THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER LIGHTKEEPER

With an Introduction by Jack T. Graham

The paragraphs below are taken as they appeared in A Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore, *edited by Benjamin A. Botkin, 1955, Bonanza Books, New York. The material is excerpted from* Big River To Cross, *by Ben Lucien Burman, 1938, the John Day Company, New York.*

Introduction

History is facts: the what, when, where, and who that tell us of people, places, and events. History is also resplendent with the mystique of folklore, which complements and fills in the chinks around the facts, and truth be told, often makes for a more interesting tale. Nowhere can more American folklore be found than in the histories of the lights that gave aid to the mariners along the seacoasts and riverbanks of our nation. Here are some of those tales.

From the bustling cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, where the blinker lights flash in brilliant rhythm, to the green jetties far below New Orleans where a drowsy pelican sits on the post beside each polished lamp, the river lights mount their guard to protect the passing vessels from disaster. Their very names are touched with the strange and the bizarre—Hanging Dog Light, Dark Slough Light, Devil's Island Float Light; they are rich calendars of local history and legend. The lighthouse service everywhere on the Mississippi is a thing of fascination; but the section of the river where the life of the light keeper goes on in the leisurely fashion of the olden days, unaffected by the turmoil of an ever-changing world, is the lower river between Memphis and New Orleans. Here cities and towns are infrequent and factories almost non-existent; there are only sunless woods and tangled swamps where long cranes fly like wandering ghosts and alligators crawl silently. Here there are no blinker lights powered by electricity; here there are only coal-oil lamps burning like the lights of those times in the past when the boats of today were unborn.

A river light possesses an importance that no mere land dweller can even faintly measure. It may mean life or death to a crew; it may mean the saving or destruction of a million-dollar cargo. I have been a cub pilot at night when a sudden fog descended, and I have stood beside the steersman, peering blindly ahead, while the vessel beneath us floundered helpless in the gray maze. And I know that feeling of exaltation when a spectral blur appeared faintly over the bow, that meant we had found the light we were seeking.

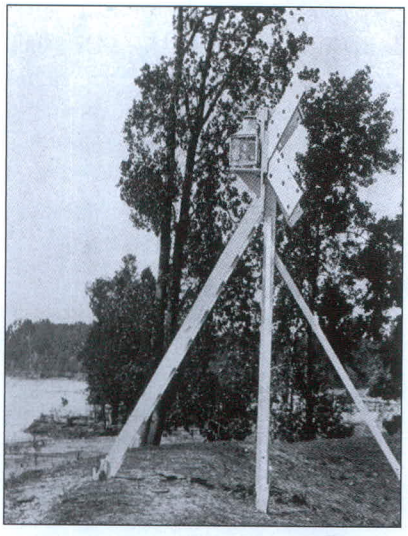
The light keeper knows his importance as well as the pilot. He knows that he has only one task: whatever the risk, he must make his way to the pole where a great brass lamp rests on a wooden bracket, and keep the light burning.

The perils of the light keepers life are many. Though the wind is blowing a hurricane, lashing the river into mountainous waves that overwhelm his frail skiff and each instant threaten to capsize it; though a flood is raging, with wrecked houses, timbers, and broken bridges sweeping swiftly down upon him, he does not hesitate. Though the mist is so thick he cannot see the oars in his hands, he must grope his way across the river in constant terror of being crushed by the barges of some lost towboat.

But his greatest enemy is the caving bank, a perpendicular wall sometimes seventy or eighty feet high, on top of which his light is resting. As he moors his rowboat below, he must watch with of the vigilance of an Alpine climber expecting an avalanche, lest the great cliff suddenly topple and bury him alive. Many a keeper has died in this fashion, with only the crew of the lighthouse tender and the superintendent in far off St. Louis to know of his heroism.

The courage and devotion of the light keeper is shared by their children. When the father grows too old and the mother is feeble as well, the son or daughter assumes the responsibility …

Besides caving banks and floods, the keeper has other, lesser enemies. There are the willow bugs, great blundering creatures, who live just long enough to drop into a light, and cause the glass to become smoky and dull. There are human enemies as well. There is the coon hunter, who, when out in the swamp, finds there is no more oil in the miner's lamp he is wearing on his cap, and replenishes his supply at the Government light, as a traveler fills his fountain pen in the writing room of a hotel. Worst of all there is the moonshiner, who discovers that he has brought insufficient fuel for his bubbling mash, and considering his greater need than that of the passing steamboats, empties the reservoir of the lamp into his oil can and carries it away to his still.



A Mississippi River post lantern. Photo courtesy Thomas A. Tag.

"They sure got mighty fine coal oil in them Government lights," the overalled swamp dweller will confide as he sets out some jugs of his product for an expected customer. "Government always gets the best there is."

These latter practices are growing rare, however, for the Secret Service agents have been vigorous, and the too-casual woodsmen are in the penitentiary, pondering the error of their ways.

With all its responsibilities and perils, the task of light keeper is one of the prizes of the river. For not only does it invest the holder of the post with the dignity of the Government—and there is no more ardent patriot than a riverman—but it provides him as

well with a regular income of ten dollars a month for each light that he tends. And on the river where life is simple and money is rare, ten dollars is many times that sum in a great metropolis. In consequence, lights remain in the same family for generations; the waiting list is long and the jealousies intense. More than once, a light keeper has started on his daily round to find that his flatboat has been smashed with an ax during the night; or he has rowed a little way across the river only to find the water pouring through a half dozen leaks in the bottom of his boat where the seams have been carefully parted, and he has been compelled to swim for his life. More than one keeper has been found killed in some mysterious fashion; and all the valley knows that an envious neighbor seeking his lights has been the murderer.

As the years pass, often a good keeper may acquire other lights, sometimes ten, even fifteen, and here he rises to the status of a merchant prince, a veritable captain of industry. And if, by some accident of fate, this fortunate individual should be a woman, she becomes a queen, to be assiduously wooed by all her male neighbors of the river, anxious to acquire a wealthy wife. They are excellent light keepers, the women, at times superior to the men, worried if a speck or smear mars the lamp's spotless surface.

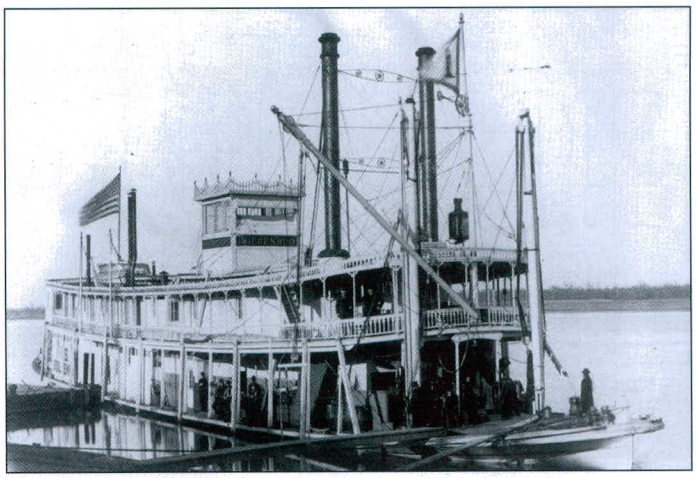
The life of the light keeper is a happy one, filled with infinite variety. When his duties are not pressing, he can go out to fish in his pirogue, a dugout made of a single log, unchanged since the days of the Indians. He can chew tobacco and talk all day with the crews of the towboats who have come into shore to remake their tows, or philosophize with the government men ...



A Coastie services a post light on the Mississippi River. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

The ordinary light keeper is a white fisherman. But there are a few who depart from the pattern. There are a score of negroes, all excellent keepers, and even a Filipino. Some of the keepers live in shantyboats anchored near their lights, some in shantyboats beached on the shore. A few live in Choctaws, houses built on great hollow logs so that when the high water comes, the curious structures float off with no damage to the interior, and as the yellow flood slowly recedes, the occupants can set them down again wherever they will. One light keeper operates a little sawmill; one has a shantyboat store where he sells candy and pop to passing river travelers; another, whose lights are all on one side of the river, is the possessor of an old and faithful horse, and every day rides out with his lamps and supplies dangling from the animal's sides.

A cutoff in the river may eliminate the light of a faithful tender and threaten him with the loss of his monthly ten dollars which is his very existence; the captain of the lighthouse boat tries to find some other light nearby and avoid a tragedy. For the lighthouse service is loyal to its loyal servants.



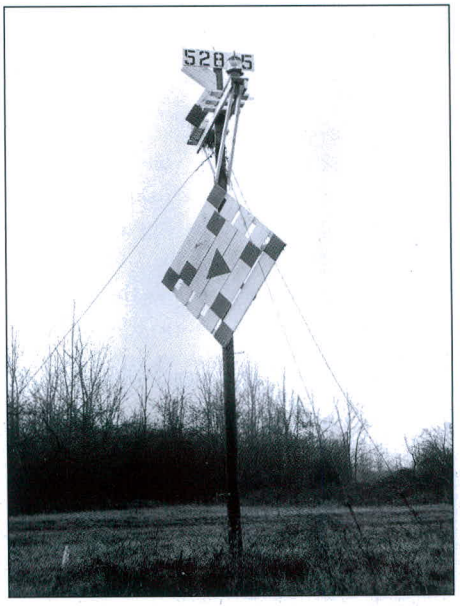
The *Goldenrod* was one of the lighthouse tenders used on the Mississippi. USLHS archive photo.

Some years ago up one of the small tributaries a group of pilots came to the captain of the lighthouse tender in the region and asked that a light be moved from one side of the river to the other. The bank and the channel had changed, they declared, and the light must be placed on the other shore, if their labors were not to be increased tenfold and their vessels even wrecked.

The captain of the lighthouse boat, an old man grown gray at his post, became troubled. "I'll move her for you next week," he declared. "But I'm sure mighty sorry it's got to go. That light's kept by Aunt Molly Snow, that's been having it for forty years, ever since her husband drowned going out to fix his lamp. The light money's all she's got to support herself and her two grandchildren. I don't think she'll ever be able to cross the river. She's too twisted up with rheumatism. I reckon she'll just have to lose it, that's all."

The pilots went away, looking worried. They returned the next morning. "Captain, we don't want that light changed at Greenpoint," said the spokesman. "We'll get along fine with the light where she is. Pilots can just be kind of extra careful going round her."

The captain of the lighthouse boat smiled and nodded. And the light remained until Aunt Mollie was dead.



Single pole structure located at mile 528.5, left bank lower Mississippi River. U.S. Coast Guard photo.