


Pilot of the



Other River

STORY BY DALE SMITH
PHOTOS BY STEVE MORSE

A RARE KIND OF RIVER GUIDE HELPS PASSENGERS ON THE AMERICAN QUEEN STEAMBOAT SENSE THE MIGHTY MISSISSIPPI'S PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL POWERS. SINGER, SONGWRITER AND HISTORIAN BOB DYER ADDS A NEW JOB AND A NEW RECORDING OF RIVER SONGS (*RIVER RUNS OUTSIDE MY DOOR*) TO HIS LIFE'S WORK OF LEARNING ABOUT ALL THINGS RIVERINE.



BOB DYER HAS TAKEN A COUPLE OF visitors up to the pilothouse of the *American Queen* steamboat, which is moored on the St. Louis waterfront just before Independence Day. Standing in the glass pilothouse, Dyer, AB '61, MA '66, can glance between the *Queen's* crown-topped smokestacks and take in centuries of transportation history and pioneering spirit. A train chugs past yards away. Just up the Mississippi River, James Eads' coal-stained bridge, an 1874 engineering marvel of stone and then-experimental steel, frames boats on the river and forms a path five stories above the surface. Capsules inside the Gateway Arch's gleaming howlegged shafts carry tourists up 630 feet to a viewing perch above most of St. Louis' tallest buildings. Above it all ascends a passenger jet in its takeoff from Lambert International Airport. When Dyer escorts passengers six stories above the water to the pilothouse, they get a long view of the river.

Dyer has spent much of his 61 years

Bob Dyer's "office" on the American Queen steamboat is the chart room, where passengers often visit to discuss river history.

learning about rivers and boats and the people around them as if in preparation for his rare job — his dream job — “riverlorian,” which he discovered just two years ago. In his work on the *Queen*, he is part river chart (“Ladies and gentlemen, coming up on our port side . . .”), part pilothouse tour guide (“This is the operations center of the boat, and its exterior is modeled after the pilothouses on 19th-century floating palaces . . .”), part historian (“This morning’s talk about the Civil War on the Western rivers . . .”), and equal parts folklorist, singer, songwriter and spiritual depth finder.

The *American Queen* will go down in the history of steam-powered paddle-wheel boats. Commissioned in 1995, it’s the newest of the three boats operated by the Delta Queen Steamboat Co. on the Mississippi River system. At 89 feet wide by 418 feet long with six decks, it’s the biggest ever built; and with luxury accommodations from bow to stern, it’s possibly the swankiest ever. It’s a modern theme hotel full of replicas of 19th-century furnishings and conversation pieces, such as the stuffed boar’s head in the Gentlemen’s Lounge. Its cargo, primarily people

of retirement age, pay up to \$240 a day to ride three-, five- and seven-day junkets on the Mississippi. Even so, the boat looks and runs much like the magnificent craft of steamboating's golden age before and just after the Civil War. The romantic charms of this floating wedding cake massage the minds of its clients up and down the river at the introspective pace of 8 miles an hour. All in all, the *American Queen* is a tall tale of a steamboat, reminiscent of the legendary *Jim Johnson* boat, about which Dyer wrote the following song lyric, just one of his many about rivers and boats:

"Well, the *Jim Johnson* ate enough wood on a run

To build 50 courthouses and a good-sized town.

With a full load of passengers, provisions and freight

She could declare herself an independent floating state."



The boat's theater is the site of Dyer's daily talks on river issues, as well as nightly musical entertainment. It was modeled after Ford's Theatre, where President Abraham Lincoln was shot.

DYER STILL LIVES IN HIS BIRTHPLACE, Boonville, Mo., a pioneer-era town on the Missouri River. In his book, *Boonville, an Illustrated History*, he wrote that, "Being born beside a great river like the Missouri does something to your heart and blood and psyche that you never fully understand and never lose. Perhaps it's the tug of that constant current cutting its inevitable path from the northern Rockies across the Great Plains to the southern seas, or the inscrutable mystery of its muddy depths, or the layers of human energy and history that hang in its valleys like morning mist or like the blue haze of a summer evening." Working on the *American Queen* is just an extension of Dyer's fascination with rivers.

Of all the other workers onboard the *American Queen*, Dyer identifies most with the pilots, whose licensing examinations require them to draw large stretches of river from memory, detailed down to the shape and name of every last bend of the snaking channel. Dyer's passengers crave detailed data about pilots, river and boat. He gladly obliges. For instance, *American Queen* pilots work alternating six-hour shifts in their glass house. They navigate with a large console of instruments and controls, including radios, radar screen and steering levers. A smaller panel operates hydraulic pistons that lower the tops of the 98-foot smokestacks so the boat can fit under bridges. Yet another panel can seal the steel hull's eight watertight compartments in case of fires or leaks.

In the center of the main console's high-tech instruments lies a brass plate called the telegraph. It is embossed in pie-slice sections containing commands to the engine room, such as full, half, slow, dead slow and stop. Pilots dial one of these choices, which, in a throwback to antebellum boats, rings a bell in the engine room. According to the bells, engineers scramble to answer pilots' desires for speed or direction of the paddle wheel.

Dyer explains that a pilot's points of



When pilots turn the telegraph's brown dial, bells ring in the engine room, and engineers hustle to execute the speed and directional commands with vintage 1932 engines.

reference are the red and green buoys that mark the main channel, where water flows fastest and deepest. As rivers curve back and forth downstream, the swiftest and deepest part of the channel stays to the outside of bends. When moving with current, pilots steer to the faster water toward the outside; when against current, they keep to the slower "duck water" on the inside, or points, of bends. The *Queen* moves upstream with four engines totaling 3,500 horsepower. The two engines that turn the paddle wheel generate a total of 1,500 horsepower. They were salvaged from a 1932 dredge called the *Kennedy*, which was built and run by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers until 1984. A diesel-fired boiler feeds 225 pounds per square inch of steam into pistons that turn a 52-ton paddle wheel assembly containing rows of 2-inch-thick red oak paddles.

The technology hasn't changed much since 150 years ago, though back then engineers made steam by tossing logs into fireboxes that heated water in iron boilers. A pair of 1,000-horsepower diesel engines turn two 5-foot propellers to supplement the steam power, though the old *Kennedy* engines can easily propel the floating hotel and its 600-some passengers and crew. At top speed, the *Queen's* paddle wheel spins 16 revolutions a minute.

THE BLUFF-TOP RIVER TOWN OF Boonville is located roughly halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City on the Missouri River. Every Memorial Day for years now, Dyer has set flowers on the graves of certain Boonville citizens who left their marks on him and on the town. He places one of the flowers at the headstone of Charles van Ravenswaay, a Boonville historian of the 1930s and 1940s. Van Ravenswaay collected stories about a local voodoo doctor from Lucy Broaddus, an elderly woman who knew the "conjuratin' man" called Guinea Sam. Dyer's history of Boonville quotes van Ravenswaay's article about this character from western Africa. Before he died in 1887, Guinea Sam told Broaddus one of his favorite versions of his arrival in mid-Missouri. He claimed to

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have been shot from Guinea inside of a cannonball, landing on a steamboat just across from Boonville. The cannonball smashed the boat, but Sam crawled ashore and told the first person he met, "Sister, beware, Ah'm a conjure man an Ah'm tellin' you right now Ah've come heah to stay, and they's a new day comin' fo this town." Like the following verse, much of Dyer's song "Guinea Sam" comes right out of the story Broaddus told:

"He wore two gold earrings in his ears, and he walked with a twisty cane.

He wore a good set of jeans and showed his pretty white teeth,

And when he looked at you, you'd just tremble all over

'Cause he's lookin' right in to you."

Dyer says it was the lure of the river

that drew him away from the history of his little town. "At some point it became clear to me that you could get on a boat on the Missouri River and go upriver as far as the Rocky Mountains and downriver as far as the Gulf of Mexico. The scope of that opened my eyes to bigger things."

His view grew even larger as a student at MU when he studied John Neihardt's epic poem, *Cycle of the West*. Neihardt considered the movement of Europeans into the American West as just the end of their much longer western migration.

Neihardt's visionary themes inspired



Period-style furnishings grace the dining room on the first deck. In order to meet fire codes, much of what looks like woodwork is cast in plaster.

Dyer. "In Neihardt's best-known work, *Black Elk Speaks*, at one point Black Elk says, 'A man who has a vision must perform his vision on earth for people to see or he cannot use the power of it.' In other words, all people are capable of having visions of great things that could expand their life or the lives of the people around them, but if you are not willing to get out and perform it in some way, then the vision loses its power." (For more on Neihardt, a former lecturer at MU, see "A Visionary and His Vision" on Page 40.)

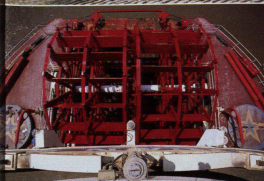
Dyer has taken this to heart. For decades he has performed his vision by writing a book of poems and three books of history; by writing and performing dozens of songs; by co-editing with Walter Bargen, AB '70, M Ed '90, a book of poems about the flood of 1993; and by teaching schoolchildren all over the state about Missouri history through the Missouri Arts Council's Artists in the Schools program. Now, he also performs the vision on the *American Queen* by talking with passengers about the river and the boat. He wants to help people sense what Neihardt called the "otherness of things" — a spiritual aspect of life. "Rivers help you feel that," Dyer says. "Beyond the importance and strength of the physical plane, there's a larger spiritual sense of flow in life, a flow of energy that's motivating. Water in itself is somewhere between earth and air. It's movement, fluid movement, something that you can ride on and dive into. Sometimes it's murky so you can't see what lies below its surface. And then there's the fact that rivers were great highways that not only sustained Native Americans, but provided the white man a highway into the interior, which, ironically, led to the near-extirmination of the native peoples." "When Dyer talks about the otherness of things, all the tall tales and the details he knows about horsepower and hydraulics begin to look like incremental steps toward the kind of spiritual ideas that sustain him. As riverlorian, Dyer is a pilot on the "other" river.



This stack of ornate decks known as the American Queen is in the tradition of boats nicknamed floating wedding cakes. Passengers can walk the balconies for exercise. Two engines totaling 1,500 horsepower turn the 52-ton paddle wheel assembly, right. In wells beneath the painted stars on the deck are a pair of 1,000-horsepower engines, called Z-drives, which turn 5-foot propellers.

BY THANKSGIVING, ENOUGH LEAVES have fallen that Dyer can stand in the bluff-top backyard of his 130-year-old brick house and watch his beloved river flow. Still, it's not the same feeling of freedom he gets floating on the river, high in the *Queen's* chart room, just below the pilothouse. This is where he spends most of his on-duty hours chatting with passengers. Dyer's "office" boasts a grand view of the Midwestern landscape and a library on river history. It also contains book-length charts, with each page representing a section of the muddy river in bright blue. Many passengers begin their visit in the chart room by checking out binoculars and learning to find the boat's location by matching the numbered daymarks on shore with corresponding marks on the charts.

Chart room talk soon expands, and passengers discover that, just as pilots memorize the river channels, Dyer has made a mental river chart of his own, layered with economics, biology, history and culture. He might converse with passengers about how engineers improved navigation by transforming the Mississippi's wild, shifting network of channels to a narrow, swift single current confined by dikes and levees; how a view from the mighty Mississippi's course can include the modern river's petrochemical traffic between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, as well as ancient bluff paintings and petroglyphs appeasing the gods of Native Americans; how, despite the efforts of engineers, the river's alligator gar fish and snapping turtles still live in the flow, little changed since prehistoric times.



**'WATER IN ITSELF IS SOMEWHERE
BETWEEN EARTH AND AIR. IT'S
MOVEMENT, FLUID MOVEMENT,
SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN RIDE
ON AND DIVE INTO.'**

winter of 1833, with the taste of gritty Mississippi mud in his mouth, Eads crawled ashore at the St. Louis waterfront after a boiler explosion sank the steamboat carrying him. Eads vowed then to conquer the river, and he is widely known for his bridge spanning the Mississippi at St. Louis. But long before the bridge, Eads started the first salvage business on the Mississippi and made his fortune walking the river's bottom, leaning into its current in pitch darkness. With no experience and little equipment, Eads took his first salvage job — hauling to the surface several hundred tons of lead in oblong castings called pigs that sunk with the boat that carried them. He was forced to improvise. He converted a bottomless 40-gallon whiskey barrel to his new design for a diving bell by fitting it with weights on the bottom and an air hose on the top.

The cruises progress, and Dyer watches as passengers' routines begin to revolve around the river. "You sense that many passengers are starting to slow down and look carefully at things. They're relaxing away from phones and business and getting a feeling for the beauty of things and the pleasure of just being there. They are thinking about things they haven't thought about before — animals, fish, birds, water and its relation to life, water and its power."

ONE OF DYER'S FAVORITE EXAMPLES of the river's power and those who have tried to tame it is the story of James Eads. At age 13 in the

Eads wrote about that first dive inside the barrel: "I had occasion to descend to the bottom in a current so swift as to require extraordinary means to sink the bell. The sand was drifting like a dense snowstorm at the bottom. At 65 feet below the surface I found the bed of the river, for at least 3 feet in depth, a moving mass and so unstable that, in endeavoring to find a footing on it beneath my bell, my feet penetrated through it until I could feel, although standing erect, the sand rushing past my hands. I could discover the sand in motion at least 2 feet below the surface of the bottom." When Eads found the lead, he raised it by cable, one 70-pound pig at a time.

Dyer admires Eads because, during years of walking the bottom, Eads devel-

oped an understanding of the river and its behavior. In 1879, this knowledge helped him rescue river commerce at the Mississippi delta, which had become clogged with sediment. As river water entered the wide ocean, it slowed and dropped its sandy load, creating waters too shallow for ocean-going ships to enter. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had been dredging for decades to no avail. The delta just kept getting wider and shallower. Eads' idea was to build jetties, a kind of in-water wall of 100-foot "mattresses" of willow and pine anchored between posts driven into the river's bottom. The mattresses reached into the channel from the river's banks, and when water hit the willows, it dropped sediment, which soon accumulated to create new banks that were much closer together. Dyer says that the narrowed channel created a faster flow, which began to scour sand off the bottom and carry it out to sea. After four years of work, the clogged 9-foot-deep channel had scoured itself out to 30 feet.

IT'S EASY TO SEE EADS AND DYER AS kindred spirits. When Eads learned firsthand that even the river's bottom is in motion for 2 feet down into the sand, that became part of the bedrock of his career. In the same way, Dyer's roots have long been in the flow of the river. He makes his art from it, and through his livelihood on the *Queen*, he hopes to help some passengers develop a more expansive view of their world. Dyer's life, as he says on the "Talking Waters" track of his new recording, is a tribute to the river: "Like a whippoorwill, there's really only one song I can sing." ❁

Dyer's new compact disc, River Runs Outside My Door (\$15 plus postage), and his other songs and books are available direct from him by phone at (660) 882-3353; by mail at 513 High St., Boonville, MO 65233; or by e-mail at rldyer@socket.net.