

Willow, 1927



WAGL-253

A deciduous tree or shrub of the genus *Salix*, with usually narrow leaves, flowers borne in catkins, and strong lightweight wood.

Builder: Dubuque Boat & Boiler Company, Dubuque, Iowa

Length: 200'

Beam: 65'

Draft: 6' 6"

Displacement: 1,070 tons

Cost: \$348,732

Commissioned: 4 October 1927

Decommissioned: 1 March 1945

Disposition: Transferred to the US Army Corps of Engineers

Machinery: 2 non-condensing steam engines; 6 oil-fired western river boilers; independent wood side-paddle wheels; 800 SHP

Performance & Endurance:

Max: 7.5 knots
Cruising: 4.0 knots; 1,300 miles

Deck Gear: 2 light derrick masts

Complement: 21 (1930); 44 (1944)

Armament: None

Electronics: None

Tender History:

The *Willow* was designed specifically for service on the Mississippi River as a replacement for the tender *Oleander*. Two main features of her design were the complete plating of the underside of the guards and the longitudinal stiffness of the hull obtained by using a system of guiders instead of hog braces. Her side-wheels were 23.5 feet in diameter, nine feet wide, and had three-foot buckets. Each wheel was driven by a non-condensing, single engine, 27 inches in diameter by seven-foot stroke. There were six boilers, each 28 feet in length by 42 inches in diameter. By all accounts she was underpowered, particularly when she battled the spring winds and currents of the lower Mississippi region. As a result, the return trip from New Orleans, where she spent the winters, was often delayed. She was the last side-wheel tender in the Lighthouse Service.

Bids for her construction were first opened in March and May of 1924 but the bids were rejected on both occasions. On 7 June 1924, however, a contract was made with the Dubuque Boat and Boiler Works for constructing and equipping the *Willow* for the sum of \$327,000. When accepted by the government she immediately started from the shipyard down river to St. Louis, escorted by the tender *Wakerobin* to assist her over shallow patches in the river during a prevailing low stage of water. En route the *Willow* underwent trials on Lake Keokuk, Iowa, and then proceeded to St. Louis and from there to New Orleans for docking and final painting. She was placed in commission on 4 October 1927. Her first commanding officer was Captain Tom Good. Her next commanding officer, LT Charles B. Berniard, commanded *Willow* for 14 years. The *Willow* was assigned to the 15th Lighthouse District and was based out of Memphis and tended river aids to navigation from New Orleans to St. Louis. She spent the winter months in New Orleans.

She became a commissioned Coast Guard cutter upon the merger of the Lighthouse Service with the Coast Guard in 1939 and received the designation

and hull number WAGL-253. During World War II she continued tending aids to navigation from New Orleans to Memphis. For a description of her duties during World War II, see the following narrative provided in a letter to the USCG Historina's Office by former crewman YN2 Earl F. Stege, USCGR, who served aboard *Willow* from September, 1943 to February, 1945.

The CGC WILLOW was built for the U.S. Lighthouse Service, by the a ship-building company in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1927. The Coast Guard took over the duties of the Lighthouse Service in 1930s. The WILLOW was 200' long, 64 ' wide and drafted 9' of water. The skipper of the WILLOW was Lt. Charles Berniard. He was the captain of the WILLOW when it was commissioned. There were several seaman still attached when I came on board. The WILLOW was the only side-wheeler that the Coast Guard had.

The U.S. Army Corps of Eng. tried to maintain a 9' channel on the lower Mississippi river. (The WILLOW drafted 9' of water). It was said by pilots and captains of various barges, Navy and Army ships when they saw the WILLOW they knew the water was safe for passage. Needless to say the WILLOW would touch bottom numerous times. The under-current of the Mississippi was rapid and churned the sand a lot and sand bars would develop and that effect would change the channel. New markings would have to be made. The boatswain or [coxswain] would sound the river with a rope and a lead weight looking for Mark Twain. Changed to the light structures would have to be made, trees had to be cut, brush also cut (no power tools) axes, scythe, saws. Banks would erode by eddies forming by the current of the river, causing big plots of earth going into the river only tree tops could be seen, some trees would be 30 to 40 feet tall. It took a lot of man power to do the cutting some times a 100' would have to be cut so the barges and ships could see the lights.

The WILLOW had a 38' boat attached for assistance. The 38' would go where the WILLOW could not. It was also used to assist the WILLOW in going up stream when the current was so strong. The WILLOW would have to put steam up through the smoke stack to get more power. The 38' would be used to take channel light changes to the various barges and ships upon request. It was also used to get the mail for the ship which was forwarded by the DCGO [District Coast Guard Office] in St. Louis, to cities along the Mississippi.

The tour of duty on the WILLOW for ships office consisted of all personnel actions, payroll actions, [subsistence] reports for officers and enlisted men, transportation requests, inventory reports, purchase orders for open market, mess reports, consolidated reports for month, daily logs, daily channel reports, liberty rosters, seaman duties, life saving duty, [pharmacist] duty[:] minor cuts and bruise[s], [chaplain] dutines.

The WILLOW, not a [buoy] tender, usually made four round trips a year. There were shorter trips. When floods would come, the WILLOW would wait till the

rises are over and. start at Cairo, Ill., and change lights, usually the Lamplighters would try to re-establish the lights. In 1944 the responsibilities of the WILLOW [were] divided, Cairo, Ill., to Rosedale, Miss., and the CGC WAKEROBIN was assigned duties from Rosedale, Mississippi to Baton Rouge, La. The WAKEROBIN was a [buoy] tender.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engrs., was responsible for [buoy] maintenance in the lower Mississippi river area. The various districts had dredging operations and it was a constant duty, due to the changing of the river bottom.

**Earl F. Stege, WWII Coast Guard Reserve
Letter to USCG Historian's Office, dated November 28, 1996**

On 15 December 1944 the *Willow* collided with USS *LST-841* and both ships received considerable damage. At this time she was under the command of LT H. G. Weber. It was decided that the cost of repairs and continued maintenance on the *Willow* was prohibitive and it was decided to decommission her. She was formally decommissioned on 1 March 1945. Her machinery was removed and she was then turned over to the Corps of Engineers who used her as a Quarters Boat (QB-2732), where she served as a messing and berthing facility for laborers, including at one time German POWs who were used as laborers. She was sold into private hands in 1962. In 1971 she was overhauled for use as a lobster factory in British Honduras but apparently that deal fell through. She eventually ended up in Belgium and was renovated in 1990. By 1999 she was on display in London, England.



USCGC *Willow* [WAGL-253]; no caption/photo number; date unknown; photo by Esther F. Cohn.

Willow, a 200-foot, 1,070 ton, side paddlewheel river tender, was built by the Dubuque Boat & Boiler Works for the US Lighthouse Service for service on the Mississippi River. She was commissioned in 1924 and was decommissioned and transferred to the Army Corps of Engineers in 1945. She had two noncondensing steam engines powered by six "western river" type 225 psi oil-fired boilers. Her maximum speed was 7.5 knots and her economic cruising speed was a stately 4.0 knots. She was stationed at Memphis.

The following was an article that was published in the March-April 1971 issue of the 2nd Coast Guard District's publication *River Currents* (pp. 4-5).

FORMER CG CUTTER SOLD DOWN THE RIVER

The Waterways Journal recently reported that the former U.S. Lighthouse Service and U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Willow* was to be, literally and figuratively, sold down the river. The side-wheel steamboat was going to British Honduras to serve as a lobster factory.

The thought brought to mind pictures of a sweating, rusting hulk swarmed over by sweating, cussing lobstermen, men who were not aware of, or could not care less for the vessel's proud history. To this writer, it seemed an ignoble fate for a ship that was once considered "the pride of the U.S. Lighthouse Service."

Built in 1927 at Dubuque, Iowa, the USLHS Willow was one of the sturdiest and statliest [sic] riverboats afloat. One old timer recalled his first impression of the 200-foot Willow thinking that it was a private yacht, and definitely not a working riverboat. As well constructed as the Willow was, she was decidedly underpowered. Her large side wheels were often inadequate against the heavy Spring winds and currents of the lower Mississippi region. As a result, the return trip from New Orleans, where she wintered, was often delayed.

After 18 years of servicing shore aids on the Lower Mississippi, the Willow was decommissioned by the Coast Guard, and turned over to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers [CofE] who gutted and stripped her of her dignity as a steamboat.

All propulsion gear, including the huge side-wheels, were removed and sold as scrap. The pilothouse was removed and placed on a CofE crane barge, and a third deck was added to the Willow. Her job now was to provide messing and berthing for CofE work crews, among them, German POW's used as laborers during the late months of World War II.

A fogbank of faulty memory and fiscal fiasco shrouds Willow history after she was sold by the CofE in 1962. The purchaser, Mr. A. J. Baron of Paducah, Kentucky, envisioned her as a floating restaurant and motel. This plan did not materialize, and the Willow, as a result, remained tied-off at Paducab until 1965. Upon her sale to the W.S. Young Construction Company in 1965, the Willow was towed south to New Orleans by the M/V Southland. Young Construction used the Willow briefly before the company was beset with financial difficulties. The Willow foundered too . . .

While tied-off at LaPlace, Louisiana, Hurricane Betsy beached the 200-foot vessel high on a levee. The Willow remained there suffering the ravages of vandals until she was rescued by the U.S. Marshall in New Orleans. However, this rescue was actually a seizure, and the Willow's troubles were continued. Sold on the Marshall's auction block, she was purchased by Mrs. Freida Parker, who is reported to be a relative of a member of the Young Construction Company.

Mrs. Parker sold the Willow to its present owners in the fall of 1970. The new owners, Belezian Industries, bought her as an investment, hoping for an early and profitable sale. One prospective buyer, as reported in the Waterways Journal, planned to operate the Willow in British Honduras as a lobster factory. After a reported \$18,000 was spent in renewing 45' of the ship's bow, however, the deal fell through.

So, that's the situation today. The former USLHS / USCGC Willow remains moored at Harvey, Louisiana . . . without a purpose, and without a foreseeable future. Her asking price: \$38,000 . . . maybe less!

Sources:

Cutter History File. USCG Historian's Office, USCG HQ, Washington, D.C.

Douglas Peterson. *United States Lighthouse Service Tenders, 1840-1939*. Annapolis: Eastwind Publishing, 2000.

Robert Scheina. *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982.

