



'Poor terror-stricken creatures'

Stanley Nelson

In the early 20th century, James "Jimmie" Morris Morgan wrote about a life-changing event that had occurred six decades earlier when he was only 14 years old. In his autobiography published in 1917, he recalled: "I was an eye-witness of the blowing-up and destruction by fire of the Princess, the finest steamboat on the Mississippi in those days."

Morgan's book (Reflections of a Rebel Reefer, Houghton Mifflin Company) provides his disturbing account of the February 27, 1859, explosion of the popular packet that ran the New Orleans to Vicksburg route. On this fatal journey just two years before the Civil War, the vessel was loaded with mail, freight, cotton and 250 passengers, most in route to New Orleans for carnival during the Mardi Gras season. Among the travelers were several residents of this region who would all die in the explosion.

The four-year-old steamer, which had been inspected by company mechanics and serviced the preceding summer, had made landings at St. Joseph, Rodney, Waterproof, Natchez, Fort Adams and Red River before arriving at Baton Rouge on Sunday morning.

Breakfast tables had just been cleared while in the kitchen, cooks were beginning preparations for "Dinner," which was to be served at 2 p.m. Entrees included Breast of Mutton, Stuffed Crabs, Broiled Oysters and Veal Cutlet. After taking on passengers and freight, the Princess departed around 10 a.m.

Minutes later at a location known as Red Eye Crossing, her boilers exploded, killing more than 70 and seriously wounding at least that many or more. The steamer grounded downriver on the east bank six miles south of downtown Baton Rouge at a bend in the Mississippi known as Conrad Point on Cottage Plantation. (The location is west of the LSU AgCenter on Ben Hur Road.)

Situated on the famous River Road, the property was owned by Frederick and Frances Conrad, and had been given to the couple by Frances' father as a wedding gift in the mid-1820s. A 22-room mansion built for the couple was named "The Cottage" in sentimental tribute to a beloved little house nearby where Frances' family would visit during periodic retreats from Baton Rouge. In 1859, the Conrad slaves lived in 50 cabins near the mansion. The plantation annually produced cotton and 215,000 pounds of cane sugar.

JIMMIE MORGAN

It was there on the grounds of The Cottage mansion on a cold, wet, foggy February morning when 14-year-old eyewitness Jimmie Morgan came upon the aftermath of the Princess catastrophe.

Morgan was the youngest of nine children. The family lived in Baton Rouge, then a town of about 5,000. Beautiful plantation homes like The Cottage lined the Mississippi River along the River Road, while a large garrison of soldiers, many veterans of the Mexican War, served at the Baton Rouge Arsenal and Ordinance Depot, where the old Pentagon Barracks still stand near the state capitol.

A group of Choctaw Indians, who lived in a village to the east along the Amite River, used to visit Baton Rouge to barter or sell beads and baskets. Young boys were fascinated by their blowguns, which Morgan recalled were made of split cane "with a tuft of thistle" at one end. Choctaw men could kill birds or squirrels with these unusual weapons without fail at 25 paces.

THE EXPLOSION

And then the Princess entered Jimmie Morgan's idyllic 14-year-old life:

"The night before the disaster my father and mother had kissed me good-bye and gone on board an old dismantled steamboat, which answered the purposes of a wharf



JIMMIE MORGAN, when he was 14, witnessed the explosion of the Princess steamboat and the horrifying aftermath. (Credit: Reflections of a Rebel Reefer, James "Jimmie" Morris Morgan, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917)

(and hotel), to await the arrival of the Princess, as they intended to take passage on her for New Orleans. Early the next morning I went down to the river to find out if they had yet left. The Princess had just drawn out into the stream (at Baton Rouge), and as I stood watching her as she glided down the river a great column of white smoke suddenly went up with her and she burst into flames...

"As though by magic the inhabitants of the town gathered at the riverside and in the crowd I spied my brother-in-law, Charles La Noue, in a buggy. He called to me; I jumped in alongside him and we dashed down the river road in the direction of the burning boat. The road was rough and the horse was fast. The high levee on our right shut out the view of the river, so we could only see a great column of smoke. On our left were the endless fields of sugar cane, with an occasional glimpse of a

planter's house set in a grove of pecan trees. "At last, in a state of excitement, we arrived at the plantation of Mr. Conrad. 'Brother Charlie' jumped out of the vehicle and ran toward the house while I made the horse fast to a tree. I then mounted the levee from where I could see floating cotton bales with people on them; men in skiffs, from both sides of the river, were rescuing the poor terror-stricken creatures and bringing them to ashore. From the levee I rushed into the park in front of Mr. Conrad's residence and there saw a sight which can never be effaced from my memory."

GHOSTS & SCREAMS

Conrad's plantation manager "had sheets laid on the ground amidst the trees and barrels of flour were broke open and the contents poured over the sheets." Flour was believed to be the best treatment of burns in those days, and it had a practical application, too: It soaked up the

blood pouring from the victims and kept the sheets from sticking to their naked bodies.

Jimmie Morgan wrote that as "fast as the burned and scalded people were pulled out of the river they were seized by the slaves and, while screaming and shrieking with pain and fright, they were forcibly thrown down on the sheets and rolled in flour. The clothes had burned off of many of them. Some, in their agony, could not lie still, and with the white sheets wrapped around them, looking like ghosts, they danced a weird hornpipe while filling the air with their screams.

"Terrified by the awful and uncanny scene, I hid behind a huge tree so that I should not see it, but no tree could prevent me from hearing those awful cries and curses which echo in my ears even now."

'I AM DYING-- HOLD MY HAND'

"Suddenly to my horror, one of the white specters, wrapped in a sheet, his disfigured face plastered over with flour, staggered toward my hiding-place, and before I could run away from the hideous object it extended its arms toward me and quietly said, 'Don't be afraid, Jimmie. It is me. Mr. Cheatum.'"

Mr. Cheatum, who had just boarded the Princess upriver at Baton Rouge, reached out to the terrified young teenager.

"I am dying," he gasped, pleading, "hold my hand!"

"And he sank upon the turf beside me. Although dreadfully frightened, I managed between sobs to ask the question uppermost in my mind: 'Can you tell me where I can find my father and mother?' The ghostlike man only replied with a cry which seemed to wrench his soul from his body. He shivered for an instant, and then lay still."

A slave rushing by told young Morgan that Mr. Cheatum was dead. Soon, Morgan found his brother-in-law, who was "ministering to the maimed, but found

time to tell me that my parents had taken another boat which had stopped at Baton Rouge in the night and thereby had saved their lives."

Some things cannot be forgotten. The passage of time never erased the nightmare of the Princess tragedy, which, Morgan recalled decades later, "troubles the dreams of my old age."

In the days after the Princess explosion, a grand jury investigated the accident. The New York Times reported the vessel, which was running behind schedule, "had too much steam on" when it departed Baton Rouge and that the chief engineer had said he "would reach New Orleans on time or blow up." Yet the grand jury drew no conclusions because the people -- engineers and officers -- had all been killed in the explosion.

AFTERMATH

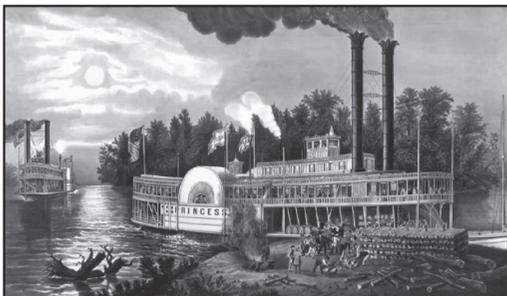
The Princess catastrophe, followed by the disaster of the Civil War, left the Conrad family at The Cottage in a state of endless gloom. Some believed the ghosts of the steamer's passengers and crew haunted the mansion and grounds. Others claimed to have seen the spirits of the flour-covered victims rising into the air in the form of white dust.

Economic hard times bulldozed the Conrads, who eventually abandoned the mansion, which by the early 20th century was in extreme disrepair. Author Frances Parkinson Keyes lived there alone while researching and writing her 1945 novel, The River Road.

In the late 1940s, however, better times enabled the Conrad family to restore the mansion and open it to public tours. In 1957 the movie, "Band of Angels," starring Clark Gable and Sidney Poitier, was filmed there.

Three years later, in 1960, the historic house was destroyed by fire, possibly ignited by lightning. The ruins remain.

(Reprinted from March 27, 2013)



THE PRINCESS, a beautiful steamer that ran the Vicksburg to New Orleans route, is shown here taking on wood. A boiler explosion in 1859 on the Mississippi River just south of Baton Rouge destroyed her. At least 70 of the 250 souls on board died. Scores survived with horrific injuries. (Credit: "Wooding Up on the Mississippi," Artist Frances F. Palmer, print-makers Currier & Ives.)

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