

# Showboat's Comin'

by Captain Bob Cerullo



The gentle quiet of a sleepy waterfront town was suddenly interrupted by the faint sound of music. Watermen in the boats heard it. Then farmers tending crops in their fields near the river heard it. Then children at play heard it loudly and marched to the sound. They were drawn to the sound like moths to the light. The rousing sound of a band playing echoed across the fields and through the town. It meant only one thing: Showboat's comin'.

James Even Adams' first job was in a saw mill in Shepard, Michigan. Soon after he married Gertie Powlson, the couple trained as aerialists and got jobs with the Wixam Brothers Circus. In 1902 he bought ten retired street car horses and some wagons. Adams started touring Michigan with his little circus called the James Adams New Century Show. Adams operated several circuses and carnivals with various partners. By 1913 he was ready for a new challenge.

While touring with his show in West Virginia, James Adams went onboard a river showboat and became obsessed with the concept. Always the business man, Adams liked the idea that there were few rivals and the initial expense of building a showboat limited the competition. On September 14, 1913, at the W. M. Chauncey Marine Railway located in Washington, North Carolina commenced the building of what would eventually become the James Adams Floating Theater. James Adams drew up the plans, selected the wood and personally supervised construction. On January 27, 1914, his showboat was launched. At first he called it the *Estelle*, but by February he had changed it to *Playhouse*. The *Playhouse* was actually a barge weighing 436 tons. It was 128.3 feet long and 34 feet wide. It measured 4.5 feet from the deck to the keel. Newspaper reports on the cost of building the *Playhouse* ranged from \$10,000 to \$40,000.

While it resembled a big barn on a barge on the outside, it was lavish on the inside. Ninety-four year old Captain Edmond Harrow, who attended it often as a young man working in Urbanna, VA, told this writer that he would

never forget the silver and gold decorations and the plush carpet in the auditorium. The room was 30 by 80 feet with a balcony running all the way around the room. The theater seated 500

people downstairs with room for 350 in the "colored balcony." (Integration was still years away.) A massive electric chandelier hung from the ceiling, with similar chandeliers on the walls. The stage was 19 feet wide with an orchestra pit just in front of the stage. There was hot and cold running water, steam heat and comfortable quarters for the 25 people in the company. The eight staterooms for performers were located at the back of the stage and doubled as dressing rooms. Married couples shared a room, as did bachelors. No unmarried women were allowed to join the company, nor were small children per-



Adam's Floating Theatre

mitted to travel with the show. The rest of the people involved with the show slept wherever they could find a comfortable place.

Since the *Playhouse* was a barge, it did not have its own propulsion and had to be towed. Originally, Adams hired commercial tug boats, but by October of 1914 he had built his first tug, the *Trouper*, powered by a 30 horsepower gasoline engine. By 1918 he had a second tug, the *ELK*, which was bigger at 47.8 feet with a 70 horsepower gasoline engine. The captain and crew slept on the tugs. The opening performance of the James Adams Floating Theatre took place on Monday, March 2, 1914 just barely on time. An unusually low tide very nearly prevented the *Playhouse* from making it from Chauncey's Marine Railway to Fowle's Dock where the audience was already waiting. The opening bill that night was a comedy in four acts, *Under Western Skies*, with specialties, all for just ten cents, twenty-five cents for a reserved seat.

Specialties were essentially Vaudeville-type performances including jokes, comic routines, singing, dancing, juggling, magic acts and tumbling, all performed by the members of the repertoire company who also did the play. Members were expected to do more than one job. A tug crewman might sell tickets and then also sell Cracker Jacks, with a prize inside, during the specialties. There was a different play each night for the week the *Playhouse* was in town. The plays included *The Girl Ranchman*, *Sunset Trail*, *The Boy Detective*, *Tempest* and *Sunshine* and then on Saturday there was a Vaudeville matinee. The play *The Devil's Partner* was presented on Saturday evening. After the show, audiences were encouraged to buy tickets for a musical concert which followed.

Longtime Deltaville resident Norton Hurd talked to me about his impressions the first time he visited the James Adams Floating Theater. "It was the first time I had ever seen real people playing their parts in a play. It made quite an impression on me. It was wonderful."

By 1924 the James Adams Floating Theater was wowing crowds at towns up and down tidewater Chesapeake Bay and into North Carolina. At the same time there was a rising star in New York City,

a young writer who had just won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *So Big*. Her name was Edna Ferber and she was already a member of the famed Algonquin Round Table. Her new play *Minick* opened at the Lyceum Theatre in New London, Connecticut. The crowds were less than enthusiastic when the lights went up disturbing a colony of bats that had taken over the gallery dome and chandeliers. While the bats did "dip, swoop, circle and dive all about the auditorium and on the stage itself," the playwright recalls that the crowd ran out of the theater. Backstage after the disastrous event, the show's producer told the cast and the author, "Never mind, boys and girls! Next time I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll charter a showboat and we'll just drift down the rivers, playing the towns as we come to them and we'll never get off the boat. It'll be wonderful."

The already celebrated author sat up from her spot on the floor and asked, "What's a showboat?"

The more the playwright Edna Ferber heard about showboats, the more determined she became to write a novel about life aboard one. She said, "Here was news of a romantic and dramatic aspect of America of which I'd never heard or dreamed." Ferber recalled, "Here I thought, was one of the most melodramatic and gorgeous bits of Americana that had ever come my way. It was not only the theater; it was the theater plus the glamour of the wandering, drifting life, the drama of the river towns, the mystery and terror of the Mississippi itself. I spent a year hunting down every available scrap of showboat material, reading, interviewing,

taking notes and making outlines."

There are some conflicting reports as to just where Edna Ferber met up with the James Adams Floating Theatre. Ferber may have stayed at Kinsale and they met there. Other accounts put the meeting at Bath, North Carolina. Quite possibly Edna Ferber visited more than once and at different locations. In fact, she actually

did live on the *Playhouse* for several weeks during which time she helped with show chores, ate with the cast and even took turns selling tickets at the box office. When she found them in a quiet moment, Ferber spent a great deal of time talking to the star Beulah Adams, known as the Mary Pickford of the Chesapeake, and her husband Charles Hunter, who loved to tell the stories he had picked up after years on the rivers. Ferber said of Charles Hunter, "I had a treasure trove of showboat Ferber describes her first glimpse of the massive showboat this way: As the "James Adams Floating Palace Theater came floating majestically down the Pamlico and tied up alongside the rickety dock... there began for me four of the most enchanting days I've ever known." Charlie Hunter needed no explanation of the notoriety of Edna Ferber. He and Beulah were already fans of her numerous "Emma McChesney" short stories which ran in magazines.

During her time on the *Playhouse*, Ferber recalled



Beulah Adams and her husband Charles Hunter

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in her autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure*, that she scratched furiously on a pad of yellow note paper as Charles Hunter told his stories of life on a showboat. "It was a stream of pure gold," Ferber said. "Incidents, characters, absurdities, drama, tragedies, river lore, theatrical wisdom poured forth in that quiet flexible voice. He looked, really, more like a small-town college professor lecturing to a backward student than like a show-boat actor." Before she left to return to New York, Edna Ferber wrote a check to Charlie Hunter and gave it to him in a copy of her novel *So Big*. In later years Hunter was forced to cash the check when the *Playhouse* hit a stump in the Dismal Swamp and sank.

In the summer of 1925, Ferber took up residence in St. Jean de Luz on the Cote Basque in France where she wrote the novel *Showboat*. The story takes place on the fictional showboat Cotton Blossom Floating Theater Palace on the Mississippi River. The novel spans some fifty years in the life of the family of Captain Andy Hawkes, drawn on the life James Adams. Hawkes' daughter Magnolia was modeled after James Adam's sister Beulah, the star



of the James Adams Floating Theater. Charles Hunter was fictionalized as the dastardly Gaylord Ravenal, a fast talking riverboat gambler who bluffs his way into the cast when the leading man and his wife are run out of town by the sheriff and charged with miscegenation. In the MGM movie version starring Howard Keel, Ava Gardner, Kathryn Grayson and Joe E. Brown, a steam calliope alerted the townsfolk to the arrival of the showboat; Adams actually used the band to announce

the arrival. He may have gotten the idea from the traditional circus parades that he knew when he ran his own circus, which alerted people the circus had arrived. While in real life Beulah Adams and Charlie Hunter were a happily married couple with five children, Ferber put a heartbreaking twist on the story that made it that much more dramatic. There were no interracial marriages on the James Adams Floating Theater. Charles Hunter told the story of miscegenation as one of the many he had heard in his travels on the rivers; Edna Ferber nourished and

embraced it. In the MGM film Ava Gardner was the victim.

*Showboat* first appeared serially in the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine and then in book form. It was a smash hit. At first Ferber wasn't keen on the idea of her book's being turned into a musical. Fortunately, in 1926 Jerome Kern convinced her that he and Oscar Hammerstein II could do a good job of putting the book to music. Ferber recalls that when Kern first played and sang "Ol' Man River" for her, "My hair stood on end, the tears came to my eyes, I breathed like a heroine in a melodrama. This was great music; this was music that would outlast Jerome Kern's day and mine." Master showman Florenz Ziegfeld agreed. On December 27, 1927, the musical *Showboat* thrilled Broadway theater-goers. It starred Norma Terris, Howard Marsh, Edna May Oliver, Helen Morgan and Paul Robeson. *Showboat* went on to become the subject of four major motion pictures and revivals across the world.

In the novel, on the radio program, on the stage and in the movies, the showboat and the characters had different names, but the story of the real showboat - the James Adams Floating Theater - will live forever in the hearts of people young and old and especially in those folks in tidewater Virginia who recall hearing the band that meant to one and all: Showboat's comin'.

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