

This story is reprinted from Dean Gabbert's collection of river stories, Brown-Water Boating.

Ice-bound towboats

Chapter 13

At a distance, they resemble tall gray ghosts, locked in an arctic wasteland. There are eight of them, proud Mississippi River towboats that gambled on the December weather of 1983 and lost.

Together with nearly 100 grain and chemical barges, the boats are caught in an icy prison at Nauvoo, Illinois, and it could be spring before they are released. Nauvoo is 197 miles north of St. Louis, the destination of most of these vessels when freak ice conditions forced them to tie up. Ironically, most of them are Lower Mississippi boats whose crews have never before tasted the fury of a Midwest winter. They are clustered along a half-mile stretch of river between the Colusa Elevator Co. terminal and Nauvoo Upper light at Mile 377.2.

Eugene Banta, captain of the *George W. Banta*, is philosophical about his predicament. "We're here and there isn't much we can do about it," he said in an easy Louisiana drawl. "I figure it would take at least a week and a half of 40-degree weather to get us out of here."

Based in Baton Rouge, the *George W. Banta* runs in tandem with a sister boat, the *Davey Crockett*. The *Crockett* is a "slave" boat operated from the *Banta's* pilothouse and together they were downbound with six empty liquid fertilizer barges when they ran out of river in liquid form. A few yards downstream, lying close along the bank, is the *Frank Stegbauer* with three barn-sized anhydrous ammonia barges. Next to the *Davey Crockett* is the *Baxter Southern*. Both the *Stegbauer* and *Southern* are Southern Towing Co. boats, based in Caruthersville, Missouri. A short distance upstream are two Valley Line boats, the *Washington* and the *L. J. Sullivan*; and two Peavey Grain Co. boats, the *Frank H. Peavey* and the *Frank T. Heffelfinger*. Five of these boats are surrounded by 75 standard barges loaded with corn bound for foreign markets.

Figuring an average of 55,000 bushels per barge, this is a total of 4,125,000 bushels of corn with a value exceeding \$13 million. Don Griffiths, who heads the Colusa

Elevator Co., said the early freeze was a factor in higher corn prices. The barges are firmly locked in the ice, but the towboats keep themselves free by periodically running their engines. "You've got to keep the ice out of the wheel and rudders," Banta explained.

Traditionally, Upper Mississippi towboats play the weather game each December, timing their activities so they can move as many commodities as possible before making a last-minute run south ahead of the freeze. But this year they couldn't predict the early sub-zero weather and some unusual problems which developed at Lock 19 at Keokuk, Iowa and Lock 25 at Winfield, Missouri.

A buildup of slush ice at the Keokuk Lock and Dam, 12 miles below Nauvoo, clogged a water inlet pipe and threatened to cut off the water supply to the city of Keokuk. The Army Corps of Engineers closed the facility temporarily and when locking resumed, it was limited to only a few barges at a time. In the meantime, the ice piled up and so did the southbound river traffic.

On December 18 an upper guidewall at Lock 25 suddenly collapsed, cutting off the escape route for a large number of towboats between Keokuk and St. Louis. At least 20 vessels are trapped in the Keokuk pool, a 46-mile stretch of river from Lock 19 to Lock 18 at Gladstone, Illinois. An even greater number are stranded in the Lock 25 pool.

The *Banta's* crew members began a marathon battle against the weather when they discharged 22,000 tons of cargo in St. Paul and headed downriver on Nov. 27. "We had ice problems all the way," Capt. Banta said as he thumbed through the boat's log. Twice they were halted by snowstorms and once by high winds. They lost two days at Lock and Dam 14 at LeClaire, Iowa, and because of the ice buildup, it took them four days to get through Lock and Dam 16 at Muscatine, Iowa. They lost two more days at Lock and Dam 18 and on December 17, with the thermometer on the far side of zero, they called it quits. It had taken them 20 days to travel 462 frigid miles.

Since their arrival at Nauvoo, Banta estimates he's spent \$2,000 on kerosene heaters, electric heaters, tarpaulins, heat tapes and insulation. "We've still got broken pipes," he said. "These boats just weren't made for this kind of weather."

Among other things, the *Banta* ran out of potable water. But Nauvoo Mayor Fred Haas quickly solved that problem by delivering a load in his stainless steel milk tanker. "I've never met such hospitable, warm-hearted people," Banta said. "Whatever we need, they're ready to help."

Meanwhile, the stranded towboats face heavy down-time costs, including diesel fuel, daily barge fees, food and payroll. The *Banta* fires up her engines at regular intervals, operating them from four to six hours per day. Six of her crew members have

been sent home, leaving only the captain, engineer John Beard and three deckhands: Buddy Hernandez, Louis Lange and Dave Sharp. The other boats also have skeleton crews and Banta laughs when he says not one of them has a cook. "Everybody here pitches in on the cooking," he said. "Everybody but me, that is. The only thing I can cook is jambalaya."

Banta, 35, makes his home in Napoleonville, Louisiana. He's worked on the same boat, off and on, for 15 years and he's held a pilot's license since 1970. He and his wife, Joy, who marked her birthday on Jan. 2, are the parents of three daughters, ages 13, eight and two. He talks to them all during twice-weekly telephone calls.

An uncomplaining riverman, Banta has learned to take things as they come, including spending the holidays on an icebound towboat. "I'm just thankful I have the job," he said.