

A Caddo Lake Tragedy: The Mittie Stephens Disaster

by Scott Sosebee

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(Sep 26, 2022) One of the most notable technological achievements of the early nineteenth century was the invention of the “steamboat” by Robert Fulton in 1807. Fulton solved the problem of how to harness steam power to drive boats upstream against a river’s current, thus revolutionizing transportation in the world. Fulton made steamboats possible, but he did not make them safe for travel. The use of steam as a power source was dangerous: they were subject to excess pressure that caused boilers to explode, thus wreaking havoc across the deck of a ship. Steamboats were also subject to fire and many a vessel burned while sailing along on a current. Just such an incident struck the side-paddle wheeler Mittie Stephens on Caddo Lake in 1869.

The Mittie Stephens began her life as a Union naval transport vessel during the Civil War. It became part of Admiral David Porter’s fleet in Louisiana in 1863 and took part in the failed Shreveport campaign in that year. The end of that operation made the Mittie expendable, so the U.S. government sold it to a private venture that began using it first on the Missouri River from St. Louis into Iowa and Nebraska, and then on a route from New Orleans to the Bayou Sarah Farms north of the city. She plied that route until 1866 when the company deployed the boat on the New Orleans-Red River route. At that time, the “great log raft” had not been cleared, so the upper part of that navigation took the Mittie to Jefferson, Texas via Caddo Lake. Jefferson was a bustling port at that time as through 1872 over two hundred steamboats stopped at Jefferson’s docks.

Jefferson was founded in the early 1840s by Allen Urquhart and Daniel Alley, who began their efforts independent of each other. Urquhart laid his tracts out along Big Cypress Creek, with all his streets running at right angles to the bayou. Alley, on the other hand plotted all his town sites along points of the compass, so where the two founders’ plans intersected the town took on a distinctive V-shape, which the central core of

Jefferson retains to this day. The town grew quickly, particularly after the town cleared Big Cypress Creek for navigation and it became a terminus for the Red River trade from New Orleans. Steamboats like the Mittie Stephens transported a myriad of goods first up the Mississippi out of New Orleans, then up the Red River, then across Caddo Lake to Cypress Creek, then to the docks at Jefferson. There, they loaded mostly cotton but some other crops for the trip back to New Orleans and then onto ships that would head out into the Gulf of Mexico and then to the rest of the world. Jefferson, by the 1850s, had become Texas' leading inland port—and the second leading port of any kind in the state as only Galveston topped it. Also, by the 1860s, Jefferson was the fifth largest city in Texas and the leading urban area in Northeast Texas.

The Mittie steamed out of New Orleans with Jefferson as the planned end of her trip on February 5, 1869. It was a journey the side-wheel steamer had made often. The boat had 107 passengers on board along with a large consignment of “government stores” a \$30,000 cache of paper money and specie as the payroll for Union Reconstruction troops in East Texas, and 274 bales of hay stacked all over its decks. The hay was piled four tiers deep along the boiler deck, a dangerous potential for ignition that somehow had escaped the attention of captain and crew. The boat entered Caddo Lake on February 11, stopped briefly at Mooringsport, Louisiana, and then steamed on across the lake toward Big Cypress Creek. The boat's stewards served dinner at 7:00 P.M. and after 9:00 P.M. the passengers had drifted from the saloon toward their cabins to sleep for the night before they docked in Jefferson.

The boat never made it. Just after midnight, February 12, a crew member smelled smoke and saw flames. A breeze had blown a spark to the hay from the torch baskets that served as the lights on the bow of the boat. The resulting fire burned quickly and consumed all the hay on the decks and then set the boat afire. There was no way to contain the flames as they engulfed the entire vessel. The captain made an abrupt turn to steer the ship directly to the shore but grounded the bow in three feet of water before he could make it. The problem was the fire continued to rage in the bow and the forward part of the ship, which kept the passengers from jumping into the water where it was shallow and walking ashore. The stern and midships area, however, was in deep water. Passengers had to jump off into the deep channel and try to swim, but they were caught, then, in another action. The captain, in a desperate attempt to reach the shore, kept the paddlewheels running, trying to free the Mittie from its grounding. The fast-rotating wheels, though, began to pull many of the people who had jumped ship and struggling in the water into the steel and wooden wheels. The action of the paddle killed most of those who had jumped. Sixty-one people perished, either from drowning, the trauma of the wheels, or burning to death.

The Mittie Stephens had come to the end of her life. The paddle-wheeler burned wholly to the water line. The liner company sent a crew up to salvage the ship's bell, boiler, and machinery. Visitors to the shore—just outside of Uncertain, Texas—could see what was left of the steamship above the water until the 1930s. During the 1980s, marine archaeologists from Texas A&M University located what was left of the Mittie Stephens in the depths of the water where it had eventually drifted, just on the Louisiana side of Caddo Lake. And Jefferson? The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleared the “Great Log Raft” from the Red River in 1873, which made the upper reaches of the river navigable. This also lowered the level of Big Cypress, which made the trip to Jefferson almost impossible. The riverboat traffic dried up, and the city's prominence declined precipitously, a tragedy likely equal to the disaster of the Mittie Stephens.

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