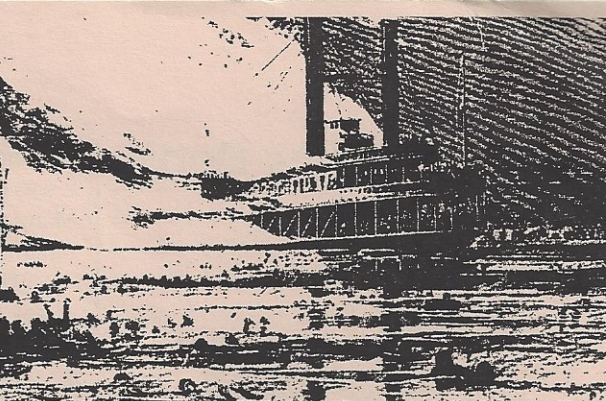


# the SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

SPRING 2009

## Knoxville Reunion details are set - See you all soon!

-by Norman Shaw

Just a short note to say that everything seems to be coming together well for the 22nd Sultana Reunion in Knoxville, TN, on April 24th and 25th. 2009

The theme for Friday evening at Mt. Olive Baptist Church at 2500 Maryville Pike will be Civil War music. There will be ample singing and instrument playing for all! As an additional attraction, Alan Huffman will give a short talk about his new book, "Sultana, Surviving the Civil War, Prison, and The Worst Maritime Disaster in American History" (see Pam's review, next page). Books will be made available for purchase at the church for \$26.95 plus tax by Borders Books. However, if you want to buy a copy in advance and bring it with you, Amazon.com is selling them for \$17.81 plus shipping (or no shipping cost if your order is over \$25.00). Alan will be glad to sign all copies.

I feel everyone will really enjoy the CW bus tour of Knoxville on Saturday. Our main stops will be at our well-preserved Ft. Dickerson which overlooks Knoxville;

the Confederate Cemetery; the National Cemetery, which started as a burial site for the CW Union dead (yes, our city has a cemetery representing both sides and a monument to each); and the Univ. of Tennessee's McClung Museum which features a movie on the CW action in Knoxville plus a fantastic permanent display. Our last stop will be at the Sultana monument.

I was surprised to find out recently that one of our Sultana descendants, Judie Warren, also had an ancestor who fought in Knoxville with the Union army. She sent me information on Col. Loren L. Comstock of the 17th Mich. Inf. who was killed by a sniper's bullet. One of the forts defending Knoxville was named after him. I would be happy to receive similar information if you have anything to send me. We will drive by the location where Ft. Comstock once stood.

We will conclude our reunion, as usual, with the banquet Saturday night at the Courtyard Motel. Expect something to keep the evening

lively. As usual, we will conclude with a brief ceremony to remember the soldiers and civilians on the Sultana.

Be sure to contact me if I can be of assistance in any way. Remember to pay in advance for the bus tour (\$10.00) and the banquet (\$18.34, includes tax and gratuity). Mail to me at P. O. Box 30372, Knoxville, TN, 37930. My email is: shawclan4@bellsouth.net

### Reunion Financial Report

Prior balance after Athens, AL (2007)  
\$58.64  
2008 Franklin, TN, Reunion

#### Deposits:

Bus Tour	\$826.50
Donation (Sam Huffman)	50.00
"Loss of Sultana" Sales	60.00
Pass-the-hat collection	306.00
	+ \$1,242.50

#### Expenses:

Bus rental	\$581.00
Van rental	109.00
Tour guide (Eric Jacobson)	200.00
U.T. Press (Sultana books)	84.00
Refund	50.00
Gratuities:	
Bus driver	30.00
Cafe servers	30.00
Lunch for tour drivers & guides	32.00
	(\$1,116.00)

**Net Balance**  
+ \$185.14



## Excellent New Book on the Sultana Disaster Now Available

*"At the time of their enlistment the (U.S. military) recruits were required to fill out a questionnaire about their physical and mental health. One question was whether they had ever experienced 'the horrors,' which is something akin to panic attacks. (Sultana survivors) Tolbert and Maddox both answered no, but in hindsight a more accurate answer might have been, 'not yet.'"* -From *Sultana: Surviving the Worst Marine Disaster in American History* by Alan Huffman.

A review that I read of this book portends nothing unusual: This is an account of the events leading up to, including, and the aftermath of the "greatest Marine disaster in American history, the loss of the Sultana." But, in fact, the book is extraordinary; not only is it well put together, but it is also illuminating.

I have read nearly every book\* and article written on the subject and have found that many tend to simply repeat known information. Not so Huffman's book. Not only does he know how it all unfolded, but he also shows remarkable and compelling insight into those long ago events and actions of the men (and women) who lived through them.

Huffman follows three Indiana men as they enlist, face day-to-day army privations, experience battles, endure the horrors of Andersonville and Cahaba prisons, survive the Sultana disaster, then make their way back to their respective homes. When Romulus Tolbert and John Maddox quietly resumed their lives as farmers near Madison, Indiana, they spoke little and wrote nothing (aside from pension depositions) of their experiences. On the other hand, J. Walter Elliott, also from the Madison area, wrote and spoke constantly of his trials, becoming one of those who seemingly felt defined by what he had experienced in the war.

The author also delves into the mechanics of survival. Why did some survive while others died? The answer

is complex and not as easy as saying that it was survival of the physically fittest. Many strong men died in prison or on the Sultana.

Huffman writes: "Survival is not an achievement. It is a process, and it is impossible to know, at any given moment, where you are in that process....Even before they boarded the boat, Tolbert and most of the other recently paroled prisoners had burned through their reserves of physical, mental, and emotional calories in what was essentially a phased experiment in human survival, the results of which would not be revealed for decades, until the last of them lay on their deathbeds as old men. By the time the Sultana went down, they had endured pretty much everything the world can throw at you: Violence, deprivations, sickness, humiliation, loss of friends, betrayal by their own country and in some cases, their own countrymen. All that was left was the specter of a sudden and complete disaster, and soon that came, too....Under the circumstances, their survival must have come as something of a surprise, and even after they made it to shore it would be hard to breathe a sigh of relief."

This is a really good book and I encourage everyone to buy it. We have the good fortune of being able to meet author Alan Huffman at our Knoxville reunion. He will answer your questions as well as sell and autograph his book. The price is \$26.95, check or cash only. For those of you not attending the reunion, buy it online at Amazon.com, or at your local bookstore.

-Pam Newhouse, Editor

*\* I am assuming that you all own and have read the two "bibles" of the Sultana disaster: Jerry O. Potter's *The Sultana Tragedy* (1992) and Gene E. Salecker's *Disaster on the Mississippi* (1996). Almost all of what we know about this event and the passengers on board comes from these two books and we are forever indebted to Jerry and Gene for their tremendous research of and extensive interest in the Sultana and descendants. If you don't own these books, you must.*

## "The most pitiable cries that ever reached my ears....."

*Related by Sgt. W.S. Blackman, member of the 120th Illinois Infantry, which was on provost duty in Memphis at the time of the Sultana tragedy.*

At 4 o'clock a.m. April 27, 1865 I was awakened by the cries of soldiers who had been thrown out of the boat and were helplessly floating down the cold and in imminent danger of drowning or chilling to death. The most pitiable cries that ever reached my ears came from those perishing men. They were returning to their homes from rebel prisons when the awful tragedy occurred.

About noon of the 25th of April the "Sultana", an antiquated steamboat of large size, landed at the wharf of the city of Memphis and remained there till 10 o'clock at night. At Vicksburg, Mississippi, the vessel had been condemned unseaworthy. Yet the precious lives of 2150 were committed to its capability to transport them safely to the Northern states. Fully five-sixths of the number were persons who had just been released from Southern prisons and had been exchanged and brought to Vicksburg to be sent to their homes, to be treated and fed, in order that at least some of them might be restored to health and many of them saved from death.

It was said that 350 citizens were on the boat coming home north as refugees, of all ages. Through the heartlessness of transport officers, the boat, though old and condemned, was crowded to its upmost capacity. There should have been not more than 1000 well soldiers put on the boat at one time if it had been sound. But to put 350 citizens, mostly women and children, and 1800 men, just out of nasty, wet and sickly prisons, aboard one boat, and it an old condemned one at that, was not only foolish and criminal, but was murder, demanding the penalty of death on the guilty officials. Yet we suppose no one was punished for the awful crime. There were so many great questions occupying the public at that time and soon afterwards, and it was so difficult to establish guilt under



the circumstances, that if there was anyone punished for the awful calamity I never heard of it.

I cannot account for the failure of the army officers at Memphis to at least cloth(e) the poor men, for they were in tatters and strings; and were going in the direction of cooler atmosphere.

The boat left the wharf and plowed her way through the swift current of the overflowed Mississippi for twelve miles, till it struck an island submerged below the surface of the waters. The boiler exploded, blowing off the top of part of the boat and the sides away, with most of the thousands of human beings that were on it. The hull then took fire and burned to the waters edge. Not one escaped except those who some way reached the banks or trees or were taken out next morning after floating twelve miles.

I rose and quickly aroused those near me and we headed to the landing, nearly one-half mile below, and in all ways possible aided the poor men. All was confusion in the darkness. But we were soon in the possession of the fact that a boat had burned, for when we arrived at the wharf we could plainly see an object burning, up the river, that seemed round, and about as large as a large hoghead. It was still fast on the island. We supposed it to be the "Sultana". It was yet dark, but began to dawn immediately. Water craft of every available character were busy doing what they could to save some, and in most instances were successful; but were, in a few instances that I witnessed, the immediate cause of the loss of the person they were trying to save.

One man, who I could not see, just as I arrived, called out to us to help him, not more than fifteen feet from the bank; but at the next instant a wheel of a vessel was put in motion and the voice was heard no more. He could call but faintly. No one could see him and the boats were so thick that we dared not go out in search of him in perfect darkness at that moment.

I think one hundred or more floated the twelve miles. A few were overtaken one or two miles below, after it became light, and were saved. They could float, but could not reach land. One of those reached and saved was a woman with a child in her arms. When the boat was blown to pieces, she was standing with her babe in her arms, in some part of it. In some way the explosion did not kill her, but threw her, far out into the river. As was the fashion then, everywhere, the

woman wore hoopskirts. As she alighted in the water, feet foremost, enough air gathered under the skirts to hold her up while she floated fourteen miles. When her rescuers found her she was down in the water to her neck and clinging with a deadly grip to her lifeless child. The air was still confined there, forming an effectual buoy that held her from certain death.

Boats soon began to ascend each bank of the river, and men were gathered from the trees or high banks till all that ever was found were recovered, except those who were fortunate in finding a way out to a friendly house, which, in a few instances, was the case.

When the sun was two or three hours high, I remember seeing one man in a tree opposite the landing, over on the Arkansas side. He rested there contentedly till parties from the Tennessee side went over and brought him across.

Mrs. J. W. Mullinax, of Vienna, this state, [Illinois] is the only person I have ever met who told me of sustaining a family loss in the accident. Her brother, a soldier from Tennessee, was on the boat, and was anxiously looking to arrival home to his family and friends, when he was blown to his death; as was reported by one who escaped from his side, were both stationed on the top of the boat at the awful moment of the explosion.

Scott Prindle of Benton, Illinois, with whom I am personally acquainted, is the only one among those who escaped, I have met, that I am aware of, since the day of the rescue. He says that in the efforts to save themselves the men hung to one another and that large numbers went down together. A stage was thrown into the water at the time of the explosion and a number were on it, but many more struggled to surmount it, and, despite the effort of those on it, the men at last turned it over and all went down. He says that he stayed on the burning boat till all but one had gone. Not having been blown off, he waited till the water had swallowed up or carried away every one that had been thrown in or had plunged in. When he could remain there no longer, to escape the fire, he plunged in and swam to the Arkansas shore and hastened down the river, and climbed a tree opposite the city. Perhaps it was he whom I saw there.

The Christian Commission and soldiers

and citizens did all in their power to revive the exhausted and chilled ones and save those in reach. Yet a few died, after bravely fighting the chilly waves for four hours or more, in spite of all that could be done. For it was in addition to the months of starvation and exposure to all sorts of weather in a sickly climate that those brave men were called upon suddenly to engage in a life and death conflict.

The prisoners were nearly all from Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. My diary, written at that time, recorded 1500 lost in all. Mr. Prindle, whom I visited lately in the interest of the truth, says of the catastrophe, that 1550 were lost and that 600 were saved. I hope that the report that he and I remember-that 600 were saved-was correct; yet I never had evidence that the number of the saved was half so many.

- Taken from: "The Boy Of Battle Ford" by W.S. Blackman Marion, Illinois, 1906. From the collection of Ken Baumann of Milan, Michigan.

## SUV to Dedicate Another Sultana Soldier Gravestone

I have been notified by John Mills, officer of the Sgt. Elijah P. Marrs (Camp 5) Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) in Nicholasville, Kentucky, that this group will again erect and dedicate a gravestone for a Sultana soldier. This time, on April 26th at 3 PM in the Lebanon National Cemetery (20 Highway 208, Lebanon, KY) the honored soldier will be Maj. William H. Fidler, 6th KY Cav., Co. A, who died on the Sultana.

On May 28, 2008 this very active SUV camp provided and dedicated a gravestone for Sultana victim Sgt. Lucian Wheatley, 6 KY, Cav., Co. A, and on September 7, 2008 did the same for Sultana survivor Cpl. David McMurty, 6th KY Cav., Co. A.

Everyone is cordially invited to this upcoming service. For more information contact John Mills, 217 E. Lowry Lane, Lexington, KY 40503-2614. Phone, (859)276-1970.

We give our heartfelt thanks to this wonderful organization for their efforts on behalf of our Sultana ancestors.

