

Steamboat Rivalry on the Columbia River:

Captain Ernest Spencer vs. The Dalles, Portland and Astoria Navigation Company

by Mychal Ostler

Despite the Pacific Northwest's irreversible transition to the railroad network so vital to the area today, steam navigation on inland waters held strong into the first decade of the 20th century. On the Columbia River, the nimble and durable sternwheeler was a commercial favorite: low rates, accessibility and often superior reliability minimized risk both for shippers and travelers, especially when floods and snowstorms rendered railroad tracks inoperable.

Still, steamboat owners were under pressure and had to constantly compete for revenue, not just with new railroad companies, but also, and much more intensely, with each other. Rate-cutting, racing, aggressive advertising, and even the use of force were common strategies operators employed to win an advantage over other lines. Possibly the last of these rivalries to play out on the Columbia was the between local transportation conglomerate, The Dalles, Portland and Astoria Navigation Company (DPAN), and Captain Ernest Spencer, a veteran steamboat captain with a 45-year career. From 1901 to 1911, these two owners mobilized employees, journalists, and local communities to win customers and disrupt each other in ways that would never be seen again due to a significant decrease in steam navigation and the passing of new antitrust legislation.



Steamboat below the Cascades of the Columbia River, 1901. The Cascade Locks and Canal were completed by the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1896 to enable steamboats to bypass the rapids and access the lower parts of the river to The Dalles.

In the late 1890s, DPAN enjoyed a monopoly over all river traffic between Portland and The Dalles, Oregon. The absence of an alternative steamboat service on this hundred-mile reach of the Columbia River frustrated patrons, whose complaints about DPAN's exorbitant freight charges and unreliable schedules made their way into local newspapers.

Given the frustration, Captain Spencer detected a business opportunity. In 1901, he refitted his towboat, the *Charles R. Spencer*, with an extended cabin and began shipping freight and passengers between Portland and The Dalles. Immediately, the *Spencer* won the affections of small riverside communities. She was praised for her reliability, comfort, and faithful service



The 1,243-mile Columbia River is the 4th largest river in the United States (by volume). Navigable for hundreds of miles inland from the sea, it has been used as a transportation route since ancient times. When steamboat travel arrived on the river in the 19th century, it was used to connect communities and allowed further development of cities and towns along its banks. Infrastructure projects along the river, including locks, canals, dams, and dredging, have made it navigable to ship traffic far beyond the shallows and rapids that restricted travel for the better part of the 19th century and before. Today, oceangoing commercial ships can navigate as far as Portland, Oregon, and smaller vessels and barges can make it as far as Lewiston, Idaho, via its largest tributary, the Snake River.

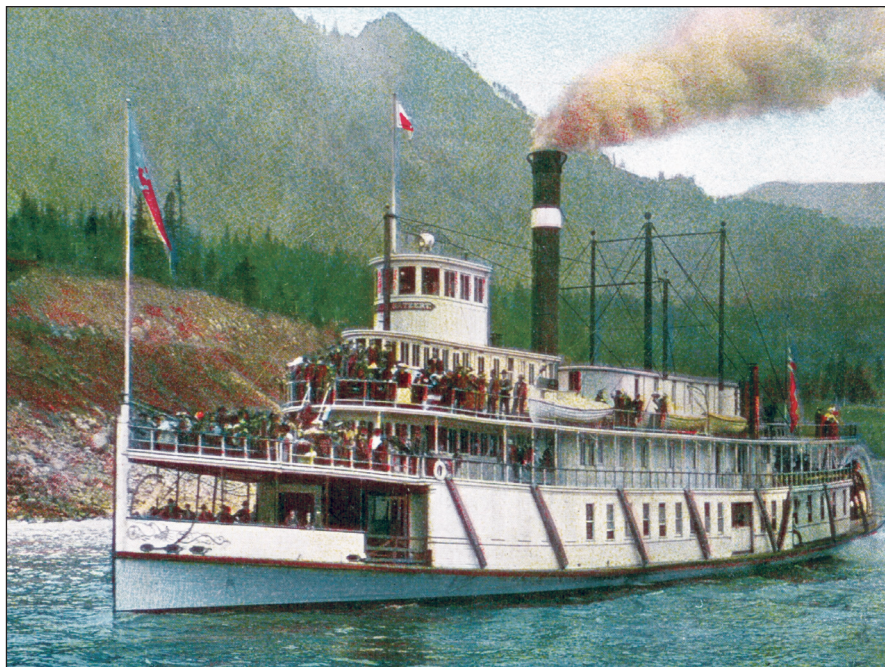
to numerous waypoints that DPAN's stern-wheelers routinely passed by.

DPAN management was attuned to the glowing reviews of its new competitor, as well as their company's recently decreased revenue. It acted quickly and with aggressive measures to restore dominance in the Portland-The Dalles market. First, DPAN changed the schedules of its most popular sternwheelers, the *Dalles City* and *Bailey Gatzert*, to match the itinerary of the *Charles. R. Spencer*. Later, DPAN attempted to block the *Spencer* from landing at certain docks by threatening Captain Spencer with legal action and constructing a barbed-wire fence around the wharf in Lyle, Washington.

Early one morning after a layover, the *Dalles City* snuck out of the harbor an hour before her scheduled departure time. Landing at Bingen, Washington, far ahead of the other steamers, the *Dalles City* crew approached consigners of a cattle shipment waiting to be loaded onto the *Spencer*. After the crew convinced the reluctant shippers that the transfer of their freight had already been authorized by Captain Spencer, the *Dalles City* loaded the cattle and made off downstream.

Word of DPAN's attempts to sabotage the *Spencer* spread quickly along the river. Journalists supporting the *Spencer* published expressions of outrage in local newspapers, admonishing DPAN management, calling for a wholesale boycott of its services and casting Captain Spencer as a hero.

The press fueled a bitter rivalry, publishing facts, rumors, and daily developments of what escalated into a rate war between the two steamboat operators. DPAN was the first to issue price cuts, announcing new rates at ports of call and in the streets of The Dalles, where its representatives hung posters and handed out fliers. Captain Spencer responded by offering even deeper discounts, and the two companies took turns undercutting each other. As rates shrank, river traffic grew. Soon, railroads running through the Columbia Gorge found themselves losing business, and hotels at The Dalles were crammed to capacity each night. Eventually, demand proved too much for the *Spencer*, and her captain was forced to turn away customers. His only relief came when he called off the war and raised prices.



The sternwheeler *Bailey Gatzert* pictured on a postcard dated 1910. The steamboat was built in Ballard, Washington, and launched in 1890. Her machinery was manufactured in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was carried to the West Coast by train. (below) The *Charles R. Spencer* and the *Bailey Gatzert* in the Cascade Locks, c. 1906.





The Bailey Gatzert (at left) and the Charles R. Spencer steering for the Cascade Locks.

Nevertheless, even after the rate increases, demand for the steamboats remained high. The opening of new resorts and the Lewis and Clark Exposition boosted tourism along the Columbia River and generated a steady stream of customers. The competitive landscape encouraged more challenges and exhibitions between steamboat operators. Impromptu steamboat races between the *Spencer*, *Dalles City*, and *Bailey Gatzert* became routine during the summer months to the delight of passengers, shoreside spectators, and newspaper editors, who sent their reporters on cruises to bring back photographs and action-packed narratives for publication.

Not everyone was impressed with the sport of steamboat racing. Collisions were not uncommon and disaster only narrowly averted. The public admonished captains for putting their equipment and patrons at risk. Complaints were made by those working and living along the Willamette River about the dangerous wakes generated from the giant stern paddlewheels as they churned past crowded waterfronts. By 1907, the federal government became involved and issued a speed limit of eight miles per hour between Ross and Swan Islands.

Passengers socialize and take in the view on the hurricane deck as the Charles R. Spencer stands by below the lower gates at Cascade Locks. Light clothing and opened cabin windows suggest a warm day on the river.

Though steamboat captains often ignored the new speed limit, it provided others a means to redress grievances about what some considered reckless behavior. Captain Spencer was summoned to testify in court several times for investigations about the *Spencer*, such as when her powerful wake allegedly snapped the moorings of a large log raft and sent it adrift.

By 1911 Ernest Spencer was growing increasingly fatigued with the demands of managing his business, piloting his stern-

wheeler, and fighting legal battles. He sold the *Spencer* to a local lumber company, which ran her as a towboat and for occasional passenger excursions. In 1914, she was sold again and sent to San Francisco for use in the Sacramento River; she later sank and broke apart in San Pablo Bay.

Soon after the loss of the *Spencer*, the DPAN steamboats were also sold to new owners, who continued running the *Dalles City* and *Bailey Gatzert* during the summer tourist season. Neither tourism nor the freight markets were ever the same, however, as the completion of a second railroad and the first automobile highway through the Columbia Gorge significantly reduced river traffic. By 1922, what remained of the DPAN fleet had either been destroyed or sold and only the occasional steamboat was seen paddling between Portland and The Dalles. ⚓

Mychal Ostler is a lifelong Pacific Northwest maritime history enthusiast. Raised on the shores of the Columbia River and having worked several seasons as an engineer aboard the sternwheeler Columbia Gorge, Ostler is intimately familiar with paddle steamer operations and lower Columbia River navigation. Mr. Ostler can be reached at mychal.ostler@gmail.com.

