Flotsam and Jetsam, Sneak-Boxes and Trick Bags

Flotsam, Jetsam and Lagan is not a maritime law firm, and its advertising slogan is not “Ship Happens!” And who or what is Lagan, do you ask? A sneak-box, you’ll learn, has nothing to do with a “Trick Bag”, a very popular New Orleans song by singer-songwriter Earl King (as well as an expression used in court by Dean Andrews during the Garrison investigation into the Kennedy assassination). But just what is a sneak-box? All of these questions floating along in the tributary of trivia will be explained in due course. A young Abe Lincoln made two flatboat trips down the Mississippi to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831, but his methods of travel were in no way unusual. The narrative that follows shall introduce the reader to a number of atypical contrivances that have floated their way downriver to the Crescent City.

Once upon a time in the 1860s, a young man received an invitation to a masquerade ball. His name was George Waters, and he found that the fancy masks for such affairs began at $8 (expensive even in those days). His frugality motivated him to create his own mask, because his father, Elisha Waters, was a paper box manufacturer (so the young gentleman knew a bit about working with paper). Now this fancy masquerade ball was not in New Orleans but in Troy, New York. There a journey would begin which would eventually connect the two cities.

A view of Troy, New York, from the North
George Waters got the idea that, from making his mask by building up layers of paper, he could make any form he desired. What resulted was light, durable and strong, a perfect material for boats (if only they could be made waterproof). The lightest boats in those days were made of a single cedar shell (40 lbs. for a 28’ boat with a 13” beam), but they were very fragile. George believed paper boats could be made lighter, as well as stronger, and his father agreed.

By coating each layer with shellac as they went along, they created a boat that was just over 30 lbs., of a strong seamless construction, offering an almost friction-free surface to the water and leak-proof. Patents were obtained and in 1867 Elisha Waters and Sons began large-scale production of these paper racing shells. Eventually they got the weight down to 22 lbs.

The boats excelled in racing competitions, and the company received an added boost from the exploits of a sportsman and adventurer of that period, Nathaniel (Natty) Holmes Bishop of New Jersey. Beginning his career with a solo hike across South America in the 1850s, Bishop traveled over twenty-five hundred miles down to Cedar Keys, Florida, in one of Waters’ paper canoes in 1874. He then embarked alone, December 2, 1875, on a voyage of over two thousand miles down the Mississippi to New Orleans in a 12’ cedar Barnegat sneak-box. He wrote about his various adventures in One Thousand Miles Walk Across South America, Voyage of the Paper Canoe and Four Months in a Sneak-Box.
A sneak-box was a low-decked boat originally designed by Captain Hazelton Seaman around 1836 in New Jersey. Covered by grass or sedge, the deck could secrete its occupant from the view of waterfowl while hunting in Barnegat and Little Egg Harbor Bays. Captain Seaman named the result of his initial effort the “Devil’s Coffin”, but the bay-men in the area gave the craft the sobriquet “sneak-box” - since it allowed a person to sneak up on the unwary ducks.

Bishop’s “sneak-box” travelogue is highly entertaining, historic, full of optimism and loaded with offbeat observations of people along his journey. His boat helped him hide from some unsavory characters along the way. Once in New Orleans, he wrote about “the Sicilian fruit-seller with his native dialect; the brisk French madame with her dainty stall; the mild-eyed Indian woman with her sack of gumbo” and “the fish-dealer with his wooden bench and odd patois; the dark-haired creole lady” and many other interesting New Orleanians of the nineteenth century.

On his arrival in the Crescent City, he was offered southern hospitality in “the fine boat-house of the Southern Boat Club” near the foot of Louisiana Avenue. From there a portage was made to Lake Pontchartrain via the New Basin Canal, and he then continued his trip out into the Gulf. His narrative mentions a “small light-house” at the terminus of the canal. This was four years before the Southern Yacht Club completed its first West End clubhouse there, and the “small light-house” was only a predecessor of the beloved red-roofed landmark from the 1890s so badly battered by Katrina (but now rebuilt).

Bishop wrote about another unusual drifter who descended a stretch of the Mississippi only a month after he did. Bishop writes that Paul
Boyton, “clothed in his famous swimming-suit, paddled his way down the current from Bayou Goula to New Orleans, a distance of one hundred miles” in May of 1876. Long before “frogman” became popular slang for a scuba diver in the 1940s and even longer before Clarence “Frogman” Henry sang like a frog who “Ain’t Got A Home” in 1956, Boyton was known as “The Fearless Frogman”. This was due to his appearance in his amazing inflatable wetsuit.

Paul Boyton (1848-1914) was an adventurer, author, innovator and showman who gained international renown and created worldwide interest in water sports and swimming. He joined the Union Navy during the Civil War when he was only 15, followed by service in both the Mexican Navy and French Navy during the Franco-Prussian War. He then prospected for diamonds in South Africa. Back in the States, he helped organize the United States Life-Saving Service, a precursor to the U.S. Coast Guard. He was made Captain of Atlantic City’s lifesaving service in 1873, where he personally rescued seventy-one people (not one person drowned there in the next two years).
There in New Jersey, Boyton began experimenting with a rubber suit invented by C.S. Merriman as a lifesaving device. These vulcanized rubber pantaloons had five tubes that could be inflated at will and were cinched at the waist with a steel band. The suit (which became Boyton’s trademark) also kept the wearer dry, and it allowed him to float on his back using a double-sided paddle for propulsion, feet forward. He must have looked like the “Michelin Man” floating down the Mississippi. After a breakfast of “five eggs, bread, and a glass of beer” he left Bayou Goula for New Orleans only to encounter powerful eddies, “terrible counter-currents” and a “large amount of drift-wood”. The year before he swam the English Channel from France to England in his suit, but with a sail attached. He wrote that his Mississippi swim was “a much more arduous one than my trip across the English Channel”. He was much more exhausted when he got to New Orleans.

His many demonstrations across Europe and the world gathered much publicity. His Channel swim provided the impetus for future swimmers to try. Medals and knighthoods came from many European countries. When he swam the Seine to Paris, the crowd was estimated at over one million. After all of these daring endeavors, he settled in Chicago. There he opened “Paul Boyton’s Water Chutes” in 1894, perhaps the first water slide theme park. He followed that with a big exhibition at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904. He died in Brooklyn, New York,
April 19, 1914.

Clarence “Frogman” Henry, born 1937 in Algiers, Louisiana

To salvage an ending for this drifting drama, flotsam and jetsam describe items cast off into the water. Jetsam has been deliberately placed there, or jettisoned. For flotsam, it was involuntary. Lagan describes goods that have been marked and tied to a buoy for future retrieval. And, in New Orleans, debris is something you want on your po-boy. With that, the author requests permission to cast off (with the hope of future retrieval).

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
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