

tide level, its sides were mere slanting surfaces of boards, banked and shored up from below. There was a gate across its end, which was opened at high tide. Then a steamer was warped in and maneuvered onto the skids which served the dual capacity of keel-blocks and shoring—for the vessels were as flat as pancakes, and drew only a few feet of water. As the tide receded, the steamboat or barge dropped easily onto the supports, the gate was closed for protection against the next high tide—and scraping, caulking and painting went on at the shipwrights' leisure. When she was ready for service again the gate was opened, the flooding tide lifted her from the blocks—and she would go puffing up the river with a payload, or down to the Gulf to tow some schooner into Port Isabel to unload.

Many of the craft used on the Colorado are listed as being built in San Francisco, but actually they were sent to Port Isabel in knock-down form, in the holds of schooners. It was the job of the shipyard to reassemble them, and send them on their way. Later, others were built at Yuma, which today is hardly a maritime center.

There is a popular legend to the effect that the first steamboat navigation of the Colorado was by Lt. Ives' expedition in the *Explorer*—an iron-hulled affair which looked like a cross between a gold-dredge and a circus chariot. That was in 1857 when Colorado steamboating already was a going business. It was, in fact, in 1851 that George A. Johnson reached the mouth of the Colorado in the schooner *Sierra Nevada*, with lumber from which a flat-boat was constructed. The first steamboat—the *Uncle Sam*—appeared in 1852, five years before the *Explorer*. She was brought by a Capt. Turnbull, in the hold of a sailing vessel, and was re-assembled at the delta shipyard. She ran for a few years, then stranded and sank, to be replaced by Johnson's steamboat *Gen'l Jessup*, built in 1853 and a money-maker until she blew up. In those days, the chilling hand of the Steamboat Inspection Service had not yet descended upon river navigation, and the requiem of more than one California river steamboat has been shortened conveniently into three words—"She blew up".

One day a travel-stained individual climbed down from a stage-coach at Fort Yuma and introduced himself to the steamboat operators; he was the San Diego County tax-collector, and he was there to see that San Diego's river steamboats—at Yuma—paid their just debts. Moreover, he had the law behind him, for at that time a part of the present city of Yuma was in San Diego County. There was no Imperial County and San Diego

County ran all the way to the Colorado. Musty records in the possession of the San Diego Historical Society reveal the following payments of taxes:

On April 6, 1856, George A. Johnson paid taxes on the *Colorado*, valued at \$20,000, and the *Gen'l Jessup*, assessed for \$2,000. A tax-receipt for Oct. 25, 1862, shows Johnson declared "Three steamers, \$15,000." And the New Steamboat Co., on May 3, 1867, paid taxes on "...one steamboat, \$6,000; three barges, \$6,000."

The *Colorado* was built at San Francisco in 1854, and was re-assembled on the delta; her life must have been short, for a second *Colorado* was built—this time at Yuma—in 1865. Then came the stern-wheelers *Cocopah*, *Mohave*, *Esmeralda*, *Nina Tilden*, *Gila* and *Cochan*. The last named, rebuilt at Yuma in 1893 on the hull of the old *Gila*, still was running in 1905. Custom House records indicate that the largest of the fleet were the *Mohave* and the *Gila*, each registered as 149 feet long.

The bore of the Colorado was responsible for giving the river one of its most colorful characters—Capt. Jack Mellon.

He was mate in the schooner *Victoria Runyon*, which arrived at the river's mouth in 1864, and managed to get herself aground on a mudbank. When the wall of water struck her, she broke her back—the hull no doubt strained by hanging on its 'midship point, with bow and stern unsupported. Mellon decided to quit the sea and go into desert navigation, so he cast his lot with the Johnson outfit. Before long he was in command of steamboats, taking cargo from schooners unloaded at Port Isabel and delivering it, from the steamers and barges towed astern, far up the muddy stream. In time he rose to ownership as well as command, and eventually amassed a tidy little bank-account. But changing times brought changing fortunes; demonetization of silver struck a hard blow at the river traffic, competition from other forms of transport appeared, and the irrigation development which was to create the Imperial Valley of today did the rest. Capt. Mellon, whose name once was legendary along the river he knew and loved, wound up as a night watchman in San Diego.



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Self-Liquidating Shipyard