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Historic riverboat sinks in Ohio River

By Dan Majors



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

The riverboat Becky Thatcher lies mostly submerged in an Ohio River channel off Neville Island on Monday.

Jeffrey Levin can only imagine how his historic riverboat, the Becky Thatcher, met her end.

Moored in a channel off of Neville Island, the 220-foot stern-wheeler appears to have been a victim of the record snowfall that has buried Western Pennsylvania this month. The weight of the snow simply was too much for the 74-year-old boat, and sometime late last week the top two decks collapsed into the bottom deck, he said.

Mr. Levin, who moved the riverboat here from Marietta, Ohio, in October, received a call from the U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit early Saturday morning informing him that the Becky Thatcher was sinking.

"It's not completely submerged, but it's submerged enough that it can't be towed anymore," Mr. Levin said Monday in a phone interview from California, where he is on vacation. "The whole top of the boat has to be demolished.

"It's all rippled. The whole thing has been crushed. The top two floors caved in. There's no way to fix that. It's beyond repair. At least that's what I've been told. The structure itself has moved off of the hull at an angle and is taking on water. It's a total loss."

The Becky Thatcher had a long and lustrous history. Built in 1926 in Jefferson, Ind., as The Mississippi (III) by the Army Corps of Engineers, the stern-wheeler originally was used for inspecting and surveying rivers. Despite being a workboat, it was outfitted with comfortable accommodations for 65 passengers.

The boat was retired in 1961 and in 1963 was sold to Mark Twain Enterprises, which set it up as a restaurant and museum in Hannibal, Mo. In the late 1960s, it was towed to St. Louis, where it was renamed the Becky Thatcher and extensively restored.

In the years that followed, the boat was used as a floating dinner theater and a bar and restaurant. In 1975, it was purchased by a group of citizens in Marietta as part of that town's bicentennial celebration. Moored along Front Street on the Muskingum River, the first production performed aboard it by the Mid-Ohio Valley Players in 1976 was "Showboat."

The National Park Service entered the boat into the National Register of Historic Places in October 1983.

Then things started to fall apart. In 1984, the Becky Thatcher incurred heavy damage to its hull and sank during a spring flood. It was raised and repaired for the 1985 theater season.

But the boat, riverfront and landings had deteriorated, said Mr. Levin, a Nashville, Tenn., real estate developer who bought it as a pet project in 2005. Despite his best efforts, he said, it sat vacant.

Hoping to find a tenant and return the boat to its former grandeur, Mr. Levin had it towed to Neville Island.

"It was fine," he said. "I was getting ready to sign a listing agreement [Monday] because there was interest on the part of some people in the area who wanted to lease it. It was going to be moved to a new location [in the Pittsburgh area]. But then this happened over the weekend."

Mr. Levin said he did not employ a caretaker but did have someone who went past the boat once a week to check on it. He would not comment on whether the boat was insured.

Coast Guard officials have told him that he has to remove the boat.

"They are telling me that I have to get it out of the water, but I would expect them to say that. That's their job," he said. "Is it going to be a hazard an hour from now, a month from now? Well, maybe.

"So, obviously, I'm working diligently to get this resolved. I've got demolition companies and salvage companies and steel reclamation companies all looking at this. I'm doing what I can, but you have to give me time. [Monday was] the first weekday since this happened.

"You can't even raise it. The weight of it, the steel cables used to raise it probably would go right through the hull and tear it into pieces."

Mr. Levin said his greatest disappointment was that the boat was denied a chance to become part of Pittsburgh.

"I was pretty excited to have this there for the city," he said. "Now, it's just one big tragedy. It's really a sad story that's come to an end."

Dan Majors: dmajors@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1456.