine noise, was sickening. And twelve-hour workdays, scheduled six hours on, six off, were rough, because five and a half hours was the most sleep anyone could possibly get in one installment. And there was overtime. I once worked thirty-six hours without sleep, building tows and running locks on the Arkansas River, while somehow cooking and serving a Thanksgiving dinner.

However, I will never forget that Arkansas Thanksgiving and, as I look back, there are many good memories. Pushing hot oil from Dubuque, Iowa, to Saint Paul (Pine Bend), Minnesota, one summer, we found ourselves in a world of summer cabins, fishing camps, houseboats, and water skiers. I also loved the Illinois River around Marseilles and Starved Rock, with bald eagles perched in trees along the bank, watching our progress in between their fishing jaunts. I spent the afternoon of July 4, 1978, eating barbecue and swimming with fellow boatmen in a Memphis slip, diving off the bow of Mama Lere. To the south,
pushing petroleum from Houston to Baton Rouge by way of Houma and Morgan City, I watched some remarkable television shows around five o’clock in the morning, with Black musicians decked out in full cowboy regalia singing country and blues songs in French (that was an eye- and ear-opener for a Pacific northwesterner). With our boat laid up with a twisted propeller at a Brusly, Louisiana, shipyard, I found a joint that served as hunting camp, boat launch, café, honky-tonk, and the local chapter of the Moose Lodge. There was not a sign in sight advertising any of these services. One day, I was sitting at the bar and a guy came in carrying a chicken he had accidentally run over with his truck in the driveway. The cook dressed the bird and threw it in the gumbo pot.

Meanwhile, on my days off, I lived at Shorty’s Boardinghouse in Greenville and, later, the Gateway and Baltimore hotels in Saint Louis. The latter two ranked several notches above flophouses and were patronized by an all-male clientele of rivermen, railroaders, and truck drivers. The only women there were strippers (in the Baltimore hotel bar) and prostitutes, riding the elevators late at night. Coming back to my room late from a movie or a Cardinals or Blues game, I encountered them, dead tired, returning to their rooms after their night’s work.

I met all kinds of folks on the river, some beloved characters, and some fools whom I never want to see again (ever), and many men who fell in between those extremes. In Greenville, there was a relief mate nicknamed Choker whose great pride was his cockfighting hobby. Once, he opened his duffel bag to show me some cockfighting spurs and pictures of his roosters and I noticed that all he had brought with him for a thirty-day trip was a toothbrush, one extra t-shirt and a pair of underwear, and a loaded pistol. Choker’s roosters were beautiful. Then there was Captain J, who succeeded in running me off my first cooking job on the City of Greenville because he did not believe that men should be towboat cooks (boat companies were sharply divided between those who used only men cooks and those who hired only women). As part of his strategy, Captain J ate only one of my meals and then lived off white bread, canned meat, and canned
peaches three times a day for a week. The first mate and engineer soon joined him; the last straw for the mate was when I served spaghetti, a dish he told me he had never eaten and never would.

Fleety and Nan were Greenville cooks on the *Mamma Lere*, stoic islands of forbearance amid the profane, all-male crew. Andy Robitschek, an oil tankerman, grew up in Kenya with missionary parents and was dubbed the “redheaded African”; Andy was a rodeo bull rider and sometime undergraduate at Murray State (Kentucky). Steve, the first mate on the *Ole Miss* was a redneck hipster who nicknamed me “Daddy Rabbit.” Dave Miller of Memphis was the *Mamma Lere*’s “hippie captain,” a seasoned, second-generation riverman who played guitar in the wheelhouse and introduced me to John Hartford’s *Mark Twang*.

When I went to work for National Marine in Saint Louis, I found a mix of old-line Mississippi Valley pilots, engineers, and cooks working alongside union deckhands, many of whom came from eastern port cities (where they lacked the seniority to secure lucrative deep-sea berths). There, I worked about a dozen thirty-day trips on small, 1800-horsepower boats with crews of six. A deckhand on the *National Enterprise* who wanted to be called “Chief” claimed to be both part Apache Indian and a Green Beret Vietnam veteran. In fact, he was a pathological liar who stole our money and jewelry before being caught red-handed carrying a sea bag full of life vests off the boat! Referring to Chief, Captain Red noted, “that son of a bitch must be a hundred years old—he’d have to be a hundred to do everything he claims he done.” On the *National Glory*, Captain B was a Marine Corps Korean War veteran who encouraged returning deckhands to bring him a magnum of Jack Daniels, which he could finish off in a couple of days (Coast Guard regulations forbid alcohol and other drugs on towboats). Because of D, an ammonia tech (tankerman) on the *National Glory*, cooks were forced to keep two bottles of vanilla extract on hand, one for cooking and one for D’s personal use.

Then there were the young deckhands. Shipping aboard the *National Enterprise*, Keith (named “Brillo” for his long hair) and Alan aimed, respectively, to become an engineer and a pilot.
Wade ("Country") showed me that the thickest southern accents on the river can come from southern Illinois (Elizabethtown). He called me "Cook," stressing the flat oo (nobody on the river ever called me "Cookie"). Wade had never tasted cheesecake before I served it up one day topped with canned cherry pie filling, after which he became a great admirer of what he called "Cook’s Cherry Cheese Pie." Mike was a worthless Saint Louis deckhand who lasted only two trips because he could not wake up when called for watch; Mike introduced me to Van Halen and wrote me a bad check when he quit National Marine on Christmas Day 1979. Leo McConaghy was an eighteen-year-old south Boston deckhand just out of the SIU training school. Presiding over the National Enterprise’s menagerie was Captain Roy Pharr, a south Alabamian who loved early ’60s folk music (Brothers Four and Peter, Paul, and Mary) and read the poetry of Rod McKuen. Roy’s relief was a pilot named Pee Wee, who was a little too nervous to be pushing ammonia barges.

As cook, I lacked rank but possessed clout. The galley was our boat’s living room, and I was the social director. A well-fed crew is good for business, and the company allowed me to order any and all the groceries I wanted. Captain J’s critique notwithstanding, I was a good cook, especially considering I was a northwesterner who had to learn how to prepare Mississippi Valley (including Cajun) dishes. On Mondays I served roast pork, Wednesday was chicken and dumplings, Friday was fried catfish, Saturday was steak dinner, and on Sunday we always ate fried chicken. Other hearty entrées were interwoven into that menu. Per towboat tradition, I served a big dinner at noon, while the evening supper consisted of leftovers with fresh bread (yeast rolls, biscuits, or cornbread) and a new entrée. I was known for my supper entrées, catering to the young deckhands’ love of Italian food, including pizza, Mexican dishes, deli fare, and even chow mein. At Christmas, I served smoked turkey alongside a big traditional roasted bird, and decked the galley with wreaths, tree lights, and holiday decor. As John Hartford sang, being “out on the river, on Christmas Eve” is bittersweet. I hope that, out on the
river right now, there are a few boatmen who remember a good Christmas spent in one of my galleys.

Segregation was coming to an end when I worked on the river. Jose, a Puerto Rican SIU deckhand from New York City, was the first Black employee of National Marine. The union also shipped a Pakistani deckhand whom we called Jimmy because no one could pronounce his name (Jimmy used a lot of hot sauce on that Thanksgiving turkey). First Mate Floyd on the National Progress was Mexican American (as was Chief), and A. J. Rosenthal, for whom I served as relief cook on the National Progress, was the son of a French Cajun mother and Jewish father. In his corner pantry closet, A. J. had tacked a sign above the canned vegetables—The Wailing Wall. Cajuns were ubiquitous; many had earned their pilot’s licenses as teenagers. They spoke strongly accented Cajun English. Women were few and far between, and, perusing the pages of a recent issue of Waterways Journal, I still see an overwhelmingly male workforce. Indeed, when people ask me today why I quit working on boats, I tell them it was in part because I got tired of spending two thirds of my time with a bunch of men.

But I never got over working on the river. Typing these words forty-one years later, I am still not over it. When I shipped for National Marine, commuting by air to get on a boat in Saint Paul, or Memphis, or Little Rock, I walked through air terminals with a swagger, vain about the fact that I was no lowly landsman. I bragged that I worked on the river, not on the bank. Choker, in a rare moment of introspection, once said to me, “Now, you tell someone you work in a factory or you’re a butcher, and that don’t mean nothin’. But you tell them that you’re a towboatman and, well, that’s got a ring to it.” Joseph Conrad was a little more literary than Choker. Reflecting on his years as a merchant sailor, Conrad wrote, “Wasn’t that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had nothing, excepting hard knocks—and sometimes a chance to feel your strength.”

About the same time that Conrad shipped as a merchant
seaman, Mark Twain reminisced about his steamboat days in *Life on the Mississippi*: “If I have seemed to love my subject, it is no surprising thing, for I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since, and I took measureless pride in it.” And seven decades after Twain, Dick Bissell reflected on his towboating in a passage that begins with a thought similar to Choker’s: “Why don’t plumbers … exult in their craft like this? And carpenters?” Bissell’s answer: “The river is dark and mysterious, but it’s your baby, you know it like a poem. You’re the big cheese, it’s all up to you. It’s a real pilot house, real coal barges, and you’re The Man.”

Why did I go on the river? … I went on the river because I liked boats all my life and I liked the river and I had already been a deckhand on the river and deep sea and I liked the smell of engine rooms and I loved those big steel barges and I liked river people and I liked the talk… I liked to cuss the company and hang around in saloons with other rivermen and our girls and act tough. I actually liked to go ashore in the yawl with the mate and flounder around in the brush and the mud in the middle of the night getting a line onto a cottonwood tree. I liked to feel that I was romantic, hard-boiled, hard-working, and a hard case.13

Two decades after Bissell wrote these lines, John Hartford recorded “Headin’ Down into the Mystery Below” on the record album of the same title. Hartford’s performance is typically lean; he does the singing to the accompaniment of only his banjo and foot-clogging rhythm. He sets the stage for the song’s story. We are on a towboat in the early morning, heading downstream. “When the sun burns the fog, the hills come out, like a slowly developin’ photograph,” he sings. “The hills and sky repeat themselves / in a 6 o’clock river of glass.” Staring into the waters that flow beneath his boat, Hartford sees “the ghost of a lumber raft” and the “endless names and faces and the souls of men / who worked on the river.” He reflects, as he does in so many of his songs, on what it is that has compelled him to be a boatman:

“Well, I tried to understand why I love the river / Tried to understand why I love to sing,” he states. “Seems like if I could understand the river / Maybe I could understand most anything.” Of course, he cannot answer the question. As in the song “On Christmas Eve,” he cannot precisely articulate his passion for river life. And so, in the tradition of all great river songwriters, Hartford surrenders to the river’s downstream current:

Out here the water’s deep and swift
We’re paddling in the flow
Headin’ down out of the mystery above
Headin’ down into the mystery below.14

As they aged, Dick Bissell and John Hartford both spent their lives much closer to the river than Mark Twain did in his older years. Twain wrote his sister Pamela in 1864, “I have never once thought of returning home to go on the river again”; as soon as he achieved notoriety, he moved to upstate New York, and then Connecticut, where he died in 1910. After his own stint in Connecticut, Dick Bissell returned to Dubuque, Iowa, where he died along the upper Mississippi in 1977. John Hartford built a home overlooking the Cumberland River in Nashville and lived and worked there until he succumbed to cancer in 2001. Neither Twain, nor Bissell, nor Hartford chose to give up their artistic careers to return to full-time riverboating. They traded working on boats for creating literature and music about boats. “Every couple of weeks or so I, too, dream I am back on the river,” Bissell recalled jokingly. “Anyway, I have a grand time and when I wake up I am at home and the old lady is here and so is old dog Tray and that’s the way I like it.”15

I left the river in 1981, wrote a doctoral dissertation about Ohio and Mississippi flatboatmen, and somehow managed to become a college professor. I retired my SIU book in 1981, but was able to continue paying dues on it with the option of reactivation. I was married with three kids and wanted to be able to ship on a towboat if we ever needed the money. But in 1991,
I earned tenure at the University of Washington, Tacoma, and I stopped paying my SIU dues. That was a hard thing to do.

I return to the Mississippi River every year, usually in the fall, to volunteer for the Community of Christ at the Joseph Smith Historic Site in Nauvoo, Illinois. During the evenings, I sit on the porch, read the *Waterways Journal* (including the Help Wanted ads), and watch the big red sun descend across the horizon. I can see the towboats churning up and down the Mississippi, pushing their loads. I look for the cook on the stern, sitting on a milk crate.