

Opinions

What does the election mean for the future?

Are people in Catahoula Parish beginning to feel over taxed? Since the bond issue to rebuild the gymnasium-cafeteria-classroom building in Harrisonburg failed by a vote of 225 to 204 (54% to 48%), one might wonder. Turnout was low (under 28%) as is typical of special elections, but I have no way of knowing if that were a factor.

The Harrisonburg High School proposal lost big in precincts 3-1 and 3-2 as well as in early voting. It won only in 4-1 and 4-2. No one in precincts 1-1 or 1-3 cared enough to bother to vote.

It isn't clear that the results in Harrisonburg tell us anything about future tax referenda since the property tax renewal in Larto passed by 20 votes to 4. That was a whopping 11.5% of the eligible voters who made that decision. You could have put them all in one classroom and for once it wouldn't have been over crowded.

In any event, considering that no one in our parish government (except Sheriff Toney Edwards who bought a prison that generates revenue) has thought of anything better to do about falling revenue than to raise tax rates, we

could be facing some very hard choices soon. The extraordinary circumstances of "the COVID Year" may have been relieved by the federal printing presses churning out "money" that, oddly enough, is often borrowed from ourselves. Social Security and Medicare, for examples, collect money to be distributed at a future date. In the meantime, some of it's available to be "invested" by loaning it back to the federal government to hand out to you. Government is tricky that way.

And speaking of tricky, I still haven't found the line in the Police Jury budget that keeps track of the \$12 per month garbage tax. Maybe once we start to collect it ourselves, we'll be able to find out how much money is there actually available for the Sanitation Fund. I'm not holding my breath yet. But I digress.

The race in Ward Three for a Police Juror could go to a runoff if Judy Duhon decides to continue the fight. McCormack received only 49% of the vote, just shy of victory despite dominating in early voting and in precinct 3-1. But Duhon crushed her in the Manifest area

By: Leo Chappelle

precinct 3-2; it just wasn't enough to overcome a consistent performance in both the precincts and the early voting. Duhon got only 2 votes to 51 in Enterprise.

Personally, I expected John Tiser to do better than he did, but the voters may have felt his campaign lacked passion. Considering the personalities involved, it was always going to be a struggle to win outright on the first ballot, even though McCormack had the great advantage of being the appointed incumbent. I was one who thought she would win on the first vote. That she did not may indicate that she is a much weaker candidate than expected. Perhaps she hasn't mended her fences with the people in Manifest after trying to wrest control of the Manifest Volunteer Fire Department away from them.

To me, though, the big take-away from this election is that our local government cannot expect merely to throw a tax at the ballot and expect it to stick. Once I would have thought so. But as the old Bob Dylan ballad put it, "The times they are a-changin'."

Mississippi River tugboat story

One summer when I was about 16 I think, I was working in my Dad's store in Harrisonburg. I didn't particularly like working there, but it was cool inside and I could earn a few dollars that was quickly wasted on something.

One day, my younger brother, Charles (9 at the time), Bernel Dixon, a friend and co-worker at the store, and I were told to bring the pickup around to load some groceries to take to Natchez. That's Natchez, Mississippi, if you don't happen to know this. It's about 35 miles east of Harrisonburg.

Charles was too young to be working at the time but our Dad thought he might enjoy the ride over too.

Actually, the rendezvous was to be under the big bridge in Vidalia, on the Louisiana side. We would meet up with the captain and crew of the tug, "Pamela D" (named after the Captain's daughter), and load the substantial size order onto their tug, and be on our way back to Harrisonburg.

We did not have to wait long before we heard a loud horn coming from up river and within minutes the Pamela D swung her bow toward where we stood and pushed hard into the soft riverbank. She was huge.

The powerful engines continued to push forward to maintain that position while we transferred the supplies using a hastily prepared walkway from shore to deck.

The Captain of the Pamela D, Dutch Clark, a family friend from Enterprise, Louisiana, and long-time customer, greeted us with open arms. Just as we were finishing up, the captain asked me if I wanted to ride up to Vicksburg on the boat where his wife would meet up to swap the crew out. We could ride back home with her.

I said, "YES!" before I even knew what I was saying. He said, 'Charles, you can come too if you want.' He did.

Bernel told us, "You'uns both go on with Capt'n Clark. Your Dad won't mind none." And just like that, we were passengers on a tugboat headed to Vicksburg, Mississippi. We learned later that it was a setup from the start.

We first had to retrieve a number of barges tied off upriver. As we drifted away from the bank and backward into the fast-moving current I realized that this was the first time I had actually been 'on' THE Mississippi River that I had crossed many times, had heard about, and read about all my life.

Only a few hundred feet away was where Jim Bowie had his famous sandbar knife fight.

Up the hill was where the Indians attacked the French Fort – Rosalie and killed or enslaved everyone, only to be tracked down and killed themselves.

All about the city there are antebellum homes so beautiful that the Yankees spared burning them during the Civil War.

It is also the southern end of the beautiful Natchez Trace Parkway, the longest National Park in America @ 444 miles, starting in Nashville.

The river was larger than I thought it would be at this level, and filled with all kinds of 'stuff' which was going by us very fast headed to the Gulf.

WOW! Did you see that tree go by??? Then a drum, a shed, and millions of sticks and limbs and boards and dead fish by the thousands. And it stunk to high-heaven. We soon reached the barges and the crew was quick to tie up to them. I watched with slack-jaw fascination from the walkway outside the bridge. Once the barges were secured, we gradually backed out into the river again and slowly pointed northward, the engines

straining against the river and now the added weight of six fully loaded barges that extended three football field lengths in front of us. An hour later we were only a few feet further upriver because the river was relentless in its desire to reach the Gulf. That's when I learned that the river actually changes its flow speed in a constant battle with sandbars and shorelines, and I suppose friction itself, because we would suddenly surge forward for maybe a half mile before starting to drift backward again, the engines never changing their constant hum. It was loud and I never got used to hearing it. Charles and I had a wonderful sandwich made by the lady cook and returned quickly to the bridge to watch the dark night overtake us. I thought we would tie up for the night but we just kept going, straining as hard as we could to make headway. The hum never let up or changed. Charles went to bed. The bridge was dark and there was a soft green glow coming from the radar screen. The radar was actually showing the river in front of us, including the flagpole mounted to the front of the barge 900 feet away. Apparently, the flag acted as some sort of 'gun-sight' so that they would know where to point the bow.

Southbound boats zipped by us as did more trees, a few buildings and more dead animals. The river stinks at night too. I could see wild animals, bear and deer mostly, on the shore when the huge floodlight was turned on lighting up the entire area. They would first look startled and then scamper back into the trees. By then I was getting sleepy and climbed into my bunk somewhere back toward the kitchen. It was very warm and smelled of everything. And it was vibrating to the sounds of the engines. But I slept well, and was up early to a hot breakfast and coffee and pretty much the same view as the night before. This was getting b-o-r-i-n-g... Back up to the bridge I was given sort of a cursory explanation of what and how things worked. I asked a lot of questions, the first being why there were two long steering handles instead of a steering wheel like in the movies? They explained that it was easy to see the position of the rudders simply by looking at the handles. I'm pretty sure there was more to it but it satisfied my curiosity enough to ask other questions. Finally we could see the bridge at Vicksburg in the distance. It could not have been more than five miles away but we weren't making any headway. I was told that we were in the "racetrack," a section of the river that was very straight and which caused the river to speed up tremendously. Over the next twelve hours we lost about a yard but we kept going.

Then the Capt'n slowly moved over closer and closer to the west bank where he aimed the lead port side barge into the riverbank. The crew was at the ready with huge lines to tie off the boat and its barges.

Using the big light to see by, the crew found a huge oak tree to tie off to. The Capt'n slowly lowered the throttle to see if the tree would hold. It did, and suddenly the engine hummed changed in pitch and speed as the Capt'n was attempting to dislodge and blow river debris out of the funnel-like tubes that shielded the boat's propellers from being damaged by the debris.

A lot of 'stuff' was blown out and the trail could be seen from the bridge. He blew it out again for good measure, put it back in forward gear and pushed hard against the shore so the crew could retrieve the lines.

They later said the tree was just about pulled out of the ground but will probably be there for another hundred years or more.

We slowly backed out into the slip-stream of the

By: Leroy McMillin, Jr.

river and headed north again. Or I should say, we strategically positioned ourselves to be in position to move forward if the opportunity presented itself. Then out of the blue, Captain Clark asked if I wanted to steer the boat.

Well hell yeah! And my adrenalin shot sky high in anticipation.

So he gave me the steering handle and said, "Have at it."

Only I wasn't about to actually move the steering handle because I was scared to death that I would mess up.

Gradually, he talked me through it, pointing out some of the larger debris that we should try to avoid, or signaling a southbound boat he knew. I actually steered the boat and 300 yards of loaded barges for about an hour, him along side me, of course. The once-in-a-lifetime adventure I would have never thought possible – and there I was piloting a boat and barges on the Mississippi River.

Then it got dark again. And we were still pretty much where we were 36 hours before. But we were still headed north. Just follow the flag. All of a sudden there was a supply boat pulling long side of us with the new crew, and within minutes my brother and I were headed to shore in Vicksburg. I slept in the car all the way back home.

All I could think about was, "What an adventure to tell my friends."

There's really no way to adequately describe what it is like to be on a working boat on the Mississippi River during a flood. The amount of stuff coming down the river was unimaginable. Some of the trees and barns and fences had somehow joined together and literally became so large they could have caused a major problem for any boat, especially one so large that it needed a flag 900' out front to serve as a marker for the captain to keep the boat from getting off track. And possibly losing whatever forward progress it had achieved over many hours or days.

Or worse, the barges breaking loose and floating uncontrolled in a river so large that it is hauling a 40 acre farm's entire crop, topsoil, animals, and buildings every single minute. Or so I've been told.

I was in awe then, and I still am today. And I'm still thrilled when I tell the story.

Thanks Dad and Captain Clark for making it happen.

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Catahoula News Booster

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