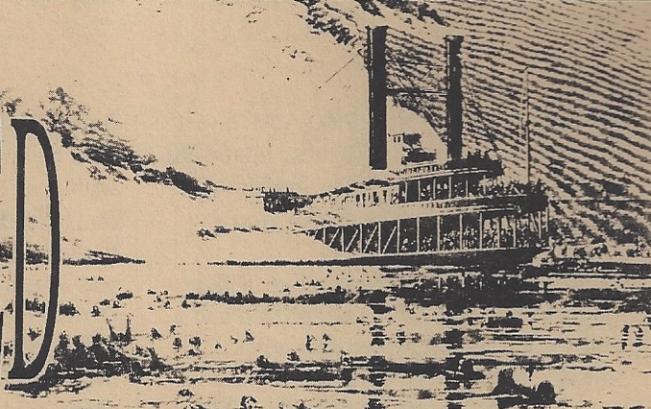


# the SULTANA REMEMBERED



Newsletter of the Association of Sultana Descendants and Friends

April 27, 1865

Vol. 4, No. 9, Spring 1992

## The Crippling of the Sultana: The Real Story

by Gene Eric Salecker

On 20 May 1865, only three weeks after the loss of the *Sultana*, Harper's Weekly, one of the leading newspapers of the 1800's published a vivid woodcut picture of the burning of the *Sultana*. While soldiers struggled against the flood waters of the Mississippi River in the foreground of the print, the *Sultana* sat in the background, fire sweeping her decks, scorching the muddy waters and rising high above the twin smokestacks. Flames could be seen engulfing the pilot house and the forward section of the texas deck while hundreds of soldiers crowded the bow of the main deck and the forward section of the second deck. Since that day so many years ago, the Harper's Weekly image of the burning steamboat has been the popular portrayal of the horrors of the disaster and can be seen above as a part of the banner headline of this newsletter.

Over the years there have been a few more paintings or prints featuring the *Sultana* disaster, and most have been based on the only known photograph of the *Sultana*, taken at Helena, Arkansas, by W. T. Barnes on 26 April, one day before her terrible demise.

The artist for Harper's Weekly was the first person to start this misconception of the *Sultana* disaster. Not knowing what the *Sultana* looked like, he took a typical Mississippi River steamboat, added a mass of flames and crowded the deck and the surrounding waters with struggling, frightened soldiers. There was no attempt to be historically accurate, to portray the *Sultana* as she actually looked after the

explosion of her boilers; he was trying only to appease an eager public. And while all of the successive paintings and prints are beautiful works of art and capture the essence of the disaster, none is historically correct; each one is merely an artist's conception of what took place on 27 April 1865. Allow me to explain.

The *Sultana* was built in Cincinnati, Ohio in January of 1863 and took on her first load of passengers and cargo in February. While there is only one known photograph of the *Sultana* - taken in Helena from behind and showing her decks crowded with the paroled prisoners - there is a picture of her sister ship, the *Luminary*, docked at the Vicksburg wharf that clearly shows the bow and upper structure of the steamboat. The

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"(The explosion)  
threw the pilot house  
up into the air, and it  
fell down where the  
boilers had been..The  
chimneys fell, killing  
and crippling many."

- Pvt. Thomas Sharp, Co. F,  
2nd Virginia Cavalry

*Luminary* was a carbon copy of the *Sultana* and from the photo of this boat one can get a clear picture of what the bow and upper decks of the *Sultana* must have looked like. (By the way, for those of you wishing to see the picture of the *Luminary*, all you have to do is turn to page 48 of Jerry Potter's long-awaited book, The Sultana Tragedy: America's Greatest Maritime Disaster. The steamboat in the middle, with the tall smokestacks, is the *Luminary*.)

From the photo of the *Luminary* one can see that the *Sultana* had a very long, wide open area on the second deck, just in front of the Main Cabin. It can also be seen that there was a wide open space on the hurricane deck, directly in front of the smokestacks. The steamboat bell is shown in the center of this open deck space on the hurricane deck. Both of these wide-open deck areas were the reason that the officers in charge of loading the *Sultana* came to the conclusion that the *Sultana* was ideally suited for transporting such a large number of the paroled soldiers.

The picture of the *Luminary* also shows that the texas deck, (the area where the officers of the boat slept), and the pilot house were almost in the middle of the steamboat, whereas a typical steamboat had the texas and pilot house well forward, usually about one third of the way back. Even the smokestacks on the *Luminary* seem to be set back farther than usual, showing that the boilers on the *Sultana*, directly behind the stacks, were set amidships rather than at the one third mark.

By all accounts, the *Sultana* and the *Luminary* were known to be large boats with an abundance of deck space, which is shown in the photo of the *Luminary*. This large amount of deck space was filled beyond capacity as more than 2,100 soldiers were loaded on

board the *Sultana*. Near 2:00 A.M. on 27 April 1865, the lives of all these men were suddenly placed in the balance with the unexpected explosion of the *Sultana's* boilers.

It is generally believed that one of the four boilers of the *Sultana* exploded and a split second later ruptured two other boilers. In all, three of the four boilers exploded. Nathan Wintringer, the Chief Engineer, later swore that the only remaining boiler was the one that had been repaired at Vicksburg while the soldiers were being placed on the boat. This statement seems to be totally erroneous. The boiler that was repaired was the middle larboard or left-hand boiler. There seems to be no conceivable way that the two outside boilers and one of the middle boilers could explode without puncturing and tearing apart the other middle boiler. In all likelihood the two middle boilers and one of the outside boilers exploded, leaving the other outside boiler intact but buried under the shattered remains of the decks above.

The engine wall partition on the main deck, directly behind the boilers, completely disintegrated. The explosion tore apart the furnace beneath the boilers and scattered hot coals and boiler bricks on the sleeping men. Soldiers sleeping around the engine machinery were blown to pieces and thrown backwards onto the men sleeping on the stern of the main deck. Albert W. King, 100th Ohio Inf., was about twenty feet from the stern and said, "Men, coal, wood and timbers were thrown over and beyond us." Commodore



Otto Bardon

Smith, 18th Michigan Inf., was near the very end of the boat and was "nearly buried with dead and wounded comrades, legs, arms, heads, and all parts of human bodies." Otto Bardon, 102nd Ohio Inf. was also in the engine room and recalled "a terrible explosion, then hot steam, smoke, pieces of brickbat and chunks of hot coals thick and fast." The immense amount of steam held within the four huge boilers instantly filled the stern engine room.



Alexander C. Brown

The escaping steam not only rolled backwards through the main deck engine room but also went up through the huge hole that had been ripped through the second deck and quickly spread down the cavernous Main Cabin. Alexander C. Brown, 2nd Ohio Inf., was in a stateroom about midway forward. He was blown across his small cabin by the explosion and found that "steam was rushing up all about" him. William D. Snow, a Senator-elect from Arkansas, was in a stateroom near the Ladies' Cabin at the stern of the boat, and said "steam came into my room through the transom." Lieutenant Joseph T. Elliott, 124th Indiana Inf., was asleep on a cot at the rear of the Main Cabin and noticed that the chandelier lights "were dim, and they must have been obscured by the escaping steam from the exploded boiler."

Elliott moved forward through the steam and found that the "cabin floor had dropped down at the front, without breaking off." "The explosion had ripped out a huge section of the Main Cabin floor and splintered a number of staterooms. The disintegration of the engine room wall on the deck below left the Main Cabin floor

unsupported around the hole and the deck instantly slanted downwards towards the now-exposed coal furnaces. Many soldiers slid down the inclining decks and died in the hot coals. J. Walter Elliott, 44th U.S. Colored Troops, was also in the Main Cabin and found a "yawning opening in the floor" and "mangled, scalded human forms heaped and piled amid the burning debris on the lower deck."

The ceiling above, holding the Texas deck and pilot house, was ripped wide open, loosening the twin smokestacks and both of the huge paddlewheel housings. Hundreds of soldiers were asleep on the wide-open hurricane deck and around the Texas and pilot house. The lucky ones were blown into the river; the unlucky went straight up and straight down, into the hot coals and fire.

When the boilers exploded the force of the blast seems to have gone up and slightly to the rear. It did NOT go straight up. Had it done so it would have torn apart the forward section of the Texas cabin and blown the pilot house completely off of the boat. Instead, the blast went at a rearward angle, ripping apart the back three quarters of the Texas and tearing off only the rear of the pilot house.



J. Walter Elliott

It is unknown how many of the boat's officers were in their cabins in the Texas at the time of the explosion but it is known that two survived the blast. Captain J. Cass Mason more than likely had his cabin at the very front of the Texas, as was the usual spot, and Chief

Engineer Wintringer stated that his room was "about amidships of the larboard side of the texas". Mason was known to be in his room at the time of the explosion but was later seen by a number of soldiers trying to help the men (which proved that his room was not destroyed), and Wintringer stated that his room "was not at all injured, and I do not know how much, if any, of the texas in front of my room was injured, but most of it behind my room appeared to have sunk down on the cabin or lower deck."

Two men were in the pilot house at the time of the explosion. The pilot, naturally, was at the very front of the house, at the huge pilotwheel. The other, the mate, was probably to the rear. The mate and most of the pilot house were blown "forty feet into the air" and landed in the river while the pilot George Kayton, "was at the wheel and fell on the top of the boilers and was wedged in by the wreck." William McFarland, 42nd Indiana Inf., "saw the pilot house....sink through the roof into the flames." What he actually saw was only the forward portion of the pilot house. The majority of the house had already been blown to bits.

One of the tall smokestacks, loosened by the blast, fell backwards, crushing what was left of the pilot house and possibly being responsible for pushing the remains of the pilot house down into the gaping hole. Sixteen year old Stephen M. Gaston, 9th Indiana Cav., had slept on the forward section of the texas deck, his head against the front of the pilot house and stated "the smokestack had fallen directly on the pilot house crushing it down almost on us". William Peacock, also of the 9th Indiana Cav., was asleep "on the texas roof right next to the pilot house" and fell into the hole all the way to the main deck.

While one stack fell backwards, the second fell forwards, crashing directly onto the bell at the center of the hurricane deck. John Zaizer, 115th Ohio Inf., remembered he was "asleep on the upper deck, close to the bell. The smokestack fell across it and split". The stack smashed the crowded forward section of the hurricane deck down onto the equally crowded front section of the cabin deck. Although many men were crushed under the falling deck, a large number of

soldiers were saved because the main stairway came up under this forward section of the cabin deck and the sturdy railings around the stairway openings stopped the upper deck from caving in on top of them.

Lewis W. McCrory, 100th Ohio Inf., was sleeping near the stairway openings on the cabin deck and said the hurricane deck "came crashing down, and in all probability would have crushed me had it not been for the stair banister which held it up and saved me." Wesley Lee, 102nd Ohio Inf., sprang to his feet but "struck my head against the deck above, which had been smashed down and was supported by the railings around the stairs." Saved by the stair railings, many soldiers worked their way out from under the fallen hurricane deck and scrambled down the stairs to the open bow of the boat.



Chester Berry

The forward section of the hurricane deck, above the stair railings, was completely wrecked when one smokestack fell on top of it and crushed it down onto the cabin deck. Soldiers lying atop the hurricane deck were covered by pieces of splintered wood and huge timbers. Joseph Norton, 5th Michigan Cav., was in the center of the deck and only about ten feet in front of the smokestacks. He was covered with debris and "tried to raise my hand but was so pinned down I could not." William P. Madden, 44th Ohio Inf., asleep on the forward section of the hurricane deck, awoke to find himself pinned under the half-circle of a piece of boiler thrown up from far below.

Much of the splintered debris from the

hurricane and cabin deck had fallen into the exposed fireboxes and it was only a matter of minutes before the debris caught fire and great flames sprang up through the gaping hole in the center of the boat and spread through the upper decks of the *Sultana*. Chester Berry, 20th Michigan Inf., recalled "the flames swept fiercely up and back through the light wood of the upper decks." In a short time, the fire was out of control and soon great licks of flames were rising high above the crowded decks of the boat. Seeking refuge from the flames, the hundreds of soldiers suddenly began pushing and shoving in their attempt to jump into the river.

It is precisely this time, as the flames were leaping skyward and the men were rushing to their fates, that most of the artists depicting the loss of the *Sultana* have taken to portray but, as you can now see from what has been explained above, all of these portrayals have been wrong: An accurate painting would show both of the smokestacks fallen down, one forward, the other back. There should be no texas or pilot house; both were either blasted to bits or crushed by the stack that fell backwards. The forward section of the hurricane deck should be shown crushed down on the second deck, smashed down by the weight of the forward falling smokestack, and the hungry flames should be shown eating at the very center of the boat and reaching towards the rear, as a strong evening breeze pushed the flames rearward, leaving the soldiers on the forward sections of each deck in relative safety for the time being.

So, if the scene were to be accurately portrayed, it would just look like a mass of flames on the water, and there would be almost nothing to distinguish it from any other burning ship. Only the huge paddlewheels, emblazoned with the name *Sultana*, would tell the real story. And, the story does not end here.

For about twenty or thirty minutes, as the flames leapt skyward, the *Sultana* continued to float backwards down the river. The strong current was pushing against both paddlewheels and forcing the boat straight back. Both paddlewheel housings had been loosened by the explosion but they remained upright for about a half hour, acting as twin sails and

keeping the boat on an even keel. The night breeze was fanning the flames towards the stern, driving hundreds into the flood waters - but some four hundred or more men sought refuge on the open bow of the main deck, upwind from the fire.

Then suddenly, one of the wheelhouses burned away from the boat and crashed heavily into the water. Now there was only one "sail" and as the strong current hit the one remaining paddlewheel, the boat was forced sideways, turning it completely around. As it turned, so did the flames. Shortly after the fall of the first paddlewheel housing, the second housing burned through and crashed into the muddy waters, but it was already too late. The boat was turning and continued to do so until it was facing completely around. To the hundreds that had sought refuge on the bow, this spelled instant disaster. Suddenly the flames were sweeping straight towards them.

A vast majority of the frightened

soldiers surged into the water. Only a handful remained on board. The main stairway and a portion of the upper decks that had slanted down to the main deck acted as somewhat of a firebreak but after awhile, even these were burned through. By now, however, most of the four hundred men had either drowned in the waters of the Mississippi or swum further away from the threatened bow. Those few soldiers that had remained on the bow now slid into the water and hung from the bow on pieces of hog chain and ropes, hoping that the fire would not reach them.

When the main structures of the boat had burned away and the fire lessened, the men on the chains and ropes climbed back aboard the *Sultana* and found that a section of the bow, for about twenty feet back, was still untouched by the flames. As others swam back to the relative safety of the unburned bow, those already aboard used wet shirts and blankets to fight back the still burning flames. In time, all the men that climbed back aboard the *Sultana*

were saved by the men from Fogleman's Landing.

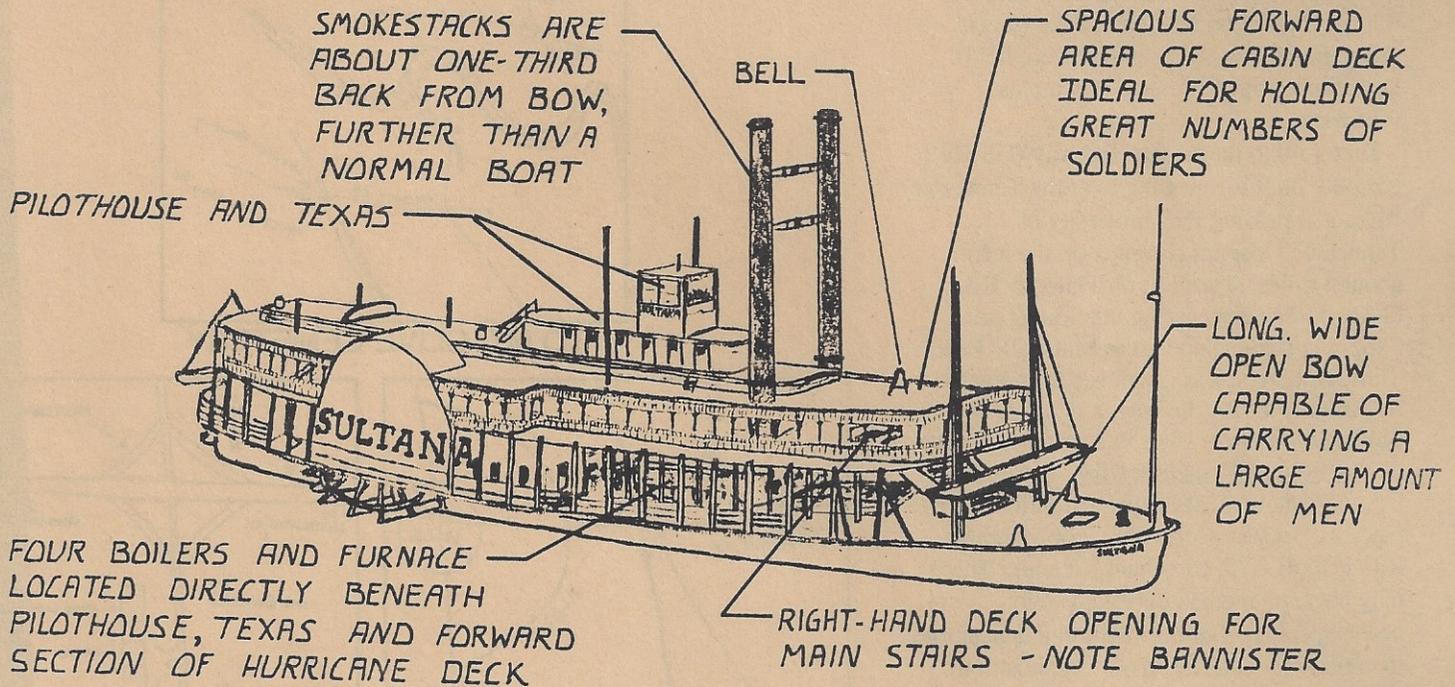
Just like in the movies, the hull of the *Sultana* sank only seconds after the last man was taken off the unburned section of the bow. When she sank there was almost nothing left of the once-beautiful steamboat. The main deck engine room, the cavernous Main Cabin and the entire stern of the boat had been burned away. The Texas and pilothouse had disintegrated. Three of the four boilers were completely destroyed and both smokestacks were down and burnt to a crisp. The forward section of the cabin and hurricane decks and the graceful main stairway were all eaten through by the flames. When the *Sultana* sank, the only thing remaining on board was burnt machinery, the one intact boiler, the small unburned section of the bow, and her tall jackstaff. The *Sultana* would no longer be the beautiful boat she once was. Forever after, in spite of the dramatic paintings, she would always be an ugly memory. ■

**"Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer!  
That calls me from a world of care.  
And bids me, at my Father's throne,  
Make all my wants and wishes known.**

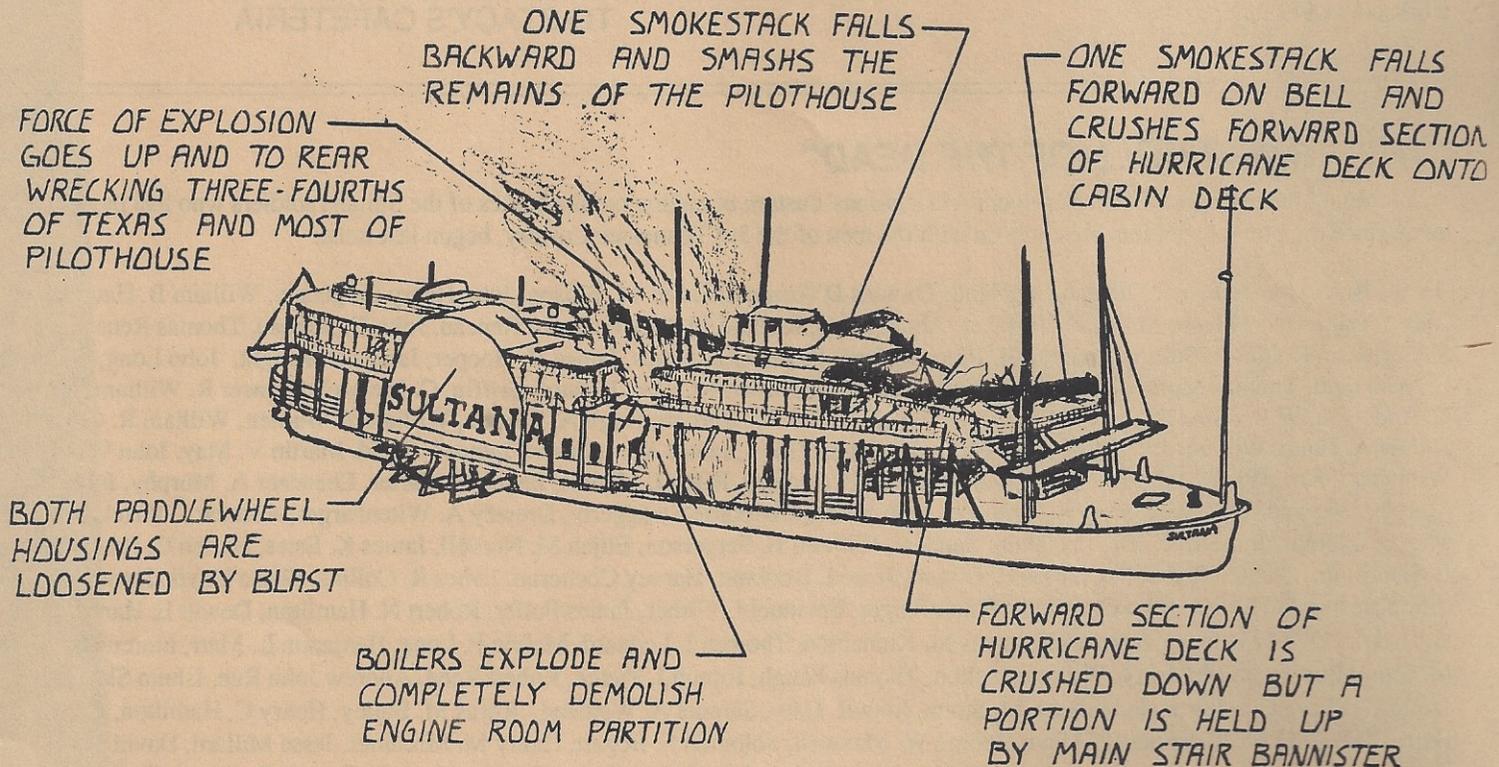
**In seasons of distress and grief,  
My soul has often found relief,  
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,  
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer."**

- sung by Chester Berry, 20th Michigan Inf. on the deck of the *Sultana* just prior to docking at Memphis, 7 hours before the explosion of the boat. (Berry survived the disaster, became a minister after the war, and wrote the book Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors in 1892.)

THE SULTANA PRIOR TO EXPLOSION OF BOILERS



THE SULTANA AFTER EXPLOSION OF BOILERS



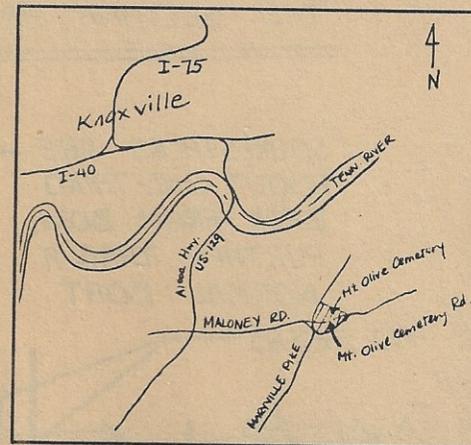
# ANNUAL SULTANA DESCENDANTS AND FRIENDS REUNION: KNOXVILLE - APRIL 25, 1992

The annual reunion will be held on April 25 in Knoxville, Tennessee starting with a memorial ceremony at the Union Soldiers Monument at 3 P.M. in Mt. Olive Cemetery. The cemetery is located near the Mt. Olive Baptist Church on Maryville Pike (this is where many original reunions were held). Directions from Norman Shaw are as follows:

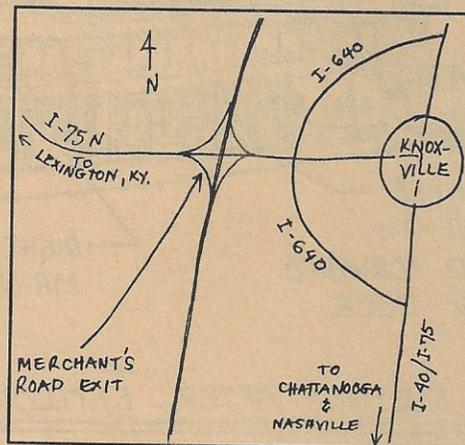
Take I-40 to the Alcoa Highway (US129); go south on this (crossing over the Tennessee River and passing the University of Tennessee Hospital complex on the left)-about 4 miles. Turn left on Maloney Rd. (1 1/2 miles after passing the Southgate Shopping Center) and go to Maryville Pike. Turn left here and you will see the cemetery on your right. (By the way, a photo of the Sultana monument is on P. 3 of the last issue of *The Sultana Remembered*.)

At 6 P.M., meet at Stacey's Cafeteria (same place as last year) located at 314 Merchant Rd., just off I-75, Merchant Rd. exit. There may be some media coverage (radio, newspapers, TV) of our reunion this year due to nationwide interest in our organization aroused by Jerry's book, which is selling very well. Speaking of the book, Jerry will bring some copies with him in case you haven't purchased yours yet. It's a must to own, and a bargain at \$19.95!

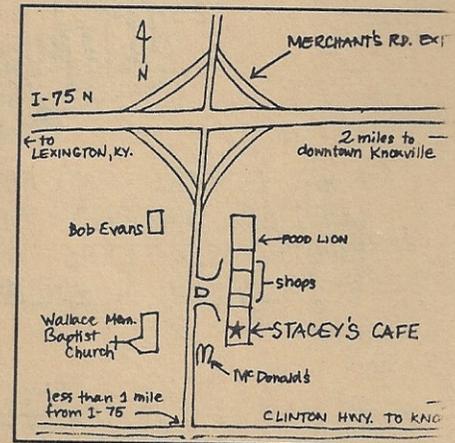
(MAPS ARE NOT TO SCALE)



TO MT. OLIVE CEMETERY



TO STACY'S CAFETERIA



## "THE HONOR ROLL OF THE DEAD"

Continuing the original Sultana Survivors Associations' custom of calling out the names of the Sultana soldiers who had passed away since the previous reunion, we carry on with the men of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, begun last issue:

James Boles, James Brown, Joseph Copeland, Thomas D'Armond, James M. Ellison, John Henry Ferguson, William B. Hancock, John Wesley Henry, Jesse Marshall Huffaker, Abner Long, Richard M. Pierce, James Reneau, John C. Reneau, Thomas Reneau, John Saylor, John Robinson Smith, Jonathan H. Rice, William Harin, O.E. Hines, James H. Hooper, James D. Knight, John Long, William E. Mansfield, Thomas Monroe Mansfield, James Anderson, Robert M. Elza, Holston Griffin, C. Meinsel, Spencer R. Williams, James C. Anderson, William A. Baker, William J. Burley, Edmund M. Burnett, Hugh A. Burnett, William B. Burnett, William R. Cruse, Joshua A. Haun, William J. Hickey, Peter Hickman, James Hines, James M. Johnson, James F. Kidd, Martin V. May, John W. Miller, William C. Kirkpatrick, John R. Kirkpatrick, McPherson Ramsey, Riley J. Manies, James M. Carter, Ebenezer A. Murphy, John M. Murphy, Morgan Ottinger, Joseph A. Simpson, John Smith, Claiborne Swaggerty, Drewey A. Witenbarger, Andrew J. Wrinkle, Marian Thomas, John Rice, David Nahum Sanders, William H. Ferguson, Elijah M. Norvell, James K. Estes, Harlen C. Jones, John B. Hamilton, Charles Bedwell, Charles H. Bogart, Jesse L. Bookout, Harvey Cochoran, James R. Collins, Elisha Davis, Jason M. Elliott, Jasper W. Elliott, John C. Elliott, Frank Finger, Emanuel L. Fisher, James Fulfer, Robert N. Hamilton, Dewitt E. Harris, James H. Hicks, J. Wiley Hodges, E. Howell, James M. Kinnamon, Thomas J. Leonard, Melvin P. Long, Benjamin L. Marr, Marcus D. McClure, Bartley R. McMurry, William Melton, Thomas Paugh, Joseph J. Pierce, Robert Reed, Andrew John Rue, Ishum Skaggs, James C. Skaggs, G. Sprongle, William M. Stone, John R. Usry, Samuel A. Wayland, Rufus M. Bailey, Henry C. Hamilton, Dewitt E. Harris, Edward Lee, Thommas J. Allen, George W. Maxwell, Solomon F. Bogart, Henry M. Missimer, Jesse Millard, David M. Williams, B. Badget, Cleaver Baker, Jacob Baker, James Baker, John Baker, James Brooks, Hugh S. Campbell, Joseph H. Collins, Richard David Curten, Charles M. Eldridge, Thomas Everett, Alexander Gross, James Hamilton, Peter Hudson, Montgomery Jordan,

*To be continued....*

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## NEW NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS....

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- Judith Tucker, 5325 Kester Brooke Blvd., Knoxville TN 37918
- Lori Smyre, 2814 Honeysuckle Ln., Rockford, TN 37853
- Raymond Millsaps, 2338 Loma Vista Place, Los Angeles, CA 90039. Great grandson of Jesse Wallace Millsaps, Jr., 3rd Tenn. Cavalry

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## CORRECTION!

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*She is not in directory*

Mrs. Elsie Huffaker of Knoxville wrote to say that the photo of the seven Sultana survivors on p. 5 of last months The Sultana Remembered was incorrectly identified. Instead of the man with the long white beard (4th from left) being Pryor Draper, he is in fact, her father, Jesse Huffaker. The newspaper apparently had misidentified him. Mrs. Huffaker writes that she "was glad to know the date (of the photo). I remember that reunion (1920) was at Mt. Olive Cemetery. Papa, Mama, brother Roy and I went on our T Model Ford, had lunch on the ground." Thanks, Mrs. Huffaker, for that important correction.

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## FROM THE EDITOR.....

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A lot of you have been sending me information to pass on to the rest of the subscribers. I really appreciate hearing from you! Keep those letters coming! I especially want to hear stories from Sultana descendants about their ancestors to use for the Fall 1992 newsletter; please send me any and all items of interest as soon as possible.

Descendant Sherry Marine of Sutter Creek, CA would like us all to be aware of a service available from the Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, PA.: The Barracks maintains a large collection of photos of Civil War soldiers and they will search for any specific soldier upon request. The address is: Department of the Army, U.S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA 17013-5008. Thanks, Sherry.

Gary Whitcraft, Midwest Representative for Pelican Publishing Co. (publishers of Jerry Potter's Sultana book) gave me a copy of The Egregious Steamboat Journal, an excellent magazine printed on heavy

gloss paper, published six times a year in the grand old riverboat town of Louisville, KY. There are lots of photos of and info about steamboats, old and new. For example, the last issue had a very interesting article called "The Clerk", which explained, among other things, how the First Clerk could either make or break the reputation of the boat on which he worked: He was the crew member whose job it was to keep the passengers happy. The Journal is available for \$20./year from: P.O. Box 3046, Louisville, KY 40201-3046.

A word here about your Sultana Remembered subscriptions: Look on your mailing label and you will see in the lower right hand corner a subscription code - like, SP92, for example. This means that Spring 1992 will be your last issue. (The SR is published four times a year, hence, "WI, SP, SU, FA"). After this current issue, the subscription price will be \$6. per year just so that I can keep up with last year's postage increase and

rising paper, computer, and printing costs. I hope this won't be a problem for any of you. We have only lost 3 subscribers since beginning 3 years ago, and those were organizations that subscribed in order to receive a certain issue that was of special interest to them. There are now 97 subscribers; we started with 20. It is my very great pleasure to serve you in this way and I solicit your comments always.

I hope you all have a wonderful time at the reunion - Larry and I will join you next year!



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Upcoming newsletter feature stories:

- "Yankees from the Great Lakes State on Board the *Sultana*" (The Soldiers from Michigan), Pam Newhouse, Summer 1992
  - "Family Stories from Sultana Descendants", Fall, 1992
- .....