

Interview with Capt. William F. Thornton 8/7/86
River Ridge Road
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Present: R. Dodds

Capt. Thornton has spent a lifetime at sea, starting on Chesapeake Bay steamboats and moving on to deep-sea ships. Capt. Thornton retired 19 years ago. He joined the Eastern Shore in November 1919 as lookoutsman, earning \$25 a month. He moved up to become a quartermaster at \$70 a month. He later left the boat to spend a winter dredging for oysters. He then joined the steamboat Three Rivers when she was transferred to the BC&A Line. He stayed on her until she burned on the night of July 5, 1924. After that he joined the Virginia and stayed with her until November 1924. He then went 'deep-sea. During his time on Bay boats he earned 10 days a year vacation. But you had to work 365 days before you received the 10 days.

The manuscript referred to in the conversation are called, "Recollections of Mr. Vaughan C. Mumford-Former Steamboat Quartermaster" and are located in the Library Vertical File. and Accession File 68-37. Mumford was a contemporary of Thornton.

The Virginia was built in 1903 for the Wicomico River service to Salisbury. In 1924 she was shifted to the Crisfield route which she served until 1932. She was then converted into a barge.

The Eastern Shore was built in 1883 and ran regularly until 1937. She had a reputation for reliability and could carry a large amount of freight. In 1894 she was bought by the BC&A Line. The steamboat ran to Crisfield and the Lower Eastern Shore. She was partially scrapped in 1948 and burned in 1949.

The Three Rivers was a sidewheeler built in 1910 and belonged to the Maryland, Delaware and Virginia Line. She was placed on the Potomac River run. In 1923 the company was taken over by POnn RR and put on the Crisfield run. On July 5, 1924 she burned while bound from Crisfield; 10 lives were lost. Her hull was used as a barge and was dismantled in 1958

All of the above information was taken from Burgess and Wood, Steamboats Out of Baltimore.

Capt. Thornton's favorite ship was the Three Rivers. He was ready to go on watch when the boat caught fire on July 5, 1924. He

believed the fire was caused by boys letting off fireworks in the cabin-roman candles-that ignited a linen locker. These were Sun newsboys that had been brought to Crisfield for July 4. Ten people were lost. Thornton jumped into the water from the boat and was picked up. He lost his possessions; the company gave the crew \$100 each as re-imbusement.

Capt. Thornton started as a lookoutsman. Expected to stand watch from sunset to sunrise in the bow. In the cold weather often allowed on the bridge. This is how a lookoutsman advanced, by taking a spell at the wheel while on the bridge and becoming proficient as a quartermaster. The lookoutsman had a berth in the forward part of the ship.

The two quartermasters shared a cabin behind the wheelhouse and worked 6 hours on and six off - 12 hours out of 24 hours.

Officers ate meals in the saloon, at a separate table from the passengers. The captain sat with the passengers.

Never had any trouble with the black crew. Crew were hired by picking up seamen from the nearby streets. There were always plenty looking for work. There was no hiring hall.

Like Mumford, Capt. Thornton had to help tag livestock as they came aboard so that they could be identified later. As well as livestock they often carried strawberries, canned goods. On the Crisfield run they took freight for as far as Cape Charles and Salisbury; would be transfered to train.

On the Crisfield run they sailed Sunday evenings, and arrived Crisfield early AM. Then went down to other stops in the south and came back to Crisfield before heading for Balto.

Capt. Thornton often spelled people on other boats. He served on the relief steamer for the Tolchester run. Would stand by off Tolchester and take any people that could not get on the regular steamboat; was considered good duty.

The crewmen would gamble quite a bit. When out of money they would borrow from the mate at 2 to 1. At patday this would be deducted from their pay by the purser.

When Capt, Thornton left Bay boats he had his pilots license. It would stand him in good stead later. Later went on to get his master's license.