

# Southward Bound on a Mississippi Steamer, 1863 excerpted from Lottie Deno: A Novel (2024)

by Frank Thurmond

I finally booked passage for myself and Mary on a shiny new paddle wheel, triple-deck stern-wheeler christened the New Orleans (after Robert Fulton's first commercial steamboat fifty years earlier). I traveled to Pittsburgh with Mary, where the New Orleans was docked on schedule. From there, the paddle steamer would head south down the Ohio River until reaching the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois, and thence downriver through Memphis and Natchez and finally to New Orleans after an almost three-month voyage of over eighteen hundred miles. One cold but sunny morning in early spring 1863, I found myself starting up the boarding gangplank with Mary. We must have been some sight too: a petite nineteen-year-old girl with flaming red sunlit locks climbing the platform with an ebony giant of a woman by my side. Lugging our own respective baggage, too!

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I knew our route would take us past Warsaw, Kentucky, and that we would probably stop there, so I would have to be careful to stay hidden to avoid being spotted. This was made easier on account of the women passengers being separated from the men for the most part and confined to second-class "deck passage"—along with immigrants and servants. I had other plans, however: I had spotted an elderly gentleman whom I recognized from the poker club in Detroit and—in hopes of an invite to a private saloon in the upper deck—formed a plan to ingratiate myself to him at the first opportunity. Women were, of course, generally kept as far as possible from bars, following the outrageous notion that ladies and liquor should never mix company. Despite such chauvinistic policies, my little scheme worked brilliantly, and for the remainder of the trip, I worked the poker table to both the delight—and the increasing dismay—of the gentlemen passengers as the lone lady gambler in their midst. Not all were gentlemen, mind you: There were ruffians aplenty aboard our ship, too, some of them professional gamblers who made their livings preying on affluent yet naïve passengers. It was the professional riverboat gambler you had to watch out for, though. They were as mean and crude and as dirty at cards as they come, and all they ever did was cheat. I tried my best to avoid these, as their wary eyes could easily spot the most subtle sleights of hand that Daddy had taught me. (Fortunately, thanks also to Daddy, I knew most of their tricks too.) I set my sights instead on the many young and chivalrous gentlemen on board. I learned to use my wiles

to charm them into a round of poker, only to fleece those innocent pigeons for all they had. In this way, we made our progress slowly

south, with me raking in cash at the tables while Mary waited patiently below decks for me to return and take her along for my afternoon perambulations above decks and—when docked—at the various landings along the way. (I would never stroll alone without Mary, especially having observed more than one sinister-eyed ruffian follow my movements with a certain lusty malice, but one look in turn from Mary’s evil eye could intimidate the devil himself.) Despite our ship being Union-controlled, Mary was forced to stay on the lower decks unless escorted by me. But between us, she knew that—in my mind—she was now free as a bird and that it was just a question of biding our time until I no longer had to play the ruse of being a Southern slave heiress. Yet, with the palpable tension on board among fellow passengers from both North and South, we knew we had best play our expected roles for now. A few days past a brief stop in Cincinnati, I saw the familiar old landing at Warsaw. We stayed discreetly below decks in our cabin till, at the piercing whine of a loud whistle, we felt the jolt of the giant paddle wheel launch our ship again with a sudden roar of steam power. I had watched anxiously through a porthole window to see if anyone I recognized boarded there. Nobody did, but what I did see were troops of soldiers in dark blue patrolling along the dock. Clearly, Warsaw was now under Federal occupation, and I shuddered to think what might be happening back home on the plantation. I could only pray for them and hope to have news from Ellie Mae upon arrival in New Orleans. As I learned later, this was also the reason for our safe passage downriver. By that time, Union forces generally patrolled the rivers, with garri- sons at the various ports and gunboats controlling river traffic to protect goods being transported North. And so our vessel trudged its steady ten miles per hour pace downstream, a relatively uneventful journey once we got past the roaring rapids at the treacherous Falls of the Ohio just past Louisville. There—at the same place where Lewis and Clark had once met up in 1803 to plan that famous little expedition of their own—the Ohio River drops twenty-six feet in the course of a mile over a rise of limestone bedrock. At one point, our hardy captain feared the water might be too low to proceed. But once he and his crew had navigated us safely through, we continued apace until finally meeting the mighty Mississippi where the Ohio converges with it just south of Cairo, Illinois. At that point, the brown, sediment-laden water of the Ohio flows into the greenish water of the Mississippi River. Also green were the distant riverbanks, where luscious pine forests bounded us on both sides. Looking out at this beautiful scenery, I hummed an old folk ballad I had heard once in the Appalachians.

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Now darlin,’ my darlin’ Don’t tell me no lie, Tell me, where did you stay last night?  
In the pines, in the pines Where the sun never shines, I shivered when the cold wind blowed.

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There, where the landscape suddenly opened up gloriously on both sides of the vast river, I first felt an invigorating sense of genuine freedom. I loved to stand in the open air of the foredeck in the shadow of the pilot house, Mary by my side, and inhale the perfume of flowers lining the rails—pungent gardenia and sweet azalea blossoms. A frantic whirl of tiny hummingbird wings made a pleasant change from the accu- tomed whine of mosquitoes and gnats. Nights were especially magical, the way the dark roiling water behind our ship’s paddle glinted moon- light in its foam. In the darkness across the river, the glow-worms big as lanterns illumined the



night. Yet nothing compared to looking up at the night sky, where on clear nights, the stars appeared like a billion pinpricks in some cosmic blanket through which the light of Heaven beamed and drew enchanted constellations. On such nights, the sultry, humid summer air was often pierced with music when the joyful banter of banjos and mandolins on deck would sometimes compete for our attention with the more sonorous melodies of the saloon piano. But it was not always such clear sailing: Sometimes, a summer storm would announce itself with a sudden clap of thunder, followed by the swift patter of rain on the water below from which steam would rise up as if the river were on fire. But when lightning began to strike, and the clouds emptied their giant buckets upon us in torrential rain, Mary and I hightailed it below deck rather than putting too much stock in Ben Franklin's lightning rods adorning the ship! When we reached Memphis, our captain had a new concern. This part of the Mississippi was notoriously dangerous for steamboats such as ours, ever since the New Madrid earthquake of 1811 had devastated the region and raised the many perilous snags along the banks. These sunken trees, with their twisted branches and roots, could lurk unseen just beneath the water and impale passing ships with deadly consequences. (Just such a fate had indeed befallen our own ship's namesake; a hidden snag had sunk the very first New Orleans steamship in 1814.) However, the savvy captain carefully navigated through the marked shallows whilst still managing to dock at the Memphis port. The Federals had occupied this highly strategic river gateway—once among the South's largest cotton (and slave) markets—since defeating the Confederates in the naval battle of '62, so Mary and I were able safely to disembark for a much-desired respite on dry land. While there, I did manage to join a small group of Union soldiers I spotted playing poker outside near the ship. One of them clearly took a shine to me, too—until, that is, I had shone him up at cards and emptied his wallet. The parting look he shot at me might have warned me to watch out for him downriver, especially after overhearing that the men were part of a cavalry regiment heading south to New Orleans themselves. But I still had much to learn about sore losers (especially when they were insecure men losing to women!). In the meantime, our next visit to shore was very nearly tragic. The river seemed to grow ever wider as we journeyed southward, often past large islands midstream. At the point where we reached the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers, there was a landing situated right on the Arkansas Delta. The riverport town there was called Napoleon, and it was there that we stopped again. I read long afterward how that same town would soon suffer a disastrous fate. After the occupying Union troops dug a channel through the narrow land separating the Mississippi and Arkansas upriver to aid their gunboats, the town of Napoleon would eventually be entirely submerged by river floodwaters. Mark Twain later wrote about it in one of my favorite books, his *Life on the Mississippi*, where he described the ghostly image of floating over the town he once knew and loved: Yes, it was an astonishing thing to see the Mississippi rolling between unpeopled shores and straight over the spot where I used to see a good big self-complacent town twenty years ago . . . a town no more—swallowed up, vanished, gone to feed the fishes; nothing left but a fragment of a shanty and a crumbling brick chimney! Yet for us that day, Napoleon was still a thriving, bustling community, and it was also where Mary and I both had a near-fatal fright. The Captain informed us that our stay would be brief—just long enough to load some much-needed supplies and fuel for the boilers—



but that passengers could have the afternoon to stroll about the town. I was walking along the bank rather briskly, my colorful parasol in hand, until I was ahead of Mary a piece despite her long stride. Suddenly, I heard her shout from behind in her deep voice, almost a scream even. She yelled, "Stop, Miss Carlotta! Watch your step!" I looked down to see a large water moccasin snake on the bank right in front of me. I screamed, but before I knew what hit me, I was flung to the ground with one sweep of Mary's strong arm. I looked up just in time to see a long shape with numerous dark bands attached to Mary's hand. It was the largest such pit viper I had ever seen. It was sunning itself on the bank when I nearly stepped on it, but Mary saw it first, and—after pushing me aside—threw herself upon the serpent right before it struck. The snake now dangled from her hand as she tried to free herself from the grasp of its sharp fangs. The cat-like pupils seemed to glare at her hatefully, and I knew she would now consider herself forever cursed and under the "snake-eye" spell. The snake finally let go after she pinned its writhing body to the ground with her foot. She then quickly grasped a sharp-edged rock near at hand and smashed the diamond-shaped head before tossing the now limp, scaly body far out into the river. Despite the pain in her hand, the first thing Mary did was rush over to my side. At that moment, I felt a new sense of deep devotion toward Mary as a loyal friend. And I knew she had probably just saved my life at the risk of her own. "You all right, Miss Carlotta?" "I'm fine, thank you Mary. But look at your hand, you must see the ship's doctor at once!"

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For the next few days, Mary lay in her bed below deck suffering from a high fever and hallucinations. Fortunately for her, the on-board doctor was something of an expert in treating snake bites—particularly those of the river variety, having seen his share as a ship's doctor—and he had responded to my urgent pleas by attending to her promptly. He said, "She'll have to lose her little finger to keep the venom from spreading. But if she recovers from the fever, she might still live." "Might? I don't like the sound of that! How long before we know, doctor?" "She will likely be bedridden till we reach New Orleans. But, with luck, she will make a full recovery." "With luck?"

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I remained, for the most part, with Mary in our quarters for some time afterward, tending to her wound and praying for her recovery—though I did venture up to the deck occasionally to observe the sights. As we drifted further south, the years of recent warfare were all the more evident. There were many burnt and empty fields along both sides of the river, where the cotton and other crops had been abandoned to rot. There were recent battlefields, such as Vicksburg, where the muddy trenches appeared still stained with blood, lined with hundreds upon hundreds of temporary graves with small wooden crosses. And sometimes, I could see empty plantation houses in the distance. Some were still quite beautiful, but others had been burned to the ground, with occasional chimneys and Greek revival pedestals and columns standing like ancient ruins from some distant land. These images brought back my worries about the situation in Kentucky. At such times, I would grasp the rails tightly and say a silent prayer for my mother and sister, anxious for news from home. At Natchez, many beautiful estates along the river had survived. There, the Confederates surrendered early in the war without a fight soon after the fall of New Orleans, and many of the old mansions were now occupied by Union troops. (General Grant himself occupied the fa-



mous Rosalie Mansion as his headquarters in ## 1863.) Soon after passing through Natchez, Mary seemed to make a miraculous recovery and was soon on her feet again, joining me on deck to view the changing landscape. If her bandaged hand troubled her, she stoically ignored it. The only pain she showed was from within, as I could see in her eyes when we passed numerous refugee camps where thousands of freed slaves struggled to survive in destitute living conditions. President Lincoln had first issued the Emancipation Proclamation in '62, and it had taken effect on the first of January 1863. Federal troops were now busy closing down slave markets and liberating captives from the horrors of human slavery at each city they captured; yet while the war still raged, they were largely still confined to these sordid camps. Many of the freedmen eagerly joined in the fighting against their former masters and were organized into separate regiments of their own. Whenever I looked at Mary now, I felt an ever-deepening sense of guilt for having been raised in a so-called "civilized" society that could condone such monstrous barbarity. As we journeyed on down into Louisiana, we also saw occasional bands of Indians—men, women, and children—watching us from the river banks, their eyes filled with a depth of sadness such as I had never seen. At night, we could sometimes see their campfires glowing red through the woods. The still evening air was often punctuated with a solemn drumbeat, and the melancholy cadence of their sacred chants drifted across the moonlit water. They, too, were displaced, mostly remnants of Choctaw and Cherokee tribes forcibly removed during the shameful Trail of Tears travesty, perpetrated by President Andrew Jackson and continued as hostile policy toward our native peoples by Van Buren and subsequent presidents. It was only later (after I finally reached the Texas frontier in the midst of the Texas-Indian wars) that I fully understood the true nature of their struggle to keep their ancestral lands and way of life.

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Baton Rouge was our last major stop before the long sternwheeler journey finally approached its conclusion at New Orleans. The landscape changed drastically as we ventured deeper south into the swampy regions of Louisiana. One misty morning, as Mary and I stood on the stern of the Texas deck enjoying a cool breeze infused with the sweet scent of wild honeysuckle and wisteria blooming along the bank, a large dark shape surfaced in the water just below us. As I peered over the railing for a closer look, I jumped back, startled to see staring back at me a pair of sinister-looking yellow eyes. Just then, a young man with eyes even darker than my own stepped up beside me and said in a thick Cajun drawl: "Don't let them gators get y'all!" He pointed toward the bank, where we could see through the clearing fog several more enormous alligators lying in the sand. "My heavens!" I smiled at the fellow and lightly touched his arm. "I don't recall ever seeing such critters back home in Kentucky." He said, "You ain't in Kentucky no more, lady." Then he winked at me before sauntering off toward the gambling parlor, and Mary glanced at me with a knowing smile. I had just gained a gullible new customer for my card table.

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That's where the "sore loser" I mentioned earlier comes in, when I learned the hard way about the perils of playing too many of Daddy's old tricks at once for the sake of winning at all costs. Our steamboat finally docked at the landing in New Orleans, and we had just stepped off the boarding ramp with our luggage when I heard a voice behind me, this time an angry shout.



“Hey, lady! Hold it right there, you cheatin’ little whore!” I turned around to see the Union soldier from Memphis who had frightened me with his appearance. He was pointing at me while speaking angrily to a group of soldiers. I tried to remain calm while looking around for a means of escape. There was none. We were quickly surrounded by soldiers, and they were all now staring at me with looks of hostile intent.

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Several things now happened at once. First, the piercing whine of our steamer’s whistle sounded above the deck from where we had just descended. I attempted to step backward onto the plank and head back up in hopes of finding safety aboard ship. But the way was shut off by a wooden gate now that all passengers had disembarked. I looked frantically around for possible help but saw naught but distant stevedores busily unloading cargo. At that moment, the soldier lunged forward with the most frightening look I had ever seen. “I finally figured out how you done it!” he shouted as he strode toward me. “You was dealin’ dirty from the bottom of your deck. That’s how you stole all my money. And now I aim to whip you good for it!” He reached out to grab me, but at that moment, Mary leapt into his way and stood firm, towering before him like some Amazonian warrior. Mary shouted, “No you ain’t, mistah!” She grabbed the young man with her good hand and dragged him with her powerful arm onto the dock. Before he even knew what had hit him, Mary threw him out into the muddy waters of the river, just as she had done with that snake up in Arkansas. I looked back with dread at the other soldiers surrounding us, fearing their angry retribution. But to my great relief, they were all laughing hilariously. One of them shouted, “Let’s get a drink!” At that, they all quickly departed in a rush to the taverns of New Orleans. I sighed with a deep breath and turned back to Mary. She was still keeping an intent watch on the soldier as he floundered in the river before finally stumbling back on land sopping-wet in his blue uniform. He took one look at us and hastened off in the opposite direction. We never saw him again. sts

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