

La Crosse

MAGAZINE

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Life in the 7 Rivers Region.

the Future of History

The La Crosse County Historical Society
takes us back to the future of our unique story

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Hurray for the Hollywood the historic Hollywood Theater

Reviving the Julia Belle Swain a gem of the Mississippi

A Man with a History with George Italiano

Reviving the

By Wendy Allen, photographs contributed by Julia Belle Swain

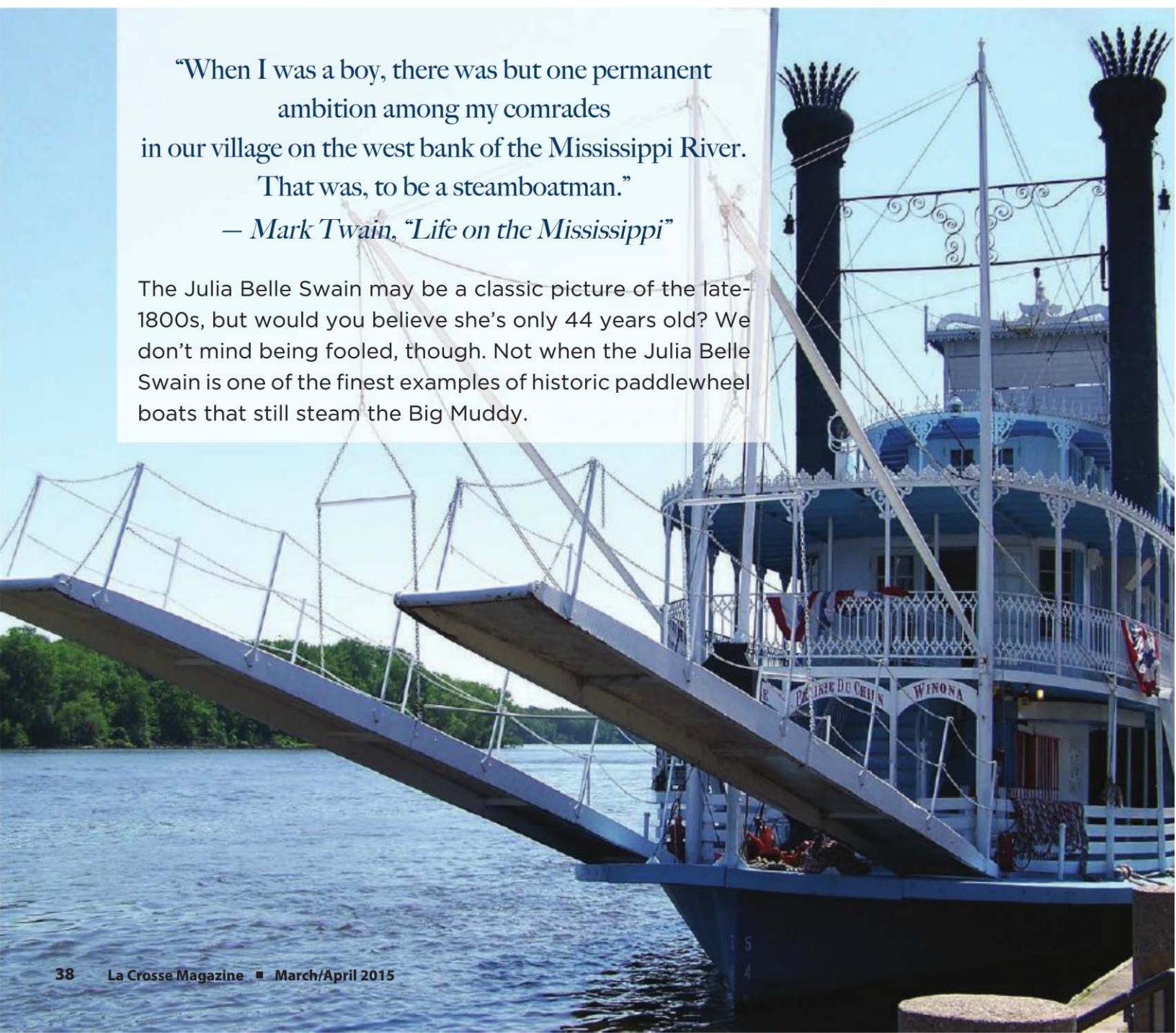
JULIA BELLE SWAIN

Step back in time and experience
American river culture

“When I was a boy, there was but one permanent
ambition among my comrades
in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River.
That was, to be a steamboatman.”

— Mark Twain, *“Life on the Mississippi”*

The Julia Belle Swain may be a classic picture of the late-1800s, but would you believe she’s only 44 years old? We don’t mind being fooled, though. Not when the Julia Belle Swain is one of the finest examples of historic paddlewheel boats that still steam the Big Muddy.



Or she used to be.

Today, this gem of the Mississippi sits in dry dock in Dubuque, Iowa, enjoying a complete overhaul after sitting neglected for five and a half years. It's difficult to keep up on a steamboat's expenses when potential customers are cutting back on tourism and entertainment because of a historic economic slump.

In 2009, owner Robert Kalhagen of the Great River Steamboat Co. made the wrenching decision to cancel the Julia Belle Swain's season and send the iconic riverboat into hibernation. For a while, news reports said the boat was up for sale, but it still sat tied up in a backwater of the Mississippi in early 2013, with no sign of life.

* * *

Of all the riverboats plying the waters, Julia Belle Swain is one of the most beloved in the passionate community of river buffs. Maybe it's because she's one of only five steamboats left on the Mississippi and the only one on the Upper Mississippi. Maybe it's because her name fits her so perfectly; a beautiful boat deserves a beautiful name, after all. White and blue exterior, happy red paddlewheel, filigreed railings and double "Mississippi-style" feathered stacks. If she was docked behind the sculpture of waving children at Riverside Park, we might forget what century we're in ...

Stepping off the gangplank onto the bow of the boat, we enter the open-air main deck filled with crates of lumber, cotton, dry goods destined for a dime store downriver, a few cows and horses. Up the blue and white stairs we go to the second deck and its narrow, elegant dining room with white linen-bedecked tables and red draperies. An Old Fashioned awaits at the gorgeous, hand-carved, wooden bar capped with the ornately carved words "Julia Belle Swain." The third deck reveals more dinner seating and a hand-carved calliope, a steam-powered whistle organ that can be heard from shore to shore. And if we can swindle or flirt our way into the pilothouse, the only room on the fourth deck, we'll be greeted by a 7-foot teak-wood wheel — so big that it's set into the floor — and a wondrous, open-air view of sandbars slipping quietly past, bald eagles fishing, and best of all, the rhythmic chhhh-chhhh release of steam and swoosh-swoosh-swoosh-swoosh of the paddlewheel as it pushes the Julia Belle Swain up and down the Great River.

Insert romantic sigh here.



Opposite Page: Julia Belle Swain docked at Riverside Park, La Crosse
Above: Julia Belle Swain in 1971

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It's easy to get carried away with imagination, but despite her styling, she really is only a few decades old. The Julia Belle Swain was the last boat built by Dubuque Boat & Boiler Works, which closed in 1972, and was designed by Captain Dennis Trone. Quite the steamboat buff, he modeled his boat after the 1880s "packet" boats designed to haul cargo on an open-air main deck and people on the upper decks. Trone planned every detail, from the filigree to the calliope (pronounced "cuh-LIE-oh-pee" by most, but "CA-lee-ope" by river folk). Upon its launch in 1971, Captain Trone steamed down to Peoria, Ill., and Chattanooga, Tenn., the Julia Belle Swain's summer and winter homes, respectively.

The current Julia Belle Swain is not the first with that name. The original was an excursion and packet boat launched in 1913 in Florida by Captain Percy Swain and later named for his daughter. This boat burned in the winter of 1931. The story of naming the second boat says that Julia Belle (Swain) Shelton was the childhood sweetheart of the banker who financed the construction of Trone's new boat. Originally from Peoria, Julia Belle was married and living in San Francisco by this time but was present at the 1971 christening of the second riverboat with her name. A 1972 letter from Captain Trone inviting her to a race against the Delta Queen in Peoria and some photos of her in the pilothouse at the wheel indicate she must have returned occasionally to see how her namesake fared. She passed away on Christmas Eve, 1993.

Such a pretty and authentic boat is sure to attract attention, and the 1970s were clearly her heyday. The Julia Belle Swain was in a number

of movies in the '70s and notably, the 1998 IMAX "Mark Twain's America." She was also part of countless steamboat and paddlewheel races, a wonderful diversion and a way for captains to show off their boats and resurrect a piece of America's historic river culture.

An amusing sidebar appeared in the July 29, 1974, Chicago Tribune mentioning a Peoria race between the Julia Belle Swain and the Delta Queen, in which "the winning edge may be provided by whisky." Captain Trone is quoted from a telegram, saying, "Whisky is cheaper than fuel these days. I will not deny that what is good for the bar is even better for the boiler." It's unknown whether he actually used whisky as a fuel additive or was making a good-natured joke with his competitor, but sadly, the Julia Belle Swain did not win at Peoria that year. She did win many others, however, including one against the Delta Queen at the 1976 Great Steamboat Race, held each year even today on the Ohio River as part of the Kentucky Derby Festival.

John Hartford, a country singer/songwriter famous for "Gentle on My Mind" (1967), was captivated by river life and wrote it into a number of songs, including one entitled "Julia Belle Swain" (1976). He became good friends with Captain Trone, earned his river pilot's license, and during the Julia Belle Swain's time in Peoria and Chattanooga, he spent time piloting the steamer and entertaining passengers on his banjo after dinner.

"Oh, the Julia Belle Swain is a mighty fine boat,
Got a mighty fine captain too,
Got a big red wheel that goes around and around,
And a bunch of old hippies for a crew...

Well I sure do love the Tennessee River,
the Ohio and the Illinois,
And I love the old Mississippi River,
It's a good old place for a boy,
Just to step on board the steamboat,
ride all the way to the sea.
Where else but a muddy old river,
would a person want to be?"

By the early 1990s, the Julia Belle Swain was paddling the Mississippi between Le Claire, Iowa, and Galena, Ill., with her sister boat and near-twin, the Twilight, also designed and built by Captain Trone. But the area's new casino boat industry, which gave gamblers free passage to get them aboard, was perilously chipping away at the excursion business.

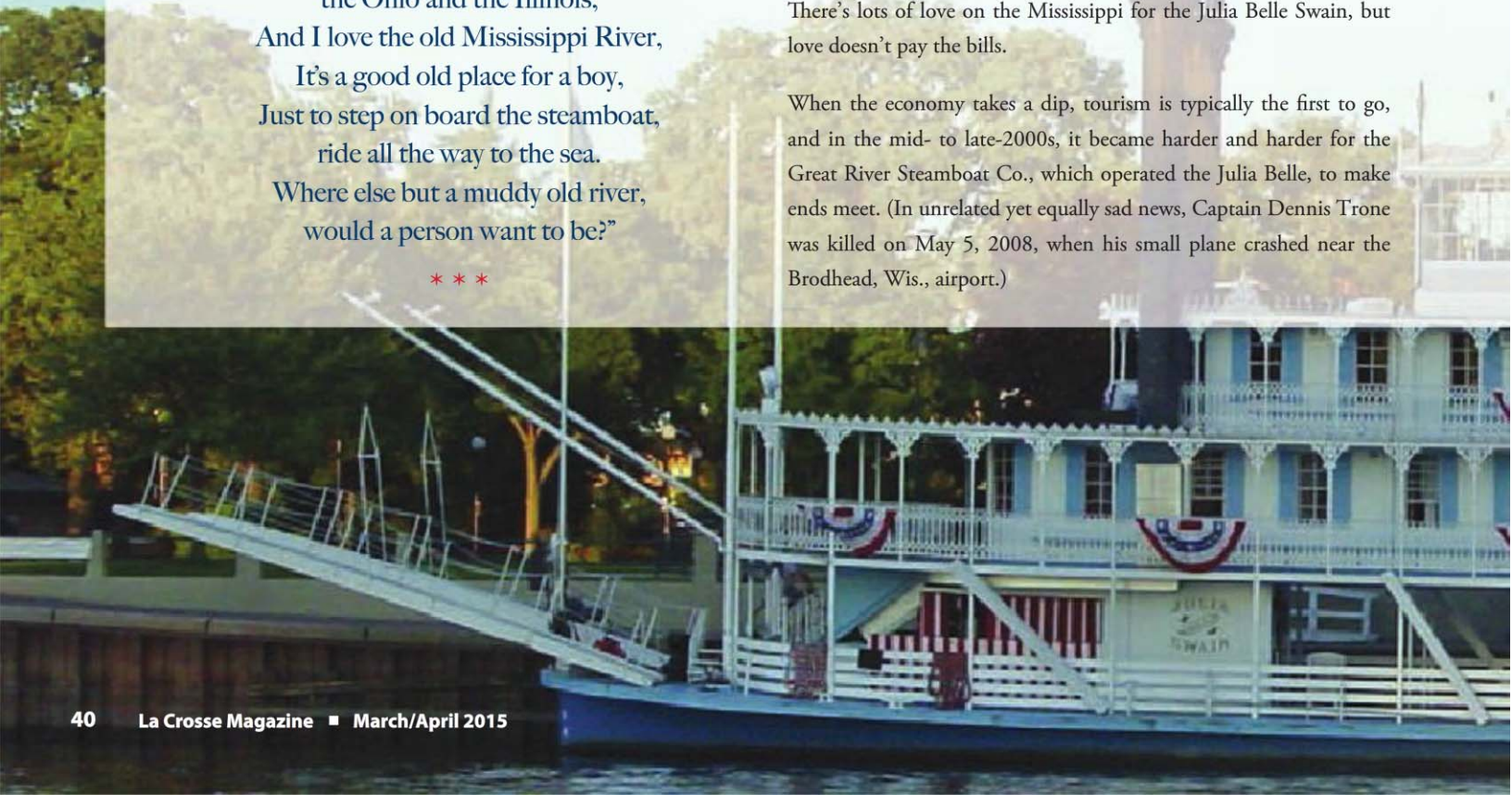
Then came the historic flood of 1993. The high water seriously hurt the season, and Captain Trone was forced to sell one of his boats. He chose his Julia Belle. No one quite knows why — maybe she was a bit tattered after the flood, or maybe her smaller size wouldn't bring in as much money as the Twilight — but whatever his reasons, it was surely a gut-wrenching decision for this lover of riverboats.

Bob Kalhagen made the drive down to Le Claire from Madison when the boat went up for auction in 1994. He knew the poor steamer would go to the scrap heap if it didn't find a new home. Going up against only one other bidder, who in the end decided he didn't want it, Kalhagen bought the Julia Belle Swain for \$500,000. He moved her up to La Crosse and began running day and overnight excursions from Riverside Park.

In July 2004, as part of an 11-day, 400-mile Grand Excursion of paddlewheel boats puffing their way from Rock Island, Ill., to St. Paul, Minn., the Julia Belle Swain passengers were in for a treat. "When the Twilight passed us this week at Le Claire, it was the first time the two had been by each other in 10 years," Kalhagen said in a newspaper interview. "We pulled alongside and gave each other a calliope concert. I was almost in tears." (St. Petersburg Times, "The Belle of the Boats," July 4, 2004)

There's lots of love on the Mississippi for the Julia Belle Swain, but love doesn't pay the bills.

When the economy takes a dip, tourism is typically the first to go, and in the mid- to late-2000s, it became harder and harder for the Great River Steamboat Co., which operated the Julia Belle, to make ends meet. (In unrelated yet equally sad news, Captain Dennis Trone was killed on May 5, 2008, when his small plane crashed near the Brodhead, Wis., airport.)





Finally, in 2009, Kalhagen announced the cancellation of the season, mothballed the boat and decided it was time to sell.

One year stretched into five. A few offers came and went, and still the Julia Belle sat collecting dust in a Mississippi backwater. "I would like to see it stay in La Crosse," Kalhagen said in a June 2, 2013, article in the Winona Daily News, and in August that year, he got his wish.

Enter the Julia Belle Swain Foundation, a new nonprofit created to save this special piece of river history. John Desmond, president of the organization, says, "It was coming to a critical time to either move forward or the scrap yard was next. A nonprofit model to save a valuable historical river asset seemed the best approach. This would allow us to apply for grants and accept private donations to completely refurbish the vessel. The condition of the vessel was such that a complete restoration would be the only viable option, and that was expensive."

Top Left: Second deck dining salon

Top Right: Third deck cabin

Bottom Left: Julia Belle Swain pilot house

Bottom Right: Passengers enjoying the seating outside the cabin

Expensive, indeed. The total budget, including the purchase price, tops \$2 million. So far, the foundation has received enough in donations to purchase the boat and start the initial restorations with Newt Marine in Dubuque. She's a pretty sad sight at the moment, sitting there out of the water, completely gutted, but it must get worse before it can get better.

The lucky girl will get a new boiler, two new diesel generators, an upgraded steam system, sandblasting and painting, entirely new walls and windows, and a new bow structure. The bar and calliope have been removed for restoration, and aesthetically, the foundation hopes to





Left: Julia Belle Swain drydocked
Right: New steel under boiler



keep the décor similar to the original. The only modernizations will be possibly air conditioning the second deck dining area and adding an auxiliary engine as a safety feature (steam will still be the primary power).

"The goal is to not lose its character," says Captain Eric Dykman. "I'm sure interior designers will be brought in and historians will try to match the style to the time period it was designed around. She's a modern steamboat, built in 1971, but meant to look from the 1880s." After returning from four years in the Navy to get his degree at UW-La Crosse, Dykman worked on the Julia Belle Swain first as a deckhand and mate, then pilot, from 2000 to 2007. Next thing he knew, it was 10 years later, he had a marketing degree and an MBA, but all he thought about was riverboating. So he went on to captain the Mississippi River Explorer boats from 2008 to 2012 and has now returned to the Julia Belle to be her captain once she's water-worthy again.

The antique Gillette & Eaton steam engines will also get a thorough check, just in time for their 100th birthday. The steam engines were not original to the 1971 design — like the teak steering wheel, the engines were manufactured in 1915 and reclaimed from a ferryboat, the City of Baton Rouge, which operated from 1916 to 1968.

"We'd hoped to be up and operating this year so we could celebrate the 100th birthday of the engines, but we still have a lot of work to do," says Dykman. "We'll just have to celebrate their 101st instead."

* * *

"The Julia Belle, it's a special boat," says Dykman. "It draws people to it. It draws crew members to it."

"The workers on the boat were a big team," says Liz Koschoreck, a former crew member. "We tried to show the passengers a fun ride on a beautiful river, a little nostalgia, and take a breath of fresh air. Everyone loves the boat and so do I. It is such a unique element — not everyone gets to say they worked on a riverboat with a real steam engine!"

"It's a piece of history," says Dykman. "At one time, La Crosse was a very busy steamboat port, lots of boats coming and going, bringing cargo. When you're on the Julia Belle, you feel how the old steam engines work, you've got bluegrass music playing, the air in your face. Life is usually rush rush rush, and it's just nice to slow down and travel at 7 miles an hour and watch the river go by. That's what the Julia Belle is for me. It brings a serenity, a kind of calm."

"I don't know what would have happened to it if the Julia Belle Swain Foundation hadn't bought it," he continues. "My guess is it probably never would have operated again. We'd have lost it forever."

Clearly, the Julia Belle Swain is not just a boat. And though she inspires us to step back in time, she's not simply a piece of history. This pretty little steamboat represents American river culture that contains stories unlike anything in the world. It's Mark Twain and riverboats, banjos and calliopes, fishing and sunbathing. It's about slowing down. It's about taking a moment to pull over for a calliope concert.

"Someday man will figure out how to travel 700 miles per hour, yet he'll still want to travel just seven." — Unknown

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For updates on this historic steamboat's restoration progress, follow the Julia Belle Swain on Facebook at www.facebook.com/juliabelleswain. If you're interested in contributing to the restoration, the Julia Belle Swain Foundation hopes to begin accepting donations from the public in summer 2015.