Little Kanawha River
Once Alive with Riverboats

Sometimes it's hard to believe tales about the extent to which river traffic once flourished on West Virginia's inland waterways, waterways which today are little more than a trickle in places. Yet oldtimers and history books insist that at the turn of the century one could pick up or deliver a sizable load of just about anything—logs, oil, coal, or college students—to just about anywhere in the state under the right conditions.

In the case of the Little Kanawha River, at least, such claims appear to be well founded. A collection of photographs and scrapbooks which was recently acquired by the Regional History Collection affords a fascinating look at a transportation system that once extended from the Little Kanawha's mouth at Parkersburg all the way to Burnsville, Braxton County, a distance of over 120 miles. Entitled the Little Kanawha River Collection, the collection was compiled by Cam DePue of Creston, Wirt County.

Like most of West Virginia's rivers, the Little Kanawha was first employed as a means of transporting timber out of the state's interior. Logs were dragged or floated down stream beds to the river where they were assembled into rafts. The rafts were held until seasonal periods of high water enabled their movement down river.

In order to investigate the broader commercial capabilities of the river, the James River and Kanawha Company conducted a survey of the Little Kanawha in 1838. Nine years later the Little Kanawha Navigation Company was formed with the intent of improving the river from Parkersburg to Bulltown through channeling and construction of a series of locks and dams.

Little was apparently accomplished towards this end until a major oil strike occurred at Burning Springs, Wirt County, in May of 1860. Reacting to news about the establishment in 1859 of the world's first oil well near Titusville, Pennsylvania, in the spring of 1860 Herman P. Karns began pumping oil from a "contaminated" salt well...
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from which local residents had been gathering oil for illumination and as a liniment for many years. Within
months Burning Springs became the world's leading oil
field and population swelled from a handful to over 6000.
Like logs, oil was initially accumulated at the river's edge
in dug out pits and in barrels until periods of high water
enabled it to be shipped out by barge. In the meantime, a
revived Little Kanawha Navigation Company began
clearing obstructions and constructing a series of four
locks and dams. Delayed by red tape, labor difficulties,
and the Civil War (during which Burning Springs was
ignited by Confederate forces in a blaze that was visible in
Parkersburg 50 miles away) the river was finally opened to
traffic on a toll basis from Parkersburg to Burning Springs
in 1874. A fifth lock and dam constructed fifteen years
later by the Federal Government ultimately extended year
round navigable waters ten miles further up river to the
town of Creston.

For nearly half a century steamboats laden with pass-
engers and cargo were a familiar sight between Parkers-
burg and Creston. A number of handsome packets, such as
the “Oneida”, the “Lucille”, the “W.A. Hilton” and the
“D.B. Burns” were built specifically for Little Kanawha
service. A round trip between Parkersburg and Creston
generally consumed the better part of 24 hours and cost
from fifty cents to several dollars.

Without the benefit of extensive improvement, naviga-
tion on the Little Kanawha's upper reaches remained
seasonal. The extension of the lock and dam system
beyond Creston was a hotly debated issue for a number of
years around the turn of the century. When the Federal
Government bought out the Little Kanawha Navigation
Company in 1905, the matter was entrusted to the U.S.
Army Corps of Engineers. A series of surveys and
investigations over the ensuing years found that no fewer
than ten locks and dams would be necessary in order to
extend the system to the Coke and Coal Railway Com-
pany's junction at Gilmer Station, at a cost of approxi-
mately five million dollars. The Corps ultimately con-
cluded that such expense could not be justified by
anticipated levels of use.

Even without extensive improvements, however, river
traffic was able to reach Grantsville, Glenville and even
Burnsville with some regularity during much of the year—
roughly late November through May. The “Kathryn”
(formerly the “W.A. Hilton”) delivered a heavy load of
Deering harvesting equipment to Grantsville about 1898.
The “D.B. Burns” was certified to go to Glenville with
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Built in 1914 for Gilmer County service, the "Reliance" proved to be too long to turn around at Gilmer Station and thus restricted operation to between Granstville and Glenville.

Owner Carl Merrill and friends enjoy the ride as the "Sunshine" tows a barge up river from Creston, ca.1925. Note the craft's slender width. While most boats were over fifty feet in length, widths commonly ran about ten feet. Even the largest boats seldom exceeded fifteen feet. The lock dimensions were 22'x12'5".

The gas packet "Dove", owned principally by the Righter family of Creston, is said to have been built in 1916 on the hull of the earlier boat "Granstville".

The "Clipper" built at Granstville about 1898 reportedly was the first gas boat on the river. The "A.C. Barney", the "Clarence", the "Glenville", the "old" and "new" "Edith H." and the impressive double decked "Dove" were just a few of the many such crafts to follow. Shipbuilding itself developed into a considerable industry in Elizabeth, Creston, and especially Granstville where dozens of gas boats, barges, and other craft were built during the early 1900s.

While the primary freight of river traffic continued to belong to the logging, oil, and gas industries, general merchandise, U.S. mail and passengers were also routinely transported to and from Parkersburg at one end of the river and the Gilmer rail head on the other.

The boat "Gainer I" reportedly operated between Gilmer and Glenville seven days a week from fall through spring during the 1920s. The boat carried a load of fifty passengers at $2.00 a head one way. Countless college bound students first caught sight of Glenville Normal College (then Glenville State College) from this riverboat's bow.

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Regional History Association's First Annual Meeting

Association members, staff, and a distinguished group of special guests gathered in Morgantown on 19-20 June to attend the Regional History Collection's first annual open house. Despite a summer heat wave that made one look forward to these crisper days, the event proved to be both enjoyable and enlightening for everyone involved.

The central theme of this year's program rested in the Collection's acquisition of the David Hunter Strother papers. A native of Martinsburg, Strother (1816-1888) was one of the nation's most popular artist-reporters of the mid-nineteenth century. He also achieved distinction for his service as a Union officer during the Civil War and as the United States consul to Mexico from 1879-1885. (See Newsletter II, No. 1, Spring 1986.)

Kirkland, Washington, and grandson Porter Strother of Grosse Pointe, Michigan. President Bucklew, John Strother, Dean of Libraries Stokely B. Gribble, Curator George Parkinson, Visiting Committee chairman John Stealey III and University Provost Frank Franz shared the podium during a brief ceremony.

The events of Saturday 20 June took place at the West Virginia Collection in Colson Hall. Following a light breakfast, John Alexander Williams addressed attendees regarding the subject of “Porte Crayon and West Virginia’s Birthday”. The author of the “Bicentennial History of West Virginia”, Dr. Williams is currently Director of the national Christopher Columbus Quincentennary Jubilee Commission. A slide/lecture presentation regarding “The Legacy of David Hunter Strother” by curator George Parkinson followed.

As the entire affair went off without a hitch, we are anxiously looking forward to next year's meeting. Indeed, plans for celebrating the state's 125th birthday are well underway. It's not too soon to circle 20 June 1988 on your calendar. We hope you will be able to join us!

Dramatic improvements in regional rail and roadways contributed to the rather sudden decline and eventual extinction of riverboat traffic along both the upper and lower ends of the Little Kanawha about 1930. For many years thereafter the once sturdy workhorses of the river could be seen rotting along the Little Kanawha’s banks. And with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ decision to allow the river to reclaim its natural course, there is little evidence today that such a robust period in the river’s history ever existed—save for the DePue Little Kanawha River Collection, that is.

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Fall Telethon Well Underway

If you are reading this Newsletter, chances are that you recently received a telephone call asking you to renew your membership in the Regional History Association. Our major membership drive of the year, the fall telethon provides Association members and candidates each year with an opportunity to renew or become members in the Association by making a pledge over the telephone. Last year's telethon brought some 260 members into the fold along with sorely needed dollars. We hope to do as well this year.

Donors of $25.00 or more this year will receive a copy of the Collection's 1987 "Porte Crayon" poster as a special premium. Illustrating four aspects of the career of David Hunter Strother—artist, author, soldier, statesman—through his own artwork, the poster is both attractive and interesting. In celebrating Strother's life and the preservation of his papers, the poster conveys visually what the Regional History Association stands for. Every Association member will be sure to want one!

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The Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa has kept alive its annual tradition of donating a rare book to the Library by presenting the Regional History Collection with an early Wheeling imprint. "The Universal School Atlas containing Thirty-four Maps Arranged on the Universal Plan", was published by Albert Edwin Picket in 1832. Formerly "president of Manhattan School", Albert Picket (1771-1850) came to Wheeling with a large family about 1819. Over the ensuing decade Picket and sons became noted educators, authors and publishers of a series of school primers regarding subjects including spelling, grammar, literature and geography. During the 1830s the family gradually shifted its center of activities to Cincinnati. Plate 13, a map of the United States from the Universal School Atlas is reproduced above. We are most grateful to the Alpha Chapter for their kind donation.
New Members, West Virginia and Regional History Association

REGULAR MEMBERS
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James M. Wilcox, Falls Church, VA

Selected Recent Accessions

A collection of articles on the history of the community of Clinton Furnace and its schools. Also family histories of the Jacob family, Reed family, Reppert family, and Staritt family. These families having, at one time or another, been inhabitants of the vicinity in Monongalia County.


Receipts, letters, photographs and newsclippings about the river traffic trade on the Little Kanawha River compiled by Cam DePue of Creston, West Virginia.

The Little Kanawha River at Creston, WV, ca. 1930. Little Kanawha River Collection.

and dams were constructed 1868-1874 on this river to enable the oil industry to transport equipment and crude oil from the Burning Springs oil field to Parkersburg. The river then became for the next half century the main artery of transportation for this region hauling at one time passenger traffic as well as freight as far upstream as Burnsville.

Correspondence of Johnson and allied families of Harrison County concerning local church matters and family
news, a majority of which concerns the descendants of Joseph and William Johnson, the most prominent members of the family. Joseph was the first governor of Virginia from the western part of the state. His brother, William, was the first postmaster at Bridgeport. Noteworthy is a letter to William Johnson dated 29 November 1864, from Mason Hesser, a Confederate prisoner at Elmira, New York, during the Civil War. The collection includes genealogical data and articles regarding the Johnson family dating from 1801 when they first settled in Bridgeport. In addition, there are programs concerning the Johnson Day Luncheon and Bridgeport Cemetery Dedication sponsored by the City of Bridgeport.

A Split-T offense football board game named in honor of West Virginia University's head football coach of the 1950's. Lewis coached several talented football teams at the University with Sam Huff being the most illustrious of a talented corps of players. The game, a production of the Morgantown Game Company, was designed to replicate an actual football game, and is played and scored according to regular college football rules.

The letters, diary, and service-related documents of William Emory Paul, a Captain in the U.S. Army Dental Corps from Camden, West Virginia, who served with the 327th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Division, A.E.F. in France during World War I. Most of the documents are supply forms, regulations, and his service records and identification papers. The diary records his time spent at the front working in medical aide stations during the Meuse-Argonne campaign, for which he received promotion to the rank of Major. The letters are to his parents or to his wife and despite censorship rules depict with much detail life in training at Camp Gordon, Atlanta, Georgia, conditions in wartime France, life at the battle front and the movements of his unit and his travels on leave to Paris, Marseilles and Nice.

A letter and bill of goods from a Baltimore merchant, Robert A. Taylor to Thomas B. Reynolds, a Lewisburg, Greenbrier County merchant. Taylor discusses the storage and sale of deerskins and beaverskins which he had on consignment from Reynolds. Taylor says that it has taken so long to sell them because of an oversupply of these items on the market and recommends the shipment of beeswax since it is the only saleable local product. A statement of accounts is included.

The discharge papers of an American soldier who served in the Philippines during the insurrection. Included is a published diary by one of the officers of his unit, George F. Collins, about life on ship and port calls to and from their tour duty. Also the discharge papers of his father Cyrus Shaffer who served in the West Virginia 4th Cavalry during the Civil War.

A notebook of genealogical forms tracing the descent of the family of Robert Young and Lydia Gould who moved to French Creek, Upshur County, from Massachusetts in 1811. In addition to family genealogy and individual character studies, the collection contains extensive records regarding family members who served in the Civil War and World War I.
Visiting Committee
West Virginia and Regional History Collection

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Winter in Preston County, ca. 1935, Arthurdale Collection.

Cruising on the Little Kanawha, ca. 1925. Story page 1.