

## Mississippi Mishaps

My wife, Maggie Silbar, had been my hiking companion for over fifty years. However, following a series of dislocations and operations on her left hip, her mobility was limited to the point where she had to use a walker to get around. We adjusted our travel plans accordingly. In June of 2018, nonetheless, we were successfully able to take a Road Scholar organized small-boat tour around southeastern Alaska, from Juneau up the Inner Passage and back to Sitka. With our (small) stateroom on the same level as the dining room, she was able to do most of the activities organized for that trip, even being able to handle stairs to get up to an upper deck for viewing of whales and bears.

In view of that trip, I signed us up for another Road Scholar trip in October the next year. It would have involved three days touring in New Orleans, followed by a four-day paddle boat ride up to Memphis. However, I had underestimated how much Maggie's mobility had deteriorated over the year. I thought there ought not be a problem in getting around New Orleans and to and from the boat. That was unfortunately not the case. We flew into New Orleans on a Friday and participated in the activities organized within the hotel we were staying at. But the next day, the three-block walk to the tour bus proved to be too difficult for her. We dropped out of the rest of that trip and returned to our assisted-living arrangement in Santa Fe on Sunday. And, as you already know, I lost my hiking companion about ten months later.

Flash forward to 2022. I fell in love with Jere Turner. We were both recently widowed after long marriages. It is probably more accurate, considering our advanced age, to think of Jere as my walking companion, but we have done small hikes in the area. Anyway, as travel companions, we signed up for the same New Orleans to Memphis trip in April of this year. This time things went as planned, no serious glitches. Not much more to say other than a pleasant vacation-trip with good food, good lectures, and good excursions. The American Queen paddle boat looked like this:



With that under our belts, we began being inundated by expensive-looking four-color flyers from the American Queen Steamship Company to do *more* paddle boat trips with them. Mostly ignorable, but eventually came one offering a two-for-one deal from St. Louis to Minneapolis, this time on the *upper*

Mississippi. Dare we try something that *wasn't* a Road Scholar trip? Sure, why not, and we signed up for their end-of-July voyage. OK, this one involved some glitches, hence the “Mishaps” in the title. Here goes:

The first task was to get to St. Louis in time for the company's orientation meeting and Covid testing on Monday afternoon, July 25. It isn't easy to get from Santa Fe or Albuquerque to St. Louis by that time, but I could find an American Airlines flight from ABQ leaving early that morning, about 6:00 AM. That would involve a transfer in Dallas to another AA flight that would get us to the designated hotel in time that afternoon. So, we opted to drive to Albuquerque on Sunday and stay over at a La Quinta motel, which would also be happy to let us park in their lot for the week we were to be away. They would also take us to the Sunport on their 4:15 AM shuttle, which would mean getting up about 3:30. OK, no big deal. We arrived and got settled there in time for a nice dinner at the Applebee's across the street.

So, Monday, up at the alarm at 3:30. After doing my morning ablutions, I decided to do a last check of my e-mails. To my chagrin, there was one from American at 1:45 AM that Monday morning saying that their flight from DFW to STL had been canceled. (“The plane was broken,” one AA guy said, later.) They were, however, happy to arrange an alternative set of flights, but from ABQ to AUS (Austin, Texas) at 1:41 PM, with a connection to STL that would land there at 8:41 PM. With arrival at the hotel around 10:00 PM, we'd be too late for the orientation and testing.

We decided to take the 4:15 AM shuttle to the airport anyway. Perhaps it would be possible to arrange some other way to get to St. Louis on time? It wasn't, and it also wasn't possible to get anyone at La Quinta to answer the phone – hoping to get back to our vacated room for some more sleep. So, we stayed at the Sunport, reading our e-books, until the 1:41 flight to Austin. I did call the American Queen people to say we'd be late, but they, and the hotel as well, said “No problem, just come when you can.” And that's what we did.

I should also mention that there was *another* early e-mail, about 2:00 AM, which had been sent to Jere, not me. It was from the American Queen people saying that the departure of the American Countess paddle boat would be leaving from Burlington instead of St. Louis. Some sort of problem with a bridge. And a more serious problem with something called a Z-Drive, evidently also broken. The now under-powered paddle boat was to be pushed all the way up the river to Red Wing (a bit short of Minneapolis) by a tug boat! To get to Burlington IA we would be taken by bus for the 3 ½ hour trip, skipping the stop we *would* have made in Hannibal MO. Hmm.

I needn't have worried about missing the testing for Covid, as the steamship company decided that it wasn't necessary if all the passengers and crew could prove they had been vaccinated. In the morning, Tuesday, we woke up to phone alarms warning us about flood dangers – it had rained very heavily during the night. Despite that, after a sumptuous breakfast for us passengers, we got on the bus and the ride to Burlington really lasted more like 4 ½ hours. We slept that night on the American Countess.

For the rest of the week things went pretty well on the Countess. Good meals with compatible people, lots of lectures on navigating the river, nice stops at towns along the way. Here is a photo of us and of our tugboat pushing us along:



In all, a pleasant ride on the boat.

We arrived on schedule at Red Wing and the next morning, Tuesday August 2, we took the 8:00 AM bus up to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport for our flight back to Albuquerque. This was to be on Delta Airlines, since before the trip I had discovered that they had a direct flight from MSP to ABQ, leaving around 11:00 and arriving at a pleasant time in the afternoon. So, I booked that flight, figuring this was the easy part of the whole trip. Not so. A few days before, I got an e-mail saying that Delta was canceling that particular flight. Reason unknown.

Delta's first suggested replacement was that we should fly, at 8:00 AM, to Atlanta and from there fly on to ABQ. That is, to fly southeast and then west to go southwest. But, of course that wouldn't work, since we wouldn't arrive at MSP until about 9:30 that morning. So, they changed things so we would fly at 11:23 AM to Los Angeles and then, with a tight connection, take a flight on to Albuquerque. Whoosh, a long day! And flying southwest to then fly east. Aren't airline hubs just a wonderful invention?

We arrived at the Sunport, got our bags OK, and called La Quinta to pick us up to get back to our car. That motel is only five minutes away, but nobody came. After twenty minutes we gave up waiting and took a taxi to get to the motel and pick up our car. The lady at the front desk did apologize, as she had to check someone in before picking us up. We then drove home, arriving at Brookdale around 7:00 PM. Fortunately, I had called ahead to our dining room, which closes at 6:00 PM, so that they would make up a take-away package of that evening's supper. Unfortunately, we were by then so tired that we skipped that meal and collapsed into bed, saving the packed meals for lunch the next day.

