

# When “Big Mama” Ruled the Rivers

By Connie Cherba and Harold Pollock



The *Sprague* was moored on the Yazoo River at Vicksburg in 1965. (Michael Dolan)

An eager crowd gathered at Dubuque’s Ice Harbor on December 5, 1901, to watch the Iowa Iron Works launch the *Sprague*, the world’s largest steam-powered sternwheeler towboat. The 318-foot behemoth slid sideways into the harbor, easily cracking a four-inch layer of ice. Earlier in the year, the Iron Works had won the contract to build the *Sprague* for the Monongahela River Consolidated Coal and Coke Company of Pittsburgh, with a bid of \$192,000.

The *Sprague*, nicknamed “Big Mama,” was christened in honor of Captain Peter Sprague, a marine construction supervisor who designed the huge towboat. Family members recall that Peter Sprague was a perfectionist. He made his own drawings and inspected every piece of lumber that went into each boat he built.

In June 1902, the *Sprague* was towed to St. Louis for the installation of her 40-foot paddlewheel, because the boat was too long to pass through the Keokuk Lock with the wheel attached. In September 1902, on her maiden run to Cairo, Ill., the *Sprague* collided with the showboat *Temple of Amusement* due to a mixup in signals. The *Sprague* cut the showboat in half, sinking it.

The *Sprague* was taken up the Ohio River to Pittsburgh for alterations to strengthen her structure and improve her signal system. After a successful run to New Orleans, she returned to Pittsburgh for additional alterations. Extra

hog chains were added to prevent the hull from sagging or “hogging” under heavy loads.

In 1904, the *Sprague* set her first record, by pushing 53,200 tons of coal. Three years later, in February 1907, she broke that record by pushing a 60-barge tow of 67,307 tons of coal on a 612-mile voyage from Memphis to Baton Rouge.

The *Sprague* also set records for tows lost. She lost a tow of empties on the falls at Louisville in 1904, when she blew a cylinder head. The next

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year, the *Sprague* lost 34,200 tons of coal. On November 30, 1913, she hit a stone dike at Island 30, above Osceola, Ark., and destroyed 35 barges carrying 53,200 tons of coal. The wreckage formed a new island in the Mississippi for a while.

Commercial and pleasure craft steered clear of the *Sprague*. Her paddlewheel kicked up a 10-to-14-foot wake, depending on the number of barges she was pushing and whether she was heading up or downstream.

Some claim the Mississippi actually ran backwards after the *Sprague* passed going upriver and her wheel wash splashed the shore for hours after she passed.

The *Sprague* was bought by the Aluminum Ore Company of St. Louis in 1917 to push bauxite upriver from Bauxippi, Ark. In 1925, Standard Oil Company bought her to haul crude oil to refineries in Baton Rouge. The *Sprague* set a record for hauling oil, when she pushed 19 barges carrying 11 million gallons of crude.

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Throughout WWII, the *Sprague* contributed to the war effort by transporting oil. The end of the war and the new diesel era doomed her and other inefficient steamers. The mighty *Sprague* was decommissioned at Memphis on March 5, 1948.

Standard Oil Company sold the *Sprague* to the city of Vicksburg for one dollar. Until 1957, the boat housed a popular floating restaurant and river museum on Vicksburg’s riverfront.

In 1959, the *Sprague* was towed to Pittsburgh for the city’s bicentennial celebration. Visitors boarded it at Pittsburgh’s “Point,” where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers come together to form the Ohio. Some recall touring the huge boat, which was “not just a little bit dirty” from pushing coal and



Left: This rusted hub held the spokes of the Sprague's 40-ft paddlewheel. (Marty Kittrell)

Below: The Sprague was featured in postcards.



oil barges for over half a century.

When she returned to Vicksburg, the Vicksburg Yacht Club used her for boat storage and as a refueling depot. After her six boilers were removed, she was converted to a floating theater and hosted the Vicksburg Little Theater's long-running melodrama "Gold in the Hills."

Sometime during the night of April 15, 1974, a fire broke out on the *Sprague*, and by the time it was extinguished she had burned down to her main deck, leaving only the stern-wheel and hull. In spite of the fire, the *Sprague* achieved a listing on the National Register of Historic Places in April 1977. The burned-out remains of the once glorious towboat sat alongside the Yazoo Diversionary Canal until the flood of 1979 sank her.

By 1980, efforts to restore the *Sprague* were abandoned, and many of the boat's fittings, including the paddlewheel and smokestacks, were removed. The Army Corps of Engineers dynamited her remains in 1981 and hauled the large metal pieces from the canal.

A few things from the *Sprague* have been saved and made available to the public. A steamboat display at Vicksburg's Old Court House Museum features the *Sprague*'s captain's wheel and many of her gauges.

Catfish Row Children's Art Park, a playground on Vicksburg's Levee Street, is decorated with brightly paint-

ed cleats, vents and capstans salvaged from the *Sprague*. The artifacts help create "an imaginary place for today's young riverboat captains," according to park signs.

The *Sprague*'s whistle is on display at the Ohio River Museum, in Marietta, Ohio. Thanks to modern technology, we can still hear the *Sprague*'s mournful, deep-throated whistle on the web. 🎧

The rest of the *Sprague* hasn't fared as well. According to the Vicksburg Landscape Department's Jeff Richardson, pieces of the *Sprague* remain outside along the Mississippi River.

A rudder, bilge pump, a pitman arm that once turned the paddlewheel, a large generator, some gears and other engine-room artifacts can be found along the river in front of the city water department near the Historic Klondyke Trading Post bar and grill. Most of these pieces are in relatively good shape and still bear traces of red paint.

The remains of the *Sprague*'s huge paddlewheel and her two smokestacks rest on county property near where the boat burned, alongside the Yazoo Diversionary Canal at the old government fleet yard. Richardson says these artifacts are overgrown and rapidly deteriorating. Talk of restoration resurfaces sporadically, but the sheer size of

the artifacts and the costs of preserving them have proved prohibitive. So, the rust continues to eat away at the pieces of the *Sprague* that haven't already been stolen by vandals.

Vicksburg photographer Marty Kittrell makes a yearly pilgrimage to the rusting remains to record the toll of another year, then he posts photos on his blog and appeals to "anyone who will listen that we need to save the *Sprague*." He favors restoring the smokestacks and installing the paddlewheel in a pool of water, where it would turn so visitors could "watch that mighty piece of Vicksburg and Mississippi history." 🎧

Kittrell may be a dreamer, but who can argue with his vision? Maybe someday the *Sprague* will be restored, and, once again, "Big Mama" will command the respect she did when she pushed record loads of coal and oil up and down the Lower Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. 🌊

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