

David Flavan's Love For River Meant Boat For St. Charles

By Joan Dames
Post-Dispatch Travel Editor

DAVID B. FLAVAN is the entrepreneur who paid more than a million dollars to have the Spirit of St. Charles built by a company in Utica, Ind., that primarily builds tugboats.

Flavan said that when the Julia Belle Swain came to St. Charles several years ago, he made an effort to get the owners to make St. Charles a permanent part of its run.

"St. Charles needed a boat," Flavan said. "It's an old riverfront town, and it needs a boat. Also, the river up here runs through some pretty country. The boats that operate on the Mississippi from downtown St. Louis don't have the great scenery we have here. And we have ample parking and the option of dinner cruises for those who want a longer excursion."

Utica company three years ago, and less than two years ago he took delivery on his new boat. Aided by staff from his Noah's Ark restaurant-hotel in St. Charles, Flavan navigated his new boat back to St. Charles.

Flavan, who is a former Eastern Airlines pilot, said, "I get on a boat and all my troubles evaporate." He became a river rat at 14, when, with his 13-year-old brother John and a circular saw to cut the wood, they built their first boat for messing around on the Mississippi. Later, when he was married to the late Martha Vatterott, he built another boat, the Mary Clare, out of plywood. His sidekick, Cl Bamer, "built the second one out of stainless steel, and we used it for fun," he said.

Flavan graduated from St. Louis University High and St. Louis University and has a degree in electrical engineering from Washington University.

"I invented a multisequence pulse code transmitter that is still being used and most recently an automatic steak-cooking machine that has three U.S. and one Canadian patent," Flavan said. "It cooks a steak perfectly in four seconds, but it takes us 15 seconds to get it to the table. Microwave makes meat tough and tasteless. My method doesn't, and we actually take the steaks out as people order them, so we won't need a

cook. The insurance company won't let us use it at Noah's Ark unless I run it."

According to Flavan, there are many similarities in flying an airplane and captaining a boat. "A lot of the technology is the same — the charts and controls — but the big difference is that in a plane you are going 600 mph and on a boat it's 13 mph. A day's work on a plane once meant that I would get on the airplane in the morning and fly to Miami and Huntsville, Ala., from St. Louis, go on to Omaha, Seattle and Portland and then go to bed for the night. On a boat, I may go from St. Charles to Washington, Mo., and stop for the night."

All the while Flavan talked, he was piloting his boat as the calliope played "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," which, except for the age difference (Flavan is in mid-life), could be his signature song.

When not running his business enterprises or mucking about as the behind-the-scenes man in St. Charles politics, Flavan flies his amphibian Republic RC-3, which he calls "a flying boat with a hull." He loves to take off in it on vacation to Africa or Australia.

"It's slow," he said, "It's primarily designed to be used on the water."

In recent years, he has helped out Wings of Hope, a

philanthropic group formed and headed by a local man, Bill Edwards, that flies medical help and supplies to obscure regions in Central and South America.

"I was flying one of Wings of Hope's six planes last year in Honduras," Flavan said, "taking doctors from the International Health Services into that country's backwoods. They want me to go back, and I think I will in February. One of the doctors I flew in was Dr. Knewt Paunsk, a dentist and facial reconstructionist, and Dr. Paul Gensen, part of an old M.A.S.H. team. People in these countries who need medical help can die without it, because you can't get anywhere in these countries without a plane. These people I flew in have been going down there for 16 years to help out in a program overseen by Dr. Miriam Deagan."

Rumor has it that the fly-boy can't stay out of the sky and that, despite his retirement, he is thinking about signing up again as a temporary pilot with Eastern.

Between inventing steak-cooking machines, building million-dollar boats and running a restaurant and hotel and captaining the Spirit of St. Charles, David Flavan manages to keep busy enough for three men.

Maybe that's why he invented a water-borne minivan designed to let the traveler slow down and see the scenery.

Riverboat

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return journey. Each experience had its own kind of charm.

One boards from the "stage," a kind of permanent gangplank. There are three decks, with the captain's deck on top, from which he pores over charts (however, the first day out someone forgot the charts), steers the ship and keeps the calliope tooting. On this particular trip, Cap'n David played the "Show Boat" tapes a lot, alternating "just when the mood strikes him" with calliope digital tapes recorded by seminarian Joe Rust of Sioux City, Iowa.

Under the captain's deck (or "the bridge," as we old salts say) is an open-air deck furnished with spanking white tables and chairs and offering a gift shop with relatively reasonably priced souvenirs and postcards.

The next deck below has a little bandstand area in the bow where a pleasant-voiced ballad singer, Tom Johnson, tied his long hair back into a ponytail and played the guitar and sang most of the day. There is a bar on this deck, too, and self-service coffee and tea all day. Meals are eaten here, and you serve yourself from a lavish buffet, but waitresses come to the table to pour beverages. The tables are laid with pale terra cotta cloths and napkins, colors picked up in the darker clay-colored upholstered chairs and the green and terra cotta Axminster patterned rug.

On the bottom deck is a dance floor, space for a bigger band and another bar, padded benches under the windows, more tables and chairs and the steps to the ship-shape engine room below.

We river rats like to sit and stare, watch the cumulus clouds pile up and the dark water slide by verdant green banks and forest land and the fine old river houses on the Missouri. We like the feeling of a cool, strong wind tearing at our jackets

and rubbing off our makeup. We river rats are not glamorous; we're earthy.

If we stayed out on the river much longer, we would be fatter river rats because the food served on the Spirit of St. Charles is first-rate. For example, upon boarding, a big breakfast buffet awaited — scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, sweet rolls and breakfast pastries, hash brown potatoes, juices, fresh fruit and good coffee.

At mid-morning, a snack of crisp cookies was offered. Luncheon buffet was another feast of ham salad, tuna salad, a salad of peas and cheese, macaroni, fruit salad and a half dozen or so other tasty things to eat, all cold, except for the specialty of the house, a hearty burgoo — soup, meat and vegetables in a rich mix.

The mid-afternoon snack consisted of crudities, cheeses and crackers.

For dinner, prime rib with horseradish sauce was offered, along with fish, vegetables and splendid brownies for dessert. The rich, fudgy brownies with crunchy pecans and crunchy crust are a specialty of Noah's Ark in St. Charles, which caters the food served on the Spirit of St. Charles.

Each of the three rivers we navigated had its own charm. There was less traffic on the Missouri and a wonderful view of old St. Charles as we embarked and sailed down the river. St. Charles from the water looks like something Norman Rockwell might have painted. I am told that, coming back from the dinner cruises that are held on a regular basis, old St. Charles is even lovelier, with warm light spilling from its windows.

Sailing down the Missouri, one sees a few barges here and there, but mostly it is woodland until one reaches a stretch of mansions overlooking the water. They are beautiful, longtime residences of some of St. Louis' super rich, and a well-kept secret.

When the Missouri meets the Mississippi, one can see a line in the

IF YOU GO ON SPIRIT OF ST. CHARLES . . .

What It Costs: The current price is \$175 a person for two days. The price is subject to change. At present it includes two continental breakfasts, two mid-morning snacks, two lunches, two afternoon snacks and two dinners, plus hotel over one night and transportation round-trip to the hotel.

When It Sails: The next such cruise to be offered will be July 12-13. Departure is at 9 a.m. from the riverfront at Monroe Street in Old St. Charles. According to Captain David Flavan, trips may be arranged on the Missouri River year-round, but the Mississippi is closed by ice during some winter seasons.

Helpful Hints: Dress is casual, but remember that it is cooler on the water at night, so you may want to bring a jacket. Take some reading material and playing cards, as these are not available on the boat. There is a ship-to-shore phone in the event of emergency.

General Information: The cruises generally include entertainment, which may change from cruise to cruise. The boat is available for private charter and also has regularly scheduled cruises from April through October. For more information, call Anne Corkery at 946-1000 or (800) 332-3448.

water where the brown river meets the gray. It is the custom to make a wish and throw a penny in for its fulfillment. I don't think this originated with the Indians, exactly, but may be a relatively new custom invented on the spot by the imaginative staff of the Spirit of St. Charles. I made several wishes; I'll let you know if any of them comes true.

According to Anne Corkery, who pretty much books and runs the Spirit of St. Charles, there is a lot of interest in chartering the boat, particularly by those who want to see by water the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri. At least one wedding is being planned to take place aboard the Spirit in exactly this spot.

The Mississippi is bustling with barge traffic, and its banks are lined with industry. According to Cap'n David Flavan, when the price of fuel oil goes up, barge traffic increases because shipping by water becomes less expensive than shipping over land.

The barge men are friendly, calling back and forth over short-wave

radios with other barge men, giving a blast of their horns as they pass, cooperating with pleasure craft and other barges on the river.

On the Mississippi at Alton is the existing lock and dam, and navigating it calls for some considerable skill on the part of the captain. First, through radio contact, the captain finds out how backed up the barges and boats are awaiting their turn through the lock. If there is a long line, and often there is, he slows his speed approaching the lock. Once in line, the Spirit awaits its turn to slowly enter the lock, wait for the gate to close behind it and the lock to fill up with water to lift the boat to the upstream level (going downstream, the water level is lowered), and then the lock on the opposite end opens to release the boat. It's fun to watch.

It is also the custom of the Spirit of St. Charles to send a lunch out to the man working the locks, complete with a packet of good brownies. The lockmaster hopped into a little golf-cart kind of thing and rode over to

collect his hospitality. There is no time for him to board the boat; the foil-wrapped lunch is handed over the side.

The Mississippi and Illinois above Alton may be the most beautiful stretch of the trip, passing under high bluffs. It was sad to see that the ancient Indian painting of the Piassa bird on the bluff has apparently crumbled and has been replaced with a painted steel version of the historic painting. It's just not the same.

We docked at Grafton briefly (after the small boys gave their OK) and Flavan met the mayor of Grafton to discuss a permanent stop there. Little shops would be interesting for passengers to explore. We then moved on to Pere Marquette State Park to disembark for the trip to the Alton Ramada Inn and met the boat the next morning back at Grafton.

By the next morning, we were down to about a dozen or so passengers and crew, and the water level had dropped, making it impossible to put up a gangplank. Four strong members of the crew stood aboard the boat, which was a foot or so away from the bank, and shouted to our party of middle-aged women, "Jump!" So we did — and to our surprise made it.

After two days on the river, I felt as if I had had two weeks' vacation. It's that relaxing!

The boat can be chartered for private parties, and it offers regular brunch cruises on Sunday, gospel entertainment cruises on Mondays, dinner entertainment cruises through the week, and one-hour cruises in the afternoons. Chartering is expensive — it runs a base price of about \$2,200 a day, without food or entertainment. The boat has been chartered in the past to take state officials to Hermann and Jefferson City over a two- or three-day cruise, stopping at night at hotels or bed-and-breakfast places. If there is anywhere you want to go on water, the Spirit of St. Charles can take you there, says Cap'n David. It is licensed to carry 500; but 300 or so is just about the right size for longer trips.

The two-day, three-river trip will be repeated several times this summer. For times and prices, call Anne Corkery, (314) 946-1000 or (800) 332-3448. It would make a wonderful minivacation for those who want a little break from the rat race but can't take much time to get away.

River rats have more fun. Joan Dames was a guest of the Spirit of St. Charles.

TEMPERATURES

Table with columns for U.S., Foreign, and weather data including Avg. high, Avg. low, Days of prec. for various cities in June.

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