

REQUIEM FOR THE CACTUS PILOTS

BY JERRY MacMULLEN

PERHAPS it lacked the tense drama of shooting the rapids of the St. Lawrence or the Upper Columbia or the Yukon, but steamboating on the Colorado was a game which had its own ways of separating the men from the boys.

Gone for all time are the steamboats on that once important artery of commerce and military supply, and forgotten are the days of San Diego's stern-wheel steamers which never saw San Diego. The muted *sssooooo, hhhhaaa!* of the slow-speed, cross-compound engine has been replaced by the staccato din of the outboard motor, and the fumes you get today are carbon monoxide rather than the pungent smoke of cottonwood logs burning under a steamboat boiler. The *Gila* doesn't tie up to the bank below old Fort Yuma any more, while the pilot steps ashore for a well-earned slug of red-eye. The fiberglass hull you see cutting figure-eights across the river's surface this Sunday no doubt will be, on Monday, nesting securely on a padded trailer in a carport. Gone too are Jack Mellen and Isaac Polhamus and George Alonzo Johnson and all the rest of those old pilots who knew the four-hundred-odd miles of that river in the days when the going was rough.

The Colorado's knights of the steering-wheel had their problems. They had no lights nor echo-boards to help them, no outstanding willows or cottonwoods or farmhouse chimneys to serve as leading marks. All they could boast, for the most part, was a clump of cactus or the whitening skull of a critter—or human—who hadn't made it.

And the gradient of the river? Well—it was 380 miles from the landing at Callville down to Port Ysabel, in the delta, and the drop was close to 1,000 feet. The Colorado was steep, and fast. Because the stream was swift, it tended to scour out its sides and bottom; the sandbar which was there yesterday was here today, and it would be somewhere else when you came back downstream next week. It was all very frustrating, and it's small wonder that there was a tendency to tie up to the bank and wait until morning when it was too dark to detect the tell-tale riffle or change in water color.

Callville was the head of practical steamboat navigation, and it was there that the boats unloaded supplies for scattered Army outposts and for the Mormon colonies up in Utah. Don't waste your time trying to find Callville; it's on the bottom of Lake Mead.

Navigation on the Colorado is both an old story and a short one, and it began when Hernando de Alarcón was fooling around its lower reaches, back in 1540. Unhappily, we are not sure just how far upstream he got; reports of the early Spaniards might not satisfy the Bureau of Navigation today. Here's a sample entry: "Fittingly observed this, the day of St. Xavier. Went about three leagues and saw in the distance a very great hill." It is possible, nonetheless, that Alarcón may have got up to, or even beyond, the present site of Yuma. If he did, it is not unreasonable to assume that he became the first white man to set foot on the soil of what now is California.

About three centuries later, people began to use the Colorado for navigation again. Lt. R. W. H. Hardy, R. N., explored the lower river about 1826 (The Royal Navy was always sticking its nose into other people's rivers in those days) and about the same time American trappers began rafting across the river in order to get into the mountains and valleys of the Pacific Coast. Ferrying across the Colorado became a booming business during the Gold Rush, and among those whose interest it aroused was Captain George Alonzo Johnson, then Deckhand Johnson of the steamer *Panama*, which reached San Francisco in the summer of 1849. Johnson went into the lightering business on the bay, and not long afterward he heard that the Glanton boys had cleaned up an average of \$10,000 a month in ferrying at Yuma. He headed for the river, determined to fill the vacuum which had been created when the Glantons were massacred, and after no little difficulty, got started.

Although far from as profitable as many had thought, the ferry did make enough money to arouse the envy of others, including one of Johnson's former partners. There is a hint of possible hanky-panky in the fact that the military reservation at Fort Yuma suddenly expanded to take in Johnson's ferry landing, and it was suggested that he sell out to his erstwhile partner—who, it seems, was on excellent terms with the post commander. Johnson sold, and embarked on a career as a transporter of cargo, using flatboats and, at last, steamboats.

The first steamer on the Colorado was a small one indeed; she was the *Uncle Sam*, a double-ended side-wheeler sixty-five feet long and drawing, with some thirty-five tons of cargo aboard,

a matter of twenty-two inches. Innocent of cabin or pilothouse, she was provided with a piece of canvas to cover her machinery if by any chance it should rain. She foundered at Pilot Knob in 1854.

Meanwhile the Army's most noted wag, Lt. George H. Derby, had made a survey of the Colorado; that was in 1852, and a year later Captain Johnson, with Capt. A. H. Wilcox and Benjamin Hartshorne, founded what was to be known as the Colorado Steam Navigation Company. Johnson's first "big" steamboat—she was 108 feet long and drew thirty inches of water—appeared on the river in 1854. She was the *General Jessup* and she was brought from San Francisco to the mouth of the river, in pieces, aboard a sailing vessel. They put her together, and Johnson was in business. His line, in the years which followed, handled a great deal of traffic, at tariffs said to have sometimes brought in \$500 a day.

As the *General Jessup* was the first steamboat to get above Yuma, Johnson had every reason to believe that, when a new survey of the upper river was ordered in 1857, he would get the job: the money for the survey, in fact, was appropriated, and things looked rosy for the *General Jessup*. The honor of going down in history as the father of up-river navigation, however, was to be denied to Johnson for many years.

Lt. Joseph Ives, of the Army's Topographical Engineers, had made up his mind that it was he who would become Mr. Upper Colorado, and a steamer for his use was laid down in Philadelphia. She was an open, iron-hulled stern-wheeler called *Explorer*, and early lithographs of her indicate that she was designed by a naval architect who had heard of a steamer but had never seen one. The money for this steamboat, and for the whole Ives show, in fact, allegedly came from the funds appropriated to hire the *General Jessup*. Johnson subsequently hinted that Ives' marriage to a niece of the then Secretary of War had been a hidden factor.

Before they got the *Explorer* together, Johnson was heading upstream with a load of government stores, and an Army escort aboard. Although he was the first to reach the practical head of navigation—and met the Ives expedition struggling upstream after he had discharged his cargo and was being backed to Yuma—he called for the credit. Ives' report was duly noted and publicized in Washington, while that of