

as a pilot and his qualities as a host. The *Cochan*, incidentally, was rebuilt from the *Gila*, which they had picked up at bargain rates from the Southern Pacific.

Like all pilots, Jack Mellen was resourceful, and not easily cheated. The story is told that when an Arizona Territory doctor handed him a bill for \$500 for professional services, Mellen said nothing and paid it. Not long afterward the doctor was called to proceed up-river to care for a man who was desperately ill, and when he got back he inquired as to the amount of his fare. Displaying a large-caliber six-gun with just the right amount of emphasis, Mellen told him to fork over \$500—which he did.

Mellen, by the way, was like Johnson in failing to receive his due from history. There used to be a small river settlement called Mellen, and it retained that name until the Santa Fe built a bridge across the stream at that point. Then some busybody decided that the little pilot had enjoyed fame long enough, and looked up the Mojave Indian word for "bridge." That word became the name of the town—Topock, in San Bernardino County.

Captain Johnson was quite a joker. A reporter for an eastern paper came out to do a story on the Colorado, and took passage in Johnson's steamer. Knowing that it would be hot, the young man had provided himself with two pairs of linen trousers, and sure enough, the day they started it was a pleasant 123° in the shade, had there been any. It wasn't long until the linen trousers were soaked with perspiration. He changed to the other pair and washed the first one. His trousers hung up to dry, the journalist went back to the pilothouse. Fifteen minutes later he went back to get them, and was startled to find them, despite the intense, dry heat, as wet as ever. As soon as they were dry, Johnson or one of the crew had dunked them in the river again. After the second or third time this happened, the reporter asked Johnson why those trousers just would not dry. Johnson gave the wheel a spoke or two before he replied.

"Funny thing about that," he remarked. "Along this particular stretch

of river, things just don't ever dry out. Can't understand it. Nobody knows why. Must be something about the atmosphere and the currents.

"Now," he went on, raising his voice so that he knew it would be heard by one of his fellow pranksters, "you just be patient. Soon as we get beyond this next bend in the river, it'll be different. Those pants will be bone-dry in five minutes or less."

Grinning to themselves, the other conspirators left the trousers hanging where they were. The steamer entered the bend, and the young man could scarcely wait to rush down to the boiler-deck and grab the flapping trousers; they were just as dry as they could be. That night he sat down and wrote a long account of this strange phenomenon on this strange river. Not only was it duly printed, but it was reprinted by a number of other papers.

The San Diego tax-collector headed east across the mountains one day a century ago to collect from Capt. George Alonzo Johnson—whose tax-return for 1863 shows "2 steamboats value \$22,000" located in Colorado Township. The 1868 assessment is for "4 steamboats 3 barges" at Fort Yuma, and brings out the fact that a part of Yuma once was in San Diego County. Under the original treaty with Mexico, the boundary line was from a point one league south of the head of San Diego Bay to the confluence of the Gila and Colorado Rivers. The meandering Colorado, just below this point, doubles back on itself, so that a piece of land, between that loop and the old boundary line, was not in Arizona Territory, but in San Diego County—which, in those days, ran clear over to the Colorado. San Diego thus was the "home port" for river steamboats which never saw San Diego Bay.

By 1864, Johnson had things pretty well sewed up; then came competition. Thomas E. Trueworthy, a Sacramento steamboat operator, took the 130-foot *Esmeralda* to the Colorado as an "independent" steamboat. About the same time Capt. Paddy Gorman brought the *Nina Tilden* down from San Francisco; he ran her for the Philadelphia Mining Company, which had an operation at El Dorado Canyon. That made

five steamboats on the river, which was too many for the available trade. Trueworthy's outfit merged with the mining company to form the Pacific & Colorado Steam Navigation Company, which became the Arizona Navigation Company, and finally sold out to Johnson. From then until 1877, when the railroad came, Johnson ruled the roost again. Trueworthy made one vital contribution to the river trade, for it was he who introduced freight barges, towed behind a steamer. His first barge, the 128-foot *Black Crook*, came out in 1864.

In 1899, the steel-hulled steambot *St. Vallier*, built at Needles to carry ore, was commanded by a former Ohio River captain. They say that although she was supposed to make twelve miles an hour—upstream and loaded—when they turned her loose for the first time, she wasn't even able to keep up with the current. It must have been terribly embarrassing.

And now the sun was setting on the Colorado steamboats. The railroads had taken the upper river business, and dams for irrigation projects did the rest. One by one the paddlers were broken up, and there hasn't been a stern-wheel steambot on the river for half a century. The little *Searchlight*, built in 1903, was the last one launched on the river, and she lasted for only about five years. For years the big *Mohave's* flag-pole stood in front of the modest cottage of Jack Mellen, who ended his career as night watchman in a San Diego hotel; he died in 1924. Johnson, later well known as the owner of Rancho Los Peñasquitos and prominent in San Diego's civic affairs, died in 1903.

Just a few years ago, antiquarians heard about the *Mohave* flagpole: they were far too late. Neighbors recalled it, but it was long gone. Some Johnny-Come-Lately had probably sawed it up for firewood, after Jack Mellen died. The funeral of George Alonzo Johnson, father of steamboating on the Upper Colorado, was a memorable event, being conducted by none other than the renowned Father Antonio Ubach. To-day it would be difficult to locate his grave amid the shambles of weeds, beer cans and defiled tombstones of old Calvary Cemetery in Mission Hills, overlooking San Diego Bay.

