

## DEATH VOYAGE

March 13, 2006

Russell Dale Flick

And a dark cloud will rise up from the earth with a great sigh.  
And those this cloud touches will fall dead in its wake like wheat  
In the mouth of a mighty storm. The gods are indifferent to the fate  
Of strong youths and men. It will burst forth like a mighty vapor.

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The Cincinnati Public Landing, known then as 'Strader's Wharf,' was a buzz of activity with polished carriages and heavily laden freight wagons bumping over the gently sloping cobbles down to the big wooden wharfboat moored at the foot of Broadway. Crew members, some sporting headaches from leave ashore in notorious saloons or the infamous 'cribs' found in the lower reaches of the city, were reporting for duty. Passengers with luggage in hand gingerly picked their way avoiding the bustle of activity and droppings from livestock and horses. Tethered below, facing upstream, rode a magnificent steamboat gleaming white with round sidewheels. The boat's high black stacks emitted curls of smoke while steam hissed from her scape pipes indicating the engineers were slowly working the steam engines up for departure. Muscular black firemen were stoking the hungry banks of boilers while carefully watching the water levels in the brass gauges above their heads. An air of excitement could be felt among the throng. Lounging youths and old retired roustabouts took all in with interest and familiarity. In the boat's office the Chief Purser and his young assistants, known as 'mud clerks,' audited the pages of their ledger books for filing with the owner's ashore and the Custom House up town. It was shaping up as profitable trip. The traditional sailing hour of 5:00 PM was fast approaching.

On the hurricane deck above the uniformed captain surveyed all giving a hand signal to the mate who tugged the lanyard of the mighty bell ten times as a departure signal. Lines were cast followed by four short blasts of the steam whistle as the steamboat JOHN KILGOUR backed out into the river, maneuvered with bow facing downstream to the center of the Suspension Bridge, paused and signaled with a long, sonorous whistle. She was free and headed for New Orleans in the deep, sunny south--a voyage of 1,590 miles of some six to seven days with intermediate stops for passengers, freight and mail. For these boats were the DELTA AIRLINES, UPS and FED-X of their day. There were no dams in the river at that time other than the Louisville & Portland Canal around the Falls of the Ohio. The JOHN KILGOUR, built for the long run, was a luxury liner of her day. It was spring in Cincinnati, on or around April 12, 1873.

Aboard was John Schenck, age forty-five, successful Cincinnati pharmacist with a large emporium at the Southwest corner of Main and 9<sup>th</sup> St., along with a small retinue composed of young Thomas--called 'Tommy'--Cosby and James Dalton. The three men were booked in fine staterooms aboard known as 1<sup>st</sup> Cabin. Below on the main deck was a selected herd of prize Devon cattle settled and cribbed beyond the seething boilers for the trip to the impending fair in New Orleans that John Schenck had raised on his

expansive farm in northern Hamilton County near Glendale. This wasn't his first trip south on such business with other commercial relations in that city.

A member of the gentry, he was known to many of prominence in Cincinnati, owning a main residence on East Sycamore St. His wife was the daughter of steamboat Capt. Betts Halley of Betts-Longworth connections in the city. Their large farm residence just north at present day Schenck and Amity Roads was reminiscent of a Russian manor house of the middle nobility composed of barns, stables and dependencies. In 1863 Confederate Gen. John Hunt Morgan had occupied the Schenck farm seeking food and shelter for his company on the memorable raid bringing fear and havoc to the region. Morgan and Schenck's relations had been mutually respectful and cool.

Tommy, a capable young man and neighbor from a nearby farm, was brought along to tend the valuable Devon cattle during the long journey and would in time marry into the Schenck family. James Dalton may have been making the journey as company or on his own business matters in the Crescent City.

A long, expensive trip by boat was not to be taken lightly in those days. The Mark Twain view of steamboats is far from the romantic images we have from his pen, movies or musicals like 'Showboat.' These great vessels, built from the hull up totally of wood, were subject to the forces of wind, navigation skills and river conditions. One of the greatest dangers aboard was fire spawned by improperly stowed cargo, proximity to roaring boilers, sparks from the tall stacks or carelessness by passengers and crew. Boiler explosions or rupture of steam lines brought death and destruction. A cask or two of linseed oil and clean cotton wadding were carried by custom to treat burns and scalds. Groundings or collisions often resulted in hull and structural failure causing the vessel to fall in upon itself like a house of cards. Massive engines could rupture cylinder heads or a 'run through' sending steel components through decks, against the boilers or down through the hulls.

The beauty of the white and gold main cabin with glittering oil chandeliers, rich carpets and staterooms opening to the side were in Twain's words, "a long resplendent tunnel." Piped water was minimal with passenger cabins offering no bath facilities other than crockery wash basins and water brought on request. Toilet facilities were usually emptied privy style into the churning sidewheels and bathing was limited to communal tin or porcelain tubs. In each cabin was a prominent porcelain or tin chamber pot emptied in the river daily by black or Irish chambermaids. Immigrants, poor whites and blacks were carried as deck passengers on the cargo decks below to sleep where they could around the freight, boilers and animals with no privacy or creature comforts. Meals were served on tin or enamel plates with just a spoon. Vigorous men often worked off their passage by helping the crew load coal or cord wood from ashore to feed the seething boilers.

Meals for 1<sup>st</sup> Cabin were usually prepared in the boat's galley—called a 'cookhouse'—and served by squads of trained black men of skill and attentive manners. Refrigeration was minimal with ice an expensive commodity. Cleanliness of sculleries, plates, utensils, linens were below present standards. There were no laundry facilities aboard. Live fowl and other stock for meals were carried in coops or pens on the roof or

lower decks supplemented with purchases ashore by the Chief Steward. All waste and garbage would be cast over the side into the river. Drinking water was either dipped from the river or brought aboard in casks. Fire protection was limited to barrels or buckets of water here and there with fire hoses supplanted with a few fire extinguishers.

As the boat rumbled and churned its way south John and Tommy studied the passing cities, towns, landings and farm lands stretching back from the river carefully noting the crops and livestock. Letters home were penned and sent by upbound steamers heading for Cincinnati. Vegetation thickened and greened as northern spring progressed to near summer in climate, a phenomenon often recorded by travelers for generations. The Ohio entered the Mississippi at Cairo and hurried the Father of Waters on its way. Climatic and cultural differences of the deep South eight years after the Civil War could be sensed. To many aboard it was like entering an exotic and mysterious foreign land as cypress trees, tobacco, cotton and dark green fields of sugar cane passed entering the Upper and Lower Coasts of the Mississippi River.

The boat docked at Vicksburg for cord wood allowing John and Tommy to explore the city amazed at the luxuriant magnolia trees, flowers, Oleanders and hanging moss being collected for the manufacture of mattresses. "The ruin produced by the war there are many...houses are still standing with holes made from cannon balls...the caves in the hills where the people stayed during the bombardment. We gathered some relics and plucked Magnolia branches and other strange flowers. The sugar cane is up and there are many plantations...houses that cost no less than \$100,000 each with holdings costing up to \$300,000. This is a beautiful country. You must write me a letter and send it to the care of Lum & Co. Gravier St., New Orleans. This afternoon we will take the cattle out to the Fair Grounds," he penned to his son Master Charles Schenck from New Orleans where they arrived at one o'clock the morning of April 19, 1873. The cloud of death was near.

John and Tommy settled in Cassidy's Hotel at 38 Carondelet Street in New Orleans as their headquarters partaking of the 'European Plan.' The steamer JOHN KILGOUR departed, but they would sail on her again in May for home. Letters dated April 22 into May were posted to Cincinnati describing more of the river voyage down along with the sights, sounds and smells of the city and region focusing again on his interest in all things agricultural. Old friends and business contacts were met and established as this was a 'working trip.' Local markets were visited where vegetables and tropical fruits from Cuba, South America and Yucatan were recorded along with the many people from various lands arriving daily by sail and steamship. John noted that no cherries grew there and that Indians brought blackberries from the swamps back of the city. He penned one ominous comment, "It is getting warm and we will have a storm before too long." The gathering storm had brought strong winds stirring up dust clouds in the city streets.

On February 9, 1873, a fifty-six year old German sailor named Peter Thompson was unloading a Liverpool vessel docked near a sailing bark from Bremen close to the French Quarter when he suddenly fell ill and died. On February 18, Justice Coig, a French native and local butcher, suffered the same fate two miles from the first. Deadly Cholera Morbus had entered the city of New Orleans. Cases of the dreaded disease soon

appeared among crew and passengers on the steamboat BELLE LEE and the famed sidewheeler ROBT. E. LEE of racing fame against the Cincinnati built steamer NATCHEZ.

Numerous cases began to appear among citizens ashore with no documented connections to the arriving sailing vessels, steamboats and steamships along the docks. Like threads in a web, mounting cases were carefully plotted and mapped from the river back into the city as far as the present 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Wards of recent hurricane KATRINA disaster fame. As the weeks progressed Cholera arrived on steamers and flatboats from the Ouachita and Red Rivers. Authorities recorded the progression of the disease among known patients and victims; but with no knowledge of related cases from those jumping ship and blending into small towns and landings along the rivers. Reports filed at quarantine by arriving sailing vessels and steamships in U.S. ports from Europe documented deaths at sea with victims committed to the deep. Liverpool and north German ports were the most suspect with secondary reservoirs of infection from France. ‘Hindustan’ or Asiatic Cholera is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Vibrio*.

The United States had been visited by this bacteria beginning in 1836, 1848, 1861-1865 during the Civil War and again in 1873. Acute illness, dehydration and systemic damage began usually within five days of exposure with some onsets dramatically shorter. Today medications, hydration by intravenous and early inoculations are available. By 1873 the modes of transmission were being more fully understood.

The disease thrives in filth, contaminated water, food, personal belongings and even freight or cargo. Old timers termed it ‘Summer Complaint’ or ‘Acute flux.’ Warm, damp climates or changes in weather brought it on with a noted gradual decline as fall and winter approached. The ‘dying time’ was often from April to October. It could be haphazard with only one in a family or entire groups falling ill in cluster patterns. A number of entire families died together. It carried as many as six names but often just lumped under the term “Apparently Cholera.” Other opinions of the day offered that it wasn’t ‘Asiatic Cholera’ and not imported, but a spasmodic form. In other words, ‘endemic’ not ‘epidemic.’ Treatment of the day was hypodermic use of morphine, calomel and quinine along with “other domestic remedies.” Thousands afflicted weren’t so lucky. In time arriving steamers reported Cholera in upper Mississippi River areas among immigrants and farmers—especially those in Russian settlements. One report stated the disease was linked to, “...local poisons and filth magnified by unusual meteorological conditions.” A myth prevailed for a time that it was a disease of the lower levels of society or those of intemperate habits and living conditions. America’s dynamic growth, settlement and rise of industrial and commercial might lagged in its domestic and civil handling of sewage, garbage and water sources. Towns and cities were still served by open privies, drains and cisterns. Sewers flowed unchecked into creeks, streams and rivers. Vessels continued to dump directly into the streams they navigated. Railroads of the era had toilet facilities that dumped directly to the track beds below as they sped along only to drain away in pools near homes, tenements and farms. How many here can recall the prominent sign posted in lavatories of crack NEW YORK CENTRAL or PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD cars, “DON’T FLUSH WHILE TRAIN IS IN STATION?”

The climate of New Orleans, coupled with its compact urban patterns and high water table, was a prime breeding ground then and now. Cincinnati in time would experience its own similar problems in the lower reaches of the city by the river within blocks of Lytle Park. Men known as ‘honey dippers’ made their living by shoveling out privies to be hauled away in horse wagons.

Murat Halstead, editor of the COMMERCIAL, friend of Mark Twain and member of the Literary Club, had in his time a fight with every daily paper and editor in Cincinnati. One day there was a parade down 4<sup>th</sup> St. Halstead, walking behind the wheezing brass band with a friend, spied such a ‘honey wagon’ turning a corner just as it hit a bump sloshing some of its evil smelling contents on the street. He paused dramatically, pointed and quipped, “Look, there goes another load of fresh copy for the morning ENQUIRER.”

Contributing meteorological conditions were evident in New Orleans. The weather had been cool and dry with much wind and dust blowing through the streets. Warm weather, high humidity and heavy rain appeared filling ditches, gutters, privies and areas around structures with a poisonous brew. John Schenck’s letters home are silent on any news of the spreading Cholera epidemic around him as he tended to the Devon cattle at the Fair, business matters and pleasures of the southern city he so admired. Local doctors and health officials rang the alarm with plans to quell the spreading infection via disinfection and fumigation of vessels, boarding houses, hotel rooms and residences of victims. Airing, scrubbing, sulfur candles, acid and the burning of bedding, clothing and personal items were employed. Water was piped to certain quarters of the city from the river. Local police were under the State Militia liable to be recalled in times of public emergency. This was not done and later reports indicated the spread of Cholera could have been stemmed. Sound familiar? One sad note was that blacks suffered most from the spread of the infection due to proximity of the river, working and living conditions or other “imprudent habits.” White victims of similar class were also categorized. True but not true, as we shall see.

May arrived and time to prepare for the voyage to Cincinnati: home, pharmacy, farm and large family. The big Fair had gone well with the transaction of business and the sale of the Devon cattle. John Schenck, Tommy Cosby and James Dalton closed their affairs in the ready. The recently arrived sidewheel JOHN KILGOUR was loading at the wharf for another profitable trip north. No letters from Schenck survive with the precise date of departure. The fate of the KILGOUR’s official log is unknown. It is assumed they sailed on or around May 13, 1873. Before departure they toured the city, bid farewell to business associates and generally enjoying their last hours. John paused in the French Market to savor various delectable fruits as they promenaded the streets in the direction of the boat landing.

The Mississippi River was running high that spring slowing the progress north against the muddy current filled with floating logs and drift. The pilots would have been unusually alert while down below the firemen fed the KILGOUR’s five boilers with a mixture of nut coal and wood for extra steam. Her engines thundered and hissed back and forth on their steel slides rolling the massive 32 ft. paddlewheels as her superstructure vibrated with each stroke. The KILGOUR, built in Cincinnati 1864, was 360 ft. long and had seen Civil War service carrying food supplies for the Union Army in

Tennessee. Her owner was Cincinnati businessman John Kilgour in partnership with other prominent investors.

John Schenck, booked in 1<sup>st</sup> Cabin, had boarded complaining of not feeling well. After sailing he fell critically ill with the full symptoms of Cholera. He was the first but not the last as the infection soon manifested among the poorer passengers and immigrants on the lower main deck. Confined to his cabin, John sank deep into distress with symptoms typically noted in near Gothic prose as, “Evacuations of the intestines and stomach, muscular spasms, full mental powers, whitish-yellow tongue, eyes wide open to an ominous and unavoidable danger, calling for water, water, ice water, when death, a peaceful death would end their suffering and the phenomenon of life. The most lamentable spectacle the imagination can possibly conceive.” He died “May 15<sup>th</sup> 1873 at fifteen minutes before 3 o’clock PM—35 miles above Vicksburg aboard the Str. JOHN KILGOUR on the Mississippi River, Captain Albert Stein, Master.” We can only speculate on the state of affairs aboard the steamer and the thoughts that ran through Capt. Stein holding total responsibility for a large vessel, valuable cargo, passengers and crew of several hundred souls. There are no secrets aboard a vessel with the dire news soon spreading from bow to stern.

The KILGOUR docked in Greenville, Tennessee, where Schenck’s body was removed to be carefully embalmed and fumigated, sealed in a steel coffin and loaded aboard a railroad train for the trip back to Cincinnati. His clothing, bedding and other personal possessions could have been burned in the boat’s boilers, tossed over the side or disposed of in town. Chambermaids, deck crew and cabin boys were ordered to work airing, fumigating and scrubbing his cabin and the entire vessel. Telegraph keys clicked the news to Cincinnati as young Cosby and Dalton rattled and jerked their way home by rail in vigil. John’s body was promptly buried from the hearse upon arrival in plot 10 Spring Grove Cemetery. He left his beloved wife Amelia, ten children, pharmacy, two homes and prosperous farm. None of the family or church attendees fell ill. His status gave the usual expanded obituary wide audience in local papers.

The KILGOUR churned north with cases of Cholera breaking out on the cargo decks. Immigrants and those of the ‘lower levels’ would have been quickly buried along the river shore with little to no ceremony other than a hasty bag of lime tossed in and quickly covered. On May 18<sup>th</sup> the boat reached Paducah, Kentucky, where two more of the lower deck sickened. The boat’s captain and officers refused any news or cooperation on the state of affairs when questioned by local authorities. Two more died as the boat reached Shawneetown, Ill. The toll mounted to nearly a dozen known victims. Passengers, mail and cargo were discharged with visitors in each port being permitted to board and leave freely on business. While in Paducah, John Baldwin, age twenty-one, came aboard as a shipping clerk to arrange a tobacco contract south on the next voyage. Described as, “unmarried, sober, but a free liver...consuming beer,” he was violently stricken the next day dying after an eight hour illness. The dark web of death spread out from the river in all directions. The same conditions began to appear among railroad passengers and workers from the LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD terminals and connecting lines from the south.

Doctors and officials were waiting as the KILGOUR slid into Cincinnati on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. All of the deck passengers had departed the boat in Louisville along with some in 1<sup>st</sup> cabin. Capt. Stein and officers met with a delegation of passengers upon arrival declaring no knowledge of Cholera cases being confirmed. He was a company man out and out. The same day of arrival a meeting was held where John Schenck's 'Last Dying Declaration' was read and signed aboard the boat by Capt. Albert Stein, Thomas Cosby and James Dalton who had returned earlier by train. It would be overly dramatic to speculate on the atmosphere during the signing and witnessing of the will between the men aboard the boat. Yet, we call upon our sense of charity and humanity to understand the situation Capt. Stein was thrust during those days. He had weathered a number of disasters and close calls in his career as one of Cincinnati's most respected boat officers. Cases of Cholera began to surface in Cincinnati near the river by May 26<sup>th</sup> with strident statements that they were not linked to the arrival of the boat. Civic and corporate interests broke out big guns for damage control. Other cases appeared on Longworth St. and in "high and healthy neighborhoods."

Health workers carefully plotted each case within feet, yards and miles of the wharf. Soon cases spread up the valley to St. Bernard, Carthage and as far north as Oxford, Ohio. It will never be known how many sickened and died over prior to and in coming months with no reports being filed. Sanitary measures and the coming of cold weather in the fall dampened down the contagion but not before it had spread up the Ohio Valley and into the hinterlands. The 'dark cloud' simply disappeared.

## EPILOGUE

But what happened to the Str. JOHN KILGOUR? After nine years of service she was quietly retired in 1874 and broken up at a local shipyard. No steamer ever carried that name again. Capt. Albert Stein, an old veteran and tycoon in his own right dating to the 1850s, took command of the new Str. CHARLES MORGAN. It was his last command before retirement.

The inspiration for this paper came from the pen of our sage Club Historian John Diehl in his classic 1983 study of Literarian Dr. Lawrence Carr who retraced nearly the same route during the horror of Yellow Fever aboard the steamboat JOHN PORTER in 1878. A classic tale worthy of a PBS miniseries.

May, 2005, I was invited by the present Schenck family, gathered from near and far, to a large family dinner at the Iron Horse Inn on Village Square in present day Glendale, Ohio, to informally speak on my interest and research in the story of their ancestor. We adjourned several blocks away for the fine musical drama titled 'The Rebels Are Coming' focusing on John and Amelia Schenck's occupation by Gen. John Hunt Morgan in 1863.

My own family involvement in the steamboat business dating back to the 1880s had steeped me in the history and experiences of family members aboard various vessels told to the sound of creaking rocking chairs in front of a winter fireplace. But there is more.

In 1848 Cholera came via river steamboats and vessels on the Great Lakes. Branches of my family lived within a few miles of the river in southern Ohio possessing a

prosperous farm, wood lots and saw mills used in building boats, covered bridges, homes and barns. The heat of summer arrived. The dark cloud fell bringing down nine year old Mary Ellen Kennedy's parents and four brothers literally in their tracks. Fear kept neighbors from approaching or rendering any assistance. Alone and frightened the child walked for miles down the dirt road until noticed by a local country doctor. Hearing her story he isolated her in his barn, burned her clothes, lathered her with sheep dip and waited. She was never stricken and later returned to extended family members in nearby Hamersville, Ohio. Each family generation since then has christened a daughter in her honor.

My great-grandfather, Martin Van Buren Flick, married Mary Ellen Kennedy in 1858. During the Civil War he served as an artilleryman and was captured by the Confederates with confinement for months in the infamous Andersonville Prison. Like so many he contracted Cholera with a near miraculous recovery. Released and forwarded back to Ohio in 1865, he never applied for his war benefits until 1912, the year of his death. Carried in his Civil War soldier's kit was a small Bible with the following inscribed in his own clear, strong script.

“Preserve me, Oh, Lord, for in thee I have put my trust.  
Hear thee right, Oh, Lord, consider my complaint and  
Harken to my prayer that goeth not out of frightened lips.  
Oh, hold up my goings in thy path, that my footsteps slip not.”

END

#### SOURCES AND NOTES

1. Billings, Dr. John Shaw, THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC OF 1873 In The UNITED STATES. Document No. 95, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., 1875. Government Printing Office, 1025 Pages. \*Incredibly detailed report on Cholera and its manifestations/progressions in the United States referencing first appearances in the 1830s with notes referencing Asia, Europe. Maps, charts, graphs, statistics, case studies.
2. Flick family papers, letters, history, involvement in steamboat navigation. Other memories transmitted in conversation.
3. Schenck family letters, papers, photographs, interviews. History from early arrival to the American Colonies, references to Europe. John Schenck's letters from New Orleans and his Last Will And Testament, May 23, 1873.
4. Way, Capt. Frederick, WAY'S PACKET DIRECTORY, 1848-1983, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 1983, Sons & Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen, 620 Pgs. History of steamboats, biographies of owners, captains, crew, construction, trade routes, anecdotes.

5. Literary Club of Cincinnati, selected papers on Murat Halstead [Personal recollections.]. On file in Club Library.

Text of letters, quotes and terms of the day were preserved as closely as possible in this narrative.