



# ASMA

## NEWS AND JOURNAL

Winter 2016

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF MARINE ARTISTS

DEDICATED TO THE PROMOTION OF AMERICAN MARINE ART AND THE FREE EXCHANGE OF IDEAS BETWEEN ARTISTS



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# ASMA JOURNAL

## Notes From Brush Hill

by **Charles Raskob Robinson**  
Brush Hill Studios, Washington, CT

In the last issue we met Debra Sanders Nadelhoffer, a Member from Dawsonville, GA and learned how plein air painting transformed her professional life. In this issue we meet Signature Member Michael Frederick Blaser and see another example of how pursuing one's bliss can bring one into a whole new world – in his case, the riverboats of the Western Rivers.

**MICHAEL FREDERICK BLASER**  
Signature Member, Bettendorf, IA  
[www.michaelblaser.com](http://www.michaelblaser.com)

### Discovery

"What is it that confers the noblest delight? What is that swells a man's breast with pride above that which any other experience can bring to him? Discovery!

To be the first - that is the idea. To do something, say something, see something, before anybody else- these are the things that confer a pleasure that compared with other pleasures are tame and commonplace, other ecstasies cheap and trivial. Lifetimes of ecstasy crowded into a single moment."

Mark Twain *Innocents Abroad*

Many ASMA members have experienced this "delight" described by Mark Twain and the Society itself has as well for it has, through its artists, discovered and made known to the world aspects of America's own rich maritime history and

### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> He eventually researched the Pacific coast ports and the rivers of mid-America to document some of their historic maritime activity. In recognition, he was inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, OK, appearing on the cover of its magazine, *Persimmon Hill*, in 1975.



"Cold River" • Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board



tradition. Back when the Society was established nearly four decades ago, founding member and now Emeritus Fellow John Stobart had arrived from England via Canada with a portfolio of maritime paintings to begin a very successful career of celebrating American Atlantic seaports and ships – a career that eventually covered other parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, now Fellow Christopher Travers Blossom, an early student of Stobart, was going to sea (the Atlantic) to get his 'concept' ideas and then return to museums and libraries to research the right vessel and historic setting in which to depict it. The late Fellow Thomas Maclay Hoyne, III (1924-1989) developed his reputation rendering Grand Banks and Gloucester fishing schooners, complementing his first hand experience with models he commissioned Erik Ronneberg to build. Further south, Fellow John Morton Barber, affectionately known as "Mr. Chesapeake," was employing a similar approach to memorialize the "waterman" and their boats on the vast waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

At the same time, other ASMA artists were experiencing this "delight" as they led the discovery of the maritime history of the Pacific coast. The late Fellow Roger David Thimgan (1955-2003), who married another Fellow similarly engaged in capturing the light and wonder of that American coast, Alba June Carey, was a maritime historian as well as brilliant artist. And Mark Myers, a Fellow who now lives in England but had his roots in the American Northwest, is another. At that time, it was said that collectors would turn to Mark if they wanted a Pacific subject that was before 1850 and to David if it was after 1850. Elsewhere Fellow Raymond Massey had arrived from England and found his "delight" working on America's Inland Seas – the Great Lakes.

### Mid-America's Rivers

However, no equivalent of these decades-old efforts on the American coasts and Great Lakes was to be found on the "Western Rivers." Located to the

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west of the original colonies, this was a vast system of rivers in mid-America. The fact that ASMA artists had not focused on these rivers is somewhat amazing for European settlers had used them since René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle (1643-1687) traveled the full length of the Mississippi in 1682. And it is an enormous system: It is the largest drainage system on the North American continent. Flowing entirely in the United States, the Mississippi rises near the Canadian border in northern Minnesota and flows 2,320 miles to the Gulf of Mexico and is joined along the way by the 2,341 mile-long Missouri, the 981 mile-long Ohio and other tributaries, draining all or parts of thirty-one states and two Canadian provinces. The Mississippi is the fourth longest and ninth largest river in the world by discharge. The possibilities were unlimited for an artist willing to dedicate his or her career to it.

But it wasn't until the late 'Eighties that this began to happen. That was when Michael Frederick Blaser, a native of Iowa, and now Signature Member, actively began his voyage of "discovery" – began seeking his "delight." He started to reveal the treasure trove of maritime mid-America that reflects fundamental aspects of American history and is, accordingly, particularly engaging. Fellow Don Demers, a gifted teacher, says that a painting should tell a story and engage the emotions. **Red Sky at Morning** is an example of how Blaser does this. It relates the mid-Nineteenth Century, nationally important affair of the Steamboat **Effie Afton** and the **Rock Island Bridge** on the Upper Mississippi. The context in which the story happens makes it so consequential and significant.

In the middle of the 19th Century owners of riverboats were the principal movers of freight and passengers but railroads were becoming a real competitor; they clashed at every opportunity they met and a principal theater of action was where

the railroads wanted to cross the rivers. "Freedom of navigation" was the battle cry to prevent railroads from constructing the bridges with their piers that jeopardized shipping channels. These were the years before the dream of connecting the coasts by rail had been realized but the railroads and, to a large extent the public, expected this would eventually happen as part of "Manifest Destiny" and the "Opening of the West." The rivermen saw it differently. If they could prevent trains from crossing the divide that the Mississippi afforded, rail competition would be greatly curtailed. And in these years just before the Civil War there was another important element in the picture: Whoever laid rails across the continent first would be the first to settle the West and bring new (slave or non-slave) states into the Union. The

to cross the Mississippi River at Rock Island, IL to Iowa and points further west and the construction challenges to build this six-span, central swivel, 1,581 foot-long wooden bridge came to symbolize the larger issues of freedom of commerce, be it by rail or water, and future of slave verses free states in the West. Jefferson Davis, a Southerner who favored a southern rail crossing, was then American Secretary of War in President Franklin Pierce's administration and he argued that Rock Island, an island in the middle of the Mississippi River, was under his jurisdiction because Fort Armstrong was there - even though at the time it had been shuttered. If successful, Davis could refuse permission and stop the northern route. Steamboat interests challenged on other grounds but eventually approvals were given, appealed



"Red Sky at Morning: Steamer Effie Afton Signaling the Bridge" • Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

bridge across the Mississippi River at Rock Island between Illinois and Iowa would allow the northern route to take the lead but, if it could be blocked, it would allow the Southern states to build their crossing downstream first.<sup>2</sup>

The legal struggles to obtain permission for the railroad from Chicago

and permission to build finally granted by the courts so long as "the bridge did not materially obstruct or interfere with the free navigation of said river." Construction began in 1853 and on April 22, 1856 three steam locomotives pulled eight passenger cars safely across the bridge. The stage was set for the next act.

## (Footnotes)

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee had surveyed the Upper Mississippi years before. Davis, being from the South, favored a route from Savannah, GA to Memphis, TN and then to the West but Congress backed the northern route from New York via Chicago to Davenport, IL and then West. This further fueled pre-Civil War tensions.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly the use of established transportation corridors to thwart new forms of transportation was not new. The network of canals in the American East in the early part of the 19th Century was used to frustrate the rising rail threat – much like the ship owners in the case of the Steamboat **Effie Afton**. That was

overturned. Then, in turn, decades later the railroads, in order to maintain the monopoly they enjoyed moving liquids over land, refused to grant pipelines permission to cross their rights of way. There, too, the courts favored progress and permission was given to the pipelines.

<sup>4</sup> On rivers, the still water between dams is referred to as a "pool." The Club was on Pool 15 of the Upper Mississippi.

<sup>5</sup> The "Upper Mississippi" is the section of the river that flows from its source in northern Minnesota to the confluence with the Ohio River at Cairo, IL. The Lower Mississippi flows from that confluence to the Gulf of Mexico. The Upper Mississippi,

like the Ohio, is made navigable by a series of locks and dams whereas there are none on the Lower Mississippi. Moline is between Lock and Dam 14 – upstream near Hampton, IL – and 15 –downstream near Davenport IA. By way of bearings, Lock and Dam 14 is 492 miles upstream from the confluence of the Ohio and the "pool" – the water between the dams – is 572 feet above sea level.

<sup>6</sup> This is no mean feat given that the Lightning spinnaker is nearly twice the total square footage (300) of the mainsail and jib combined (175).

<sup>7</sup> The Lightning is one of the more popular one-design boats

A mere fifteen days after the successful opening of the bridge, on May 6, the new, state-of-the-art Steamboat *Effie Afton* pushed upriver, successfully passed through the central swivel draw and was 200 feet upstream from the bridge when her starboard engine stopped. She swung hard to the starboard and was swept by the current into one of the piers of the bridge, doing much damage to both bridge and boat. A stove in one of the cabins overturned in the collision, igniting the boat and then the bridge. The boat sunk and by the following day the entire wooden bridge had burned. The railroaders had no doubt that this was a planned fire-ship attack with combustibles put aboard for the mission. The rivermen, on the other hand, now had proof that bridges were a hindrance to free navigation. Open the third and final act.

Captain John Hurd of the Steamboat *Effie Afton* filed suit in U.S. District court in Chicago and thus began the case of *Hurd vs. Rock Island Railroad Company* – a case in which Abraham Lincoln, an adroit Illinois lawyer with railroad litigation experience, was enlisted to defend the Rock Island Railroad. His thorough investigation of the facts and his skills in the courtroom put him on a national stage for the first time. He won the case. A couple of years later, in 1860, he was elected President of the United States and a year later faced the President of the new Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis. In the end, the northern route went ahead and in 1869 the Golden Spike was driven in to connect the coasts by rail; the War resolved whether new states in the West would be slave or free; and, river navigation could no longer thwart the expansion of rail transportation.<sup>3</sup> With episodes like this, it is no wonder that the “Great American Story Teller,” Mark Twain, was at home on the Mississippi!

## (Footnotes)

with over 15,000 built over the 78-year life of the class and they are easily trailered so it is no wonder they are found throughout the Midwest. There are over 500 fleets of them around the globe.  
<sup>8</sup> Although roughly the same length as a Lightning, the C-Scow carries in its single sail more than 23% the sail area of the Lightning’s main and jib combined. This one-design boat was created by Johnson Boatworks in White Bear Lake, Minnesota in 1905 and originally sported a gaff rig. Although materials have changed over the 110-year evolution of the boat, C-Scowlers boast that the critical formula remains the same: “One hull, one large sail, two bilge-boards and one helluva ride!” This is because

## Young Michael Blaser: A Difficult Launching

Army Air Force Sergeant Alfred D. Hardkop was a photographer on a B-17 reconnaissance mission for the 97th Bombardment Group of the 15th Air Force over the Adriatic Sea in 1945 when his plane was shot down. The sole survivor, he was rescued by a Greek fishing boat and successfully hid from the German Army until he could rejoin his unit. After the war he left the service with a Silver Star for “Conspicuous Gallantry and Intrepidity in Action” and an Air Medal with two Oak Clusters (AM/ 2OC) awarded because he “Distinguished himself by meritorious service while participating in an aerial fight.” But he also left with what would be diagnosed today as PTSD.

Upon his return to the States, Alfred Hartkop married Loretta Huyes and they had a son, Donald, and two years later on December 8, 1947 in Davenport, IA his brother, Michael, arrived. Traumatized, his father then left the family, divorced his mother and rejoined the Air Force. Michael and his older brother were placed with their grandparents. It was a rough experience. “I never met my father,” Michael notes, “and remember blaming myself for his departure.” Three years later the brothers were reunited with their mother when she married Stewart Blaser. The couple produced a half-brother, Steve, nine years Michael’s junior. They lived in Moline, part of what is known as the Quad City that also includes on the Illinois side of the Mississippi the towns of East Moline and Rock Island and on the other side of the river in Iowa, the towns of Davenport and Bettendorf.

## Bitten by the Boat Bug Early On

“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

Mark Twain

From an early age, Michael was

fascinated with drawing boats and art but received no encouragement. “My late mother was a home decorator for over twenty years and had many positive attributes but did not agree with my childhood desire to paint boats and never looked at the art world as anything other than a hobby.” Michael not only drew boats and made models of them, he sailed them and even taught his older brother how to sail. “We had a sailing club on the Mississippi that was located in a broad pool<sup>4</sup> upriver from Lock and Dam 15<sup>5</sup> and there I was introduced to the Lightning one-design sloop – a 19-foot centerboard boat designed by the famous naval architects Sparkman and Stevens in 1938 and which sports a 26-foot mast carrying a main, jib and spinnaker managed by a crew of three. I became an experienced crewmember – I fancied my ability to jibe the spinnaker cleanly without collapsing the chute<sup>6</sup> – and was invited to weekend regattas throughout the Midwest.<sup>7</sup> We also had an active racing fleet of C-Scows. These 20-foot long, wide beamed, single sail, twin bilge-board boats are faster than the Lightning but brutal to crew!”<sup>8</sup>

Michael recalls clearly the day he introduced his brother to sailing. “I took him out on Thanksgiving Day back in 1975. The temperature was below freezing, but the river was still open. There was a stiff fresh breeze that afternoon. As we tacked, the spray froze onto the jib and shook itself off in big sheets. On that clear, cold afternoon my brother found a pastime that soon became a passion. Eventually he owned an Etchelle 22 one-design sailboat that he kept on Lake Minnetonka in Minnesota.” He went on to compete in a number of world famous races: The “offshore” inland 338-nautical mile Trans-Superior race from Duluth, MI to Sault Ste. Marie, MN; the 630-nautical mile Australian Sydney-Hobart race from New South Wales to Hobart on the island of Tasmania; the 608-nautical mile Fastnet race from the Isle of Wight, England around the Fastnet Rock in Ireland and back to Plymouth, England; and the 635-nautical mile Newport, RI to Bermuda race. “Alas, Michael laments, with married life, my brother Donald turned colors, bought a Fleming 53 Trawler and retired to Florida.” However, Michael also had big boats for he graduated from Lightnings to a 41-foot ketch and then a 44-foot ketch. He kept

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both of them in the Green Bay, WI area and sailed the Great Lakes for ten years but eventually sold them to help finance his three children through college.

"I graduated from Moline High School in 1965 in the exact middle of my class and enrolled at St. Ambrose University, a local school in Davenport, IA which began as a seminary in 1882.<sup>9</sup> I began as an art major and the chairman of that department, Father Edward M. Catich (1906-1979), left a permanent impression



Michael Blaser on his Cheoy Lee 44' ketch, *In the Mood*

on me.<sup>10</sup> He and his twin had been brought up in an orphanage and he was a rare individual who had a photographic memory, spoke five languages, played at least six musical instruments and could look through his students and see what they had to offer at a glance. His outlook towards the art world was that it was 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. He was a renown calligrapher and wanted me to be one and would patiently remind me from time to time that 'there really was not much demand for men from Iowa who painted boats' and if I pursued that line of work, it 'might be a long time between meals.' Not successful in interesting Michael in calligraphy, he urged him to switch majors to philosophy. "However," Michael acknowledges, "I must credit Father with many of the good habits I still live by. I think he had a fondness for my lonely course in life." Meanwhile, other things were happening in Michael's life that would radically change it. His summertime work was already broadening his view of the world.

"The summer I graduated from high school, I took a job in 'Dante's Inferno' – moving hot castings about in the John Deere Foundry in Moline." (The John Deere company was established in the town in 1848 and the headquarters of

Deere & Company are there today.) That summer made him appreciate all the more the job he held for the next two summers at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island located near the Mackinac Straights that connect Great Lakes Huron and Superior. However, as a bellman, it was not without its challenges. Built in 1887 as a summer resort, it boasts of the world's longest front porch – 660 feet! Lugging luggage that distance to the hotel's 330 rooms was further complicated by the fact that the island allows no cars – only horse and carriage and bicycles. It was fine work and rooms were in great demand for this National Historic Landmark is seriously credentialed.<sup>11</sup> And, in keeping with this story about a painter of the Mississippi, it is appropriate to note that Mark Twain lectured there. Over the years, Michael has painted the Hotel and many other prominent aspects of the island.

"During my sophomore year, a student with whom I had gone to high school and often shared rides to college, Ricky Amanza, joined the Marines with the promise of the G.I. Bill on separation. He

a dramatic change and the indifference – outright hostility – shown by my college classmates over Ricky's tragic loss gave me the courage to enlist in the Corps in December, 1968."

"My arrival at boot camp in San Diego was a jarring lesson in philosophy, Marine Corps style. The memories of those years are a blur. But one important and fateful event occurred upon my assignment after boot camp: The Corps noted that I was an illustrator and they could use that talent. That sent me in a different direction than combat in the jungles and rivers of Vietnam. I did what the Corps told me to do. The young men I served with came from a lot of different backgrounds and most of them had never shared my opportunities. In the end, we were all left with an identity for life as a Marine."

Blaser mustered out of the Corps in January 1971. "My brother, who had flown fixed wing spotter planes for the Army (three of which were shot out from under him), had arranged a surprise for me. Knowing of my love of boats and the water, he took me from his apartment in



Moonlight Above the Mackinac Steamer *South America* Arriving at Arnold Line Dock  
Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

was sent to the I-Corps Tactical Sector in Vietnam and was killed along with most of his company. The news polarized me and, a funny respectful fear of the Marine Corps stayed in the back of my mind. My older brother had left college to enlist in the Army and was promptly sent to Vietnam (he survived). As I began my third year at the College, my major had been switched to Philosophy and I was not happy with the image of myself as a philosophy major while the war raged. That 'all in' desire for

North Chicago early one freezing morning to the waterfront in Waukegan well north of Chicago. Upon arrival, we began driving out along the pier and I noticed some crates piled and covered with snow and an old half-loaded pickup truck hiding a couple of distinctive Great Lakes fishing boats well frozen into the ice. He put the car in park and jumped out into the cold. I kept up with my brother as he walked up to a boat through a litter of partially coiled fishnets to introduce me to the

captain who, in my brother's plan, would be my future employer. I don't remember the captain's name - at the time he hardly looked like my vision of any captain I had ever read about. This fellow was down in the bilge just below looking up at us. He was sitting on one of the wooden crates they used to stack whitefish. He sported a mostly worn pair of heavy rubber gloves and was trying to wipe up syrupy diesel oil lost in the bilge. The smell was overwhelming. Even in winter rotted fish and diesel oil leave an odor that is unforgettable. It turned out that the captain was a Marine who had served in Korea and this bond of brotherhood made me all the more attractive as a potential member of his crew. We discussed working arrangements, pay, etc. and how the boat really would not be as bad once hosed down and underway but, of course, on the way back to port there would be the gutting of fish caught, etc. I had a quick flash that I'd meet a girl sometime and try to sit next her at a bar or start to dance. I just knew I'd look at her nose and wait for the twitch when she smelled that awful scent I would always carry. I don't care what kind of cologne fishermen wear, diesel and fish are bound to leave a lasting mark. This life-changing dialogue probably took place in less than three minutes. In the cold it seemed like I was frozen in place for the entire morning. I told the captain I would have to think about his offer."

## Boats Abandoned in His Early Art Career

His brother drove him home where he dug up some of his better paintings, put them in an old art case and returned to Chicago for an interview at the Grant Jacoby Art Studios. "It was my only interview, for the art director offered me an apprentice immediately. At this amazingly large studio I was given a

board and even a private room. I was able to gather real technique both from the illustrators and the graphic designers. In a word, I learned my trade." [12] After three years in Chicago he received an offer to become an art director for John Deere so he returned to his hometown of Davenport, IA.

"My job there was to do the collateral brochures, design ads and supervise photographic shoots for the Harvester and Forage lines. John Deere is a well-managed creative leader in the agriculture business and its employees were showered with benefits, good pay and enjoyed high standing in the community. The problem with my job was it required constant travel. We were a big herd moving across the rural landscape with our photographer, copywriter, movie crews, engineers, and product information people. That first year I spent over 200 days on the road. I remember starting out in the Texas rice paddies and then moving north with custom cutters through Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and winding up near freezing on the windrowed wheat fields of the Canadian plains. It was a fine job to be sure, but through all the years since childhood, inside I was still that boy who painted boats."

## Finding His Compass Back to the Sea and Boats

"The secret of getting ahead is getting started."

Mark Twain

In the summer of 1976, less than five years since he had turned down that first job as a Great Lakes fisherman, he decided to attend the "Tall Ships" Bicentennial event in New York Harbor. It changed his life. "I had never actually seen a full rigged ship under sail. I was not disappointed and I made lasting friends

during the event. The following week I arranged for an interview with the editor of *Sail Magazine* in Boston. Her name was Patience Wales and she epitomized my image of the patrician New Englander. A thin handsome woman with a tanned chiseled face, she took me into her office and said, 'Now where in Connecticut are you from?' I apologized for the mix up and freely offered that I was from Iowa. The statement took her by surprise. She pulled her reading glasses down a bit and smiled. She said, 'And no doubt you are the greatest marine painter in Iowa.' She went on to say that she had sailed around the world twice, yet never had really been west of the Pocono Mountains in northeastern Pennsylvania. After viewing my portfolio that was a mixture of small originals and illustrations, she agreed that I had mastered some useful illustrative techniques and was willing to give me a try. 'Here, Mike, read this manuscript, make a half page B & W illustration and have it back here by Friday. If it suits me, I'll pay you for it and we will see where things lead.' One job led to the next and for the following ten years I was a monthly contributor to the magazine. Eventually I branched out to *Cruising World* in Newport, RI, *Boating* magazine and others. I also did illustrative work for Hood Sail Lofts in Marblehead, MA, Southern Cross Yachts, Palmer Johnson, and many others."

As this became a financially viable way of life, he left the embracing security of John Deere's Advertising Department and hung out his shingle as a freelance Maritime Illustrator. He was, indeed, unique to Iowa! Over the following years he illustrated several books on seamanship, electronics and one devoted entirely to tying knots while continuing to make frequent trips to the North East and bring back all the illustrative work he

## (Footnotes)

<sup>2</sup> Although small with a coed enrollment of only 2,700 today, it is nonetheless ranked by U.S. News as among the top three-dozen Regional Universities in the Midwest.

And well he should have for when Catich's parents died when he was eleven, he and his siblings were taken by train to the Orphanage of the Loyal Order of Moose near Aurora, IL. There he apprenticed under sign painter/writer Walter Heberling, graduated high school in 1924 and toured the Midwest with the Mooseheart Band, played in bands in Chicago, studied at the Chicago Art Institute and supported himself as a sign painter. He received a Masters degree in art from the University of Iowa, found he had a vocation, and studied for the priesthood at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome where he also studied

archaeology and paleography. He returned to the States and served as parish priest and taught for forty years at St. Ambrose University. Thousands of his works are there in the Galvin Fine Arts Center built by a donation from Hallmark Cards where many of his students worked. His works are also at the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Cultural Center at Rensselaer, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and several others. He also authored many scholarly books on calligraphy.

It also received a "Distinctive Destination" from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is viewed as the "Best Resort in the Midwest" in the eyes of Condé Nast Traveler and entered TripAdvisor.com's "Hall of Fame" in 2015.

Grant Jacoby, established in 1944, is still thriving and boasts

of Microsoft as one of its principal clients. At the time Michael worked there, Fellow Thomas Macay Hoyne, III, (1924-1989) who was from a long line of prominent Chicago families, had his studio across the street from Grant Jacoby. "I did meet him at one of the Artist Guild functions in the early 'Seventies," Michael recalls, "but in those days I made no connection with his future maritime success. He did a marvelous job painting the Phillips 66 calendars. Funny the pigeon-holing of 'calendar art' and 'realistic art' by museum people: The Milwaukee Art Museum refused a donation of the original John Stobart painting of the old city along the Milwaukee River apparently because it was 'too realistic!'"

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cared to do. He also worked with **Better Homes and Gardens** in Des Moines, Iowa.

"I found a sales representative in Boston. It turned out that she also represented ASMA Fellow Don Demers. I did not meet Don but was very impressed with his work, took note and began painting in oils once more. In the process, I rediscovered my old friend the Mississippi River right down the street and realized it had a maritime history all its own." Or, as Lin-Manuel Miranda, the brilliant young playwright of the current smash Broadway musical, **Hamilton**, described the play's successful marriage of rap and hip-hop with American history as being "like a mosquito that found an artery," so it was when this Iowan artist, the "mosquito," found the Big Muddy, the "Artery." He still had a love for blue water, but realized that the Western Rivers and their rich history were waiting for his talents to be put on canvas. This gradual transition from blue water to the brown waters of the inland rivers and the transition from illustrating to painting occurred during the twelve years following the Tall Ships experience of 1976. By the late 'Eighties, the transition was complete. He was a mid-America maritime artist in full swing.

A lot of other things were happening in his life at this time as well. Michael first met Sue Zimmerman in an art class in 1961. She was a graduate from Moline High School and went on to obtain a BA from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a Masters Degree in Physical Therapy from the University of Iowa. Over the years they kept in "distant contact" while she lived in Nepal setting up the Physical Therapy Department of the Katmandu General Hospital. Upon her return they became reacquainted, courted and married in 1979. Michael describes Sue's family as "encouraging, involved, colorful and very well educated"<sup>13</sup> They began a family in Moline, Iowa, moved from house

to house - each ever larger as the family grew - and ended up in a large home in a golf course community in Bettendorf, IL. After a long hospital career, Sue went on to teaching at St. Ambrose University. They have three children, Sarah, Tom and Noah. "All are college graduates - Sarah with a nursing degree from Colorado State and the two boys with degrees from the University of Chicago. Tom is with a consulting firm in Chicago and Noah is a bilingual correspondent and journalist living in Istanbul." In 1992 the Michael and Sue divorced. "After twelve years of marriage, we spent little time together. I was always in my studio or traveling painting river scenes." Both subsequently remarried and all lived within six blocks of each other. "Our children had the benefit of four adults hovering and one set of grandparents overseeing the lot."

Michael still lives in Bettendorf. He married Gay Mink who owned a gallery in Cincinnati that sold his work and he used to visit. She had been married and following their respective divorces, she sold the gallery and moved to Bettendorf. "She has been my partner for twenty-five years and administers the various structured business functions that allow me to focus on my work - such things as managing our regional gallery network, selling giclées and prints and orchestrating details regarding original canvas commissions. Every artist would be fortunate to have a marriage partner who is willing to develop a useful hand and offer important advice in this most difficult of careers."

## The "Discovery" Begins: How It Happens

"It is strange how little has been written about the Upper Mississippi."

Mark Twain

From an interview in the **Chicago Tribune** July 9, 1886

As we saw above with the opening story of the Steamboat **Effie Afton**, Michael Blaser writes about Upper Mississippi by telling its stories with his brush. He does this with other Western Rivers as well. The process starts by finding an idea or concept - a story to be told. "Once I have a concept and have done my homework, I first do a sketch on tissue (tracing paper).

This can be rendered in a traditional fashion - a scene seen from the shore, from another boat, etc. - but lately I have developed what I call the 'gull's eye view.' This is not an aerial view perspective, per se, but rather an elevated perspective often drawn with an underlying grid beneath the tracing paper."

"If the complexity and perspective is too intricate I will optically enlarge my tissue or even blow up the final study.



Sketch for a painting of the Marine Railways Yard in Paducah, KY, one of the biggest repair facilities for towboats



Large oil sketch based on the pencil sketch for the painting *Hazy River*, a current commission



The commissioned painting, *Hazy River*, is on the easel. Note the many reference photos taken of the Paducah Yard used for the painting

A tissue can be mounted to two-ply paper and enlarged to almost any size by Kinko/FedEx outlets. Then the enlarged, appropriately sized, reproduction of the actual drawing can be taped to the top of the panel and graphite tracing paper slipped underneath. I follow my lines with a red pen (so I know what has been traced) until the entire image has

## (Footnotes)

<sup>13</sup> Both parents had engineering degrees from Purdue University where they met. At the outbreak of WWII, her father became a Naval officer and spent the war years at Annapolis participating in the design of an effective torpedo while her mother was Admiral Hyman G. Rickover's personal aid. Rickover, the "Father of the nuclear Navy," rose to a four star Admiral and with 63 years of service became the longest serving Naval officer in U.S. history. They raised four children and all graduated from college, one going on to Harvard Law School and others, like Sue, on to a Masters Degree and a career of teaching.

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transferred to the panel. Alternatively, I simply have my study at hand and block in the elements by eye."

"When I am satisfied with it, I will transfer it to a small gesso panel and paint a 4" x 8" study in oil. If the palette seems to work, I do a larger study, perhaps 8" x 16" and sometimes larger. During execution it is vital to avoid going dark too quickly. Midtones will tend to follow and wind up way to dark as well. As the work progresses, the painting will begin to take on a life of its own. The larger study can be presented to the commissioner for acceptance but mostly I do it for myself to be sure I am on the right track."

"Many years ago I attended a painting seminar by a famous German wildlife painter named Manfred Schatz (1925-2004). Mr. Schatz had mastered a technique of depicting motion - showing

is heartfelt. Inside I know what I am really doing is adding bits of paint to a board, but after a while it does seem to take on a life of its own."

Speaking of board, Michael notes that he used to paint on fine weave canvas but has now gone to a specific type of 1/8 inch, pressure treated, hardboard construction panel. "I cover this with five or six coats of traditional gesso. This dry compound is mixed with water and heated. It contains rabbit skin glue, gypsum (plaster of Paris) marble dust and titanium dioxide. This creates an absorbent luminous surface and binds well with oil pigments. (He works exclusively in oils.) The hardboard panel is not subject to stretching or shrinking with changes in humidity or heat. The panel is easier to ship or transport as well. It is thinner than a stretched canvas and does not require a 'build out' charge from the frame maker."

steam and sufficient information can be found if you dig and keep your eyes open. For instance, much of the architecture of the period between 1900 and 1960 still stands and living residents remember many of the steamers of this period. But I have also done subjects in more recent decades and these, obviously, are easier to research, and can often be done first hand. **Nightwatch** is an example of night activity at a Lock and Dam 14 located only blocks from my studio."



The Steamboat *Natchez* from New Orleans is bound for Cincinnati. It stopped in Louisville, lowered its gig (ramp to the shore) and picked up Michael Blaser. He returned to New Orleans on her the following week. Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board



This "downbound" has fifteen barges, three wide and five long. To make a "lock thru" she must break apart the tow into two sections. In freezing conditions this can be dangerous and backbreaking work. Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

a well-focused head of a bird but blur the wings in such a way you could swear they were moving. After his heavily accented but fascinating talk I found myself looking for something of merit to add during the question period. I asked if he ever listened to the radio or had the TV on in the background. At first he scowled in a frightening Germanic way, but then lightened up a bit and added, 'No, young man, I listen to the painting. You know, it will begin to tell you what it wants.' I have taken this message to heart - so much so that when commissioners call, I find myself saying 'we're coming along and I think it is beginning to breath.' The 'we'

## Know Your Subject

Once Michael has a concept for a painting and before he gets too far into preliminary drawings or sketches, he attempts to find and research any history or material written about it. "I also try to locate any photographs or art depicting it. My research success with source material will have a lot to do with the time period I choose and thus I try to select one where I am comfortable research will provide what I need. A brilliant concept but no historical information about the subject flies in the face of 'know your subject.' In the past I have been interested in the twilight era of



Although called "towboats" or "lineboats," these diesel-powered vessels actually push their barges. Here the artist visits the MV *Sally Bromfield* in a floating dry-dock where she is having two of her three rudders and one wheel (propeller) replaced. The propellers are encased in Cort Nozzles, a European invention resembling a jet's cowling designed to increase the power and efficiency of the propeller.



Painting of the floating dry dock with the MV *Sally Bromfield* under repair. Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

The research that Michael does as he translates his concept into a painting is multi-faceted. Most fundamentally, he has



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In this painting, "Looking for a Single Straight Line", the Steamboat *Betsy Ann* is passing the Steamboat *Queen City* and has it in the beam of its powerful carbon arc spotlight. Featuring graceful sheer lines and beautiful arches, not a straight line can be found on the *Queen City*. Carlisle & Finch of Cincinnati developed the first successful marine spotlight in the 19th Century and continues as a global leader in marine lighting. The company not only advises Blaser about how the lighting evolved over the generations but collects his work as well. Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

spent his painting career learning about the river and its boats, levees, bridges and towns. They have become a second nature for him. His knowledge of the subject also comes from first hand experience on the boats he paints, in the river towns he depicts and even the in yards where the boats are repaired. To help record what he learns, his camera is his constant companion.

## (Footnotes)

<sup>14</sup> True to Way's instinct for history, he named the journal after one of the many on-board newspapers printed for the diversion of passengers on a number of larger 19th Century river packets. This one comes from the Steamboat *Fleetwood* that published the *Fleetwood Reflector* on its Cincinnati-Pomeroy-Parkersburg run. The current editor is David Tschiggfrie, who has authored booklets, articles, and DVDs about steamboating over the past forty years. He presently serves on the Board of the National Rivers Hall of Fame in Dubuque, IA.

<sup>15</sup> Originally named the *Idlewild* from 1914 to 1947 and then the *Avalon* until 1962 when she became the *Belle of Louisville*.

Reading and writing about the river and its legendary figures has proven invaluable to Blaser in knowing his subject. Some years back, a book publisher in Salt Lake City, UT approached him to write an illustrated book focusing on river history and great river personalities. He was quite excited at the prospect and laid out a galley outline but in the end it did not work out. However, featured on the cover he designed were three men – all heroes in Blaser's mind: Mark Twain, Captain Frederick Way, Jr. and Captain Clark C. "Doc" Hawley. Twain we have honored already by using his quotes as headers throughout this article but less well known are the other two.

Captain Frederick Way, Jr. (1901-1992) was one of the youngest steamboat captains on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, earning his pilot's license at the age of twenty-two. At twenty-four he bought his first steamboat, the *Betsy Ann*, and ran her between Cincinnati and Pittsburgh for

Captain Gordon C. Greene (1862-1927) founded that company in 1890, the same year he married Mary Catherine Becker. They had three sons, two of whom (Thomas and Chris) became riverboat captains. The Greene name and reputation grew but Mary Catherine Becker Greene (1867-1949) made it legendary for she learned navigation, earned a pilot and masters license, ran and grew the Greene Steamboat Company when her husband died and became one of the most noted figures on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers for more than half a century. She died at eighty-one. There is a bronze statue of Captain Mary Catherine Becker Greene on the Cincinnati River Walk, appropriately over looking the river she knew so well.

Nearly twenty years after the Steamboat *Betsy Ann* lost the gold tipped elk antler trophy to a Greene steamer, Captain Thomas Greene went to California to look at two luxury steamers, the *Delta Queen* and *Delta King*, that were up for



"Moonlight Memphis" • Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board

a number of years. She was a fast boat, and won the "Horns" - a trophy for the fastest speed. This was a set of gold-tipped elk antlers, the river equivalent of the Blue Riband for the fastest crossings of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, Captain Frederick Way, Jr. and the Steamboat *Betsy Ann* lost the "Horns" trophy in 1928 to Captain Christopher Becker Greene at the helm of a steamboat named after him that was owned by the Greene Line Steamers.

sale after operating for several years on the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers in California. He bought the former and in 1947 asked Captain Frederick Way, Jr. to take the flat-bottom, stern paddle wheeler out into the Pacific Ocean, down the coast through the Panama Canal, across the Gulf of Mexico and up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to Pittsburgh. He did this and wrote a book about it, *The Saga of the Delta Queen*.

Michael Blaser is particularly

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fascinated with and indebted to Captain Way for other significant contributions to preserving the history of the rivers and thereby helping him with his painting research. In 1933 he wrote *The Log of the Betsy Ann*, a book about his ten years on that steamer. This was sufficiently successful in spite of the economic trials of the Great Depression to enable him to create the Steamboat Photo Company in 1939 that went on to collect the greatest number of steamboat photos known at the time. This led to another book, *Way's Steamboat Directory* published in 1944 and the founding of the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen of which Way became president. This, in turn, led to the establishment of the Ohio River Museum in Marietta, OH. In 1964 when he was sixty-three, he launched the quarterly journal, *The S&D Reflector* for the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen organization.<sup>14</sup> Appropriately, when Captain Way died in 1992, his remains were taken up river on the *Delta Queen* to Sewickley, near Pittsburgh, PA to be interred with his beloved wife, Grace.

The other legendary figure Blaser had on the cover of his book galley was Captain Clark C. "Doc" Hawley. He was born in 1936 in Charleston, WV on the Kanawha River sixty miles from the Ohio River. On a high school matinee cruise on the Steamboat Avalon,<sup>15</sup> Hawley told

the captain that he missed the sounds of the calliope, whose player had quit a week earlier. After demonstrating his talents in this regard, the teenager was hired on the spot and thus began his long and distinguished career on the Western Rivers. He started working summers jobs such as watchman, deckhand, mate, and of course calliope player. While working on the Avalon, he attended and graduated from Morris Harvey College and won a Rhodes Scholarship but turned it down to continue working on the Avalon and then the Gordon C. Greene. By the age of twenty-four, he had earned his pilot and master licenses and went on to captain the Avalon, the Natchez, the Mississippi Queen, the American Queen, and, the "Lady of the Rivers," the Delta Queen. For two years he was the General Manager of the Greene Line Steamers, owners of the Delta Queen, the Gordon C. Greene and many other boats. In 1993, the National Rivers Hall of Fame in Dubuque, IA gave him their Achievement Award and in 1994 he co-authored with Alan L. Bates the book: *The Excursion Boat Story: Moonlite at 8:30* which relates the history, business and romance of excursion steamers over the generations and is illustrated by over 150 photographs. He lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans, has taught at Tulane University and still plays the calliope.

Another important way that Michael knows his subject and composes his paintings is through model making. He has done this his whole life and is good at it – not just sailing ships and riverboats but also smoke-belching, radio-controlled warships. With a riverboat model in hand, he takes what he calls his "gull's view" of it and drops it into the scene on his canvas. Below we see his model photographed on studio backdrop paper and then used in the painting of the famous, no-holds-barred race between the Steamboat Natchez and the Steamboat Robert E. Lee in June 1870 from New Orleans to St. Louis. The other pair of photographs shows another stern-facing model of the Steamboat Queen City. It was used first in a study and then in the large unfinished painting entitled *Steamer Queen City at the Public Landing in Cincinnati*, 1926 (both seen together in the second photo).

Michael Blaser has gone from strength to strength with a lot of promise before him. Upon reflection he notes, "If I were to take another round and do my life over, I would like to take a series of classes put together by great painters. Of course, this is after I had mastered the basics. I spent a rewarding period attending the Loveland Academy of Art in Loveland, CO and studied illustration at night at the Academy of Art in Chicago. I also studied under Irvin Shapiro (1927-1994) and the marine artist Charles Vickery (1913-1998). I was exposed to masters of the craft. Those who know the craft can only teach Art. If I had this experience and similar exposure earlier, it might have compressed my learning cycle and made me much more productive at an earlier age." However you look at it, Blaser, the "mosquito," has found the Mississippi, the "artery," and is drinking his fill. He has much to show for it.



Model used in the painting "Under the Bridge", *Queen City* at the Public Landing in Cincinnati, 1926.



"Under the Bridge" • Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board



Model used in the painting "The Great Race".



"The Great Race" • Oil on Gessoed Fiber Board



Charles Raskob Robinson is a Fellow of the Society. He paints at Brush Hill, a studio built in 1752, located in Washington, CT and formerly owned by Connecticut and New Mexico artist Eric Sloane. Some of Charlie's work may be seen on his website at:

[www.brushhillstudios.com](http://www.brushhillstudios.com).

