

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Floating Palace

In the thirteenth James Bond spy thriller in 1983, Roger Moore comes up against "Octopussy", an exotic jewel smuggler who lives a life of opulence aboard her "floating palace" near Delhi, India. She owns a traveling circus used as a cover for her jewelry smuggling operation (with Afghan prince and partner Kamal Khan). The "floating palace" is guarded by a team of female gymnasts, all part of her Octopus cult. But floating palaces with traveling circuses are nothing new to the Crescent City. They've made visits many times before.

The first "floating theatre" was constructed in Pittsburgh in 1831 as a vehicle for the Chapmans, a family of English actors. Only a narrow box 16 by 100 feet long on a narrow barge, but it was a real theatre nonetheless. With a stage at one end, a pit in the middle, and a gallery at the other end, the nine-person Chapman family floated it down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers (with performances along the way) to its journey's end in New Orleans. There it was sold for firewood, and the troupe trekked back to Pittsburgh to build another craft for the following season. By 1836 they were able to afford a steamboat to use as their own permanent "floating theatre".

The Chapman presentations included Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" and "Hamlet", August von Kotzebue's "The Stranger" and the fairy tale "Cinderella". Frequently featured were performances of popular songs.

Other boats followed with offerings that ranged from serious dramas to circuses, and along the way the word "showboat" came into the lexicon. Not that anyone lived lives quite as melodramatic as those portrayed in Edna Ferber's 1926 novel "Showboat", but the movie versions no doubt influenced the public's cultural interpretation. There was the 1936 black-and-white film (with Irene Dunne as Magnolia, Helen Morgan as Julie and Paul Robeson singing "Ol' Man River") and the Technicolor remake in 1951 (starring Kathryn Grayson, Howard Keel, Ava Gardner and William Warfield).

Ferber realized that for over a century there were many "floating theatres" traversing the great waterways of mid-America down to New Orleans, and she herself had spent several weeks aboard "James Adams Floating Palace Theater" in Bath, North Carolina, gathering data for her novel on that great American phenomenon, the "Showboat".

But the most spectacular showboat of them all was "Spaulding and Rogers' Floating Circus Palace", launched in Cincinnati in 1851. Dr. Gilbert R. Spaulding, a former pharmacist from Albany, New York, and English equestrian Charles J. Rogers partnered to pioneer the idea of a riverboat menagerie (another name for some circuses in those days). Reportedly costing \$42,000 (over a million dollars today), the "Floating Palace" had 3400 seats on two decks. The 200-foot long boat was twice the size of New Orleans' St. James Theatre, the city's largest building in 1851. It wintered several years in New Orleans, performing at the Academy of Music on the corner of St. Charles and Perdido.

The vessel's sizable amphitheatre had 1000 seats on the main deck (called the dress circle), 1500 seats in the family circle and 900 seats set aside for African-American spectators. Besides the 42-foot circus ring area, the boat boasted (in an 1860 advertisement in "Gardner's New Orleans Directory") a museum with "100,000 curiosities of past years". Decorated with elegant mirrors, velvet appointments, thick carpeting and carved woodwork, the "Floating Palace" had 200 gas jets for lighting the ring with its impressive performing horses (as showcased in a lithograph by A. Forbriger). It also put on minstrel shows and dramatic presentations. The "Palace" was pulled along by a towboat named the "James Raymond" that had a steam engine to provide heat. It, too, had entertainment directed by Frank Lynch (once a dancer at P. T. Barnum's museum).

The super-steamboat employed over one hundred people, including crew, trainers, performers and business staff. It had facilities for the care of the animals and its own daily newspaper, yet never had to worry about blowdowns (the fear of every tent circus from any era).

The beginning of the Civil War, however, created problems for Spaulding and Rogers and other traveling troupes (most of which were from Northern States). Being stranded in a hostile South was a possibility, and that's just what happened to the "Floating Circus Palace". Marooned in New Orleans after a chain of performances, the "Palace" was confiscated by the Confederate authorities in 1862 for use as a hospital ship. Fearing spy activity, the circus troupe was commanded to depart and go back above the Mason-Dixon line.

Doc Spaulding was an agile businessman who refused to give up. He and Rogers outfitted a smaller steamboat, renaming it "Dan Castello's Great Show" after a talented clown with Southern credentials. With the circus band playing "Dixie" when needed, they worked their way past the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers, where Grant was advancing closer and closer to Vicksburg, and made it back North (then on to South America for the next season away from the war).

Their great escape was only one of Spaulding and Rogers' many circus accomplishments over the years: the first to introduce the calliope to a circus, the first to use knock-down seats and quarter-poles in tents, the first to move an entire circus by rail, multiple simultaneous performing acts in different rings and the first to employ Drummond lights for evening performances. Better known as limelight, this stage lighting is provided by an oxyhydrogen flame (and where we get the expression "in the limelight").

After the war, showboats were revived in 1878 with the building of the "New Sensation". Then came the "Twentieth Century" in 1882, "Dan Rice's Floating Opera" in '86, "Robinson's Floating Palace" in '93 and the "Cotton Blossom" in 1909. A new century saw the emergence of the "Big Three", all owned by W. R. Markle of Ohio. These boats were the "Sunny South", "Goldenrod" and the "Grand Floating Palace". The 1930s had burlesque shows catering to the less sophisticated, and by the 1940s high operating costs and a changing audience brought an end to the era of showboats.

These floating temples of the muses, Calliope feeling especially at home, were much loved by the public (both North and South). Today one can take a New Orleans riverboat cruise on the "Natchez", but the showboats of old with their big shows are but floating memories of a time before TV and TIVO, and the "Spaulding and Rogers' Floating Circus Palace" was by far the most memorable of all.

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