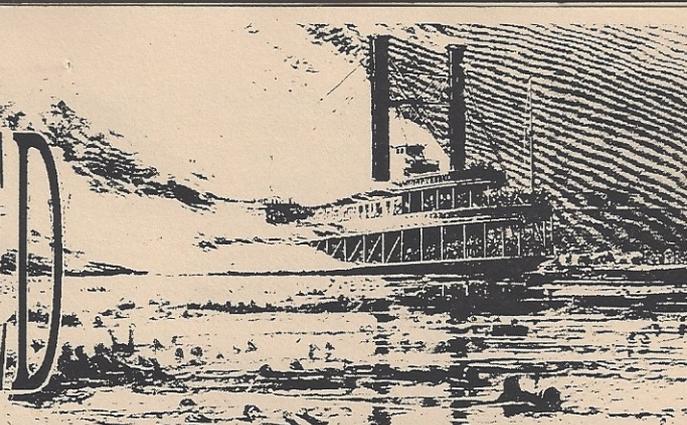


# the SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

SUMMER 1999

## The Last Survivor

- By Gene Eric Salecker

On April 27, 1865, the Mississippi steamboat *Sultana* exploded her boilers and took the lives of more than 1,700 people. Among those listed as being killed was Pvt. John H. Simpson, Co. I, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry. Fortunately for Simpson, the announcement of his death was a bit premature. John Simpson did not die on the *Sultana*. Instead, he survived and went on to be a driving force behind the southern camp of the *Sultana* Survivors' Association, being largely responsible for the granite monument in Mount Olive Cemetery outside of Knoxville, TN. By the late 1920s, there were only two men still meeting at the annual reunions. Then, with the death of Simpson on July 1, 1919, at the age of 82, only one person was left to attend the next reunion.

Commented the *Knoxville Sentinel*, "Only one Tennessee survivor of the *Sultana* disaster on the Mississippi River April 27, 1865, has escaped the hand of time. Only P. M. Keeble . . . remains in this state." According to the newspaper article, even after the death of Simpson, "There are a dozen or more survivors living in Ohio . . ." admitting that Keeble was not the last living survivor. Who then was the last survivor of the *Sultana* disaster? Only a handful of men were still alive, some in Ohio, some in Tennessee, and some elsewhere. But who was the last survivor?

Among the men still alive in Ohio was Pvt. Otto Bardon, Co. H, 102nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry. At the time of the disaster, Bardon had been on the main deck of the *Sultana*, sleeping in the stern cargo room, near the rear hatch that led down into the hold. After the explosion, which threw "pieces of brickbats and chunks of coal" over Bardon, he stood beside the open hatchway trying to keep his fellow soldiers from falling into the hold. Finally forced off the boat by the flames, Bardon and another man were able to cling to a

floating cabin door until they reached the submerged trees, where they stayed until rescued by a searching steamboat. An active member of the northern camp of the *Sultana* Survivors' Association, Bardon passed away at his home in Wooster, Ohio, on March 9, 1930. He was 89 years old.

With the death of John Simpson, only one Tennessee survivor remained active in the southern *Sultana* Survivors' Association. Wrote the *Knoxville Journal*, "A stocky man, with white mustache and brown-gray hair, his shoulders stooped with cares of eighty-four years, will go today from his home in Knoxville to the Rockford Presbyterian Church, and there elect himself to all the offices of the *Sultana* Survivors' Association." The man was Pvt. Pleasant Marion Keeble, Co. H, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry.

The "last survivor of East Tennessee Federal soldiers who were saved when the *Sultana* sank," Keeble held the last meeting of the southern survivors on April 27, 1930. As the newspaper noted, "Alone, he will attend what would have been a reunion had another of his comrades lived. There will be speeches, and he will make them; dinner,

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**"I remember that when I finally saw the fire, I was so cold that I tried to crawl right into it, but the boys held me back."**

- Pvt. Charles Eldridge

and he will eat it; he will then call a business session, answer the roll, close the meeting, and return to his home." Before the next reunion, however, Keeble too was dead.

"Last *Sultana* Survivor Dies," touted the article headline in the March 5, 1931, issue of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*. Passing away at the age of 85, Pleasant Keeble was called the "last Tennessee survivor of the steam *Sultana* disaster." However, the newspaper was wrong on both accounts.

Less than six months later, and hundreds of miles away, in Ava Missouri, another *Sultana* survivor joined his comrades in everlasting slumber. Pvt. Emanuel Hush Yeisley, Co. G, 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, passed away on August 23, 1931, at the age of 90 years old. Badly injured the explosion of the *Sultana*, Yeisley was burned on his chest and had the lining of his nose scalded. He had suffered the rest of his life from the nose injury, being unable to tolerate strong odors or cigarette smoke.

Before 1931 drew to a close, another "last" survivor passed away. Having been born in September 1847, Pvt. Henry J. Kline, Co. G, 9th Indiana Cavalry was only 17 years old when the *Sultana* blew up. Undoubtedly a strong, young man, Kline knew how to swim and left the *Sultana* with another man, a nonswimmer, clinging tightly to his back. On December 16, 1931, Henry Kline passed away near Marion, Indiana. Believed to have outlived every other survivor from the state of Indiana by a number of years, the *Marion Tribune* noted, "Mr. Kline was for a number of years the only Indiana survivor of the *Sultana* disaster of the Civil War." However, once again, the newspapers were wrong.

Back in east Tennessee, another *Sultana* survivor had surfaced after the death of Pleasant Keeble. Corp. Samuel Washington Jenkins, Co. L, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, was found to be alive and well and living in Chattanooga. He had survived the disaster by being blown off the boat by the explosion and floating down river before being rescued. Having witnessed the terrible destruc-

tion to the human body by the explosion and fire of the *Sultana*, Jenkins went to medical school and eventually became a doctor. On January 19, 1933, Samuel Jenkins passed away. He was 85 years old and had survived Pleasant Keeble the "last Tennessee survivor of the steamer *Sultana* disaster" by almost two years. During his lifetime, Jenkins had been married twice and fathered 21 children.

A few months later, on May 18, 1933, Pvt. William Carter Warner, Co. B, 9th Indiana Cavalry, passed away at Wellington, Kansas. Born on May 6, 1848, Warner was only 15 years old when he enlisted in the Union Army and was one month shy of his seventeenth birthday when the *Sultana* blew up. Having gone to sleep atop one of the huge paddlewheel housings, Warner was blown into the river by the exploding boilers and grabbed onto a floating piece of wreckage. While floating along, his wet drawers became heavy and were impeding his progress, so he took them off. Later, he found a frozen hat floating on the surface of the flood-swollen river and put it on his head. When he was finally pulled from the swirling Mississippi, he had on "only his undershirt and his stiff hat." The passing of William Warner in 1933 marked the death of the last surviving Indiana soldier of the *Sultana* disaster.

Almost a year later, another *Sultana* survivor passed away. On April 2, 1934, 89-year-old Pvt. William L. Horn, Co. I, 102nd Ohio Volunteer Infantry, died at his home Wooster, Ohio. At the time of the disaster, Horn had been asleep on the second deck outside the main cabin, and had been blown into the icy waters. Fully asleep when the boat blew up, Horn woke up in midair, just seconds before hitting the water. Not knowing what had just happened, but realizing that the *Sultana* was in trouble, Horn climbed aboard a large floating section of decking with several others and floated along until rescued by sailors from the gunboat *Essex*. With his passing, the *Wooster Daily Record* wrote "... Mr. Horn was the last Wayne County survivor of the most outstanding disaster of the Civil War."

With the passing of Philip Horn, only one surviving *Sultana* soldier from the state of Ohio remained alive. Pvt. Albert Norris, Co. A, 76th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, was still alive in Grandville, Ohio. Norris had been asleep on the second deck of the *Sultana*, almost directly over the boilers, when the explosion ripped the center out of the boat. With the supports gone, the portion of the deck Norris was on tilted down toward the exposed furnaces, and Norris slid down onto the hot metal, "receiving severe burns from the irons of the furnace..." Eventually able to claw his way out from under the wreckage and bodies that had tumbled down on top of him, Norris grabbed a cracker barrel and jumped overboard into the cooling waters of the Mississippi.

More than a year and a half after the death of Philip Horn, Albert Norris passed away on January 1, 1936, at age 93. He was the last Ohio survivor to die and the newspapers read, "The Last *Sultana* Survivor Dies."

Once again the newspaper was wrong. There were still two *Sultana* survivors alive. Pvt. Elkanah Millard, Co. G, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, was still alive and living in Hamilton County, Tennessee, and Pvt. Charles M. Eldridge, also from Co. G, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, was alive and living in Dennison, Texas. Although almost nothing is known of Elkanah Millard's survival from the *Sultana* disaster, it is known that he was born on March 20, 1840, and he died on March 3, 1937, just a few days short of his 97th birthday.

With Millard's passing, only one *Sultana* survivor remained alive. Charles Eldridge had been sick on board the *Sultana* just before the explosion and had fallen asleep on the hurricane deck behind one of the smoke stacks. "When I awakened," he remembered, "I was spinning through the air and landed many yards from the demolished boat." Grabbing hold of a ladder with three other men, Eldridge and the others floated past Memphis and were finally rescued by an ex-Confederate soldier. Unconscious when he was found, the soldier dressed Eldridge in an old Rebel uniform to keep him from freezing to death and left him beside a fire.

"I remember that when I [finally] saw the fire," he recalled, "I was so cold that I tried to crawl right into it, but the boys held me back." After a while, Eldridge regained his senses and noticed that he was wearing a Confederate uniform. "How did I get these clothes? I am not going to wear them," he protested. Although Eldridge

started to strip the unwanted uniform from his body, the other men convinced him to leave the clothes on. Later, Eldridge would admit that the ex-Confederate soldier had saved his life. "He was a good man," he wrote. "I have often wished I could have met him and shook his hand and thanked him for his kindness to me."

On September 8, 1941, more than 76 years after the burning and sinking of the *Sultana*, Charles M. Eldridge, the very last survivor of the disaster, passed into eternity. Born on July 20, 1845, he was 96 years old when he died at his home in Dennison, Texas. He had survived Elkanah Millard by almost four and one-half years.

Unfortunately, by the time of the death of the *Sultana's* last survivor, the disaster was almost forgotten. The world was poised on the edge of a second world war. Adolph Hitler had already conquered much of Europe and was bombing the cities of England, and the Japanese were getting ready for a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. With so many other concerns, the *Sultana* was already a forgotten tragedy. When Charles Eldridge died, his obituary noted, "While Mr. Eldridge was a prisoner, he and other captured soldiers were being transported up the Mississippi River from Vicksburg when the historical explosion occurred on the prisoners' steamboat." The name of the steamboat is not even mentioned.

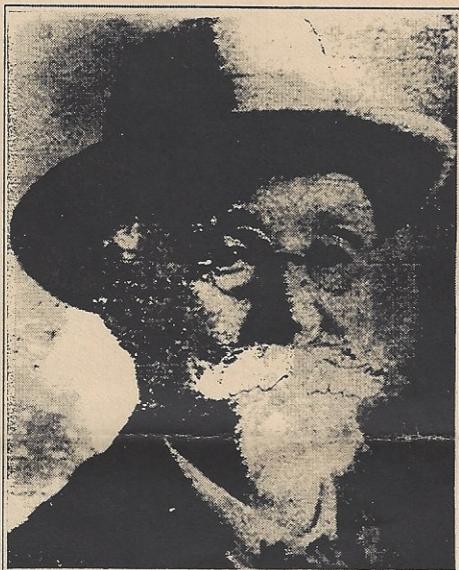
Surely Charles Eldridge and the other survivors had not forgotten the *Sultana*. Until the last survivor of America's greatest maritime disaster passed away in 1941, you can be certain that he always remembered the *Sultana*. Let us honor their memory by doing the same. ■



MEMBERS OF THE TENNESSEE SULTANA ASSOCIATION, c. 1900.

THE LAST SURVIVORS OF THE SULTANA

<u>Survivor</u>	<u>Regiment</u>	<u>Date of Death</u>	<u>Age</u>
Pvt. John H. Simpson	Co. I, 3rd TN Cav.	July 1, 1929	82
Pvt. Otto Bardon	Co. H, 102nd OH Vol. Inf.	March 7, 1920	89
Pvt. Pleasant M. Keeble	Co. H, 3rd TN Cav.,	March 5, 1931	85
Pvt. Emanuel H. Yeisley	Co. G, 76th OH Vol. Inf.	August 23, 1931	90
Pvt. Henry J. Kline	Co. G, 9th IN Cav.	December 16, 1931	84
Cpl. Samuel Jenkins	Co. L, 3rd TN Cav.	January 19, 1933	85
Pvt. Wm. C. Warner	Co. B, 9th IN Cav.	May 18, 1933	85
Pvt. Philip L. Horn	Co. I, 102nd OH Vol Inf.	April 2, 1934	89
Pvt. Albert Norris	Co. A, 76th OH Vol. Inf.	January 1, 1936	93
Pvt. Elkanah Millard	Co. G, 3rd TN Cav.	March 3, 1937	96
Pvt. Charles M. Eldridge	Co. G, 3rd TN Cav.	September 8, 1941	96



CHARLES M. ELDRIGE,  
CO. G, 3RD TENNESSEE CAVALRY



SAMUEL W. JENKINS,  
CO. L, 3RD TENNESSEE CAVALRY

## Report: The Annual Knoxville Reunion April 10, 1999

- By Norman C. Shaw

Attendance was good, with about eighty people signing the register. It was exciting to see the many states represented as well as Tennessee: Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas.

I hope the earlier meeting date in April this year was agreeable to everyone. Originally, this was the result of a scheduling conflict at our meeting place, Mt. Olive Baptist Church. However, I now believe early spring is a better time to meet since it coincides with Knoxville's annual Dogwood Arts Festival. Now, when you come to our reunion, you can enjoy the full beauty of the spring blooming season here as well as visiting with friends who share a common interest in the *Sultana* story.

An added treat for us this year was a second visit from Ron Farmer who is filming a *Sultana* documentary. Ron is financing this project himself and somehow finds the time to work on it during his busy work schedule as an Assignment Editor for NBC News. I know he was pleased with our meeting and the new material he discovered.

Thanks to everyone who played a part in making the reunion work. I would like to express particular appreciation to the following people: The Appalachian Harmonizers for their music; Virgil Davis for video; Juanita Murphy and her sister, Dot Blazier, for money collection and supervision at lunchtime; Mary McAlister for flowers and landscaping at the Sultana monument in the church cemetery; and those who helped on room setup, breakdown, and cleanup.

I expect another great turnout in next year, 2000, on April 8. Make plans to attend!

### 1999 Post-Reunion Financial Report

\$349.00	Collected at meeting
- 20.00	to custodian
-100.00	donation to Mt. Olive Church
- 22.75	for soft drinks, etc.

\$206.25 to Pam Newhouse for Internet website @ \$25.00/month

## Flowers in the River: A Fitting Memorial

- By Mary McAlister

Pam Newhouse told me that in the years after the *Sultana* tragedy the survivors would throw flowers and wreaths into the rivers running into the Mississippi in memory of those who lost their lives on April 27, 1865. She asked me to reenact this in April of this year. My family and I, descendants of John

Leslie, (Co. K, 3rd TN Cav) did just that.

Most of the family put their flowers in at Carlock, Tennessee's Cane Creek, which runs through what was John Leslie's farm. Gathered here were John's gr granddaughter, Joan Leslie Wilson and her grandchildren, Jessica and Natalee Rowland, Cierra and Joseph Martin and Royce Richeson.

John's granddaughter and namesake Johnnie Leslie Barnett dropped flowers

in the Conasauga Creek, near where it enters the Hiwassee River.

Our son, Mike McAlister, chose the Tennessee River to throw his flowers.

Our daughter Belinda tossed flowers in the Mississippi River while on a business trip in Louisiana.

Bob, myself and our other son Bob threw white Sultanas (a 19th century word for *impatiens*) in the Clinch River.

We hope for a bigger group next year. And we plan to have everyone, at all rivers and streams, to toss flowers at the same time so we can all feel joined during this ceremony honoring the those who lost their lives on the *Sultana*.

(Mary, God bless you and your family for carrying on this touching tradition. -Ed.)

## East Tennessee Historical Society: A Depository for Sultana Artifacts

I am excited to announce that the East Tennessee Historical Society (ETHS), located here in Knoxville, TN, has readily agreed to house and safekeep *Sultana* pictures, documents, and artifacts. Any person who doubts that his or her descendants will adequately protect family *Sultana* items now has an option to safeguard these precious possessions. The contact person at ETHS is the curator, Lisa Oakley, who can be reached at (423) 544-4262. All items will be safe, secure, and insured. They can either be donated or loaned to the ETHS.

In addition, Lisa tells me that within the next year she plans to redo the Civil War section of the museum and feels it is essential to tell the *Sultana* story by including a display devoted to this great disaster. Lisa would like to meet or talk with any potential donors, so please consider giving her a call.

-Norman Shaw

## Memorial Day at Cahaba

My family and I attended the Memorial Day services this past May at the old cemetery at the site of the Civil War Cahaba Prison site (near Selma, Alabama). I was invited to attend by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUV), Montgomery, AL Camp. It was very interesting. Dressed in Union soldiers' uniforms, they gave a three gun salute in the cemetery and at a few unknown soldier's graves. Also, there were ladies dressed in (19th c. costume) black, as widows. There was a tour after the service and a question and answer session about the prison and the *Sultana*. I met a lady there whose gr gr grandfather was a civilian prison guard at Cahaba (during the war). We enjoyed it!

- Greg Shipe,

gr gr grandson of John W. Miller, Co. E, 3rd TN Cav.

(Thanks Greg- I hope that other descendants will attend this event next May. What a worthwhile thing. -Ed.)

(The following excerpts appeared in an article in the July 1(?), 1999 edition of the *Indianapolis Star*. We are all proud of *Sultana* descendant William Stewart and his wife Marsha for what they have been able to do in Indiana to honor *Sultana* soldiers from that state. -Ed)

## Monument evokes memory of 230 Union Dead

Couple completes quest to honor Hoosiers felled in blast just after Civil War.

- By Stephen Beaven, Staff Writer

MUNCIE, Ind. - It is a horrific, often overlooked piece of U.S. history, an accident that killed hundreds of Union soldiers returning from the Civil War. When the steamboat *Sultana* exploded near Memphis in 1865, an estimated 230 Hoosiers died. William and Marsha Stewart don't want anyone to forget it.

So on Sunday, finally, the Stewarts got their wish: in a shady cemetery, they unveiled a small monument to approximately 55 Muncie-area men who died in the "It's the right thing to do," Marsha Stewart said of the monument at Beech Grove Cemetery in Muncie. "These poor men were never recognized. They fought for us. The disaster just touched my heart."

For the Stewarts, Sunday was the culmination of a long effort to erect some sort of memorial for *Sultana* victims - including William Stewart's great-great-grandfather. The state rejected their bids to place a historical marker in Indianapolis. Then Muncie monument maker Jim Wilhoite donated the marker and the engraving after he read about the Stewarts' efforts in the newspaper. "Everybody deserves to be remembered," Wilhoite said.

The Stewarts' interest in the *Sultana* started in 1990, when Marsha discovered that her husband's great-great-grandfather was killed in the explosion. Pvt. Thornburgh was 28 years old, married and the father of four children when he died. Like so many of his shipmates, he was returning from the war shortly after it ended and only days after President Abraham Lincoln was shot. The story of Nathan Thornburgh led the Stewarts to do more research. What they found was a piece of history often obscured by the end of the war and Lincoln's assassination.

Two years ago the couple applied to the Indiana Historical Bureau for a marker. The bureau encouraged them to continue their application, saying a marker in Indianapolis listing those who were killed would be appropriate. But in April 1998, the Indiana Library and Historical Board rejected their application because the ship exploded in Tennessee and not Indiana. But they didn't give up. And about six weeks ago, Wilhoite stepped forward and offered his services.

Sunday's ceremony was gratifying for the Stewarts. About 80 people showed up, including Civil War historians, several men dressed as Union soldiers, the deputy mayor of Muncie, Wilhoite, and others. When it was over William Stewart was a happy man. It's a great day," he said.



JIM WILHOITE SETTING THE SULTANA MEMORIAL STONE

## Mark Your Calendars! Sultana Memorial Dedication in Memphis- April 1, 2000

This is an event we have been awaiting for some time. On Saturday, April first, the Arkansas Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) will be unveiling a historical marker honoring the Sultana's passengers in Marion, Arkansas. Marion is the town closest to where the skeleton of the *Sultana* rests, now underneath a field (keep in mind that the Mississippi has changed its course many times since 1865).

DAR member Jeannette Coley of West Memphis is spearheading this. She says: "There will be a reception at the Marion United Methodist Church, which is right across the street where the marker will be. Descendants from families that assisted rescuing passengers from the river will be there; Marion Mayor Frank Fogelman is one such person. Arkansas DAR State Regent Ruth Oberhelman plans to invite the Sons of the Sons of the American Revolution to come and take part in the ceremony also. The reception will be a time for everyone, especially descendants of passengers and rescuers, to get acquainted and share meaningful moments. Punch and cookies and finger sandwiches will be served. The press will be invited and there will be brief statements made by the mayor, the DAR State Regent, and representatives of the *Sultana* descendants. (Time frame for the above: mid- afternoon.) Then, a dedication service will take place at the new *Sultana* memorial marker."

"Those that were aboard the *Sultana* that fateful night is who the memorial is for and what this event is about. To look into the eyes of their descendants while we pay them this tribute will be a memorable event. As I think about the Federal soldiers on their way home as tragedy struck, and rescuers setting out from this small Southern town to do what they could to save them, it seems that this act of humanity was a significant foreshadowing a nation beginning to heal."

I hope all descendants and friends will make a special effort to be in Memphis for this event. There are other *Sultana*-related places to see in the Memphis area, such as the Hunt-Phelan Home on Beale St., where some of the wounded soldiers were taken. The guides there are aware of the *Sultana* connection. Perhaps we can arrange a special tour with Don Pritchard, staff member who is especially interested in the *Sultana*. Also in Memphis is the Tennessee Historical Marker down by the river which is there thanks to the efforts of Jerry Potter. And the *Sultana* monument in Elmwood Cemetery. And are you aware that the old cobblestone wharf where the *Sultana* docked for the last time is still there, and you can walk on it? Finally, there is the National Cemetery, where unknown *Sultana* soldier victims are buried. If you have any energy left, you can always fight the crowds at Graceland and pay homage to the home and grave of Memphis' Favorite Citizen!

As more details are known, I will let you know via this newsletter. You can also contact Jeannette Coley online at [JMCOLEY@aol.com](mailto:JMCOLEY@aol.com).

You can be sure that I'll see you there! Wouldn't miss it. - PAM NEWHOUSE



AT THE SULTANA MONUMENT IN KNOXVILLE, L-R: NORMAN SHAW, GENE SALECKER, PAM NEWHOUSE, AND JERRY POTTER.

## A Letter Home

*(When we think of the Sultana we usually only think of the night of April 27, 1865 and disaster. But the Sultana was a well-known, well-respected boat which carried many a satisfied passenger before her demise. The following are excerpts from a letter written by one such passenger, 2nd Lt. Charlie H. Dickey, Co. B, 4th Illinois Cavalry. He was writing to his niece, Isabel Wallace, daughter of Brig. Gen. William H. L. Wallace, who was killed in action at Shiloh in 1862. At this time the Sultana was only seven months old.*

*The letter is a part of the collection of Ken Baumann, Milan, Michigan.)*

On Board Steamer Sultana  
Cairo (IL) September 8th 1863

Dear Belle,

....At Carbondale Genl Logan got on board. A large crowd was assembled to see him off and they gave "Three Cheers for Gen. Logan" as the train moved off. I had a short talk with him. He is looking well and is bound for his command...

We are just shoving off from Cairo-- GoodBye to Illinois-- when will I see you again - Somehow I dislike to leave the old state this time more than I ever did before. I much fear that I will not get another leave of absence till my three years are up-- As I write we are passing into the Mississippi Water Birds Point is in full view and I can see the old familiar house where Will spent so many days.

The *Sultana* is a very pleasant boat to travel on, and I think is pretty fast. There is a good piano in the Ladies Cabin.

Str *Sultana* Sept 9th 1863  
Have found several good singers on board and got up quite a quartette. "Old Shady"- "Weeping Sad and Lonely" & "Lorena" are among the favorites.

We are just "sounding to" at Fort Pillow. I must go out and take a peep at it.

I will send this letter from Memphis instead of filling up the sheet... We made the connections much better than I expected to- the only serious delay we have had was being obliged to lay to all night on account of low water and poor pilot.....

Remember me to friends

With Love,

Charlie H. Dickey