

STEAMBOAT CARDS AND THE MISSISSIPPI MYSTIQUE

By Rod Starling

In August of 1807, Robert Fulton successfully sailed his newly invented steamboat, the "Clermont", from New York City up the Hudson River 150 miles to Albany in 30 hours. In 1811, he launched his steamboat, *New Orleans* from its name sake city and began a passenger and freight route to Natchez, Mississippi. Thus began the Steamboat Era that grew by leaps and bounds.

By 1820, there were an estimated 69 steamboats plying the waters of not only the Mississippi but also the Missouri River, the tributaries of both and the Ohio River. By 1845, the estimated number of steamboats in operation was 557 and by 1860, the number increased to 735.* Steamboats were used mainly to transport goods and other commodities. Passenger accommodations were at first rather shabby, but shabby or not, the stage was set for the entrance of the Mississippi River Boat professional gamblers and card sharps. It has been said that if those gamblers had been asked to devise a perfect setting in which to practice their craft, a better scenario could not have been imagined than that presented by the steamboats.*

There were trips of long or short duration with a captive pool of unwary farmers, bankers, and business men of all kinds who were willing and eager to participate in poker and other games of chance. In early days, the card sharps were a rough and ready lot. Their early victims were usually members of the crew but later on, as passenger accommodations improved, they assumed the trappings of respectability, dressing in high style, even to the point of being dandified, and cultivating manners and education sufficient to lure unsuspecting victims to the gaming tables. Oddly, even though there were notices aboard the boats warning passengers to beware of gambling, the games flourished and small fortunes were lost by the hapless. The accounts of such losses and the practices of the Mississippi Riverboat card sharps became legendary and created a mystique that still lingers to this day.

Although the old time steamboats have long since left the scene, their modern reincarnations, in the form of elaborate floating tourist attractions are still to be found and I think that it is safe to say that their presence on the very rivers where the card sharps of old once held forth still stirs fantasies in men who would love to don a rich brocade vest, a diamond pinky ring and take a seat at the green felt table

amid the lavish Victorian furnishings that eventually came to adorn the steamboat parlors. One such reincarnation is the *Natchez* which has been rebuilt several times. In fact, it has its own website: www.steamboatnatchez.com. A visit to that site disclosed the following rather remarkable report:

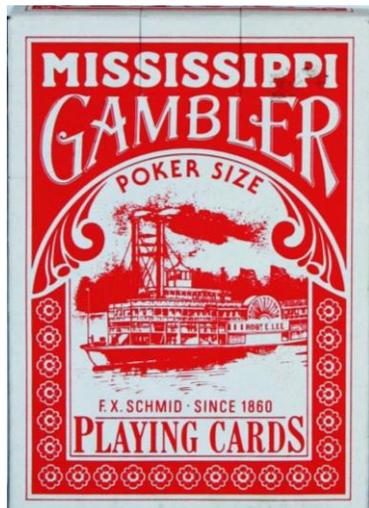
She's the ninth steamer to bear the name "Natchez". It was her predecessor, "Natchez VI" that raced the "Robert E. Lee" in the most famous steamboat race of all time. Even today, the NATCHEZ is proudly the undisputed champion of the Mississippi, never having been beaten in a race. In many ways, she's the best of her line.

A remarkable report because there is something very wrong here. The story about the boat race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee* is told in the 1978 Time-Life book, *The Old West-The Gamblers*, according to which the *Robert E. Lee* won the race against the first *Natchez* in 1870! The story captures the flavor of the time and is worth summarizing here as follows:

"Competition for passenger and cargo business was great among the various steamboat companies operating on the Mississippi River and in the summer of 1870, a bitter rivalry developed between John W. Cannon, Master of the *Robert E. Lee* and Thomas P. Leathers, Master of the *Natchez*. It was realized by both Masters that the fastest boats would attract the most shipping business but when they both published public notices denying any intent to compete in a 1,200 mile race from New Orleans to St Louis, few believed them. Newspapers, including some in Europe, proclaimed it to be the race of the century and huge amounts of money were wagered on the outcome.

And so about 5 pm on June 30, 1870, the two steamboats left their moorings and headed upriver. Great crowds descended upon the river towns along the route such as Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis to watch as the boats passed by trailing great plumes of sparks and charcoal-black smoke in their wake. It must have been a grand sight indeed. Master Cannon, aboard the *Robert E. Lee*, fiercely determined to win the race, engaged the services of another boat that he had waiting midway from which he undertook a dangerous refueling operation while still proceeding forward through fog. Master Leathers of the *Natchez* growled that any sane man would have laid up. The *Robert E. Lee* made the trip to St Louis in 3 days, 18 hours and 14 minutes, more than six hours ahead of the *Natchez*. Her time was never equaled."

That story would appear to be at variance with the report on the website of the Natchez. I wonder which one is correct? All of the references that I found on the internet state that the race was won by the *Robert E. Lee*. In any event, it seems clear that it was the general mystique of the steamboats that inspired card makers of a slightly later period to produce the famous *Steamboats* brand of playing cards, a brand that until just a few years ago was still in production by the *United States Playing Card Company*. With that brand, steamboats and other related things like cotton bales and deck hands were pictured variously on the Aces of Spades, the Jokers and on the card boxes. No doubt, some of the graphics are also of interest to collectors of black American culture. While USPC saw fit to abandon the *Steamboats* brand, two enterprising men, doing business as Dan & Dave (www.dananddave.com) collaborated with USPC to reissue it. Consequently, and happily, the *Steamboats* brand is thereby still available. It would have been a pity to abandon not only the brand of cards but also along with it a part of historic Americana. The mystique of the steamboats, the *Mississippi Gamblers* and also the Old West in general is still felt to this day, even across the seas in Europe.



In support of that fact, I am showing a scan of a box containing a deck called *Mississippi Gambler Playing Cards* that states that it was made by the German maker, F.X. Schmid, in West Germany! For reasons that follow, I am inclined to believe that the deck was Schmid's attempt to compete with the *Steamboat* brands. Both the box and the back design of the cards show a picture of the steamboat, *Robert E. Lee* and with the story of its victorious race against the *Natchez* in mind as related in the *Time-Life* book, we can appreciate why F.X. Schmid chose to picture it on its *Mississippi Gambler Playing Cards*. When the race took place in

1870, Schmid had already been in business ten years but the event evidently left a lasting impression. F.X. Schmid is no longer in the playing card business.

As to the dating of the Schmid deck, the following facts must be considered. After World War II, in 1949, Germany was divided into two separate countries, East and West Germany. In May, 1990, the country was reunified into one entity, the Federal Republic of Germany. Accordingly, my copy of the *Mississippi Gambler* deck, if made in West Germany as stated on the box, would necessarily have had to been made between 1949 and 1990 and I would therefore approximate the year as c.1969. However, the Ace of Spades states made in Germany. That makes the dating of the deck more difficult. Dating it c.1949, the earliest possible date if made in West Germany, would seem to be a little belated with respect to the steamboat race that took place in 1870. It must therefore be considered that perhaps the *Mississippi Gambler* deck was originally produced in pre-war Germany, at a time closer to the event, and continued in production even after the war using the original plate for the Ace of Spades that states "made in Germany" but updating the box for issues between 1949 and 1990 to reflect "made in West Germany".

A further fact to be considered is that the court cards used in the deck are those that I pictured as Type D in the June, 2013 edition of *Clear the Decks*, page 19, which were used as far back as 1895 by the United States Playing Card Company, Russell & Morgan Factories, for its *Steamboat* brand. As far as I have been able to determine, those courts were last used by USPC in 1943 for its *Bicycle* brand. It would therefore appear that F.X. Schmid had access to those Type D court card designs from 1895 to 1943. That tells us that my particular deck could not have been made before 1895 even though the boat race took place in 1870. However, it is quite possible, even likely, that the *Mississippi Gambler* brand was introduced prior to 1895, using different court card designs and perhaps at a time closer to the racing event. The permutations of the question are too numerous for further discussion here. Therefore, as far as my particular deck is concerned, I will stay with c.1969.

I am including some photos of old steamboats obtained from the "Dave Thomson Collection" that, by way of the internet, he has kindly posted permission to use. From my own collection, I am also including pictures of some cards and boxes from the *Steamboats* brand that were issued by various ear-

ly American makers. They are all great images and capture the allure of an American era that will continue to live in some romantic chamber of our hearts where it is always the nineteenth century and the old steamboats yet ply the majestic Mississippi River.

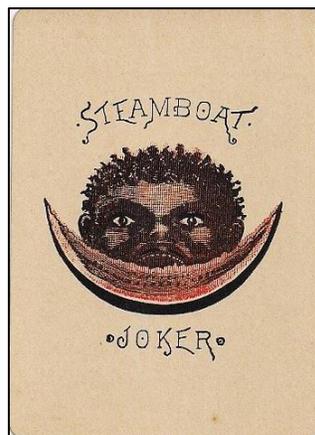
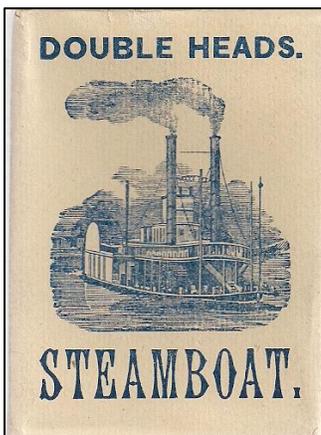
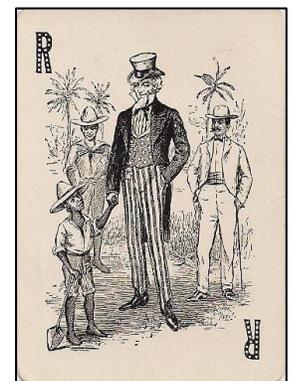
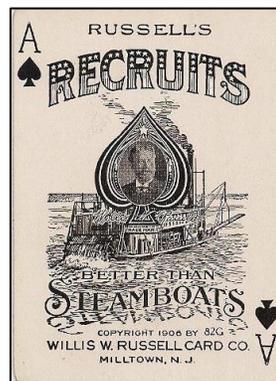
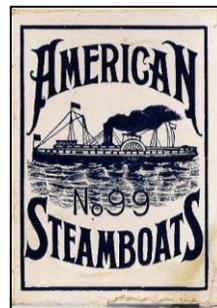
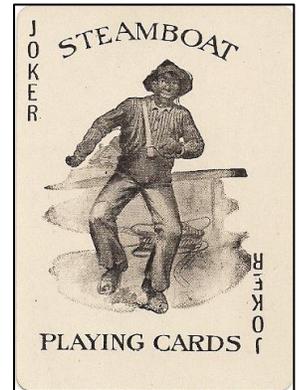
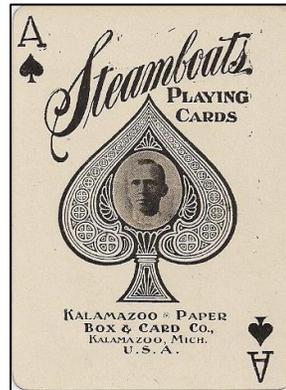
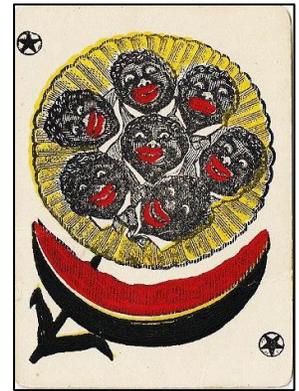
*Time-Life Books, *Old West-The Gamblers*, 1978.



The Red Wing



The Greater New Orleans



Editor's note; Thanks Rod, again you have caught my interest! Steamboats rank high in our collection as do all turn-of-the century playing cards issued with specially designed Spade aces and jokers. These were all made during the early years of standard brand manufacturing and were not manufactured for long. It really delights us whenever we find a standard deck from this period in mint condition as they were made to play with - not to save!