



# DELTA DISASTERS

TWO HISTORIC SHIPS THAT CALLED THE SACRAMENTO DELTA HOME ARE SLATED FOR A BAD END  
BY ROGER CAIN

In past issues, we have reported on the sad state of some of the vintage vessels docked in and around the Sacramento Delta. This January, camera plane pilot Jerry Anderson and myself set out to record any changes. Well, there have been changes and they are not positive. The *Grand Romance* riverboat had been utilized as a restaurant that sailed the Long Beach Harbor before being moved to berthing near Vallejo, California. The vessel was originally built back in 1990 and went to work as the *Petaluma Queen*,

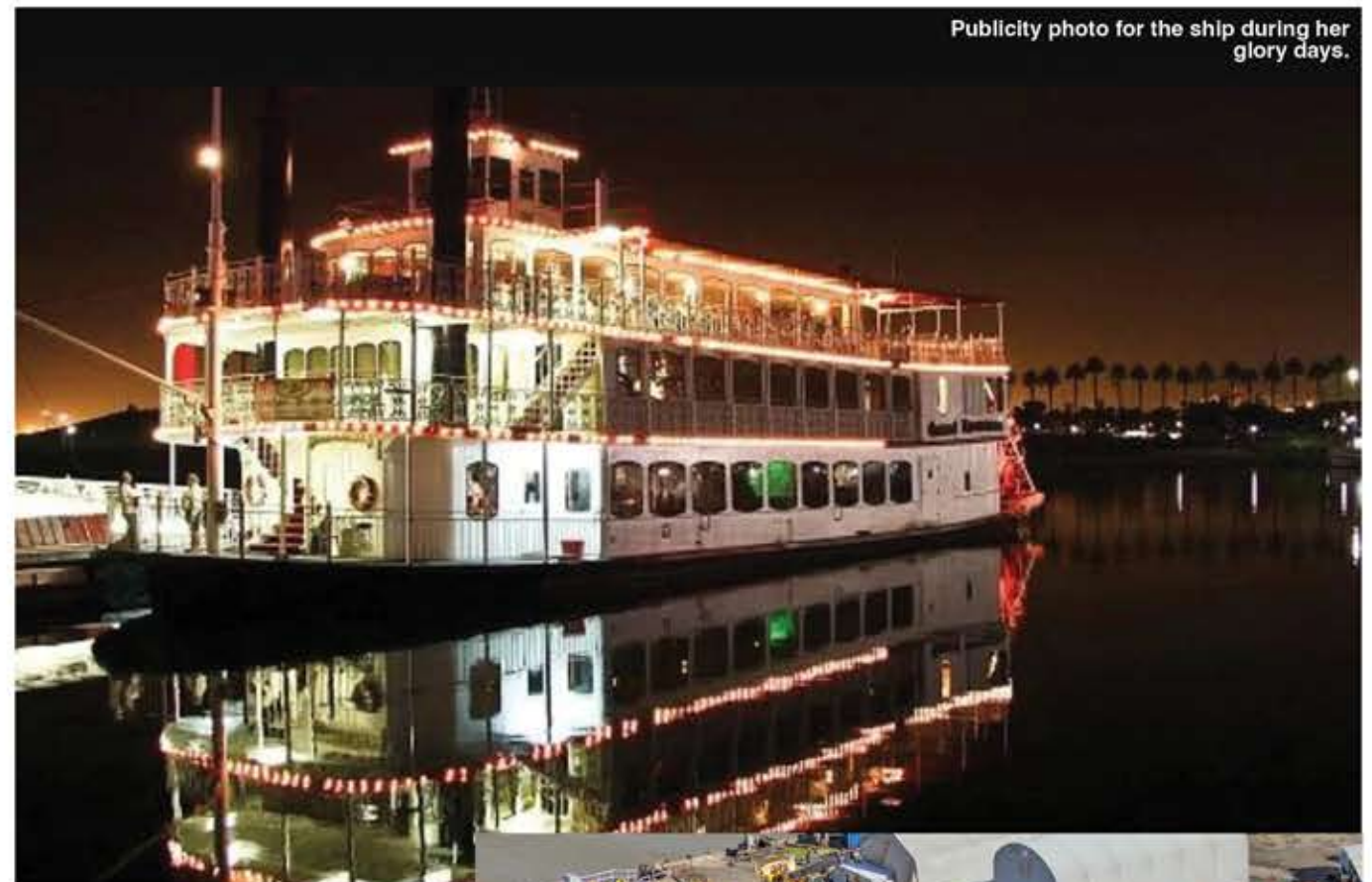
going back and forth on the Petaluma River as the first true California sternwheeler in 150 years. Built with iron smokestacks, marble dance floor, and lots of mahogany including a bar that dated back to 1900, the ship was initially extremely popular. For 20 years the ship enjoyed success but ran into trouble with city officials when the owners attempted to have onboard gambling. This did not work out and the ship set sail for Long Beach.

At Long Beach, she underwent an overhaul but passengers began

reporting various mechanical problems with the ship as well as shoddy service. This led the City of Long Beach to deny an operating permit and the vessel headed back north and was moored at various berths before finally settling down near Vallejo in 2018.

During August 2023, a passing ferry reported that the *Grand Romance* had partially sunk. Then in September of that year, she caught fire and the blaze quickly spread. The Vallejo fire department responded along with

Partially sunk, *Grand Romance* is now a haven for the homeless and, according to the police, drug sales.



Publicity photo for the ship during her glory days.

the US Coast Guard and the fire was knocked out before the entire vessel was consumed. Prior to this, the sternwheeler had been subjected to varying degrees of vandalism and there may have been homeless living aboard when the fire started.

Reported and posted as a dangerous area by the local police, as we orbited the partially sunken ship we could see a large encampment of homeless people nearby. The police have also said that this is an area of high crime and open drug sales. The city of Vallejo has advised “urban adventurers” to be extremely careful if they try to visit *Grand Romance*. Also, the structure of the ship may be compromised by fire and water so do not attempt to board her.

What is the future for *Grand Romance*? It is probably bleak. It seems that this type of entertainment has gone out of style and it would cost a fortune to refloat and repair the sternwheeler. Unless local officials or the Coast Guard take some form of action, it appears *Grand Romance* will continue to go downhill and keep serving as refuge for the homeless and drug users. Vallejo city officials note



*Aurora* in what may be her last stop — a dry dock at Mare Island.

that there is only very limited police protection in the area.

After a few circles, we departed the area and headed out to the famed maritime facility at Mare Island. We were in search of another vessel that had called the Delta home. Over the years, we have featured the ups and downs — sadly, mostly downs — of the *MV Aurora*. Completed as a cruise ship during 1955 in a recovering post-war West Germany, her original name was *Wappen von Hamburg* and she was built for day cruises from Hamburg

to the vacation area of Helgoland and on her initial voyage she carried a full complement of 1600 passengers.

At the time, private cars were not common and a good portion of Germany was still war-damaged. The popular cruises let a war-weary public enjoy a relaxing day in a pleasant environment. Prior to this, Helgoland, an island, was utilized by the British as a bombing area for the Royal Air Force so the British and Germans had to go through an extensive search for unexploded weapons.