
Friends of the Peconica River Foundation

September 20, 2012

History

Early Steamboats On Peconica River Part 3 of 15

The J. B. Taylor was an almost instant success. The demand for its use as a picnic boat was steady especially after it had been used in a political parade, sponsored by the Democratic Party in the campaign of 1888. The boat had been placed on wheels and especially decorated as a float for the occasion. It was drawn by a team of fine horses. When John Ellis JR. began to plan a larger boat he sold the J.B. Taylor to Doctor Sunderland, a local dentist. It was later fitted with a gasoline engine.

Columbia, a craft about 37 feet long capable of seating some 35 or 40 persons was built in honor of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Like the others, it was constructed in the yard of the Ellis home on Galena Avenue, and the work was done mostly at night by Mr. Ellis after a hard day at the blacksmith shop. He was assisted by his son, John F 111, who, among other things, held a lantern by the light of which the job was done. The frame of the boat, (ribs, keel, etc.) were of oak and ash. The hull strips were of white pine fitted to one another by the use of special concave and convex planes. The gunnels were ash and the decks, fore and aft, were made of alternating one-inch strips of walnut and ash.

The two-cylinder upright steam engine, which was to power Columbia, was designed by Mr. Ellis, who drew the plans, and made the patterns for all the parts, which were cast in a local factory. Then Ellis himself machined and fitted all the pieces. He honed the cylinders by hand and the pistons as well. The gears and timing mechanism also received his careful attention. Twenty-five years later this engine, after extensive use, was found to be in excellent operating condition.

There were happy and sad times for Columbia. On the happy side there were the many enjoyable river trips when John Ellis JR. took picnic parties upriver to such favorite spots as Dreyer's Landing, McGrath's and catfish Point. Among organizations making frequent use of the boat was the Matchbox Club. William Ascher, a personal friend, chartered the boat for an outing at least once a year. But the Columbia was sold to Misters Beckman and Young about 1903. Contrary to good advice, they put the boat in the river below the dam and, when convinced that boating downstream was not good, sought to float the boat upstream over the dam during high water. During the operation the boat capsized and the engine and boiler were torn loose and dropped to the bottom of the river. A diver from Chicago was employed to locate and harness these items so they could be raised. After this sad experience Beckman and Young sold Columbia to William Ware who took it to a small lake near Milwaukee, which proved to be a body of water not suitable for boating. After Ware returned the boat to Freeport, it was eventually purchased by Leo D. Ellis a son of John Ellis Jr. who converted it to a clamming vessel and installed a gasoline engine. Thus Columbia ended her days in the Peconica.

The conclusion of this essay awaits next month, in keeping with one page history series.