

The Charleston Gazette

wvgazette.com

July 25, 2010

Regatta founder Nelson Jones dies at 52

By Sandy Wells



CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Nelson Jones, boat lover, river industry icon and founder of the Charleston Sternwheel Regatta, died Sunday afternoon at CAMC Memorial Hospital after an arduous war with cancer. He was 52.

He was president of Amherst Madison, a marine transportation, construction and repair company in Port Amherst.

He fell in love with boats and the river as a boy hanging out at Port Amherst, his father's river transportation business. "The only family vacation we ever took was on a boat," he said in a 1997 feature story. "I was fascinated by everything that happened on the river."

Born into an affluent Charleston family, he preferred blue-collar labor on the docks and drinking beer after work with deckhands to hobnobbing at the country club.

Tall, blonde and boyish with a contagious enthusiasm for pet projects, he had a Pied Piperish knack for organizing events and recruiting people to help make them happen.

At age 12, he mentioned the idea of a sternwheel race to his surrogate mother, Henny Cook, executive secretary to then Mayor John Hutchinson. Cook encouraged him to present the idea to the mayor. On Sept. 5, 1971, he corralled five sternwheelers and launched the regatta. Thousands lined the banks to watch the majestic sternwheelers parade up and down the river.

"When we started, it was a big thing to get five sternwheelers to agree to come," he said in the 1997 interview. "It took someone with a lot of time and persistence to make them to where they would come. They got tired of hearing from me."

He added river-oriented events and provided barges and other necessary equipment as the event grew into a mammoth week-long festival that attracted more than 30 sternwheelers and hundreds of recreational boats.

Citing philosophical differences with the commission and dwindling interest in boating events, he resigned from the Charleston Festival Commission in 1997. Two years later, he returned to the fold, but bowed out for good in 2001.

He embraced any opportunity to hit the river. Most at home at the helm of a towboat or paddlewheeler, he relished telling river tales and dispensing morsels of river history.

Like a kid collecting Tonka toys, he loved to buy boats, especially ones he could refurbish. Many were christened during festive gatherings at the levee. He named most of his boats for employees and several for community leaders.

He studied business management and marketing at what was then Morris Harvey College, but only for the sake of a college degree. "My love was the river," he said in the 1997 story. "I wanted to run a crane and pilot a boat, but I knew I had to get an education."

He was 24 when his father put him in charge of Madison Coal and Supply and challenged him to revive the struggling company. Today, it operates a fleet of more than 33 towboats.

In 2006, he helped establish a museum of river artifacts on the Amherst grounds. In cooperation with the Huntington District Waterways Assn., he also was a guiding light in the "Navigating River History" educational programs staged for schoolchildren in St. Albans for several years.

He is survived by his wife, Robyn Strickland; stepsons, Carl and Caleb Simpkins; father and stepmother, Charles T. and Mary Ellen Jones; sisters, Laura Ellen Pray and Jennifer Hill Jones; brother, C. Tandy Jones; stepdaughter, Heather Strickland; and grandsons, Nate and Aaron Ballard.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete on Sunday.

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