

# END OF THE ROMANCE?

THE HOMELESS MAY HAVE SPELLED THE END FOR THIS STERN-WHEELER  
BY ROGER CAIN

During the last century, there was a certain fascination with recreating the golden era of American Paddle- and Stern-wheelers. Vessels such as the *Reuben E. Lee*, *Mansion Belle*, *Mark Twain*, and *Grand Romance* were all built as business ventures to capitalize on a “gentler” time in American history. *Mark Twain*, for example, is owned by Disneyland and it was the first functional paddle-wheeler built in the USA in a half-century. She was designed by Long Beach Naval Architect D.M. Callis and has been in service since her maiden voyage in 1955.

Todd’s Shipyard built the *Reuben E. Lee* and *Mark Twain*. The *Lee* (later known as *Pride of Newport*) opened as a restaurant in 1964. Later, it housed the Newport Harbor Nautical Museum until 2006. Soon after, she was moved to San Diego. Her funnels

emitted fake smoke while a small engine made her paddlewheel revolve. She was part of the Far West restaurant chain but was actually a barge with a restaurant built on top. In 2012, she sank at her dock and was later scrapped.

*Maison Belle* (later *Spirit of Sacramento*) was built in Long Beach in the 1960s. It caught fire in 1996 and sank. In late 2013, the hulk was hauled up onto the east bank of the Sacramento River.

That brings us to the

*Grand Romance*. The stern-wheeler was built on a sand lot near the Noyo River in Fort Bragg, California, by the Daniel Steel Company and Bill Barker (an electroencephalograph technician) and his father Neal Barker (a WWII USCG veteran and former coin-sorting



*Grand Romance* during its hey-day in Long Beach. Bill Barker recounted: “We were running fishing charters in Bodega Bay and quite frankly I was scared of the liability involved. That, coupled with some bad weather, made me rethink my line of work. I went to Old Sacramento for a family outing on the river and discovered a converted houseboat with a fake paddle-wheel mounted on the side. I talked with the folks on the boat about the great time they had. I guess that’s what gave me the idea. I love to entertain people and this seemed like something good for Long Beach.” (Barker Family)

machine salesman whose hobbies included chicken ranching and running sportfishing expeditions). Eventually, the entire Barker family worked on the ship. It was completed in 1993 as the *Petaluma Queen* and operated up and down the Petaluma River. She was the first stern-wheeler in California in 150 years. The vessel was designed and outfitted to impress with iron smokestacks, a dance floor made of

marble, and a vintage mahogany bar. She had a successful run as a dinner cruise and party boat for the next two decades. However, there were problems.

In 1997, the Barkers were charged with operating an illegal gambling operation aboard the *Petaluma Queen*. The third floor of the ship was outfitted as a gambling parlor with armchairs upcycled from the Palace Hotel. The Barkers hired a “cardroom consultant” named Dennis Luddy who predicted they were on the brink of a multi-



The *Grand Romance* during my August visit. As can be seen, it appears that a storm pushed the vessel up against the bank. During high tide, the lower deck is about half-full of water and this legally classifies the vessel as sunk.



This is what the *Grand Romance* looked like a couple years ago when it was at anchor and before the storm pushed it into the shore.