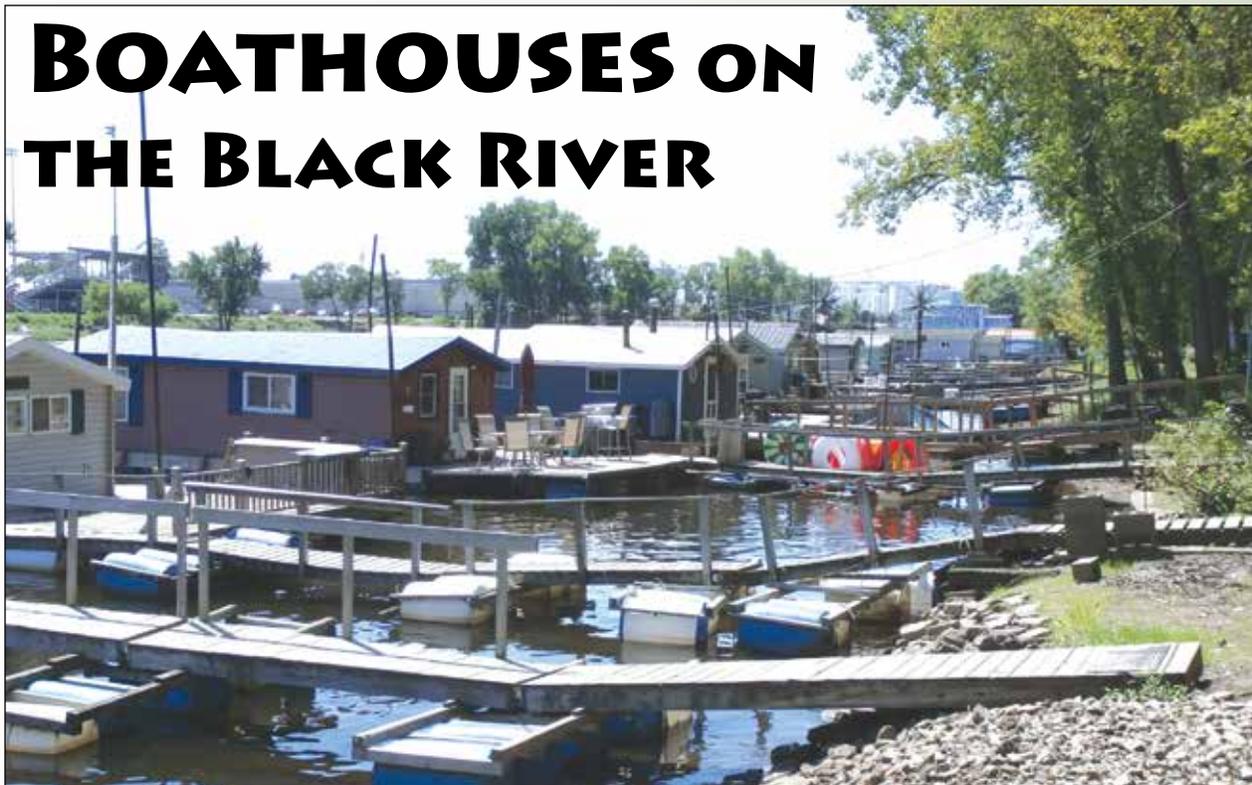


# BOATHOUSES ON THE BLACK RIVER



Story and photos by John Elliott

People have been living on the water for as long as there have been boats big enough to live on. Cleopatra had her barge. In southern China, the Tanka people have lived on boats for centuries. In Jamaica Bay, New York, some people find boat living, with a monthly marina fee of \$700, much more affordable than \$2,400 a month for a one-bedroom in Manhattan. Out west in Sausalito, Calif., *Whole Earth Catalog* founder, Stewart Brand, and his wife, live on a tug boat on Sausalito Bay. The boathouse communities in Lake Union and Portage Bay, in Seattle, are fairly upscale.

Of late, I've been reading a lot by Dubuque author Richard Bissell, and in his mostly autobiographical *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*, (1973) he describes living on a houseboat in the Ice Harbor in Dubuque with his wife, an arrangement that horrified his patrician-sounding mother. In a 1954 article in *Holiday Magazine*, "Good Old Dubuque," he has a running gag involving some unfortunate neighbor, "Smitty," and his family who live on a houseboat in the harbor. They dreaded the launch of

new boats from the Dubuque Boat and Boiler Works. Notes Smitty, "Last time that they launch a barge over there, one of them hunnerd-ninety-five foot

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jumbos for North River Transit it was, why they send such a wave over here the refrigerator like to fell over onto Lorraine Lou."

My interest piqued, I read more. As it turned out, living on the river was very common on the upper Mississippi and to some extent still is. Boathouses, they are called, and I found some at La Crosse, Wis., on the Black River, near its confluence with the Mississippi.

The boathouses on the Black River can look like anything from an ice-fishing shanty on a raft to abodes decidedly more posh. The rafts float on

plastic 40-gallon drums arranged in racks beneath the deck. Unlike houseboats, boathouses, by law, aren't supposed to float free. They are anchored to poles driven 20 feet into the muck and connected to the shore by gangways. They can have electricity and propane tanks, but no running water or toilets. Where they're docked, there is usually a line of porta potties.

So, I went to visit the boathouses in La Crosse.

## **Popping Barrels on Boathouse Drive**

When I got there, on a sunny Saturday morning in August, the sky was a deep azure. From Clinton Street, I headed west, crossed the Black River, then took a left onto Boathouse Drive in Veterans Freedom Park, and found a tidy row of boathouses on the water. One of my first thoughts was, "Wow, I want one!"

They're a varied lot. Appearances ranged from needs-a-coat-of-paint to quite nice — neat as a pin, actually. One boathouse owner told me that his had been in the family since the 1890s, but I suspect that most date from the late 1940s or 1950s. Some even have



*This boathouse might date from the early 20th century.*

names — “The Rat Hole Retreat,” “Hill of a Good Time,” “The Pack Shack,” “The Store.”

I was walking along the shore when I noted some activity and went to have a look. I waved at a fellow on board, “John Boy,” and he waved back and said, “Come on over. We’re out back.” I crossed the gangway, and made my way to the back deck.

When I got there, I could hear talking, but didn’t see anybody. “Over here!” I looked down between some removed floor boards and saw Rick Penning’s head.

“What ya doing?” I asked.

“Replacing barrels.”

They were replacing some of the leaky barrels under the platform, “popping barrels” as they say. Most home owners don’t have to put on neoprene suits to work on their houses. These guys do. Rick’s buddy, Jared Milliren, the owner of an 1890’s boathouse, was helping.

The blue plastic barrels, byproducts

of the soft drink industry, were set in racks made of treated four-by-fours and welded rebar. To get barrels under the raft, the barrels are partially filled with water and put in place. Then they’re refilled with air, driving out the water. It was quite interesting.

While the guys worked, I’d occasionally try to appear useful and press down an errant four-by-four with my foot, while we talked about all things boathouse. The conversation drifted to the porta potties that line the shore, which brought up the Department of Natural Resources. Milliren noted that he understands why the DNR is concerned with water quality, but boathouse people are “the biggest stewards of the water, because we’re in it.” And he was, up to his neck.

He had great stories about the Great Floods of 1965 and 1993, mainly that French Island was completely submerged, and you needed a boat to get to your boathouse, which didn’t float away due to the fact that is was

attached to poles, which at “normal” river depth, stand about 20 feet above the water.

### **Rules, Regulations & Pleasures**

In La Crosse, the boathouse season appears to be March to November, but you aren’t allowed to live in them on a permanent basis. Boathouse owners belong to a club, the West Cope-land Boat Club, and it wrangles the porta potties, electricity, and also deals with city, state and federal agencies. The boathouses don’t have running water, although I saw one that had a water tank on shore and long hose to the boathouse. In Wisconsin, you can’t build a new boathouse, but you are allowed to buy one, which sounds tricky. It seems that marketing relies mostly on word of mouth, but occasionally they show up in the *La Crosse Tribune*. What’s a boathouse cost? I heard anywhere from \$25,000 to \$50,000, but read later that they can



Left: Jared Milliren and his buddy Rick Penning install new barrels.

Below: Rick Penning looks up through the deck of his boathouse.



go for more. They do have refrigerators, televisions, real furniture, propane appliances and outdoor grills. Imagine, if you will, a vacation cabin on a raft in the water. As you might expect, once you're inside, you do notice a bit of rocking. Well, you are afloat.

So, what are the rules for a cabin on a raft sitting on a river? The city of La Crosse controls the land the boathouses are moored to. City residents pay \$500 a year, non-residents pay \$600. Boathouses must comply with city and state regulations regarding water, waste, safety and the like. The La Crosse City Inspection Department enforces city codes and ordinances. The Wisconsin DNR regulates the boathouses, according to La Crosse Parks director, Steve Carlyon. In a word, you can't just set a boathouse anywhere you wish.

To learn about day-to-day life on a boathouse, I contacted Gary Buchner, president of the West Copeland Boat Club. Buchner is a plumbing contractor by day and boathouse enthusiast for every minute he can spare, or so it seems.

I asked why people own boathouses.

"It's a place to have on the water. People like to be on the water, and if they can't have a boathouse, they'll have a big boat or an enclosed pontoon," he explained.

And what do they do there? Watch TV? Fish? Drink beer?

"Some people got TV down there, but most people down there cook out,

fish, you know, drink some beer, and maybe store their boat down there — a fishing boat, a pontoon or something. It's a place for family and friends to get together and socialize. In our case, we're a club, and there are 38 boathouses down there, so you pretty much

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know your neighbor and pretty much get along."

I had to ask about the term, "boathouse," as in a place to keep a boat. Clearly, they have morphed into something else.

"They started out as boathouses [places to keep a boat], many, many years ago. That's what they were made for, a building over a boat, where they could pull their boat inside and store it. But, as the years went on, people started enclosing them and leaving the boats outside, making them a houseboat, so maybe the name should change."

Does anybody live on them seven days a week?

"Eh, I don't think there are any. There are some people down near Pettibone [park], but up near us, there are no people living seven days a week. You know, like me, for instance, if the weather is nice, I'll stop on the way home from work and maybe sit down there for an hour or so, or just mess around and look at the water, maybe have a beer or something, some chips or something like that. Or some friends will stop down for some BS-ing, whatever."

It sounds like a pretty good life on a boathouse on the Black River in La Crosse. The boathouses are quite a sight, sitting placidly in the water. The owners seem comfortable with people coming by and taking a look at their unusual vacation abodes, rather friendly in fact. The part that appealed to me was that it seems like such a throwback to an earlier time on the river, before the dams went in, back when people really did live on boats. It's nice to see that this kind of thing is still going on. 🌿

***John Elliott lives in Madison, Wis. His last piece for Big River was a review of the book This Storied River, September-October 2017.***