FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Live Steam: Paddlewheel Steamboats on the Mississippi System
Jon Kral
Long Wind Publishing
978-1-892695-00-0
(September 30, 2001)

When Mark Twain was spinning his tales of life on the mighty Mississippi, steamboat travel was high-tech and high class. Fifty to sixty vessels a day would land at the thriving New Orleans docks, ferrying passengers and cargo from the river mouth to the young nation's interior and back again. A century and a half later, the steamboat is but a relic, a quaint tourist attraction. Only six still rumble along the Mississippi and its major tributaries, offering adventurous riders a glimpse of an era that has long receded into history.

Which makes the title of this photographic collection, at first glance, appear somewhat misleading: How could a form of transportation that is all but dead be described as "live"? Yet it quickly becomes apparent that Kral is conveying a deeper message. The veteran photojournalist, a staff photographer with the Miami Herald for the last sixteen years, has directed his lens beyond the postcard exteriors and discovered a youthful vibrancy and zest in these stately grand dames.

Aside from a short introduction by Publisher Jon Ward, this volume is devoted entirely to photographs. Yes, there are shots an amateur might have chosen, such as fireworks bursting in a darkened sky over the Delta Queen during a regatta at Charleston, S.C. (although a nonprofessional would never have captured the scene so well). Kral, however, displays an artist's eye as he selects everyday, behind-the-scenes happenings to illustrate life aboard a river ship. A fireman stands deep in the bowels of the Mississippi Queen, an earnest look on his face as he generates steam for the engines. A dining room captain delicately folds cloth napkins. A saxophonist rehearses alone inside his cramped quarters. A passenger plays a game of solitaire beneath a wall portrait of, yes, Mr. Twain himself.

Kral is a master craftsman, and this photographic essay does justice to the courageous labors of those who believe the steamboat is too precious to fade into extinction. “Her steam touches your senses,” Captain Mike Fitzgerald says of the Belle of Louisville. “She huffs and puffs and…cradles her passengers and connects them to centuries past.” Tom Sawyer would surely understand.

John Flesher