



Steamboat Captain's Wife A Brief Biography of Pelagie Guerette La Barge

When I started contemplating doing programs about the history of Missouri River steamboats, I decided it would be more interesting for people to listen to someone who “knew” first-hand about the river and the boats. Since there were only male steamboat captains on the Missouri, I couldn’t portray a Captain! So, the “next best thing” was a steamboat captain’s wife. Unfortunately, not much is known or written about most of them! However, as you will see in the following article, Pelagie participated to some degree in her husband’s endeavors. Thanks to the LaBarge family website, , and a few other sources, there is some information available about the lady. So, I made myself an 1850s style costume, and present my “TRIP BACK IN TIME” talks in the persona of Pelagie LaBarge. Admittedly, I don’t look as good as her, but I hope to do her justice in my portrayals.

”Steamboat Granny”

Pelagie (pronounced P(e)-la-gie’) is a rare name which comes from a Greek word meaning “of the sea”. I doubt that Pierre and Marie (Palmer) Guerette had any inkling of how closely their daughter’s life would be tied to water--not of the sea, but of the Missouri River.

Pelagie Guerette was born in St. Louis on January 10, 1825. Her father was a millwright and architect and built one of the first water-powered mills in St. Louis. Her mother, Marie Palmer, was a daughter of a prominent Illinois family.

Little information has been found about Pelagie’s childhood except that she grew up in St. Louis, amongst the French population, and spoke both English and French fluently. On August 17, 1842, she was married to Captain Joseph Marie LaBarge who was almost ten years her senior. By the time they married, Joseph LaBarge had already established himself as a noted Missouri River steamboat pilot, having begun his career on the river in 1832 as a clerk.

Although she had a comfortable home, one can surmise that Pelagie had a lonely married life, with Joseph being absent on the river for months at a time. She may have been bored, but that probably ended in 1847 when Joseph took her along on a trip up the Missouri.

The boat on which they traveled was the MARTHA, a new side-wheeler rated at 180 tons. Captain Joseph Sires was master of the boat, and LaBarge was the pilot. Part of the cargo they carried consisted of annuities for several upper-Missouri tribes. The trip was relatively uneventful until they reached Crow Creek in the Dakota Territory, near a trading post operated by Colin Campbell, where there was a large supply of wood which Campbell had cut for fuel for the boat. A band of Yanktonian Sioux Indians tried to prevent the crew from loading the wood, killing Charles Smith, a crewman in the fray. The Indians boarded the boat and managed to drown the boiler fires.

There was a cannon aboard the boat but at the time of the attack it was in the engine room undergoing repairs to the carriage. While the Indians occupied the forward part of the boat, Captain La Barge had the cannon brought up into the cabin and loaded. He then lit a cigar and, holding it in plain view of the Indians, told them to leave or he would blow them all to the devil. The Indians fairly fell over each other in their panic to get off the boat!

During all this commotion, Pelagie was in the ladies cabin near the rear of the boat, with the entrance barricaded by mattresses and John B. Sarpy guarding her. Despite the obvious peril, Pelagie may have considered it worth the experience as she was the first woman of European descent to visit the Dakota Territory.

Pelagie and Joseph shared tragedy in 1852, when each lost a brother in the explosion of the SALUDA at Lexington, Missouri. Joseph's brother, Charles La Barge was first pilot on the boat, and Pelagie's brother, Lewis Guerette was second pilot. Both were killed.

In 1862, fifteen years after her first trip on the Missouri, Pelagie again accompanied her husband up the river to Fort Benton, Montana, just below Great Falls, aboard the EMILIE. This was another side-wheel packet which was named for their daughter.

During that trip, Pelagie helped break ground for Fort LaBarge, a trading post owned by La Barge, Harkness & Co., which was being established in direct competition with the American Fur Company. The American Fur Company did not take this competitive threat lightly and engaged in various unscrupulous activities, even ramming the EMILIE with the company's boat in an effort to sink it and prevent LaBarge from reaching Fort Benton. Captain La Barge was forced to sell out to them the following year.

Although much of her married life was spent raising their seven children while the Captain was away, she maintained an interest in, and knowledge of the Captain's business affairs throughout his sixty-plus year career as a steamboat Captain, pilot, and owner. Joseph and Pelagie made their home in St. Louis, and descendants remain in that area to the present day. Captain Joseph La Barge died in 1899, and Pelagie in 1903. They are interred at Calvary Cemetery, which is adjacent to Bellefontaine Cemetery and overlooks the Mississippi River in the northern part St. Louis.