

A Family Tree with Roots in the River

By Sara Millhouse



Ann and Steve Suiter are long-time boating enthusiasts, and Steve is a manatee-tour pilot. (Courtesy of Stephen Suiter)



Glen Suiter's 1939 Chris-Craft is on display at the Buffalo Bill Museum in LeClaire, Iowa. (Sara Millhouse)

Another generation has been added to a family of river pilots going back to the early days of navigation on the Upper Mississippi. Stephen Suiter represents the family's fifth generation of pilots and uses his skills in Florida, where he leads manatee tours and ecotours.

The family's Mississippi ties began when Stephen's great-great-great-grandfather Philip Suiter took his young family down the Ohio on a homemade boat made of white oak and grapevines. They moved up the Mississippi to the Rock Island Rapids, which were so formidable that boats were often unloaded at one end and the freight portaged to the other end and reloaded on the boat after it had navigated the rapids.

According to river lore, Philip learned how to run the rapids from French-Indian voyageurs and soon became the most-respected rapids pilot in LeClaire, Iowa, at the upstream end of the rapids, where rapids pilots would gather at the "Green Tree Hotel" to await hire — under what was reportedly the largest rock elm ever recorded.

Philip helped Robert E. Lee make early river maps and established the low-water gauge that still measures the river's depth in the area. Philip's three sons, grandsons and even

great-grandsons became river pilots.

"You can kind of see how I got the boat bug," Stephen explained.

Transportation dominance steadily shifted to railroads, helped in part when — after the *Effie Afton* struck the first railroad bridge across the Mississippi, damaging both boat and bridge — Philip Suiter testified that the bridge

The beautiful Chris-Craft, built in Algonac, Mich., is a classic mid-century pleasure boat.

didn't pose a threat to river navigation. Abraham Lincoln represented the railroad in that landmark case, which ended in a hung jury and de facto railroad victory.

The pilot profession skipped a couple generations in Stephen's family tree, though the river bug didn't. Stephen's great-grandfather Zach taught his sons math from the pilothouse when he saw that a river livelihood would be less likely for his boys.

For Stephen's father Glen's generation, the river and boats were a passion but not a livelihood. Glen made

his living on land, but he spent a happy retirement on the water, and he spent 25 years caring for a 1939 Chris-Craft runabout that was fully restored in 1995. Eventually, the family donated the 15.5-foot, mahogany utility boat to LeClaire's Buffalo Bill Museum, where it is displayed near the paddlewheel towboat *Lone Star*.

The beautiful Chris-Craft, built in Algonac, Mich., is a classic mid-century pleasure boat. The exhibit tells the story of an earlier era of recreation, when the family might have taken a leisurely trip up to Princeton Beach. Today, vintage mahogany Chris-Craft boats have a devoted following.

Stephen's family spent summers on the river, taking vacations up to the St. Croix River, by boat. Stephen's father and grandfather Zach were bankers in Princeton, Iowa. Many descendants of Philip Suiter still live in the LeClaire and Princeton areas.

Stephen describes how locals connect to one another when introduced. "We're Suiters. We live on the river," he says. "It's like we didn't have an identity until we said that."

A retired banker and insurance agent, Stephen and his wife, Ann, raised their family in Princeton. They now winter in Florida, where they

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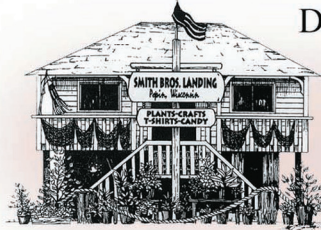
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learned a new ecology of mangroves, alligators, panthers and jumping mullet.

Stephen imagined that captain school there would be fun, but the Coast Guard test was a challenge. Three-quarters of his class flunked their first go, and Stephen spent long hours studying to earn his operator's license. He already knew about boats on the river, however Gulf equations and international water regulations were another story.

Stephen is licensed to take out groups of up to six, and he could transfer those skills back to the Mississippi if he chose. In Florida, he's captained 150-horsepower fiberglass pontoon boats full of American, Canadian and European tourists looking for manatees and other wildlife. Visitors are especially fascinated by alligators and thrilled to see bald eagles. Stephen learned to look for the water "footprint" of a manatee's tail and watch for their breath through blowholes, as he

follows the stringent speed limits in manatee waters.

Maybe there's an inherited gene for pilots. Maybe it's nurture, but a love of the river and boats has certainly been passed down through generations of Suiters, as riverboating turned from a profession to a pleasure. Now, another generation includes a captain. 🌊

Sara Millhouse is Big River's associate editor.