

Bringing an Old Boat Back to Life



Top: The Shamrock was built in Grafton, Ill., in the 1950s.

Above: River Explorer

By Capt. Carl Henry

Restoring a 60-year-old houseboat has been a labor of love for me. It almost has to be. If you looked at it from a purely practical viewpoint, you would walk away. It's cheaper and easier to build a new boat from scratch.

This is a huge commitment that has required significant investments of time, effort and money, with a workforce of just one person — me. It's not for everybody, but to me this boat has value beyond the investment. There's a lot of satisfaction in bringing an old boat like this back to life.

I searched for a houseboat to suit my needs for a long time, until I found the *River Explorer* sitting up on blocks and out of service for several years at

a La Crosse marina. At 64 feet by 18 feet and weighing 64 tons, the steel boat was big, heavy and solid as a tank. Originally named *Shamrock*, it was built in 1955 by Grafton Boat Works

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in Grafton, Ill. Renamed *Jay-Dee*, it became the corporate houseboat for the John Deere Co. of Moline Ill., where, for four decades, it entertained

many guests of the company on Mississippi River excursions in the Quad Cities area.

Then John Deere passed it on to the river cleanup organization Living Lands & Waters. A short time later they sold it to Winona State University, where it became a familiar sight on the Winona riverfront, carrying students on river excursions (the predecessor to the new *Cal Fremling*).

I first noticed the boat while making regular stops at the Winona levee when I was piloting the *Julia Belle Swain*, a paddlewheel excursion boat based in La Crosse. When I discovered it languishing in a La Crosse marina in 2010, it had already been laid up for several years and was in a serious state



The inside of the hull was in bad shape (left) before it was cleaned and painted (right).



of disrepair. I brokered a deal with the university and soon the boat was mine — “as-is.”

I got it at a fair price, but it was definitely a fixer-upper. I didn’t know if anything worked — if the two 130-hp engines even ran. It was the dead of winter, and there was a foot of water and ice in the bilges. Some machinery was underwater and ruined. The ceiling was collapsing from water damage. It was rough, but it was a solid boat with a lot of potential and character, just the project I was looking for at the time.

I’ve spent four years rebuilding it into a boat that will eventually be capable of going on extended trips on the Mississippi River system, which is quite different from how it was set up and used by John Deere and WSU. They used it for accommodating large groups on day trips. I envision it as a family, live-aboard houseboat, equally at home in a marina or on a sandbar, but set up to go long distances and be away from home.

The Work

As a Mississippi River towboat captain and excursion boat pilot, I’ve worked on and aboard commercial boats for 35 years. The physical work on this boat doesn’t intimidate me, and I do

as much as I’m able to myself. I’ve got a lot of experience around shipyards, dry docks and heavy industrial work. I have the tools I need, and I know how to work with steel. I’ve done plenty of chipping, grinding, painting and caulking. I’ve also been a woodworker my entire life, which is important because

There’s something romantic about bringing an old boat back to life. Older boats have a personality and character that new boats don’t.

almost everything needs to be custom built and installed to fit in the boat’s unconventional spaces. There are no square corners on this boat, and there’s not much that I can buy at the home improvement store and slide into place. For things like electrical work, plumbing, diesel engineering, etc., I research and learn what I need to know as I go along, or I seek outside help, when necessary. I’ve never learned to weld, so that may be a skill I need to acquire in

the future. I’m not too proud. When there’s something I don’t know — and there’s a lot — I read books, research on the internet or find knowledgeable people and ask a lot of questions. I’ll take advice from any source, and I’ve always had a great desire to learn new things.

First I dismantled the interior compartments to trace water leaks. It quickly became obvious that the whole interior would have to be gutted. Everything was either wet, rotten, outdated, rusted through, unserviceable or all-of-the-above. Early on, I discovered many things that enlarged the scope of the project. I knew starting out that this was a possibility.

One of the big concerns? As all boat owners know, it starts and ends with the hull. It’s the foundation to the house. Everything comes after that. It’s imperative to get to the inside of an old steel-hulled boat to treat the bottom plating to prevent encroaching rust and deterioration. Steel boats rust from the inside out, from moisture or water trapped inside. This boat had been operated for decades without proper attention to the inside of the hull. You need to get it all cleaned up, get good paint on it, then keep it dry. After four years of work, most of the machinery below-decks has been removed to gain



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The interior walls, floors and ceilings had to be removed.

access to the bilge spaces. Everything but the engines and the fuel tanks has been removed — appliances, bunks, boilers, ductwork, piping, furnaces, air conditioning units, tanks of all sizes — most of it junk. I've filled several dumpsters and made many trips to the scrapyard. I've performed considerable below-the-waterline work on the hull and running gear, and had some hull sections replaced recently by SkipperLiner in La Crosse. The work was completed the week before the boat manufacturer closed its doors for the second time in recent years, going out of business last fall.

So right now, most of the interior spaces are still in a state of deconstruction. I'm still working on basic infrastructure, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. There always seems to be something demanding my immediate attention, something that threatens to get worse or cost more the longer I delay. Sometimes I have to adjust my plan of attack, but I've gotten a lot of the big, necessary projects out of the way, and I'm looking forward to the actual "rebuilding" part. I'm working along, one compartment at a time (for the most part) and it can be a mess, but I always try to keep a "clean" area where I can relax and enjoy the boat and being on the river.

I've got most of the exterior painted, and it looks good now. It's no longer an eyesore among all the fancy boats at the marina. The vintage John Deere diesel engines are running (installed new by John Deere in the 1970s), and I've taken the boat out on short trips from time to time. I haven't gone too far from home yet. When I'm able to check the machinery more thoroughly — troubleshoot and test things a little more — I'll go on some trips. There are no boat systems yet, no running water. For now, it's easier to stay in the marina, plugged into the utilities.

The Future

The boat carried the name *River Explorer* when I bought it, and I'm partial to the name. I worked on a large passenger vessel by that name several years ago, so I decided to keep it. I think it describes both the boat and myself.

People sometimes ask why someone who works on the river full-time would want to spend so much free time working on an old boat. It's an addiction I guess. There's something romantic about bringing an old boat back to life. Older boats have a personality and character that new boats don't. I also like having a project in front of me and planning things out — visualizing what

I will have in the end. I'm a driven person by nature. I enjoy working hard, so this is actually a release for me. And, I like the river culture. I enjoy being on the water. It's a refuge from modern life, and everything seems to slow down a little. Sometimes it seems like going back in time, to a different place. This boat will take me to those places. When this boat is finished, it's going to be something really special.

My houseboat is moored at North Bay Marina on French Island in La Crosse (adjacent to American Marine and Huck Finn's restaurant). The marina staff all know me by name — I'm here almost as much as they are. If you're interested in visiting this old boat, I will gladly give a tour, but I figure this is a 10-year project — not including coffee breaks — so I may have to put you to work. 🌊

Photos by Carl Henry with the exception of the historical photo.

Capt. Carl Henry pilots for Southern Towing Company. This is his first story for Big River, though he has helped with and appeared in several other stories.