

## Big Wheel Betty

---

Big Wheel Betty was a side paddle ferry just large enough to fit a whopping six cars, or maybe two of those big tractor trailers that came west out of Chicago and Indianapolis. She didn't look like much, a timber deck with white-washed sheds on either side of her mid-point. The sheds hid her twelve-foot-wide paddle wheels and kept them from splashing too much water on the cars. Not that anyone really cared about the wet, but the water could be a real hazard in the winter when the ice got bad.

Jim, Betty's owner, had built her from an old barge, a 1930's Caterpillar bulldozer, and a bunch of spare parts he'd scavenged from around the county. The little diesel engine had more than enough oomph to turn the big wheels, and the drive mechanism had been perfectly suited to steering her. All Jim had to do was extend the control linkages and he was in business. He'd even built himself a wheelhouse on top of one the sheds to keep dry and warm when the weather got unpleasant. There was a tiny little cabin underneath with a bed and wash basin. To keep her balanced he put the motor in the shed on the opposite side. Wide a-frames and cables at either end of the ferry helped adjust the ramps when the barge deck didn't quite match up with the riverbanks.

Jim had a little education and could read the newspaper and most books. A salesman passing through a few years back had given him a copy of the American Practical Navigator by some fella called Bowditch. The salesman said he couldn't get anyone to even look at the nautical book much less buy it so far west of the ocean, so he gave it to Jim as payment for a trip across the river. It quickly became Jim's prized possession next to Betty herself. As he read through the book and learned all sorts of boat terms, he'd gone around the ferry with a can of yellow paint labeling everything. He'd even bought some electric railroad lanterns for his red light on the port side and green light on the starboard. Though it had taken him a while to figure out which end of the Betty was the bow and which was the stern. He finally settled on the side with the wheelhouse as port since that was the same side you steered a truck from. With all the details straightened out Jim figured he was officially a river captain and started introducing himself as such. Captain Jim soon became a fixture on his stretch of the upper Mississippi River.

He'd done alright after the war, but with new bridges going up all the time and the factories switching over from war to peace time production there were newer and more powerful boats showing up on the river every year. Jim wasn't old but he wasn't a young fella either, and he used himself as hard as he did Betty. They were both feeling their age and the changing times. This past winter had been especially hard with ice and lack of customers due to snow. The spring was better, but he'd had to call off a few runs due to the windstorms. It was getting close to summer now and tornado season was in full swing.

Jim was mid nap on a pleasantly warm and breezy spring afternoon when the grating horn of an old flatbed Dodge startled him awake. It was Nathaniel and his driver Hadley, one of his regulars from over in Illinois. Nate had two trucks with trailers of equipment and supplies he ran down river every two weeks, regular as a clock. Captain Jim waved them aboard and cast off the lines, not ropes mind you, but lines as Mr. Bowditch specified. After their customary hellos Jim climbed up into his wheelhouse and got the diesel churning. In minutes they were idling their way down river.

Most of Nate's cargo looked like hardware store junk to Jim. Truth be told it was exactly that. The man and his driver ran illegal booze down from Canada by way of Chicago. They paid Jim in silver dollars and Canadian whiskey to not ask questions. The repeal of prohibition hadn't slowed down federal appetite for untaxed alcohol and Nate wasn't one to pay taxes. It was a slow two-hundred-mile trip down from

Keokuk Iowa to St. Louis Missouri on Big Wheel Betty, but it let the smuggler bypass a lot of law enforcement on the highways. At night they'd tie up at little towns along the way to eat drink and sell a little product; this trip turned out to be no different. They'd even made it down a day early with a full moon that let them push a little farther at night.

---

Now they were headed north on the return leg of the journey and the river was taking back the time they'd gained. Spring rainstorms and melting snow near the head waters had pushed the Mississippi high up on its banks. Any higher and it would spill over a few cutbacks making temporary islands out of the sharper bends in the river. Hell, if the floods were bad enough this year those islands might turn permanent.

Morning of the second day heading upriver was a red sunrise that promised rain. It bathed everything in an ominous glow before disappearing into the low, brooding sky. Soon after the clouds started flashing white and their thunder rattled the windows of the ferry. The sky only grew darker as the day wore on and neither Jim nor his passengers ever saw a bolt of lightning or a drop of rain. The first major storm of the season was upon them and was holding everything back until the last possible moment.

Around noon the wind started to build and shift, making it even harder for Jim to steer Betty. Every time it changed directions it went from a warm spring blow out of the east to a biting cold gust out of the north, heavy with rain that refused to fall. An evil wind that made the three men aboard the ferry shiver with a creeping fear. Every bone in Jim's body told him to find a sheltered spot somewhere to tie up where he could wait out the storm.

The old Caterpillar diesel was blowing a steady stream of black smoke as it droned on in an endless growling note. The loud slap of the paddle wheels against the churning water was so fast Jim could barely count the revolutions per minute. He kept watching the bank crawl by as the muddy water churned angrily underneath the ferry. They were moving too damn slow and it was almost dark. He was getting desperate to find a place to shelter for the duration of the storm.

Night began to fall early under the leaden sky. In fit of inspiration Jim had his passengers lower the forward ramp a little and turn on the head lamps of their trucks to stave off the darkness a little longer. The wind finally settled on blowing out of the north as it whipped at the water like they were on the sea. The lightning that had been hiding in the clouds all day started to search for victims on ground. It lit the turbulent river in flashes that allowed Jim to steer Betty by guesses and gut feeling.

As the last light of day fell so did the first heavy drops of rain. They hit the windows of the wheelhouse in ones and twos, loud pings of impact against the glass. They hit hard enough that Jim thought they might actually break it. It sounded like there were chips of ice in those rain drops. They began to fall faster and faster until the dim glow of the trucks head lights was a just a blur of light ahead. The lighting strobes turned the waves of rain into an impenetrable shifting haze. Jim gave up trying to see through the windows and opened one on the side to lean his head and shoulders out into the storm, but it did him no good. The howling wind drove the water into his eyes like needles. By chance a small water spout drew off enough of the rain for Jim to see a low sand bar up ahead. It was the south bank of a hard bend in the river. It was their only hope at this point, so he pointed the bow of Big Wheel Betty

right at it. Thankfully the trucks were empty of freight and the ferry was riding high. She hit the shallow bank and slid far enough up for her wheels to start grabbing sand. They churned and scraped as Betty pulled herself even further aground. The wind and river had her shuddering and shaking as though she wanted to come apart. The rattling took on a new intensity as she dragged her bulk across the soaked earth.

Once they were stuck hard Jim mashed the clutches down and pulled the levers to neutral, then heaved against the wind as he closed the window. He sagged onto his stool and ran a shaky hand over his face wiping away the water. The wind hammered the glass and shook the ferry but they weren't going anywhere anytime soon. Absentmindedly he pawed around in the darkness until his other hand found the throttle and pulled back to idle quieting the now roaring diesel. He just sat there trying to stop shaking. He hadn't been this scared since he didn't know when. Nathaniel poked his head up through the ladder hole in the wheelhouse floor, an old miner's carbide lamp in one hand. It gave off a harsh white glare and the faint stink of burning gas. The light cast everything into stark, hard-edged planes of washed-out colors and shadow.

"Hey, Jim! We hit something! I think... I think we're on land or somethin." Jim didn't answer him immediately, he just stared at the rain pounding the windows. He finally stood up from his stool to turn around and look down at his passenger.

"Yeah Nate, we did. I can't see ahead to steer. We can dig Betty out when the storm passes. 'Til then we sit tight, ok?" Nathaniel normally balked at folks not using his full name but he was just as shaken as Jim. "C'mon, lemmie get down there, I've got some bread, pickles, and jerky in the cupboard we can eat."

The other man stepped down off the ladder as Jim stood and pulled on the fuel cut off handle. The idling chuf-chuf-chuf of the old diesel died away. The storm howled around the beached paddle wheeler making her tremble and creak in the wind. Down in the little bunk room there was just enough space for the three men and Hadley's stocky pit bull, Pete. The smoke gray dog looked just as worried as the men. His ears were laid back and tail tucked in close to his side. Jim opened the cupboard over his wash basin and pulled down a pickle jar, a wax paper bundle of dried meat, and a crusty loaf of beer bread. Despite his fear Pete's tail thumped hopefully. The food was passed around and each man took their share. Jim made sure Pete got a hunk of meat as well as he had a soft spot for dogs and often fed the strays that would wander by the ferry in the evenings. Finishing their meal Jim broke the silence.

"Well there ain't much room to sleep but I think we can sling a hammock in here and one over in the engine house." Hadley shook his head.

"If its all the same Jim I'll just sleep in the truck. I keep a couple wool blankets in there for just such an occasion. Pete likes to sleep curled up 'hind my knees anyway. It gets right toasty in there after a while. Don't it boy?" Hadley smiled as he reached down to scratch the dog behind its ears. Jim nodded his head at this. The shed covering the engine kept the majority of the rain off, but it was hardly warm. Not to mention the pervasive smell of hot fuel and burnt oil gave him a headache if he didn't keep the door propped open.

"Alright, well sleep if you can. I don't think we have to worry about the water this far up but your never know." The other man nodded his head and stood. Putting a shoulder to the narrow door of the small room he heaved it open against the driving rain and whistled at Pete. The dog grudgingly followed his

human outside into the storm. A moment later Nate and Jim heard the door of Hadley's truck slam. "Well, Nate let's get that hammock strung up for you."

A few minutes later the bootlegger was laying precariously in the hammock. The narrow strip of fabric was just wide enough to cup his shoulders and hold him in place. It was strung diagonally across the small room to take up what little space was left. Jim sprawled out on his bed utterly exhausted from the stress of keeping the ferry off the river banks all day. Before reaching up to snuff the carbide lantern he noticed Nathaniel's white-knuckle grip on the edges of the hammock. Despite his tiredness he had to laugh. "Nathaniel you're not gonna fall asleep all tense and stiff as a board like that. I've seen drunks sleep on fence rails like cats. Cross your ankles and put your hands in your coat pockets." Shakily the bootlegger did as he was told. "Now relax."

"But what if I fall?" Jim snorted.

"Then you drop about three feet and hit the floor."

"Oh. Well, I've fallen from higher than that." There was an introspective note to his voice.

"Exactly, now, I'm gonna sleep. If you take a breath and unclench you might do the same." With that Jim closed the valve on the carbide lamp and pulled his coat over his head. Both men were snoring within minutes.

---

An few hours later Jim woke from a nightmare to someone shouting his name. "JIM! Wake up Jim! The boat's coming apart! Jim!" It was Nathaniel and he sounded terrified. There were hands on his shoulders and the room smelled like acetylene. Jim reached up and grabbed the other man by his forearms to stop him and to make the world quit jouncing around so much.

"I'm awake dammit. I'm awake!"

"Oh thank God, the boat's shaking to pieces! You gotta do something!" It was then that Jim realized that Nathaniel hadn't been the one shaking him, Big Wheel Betty herself was rattling and shaking like she was trying to drag herself over a half-sunk field of rocks. He could hear the moaning wind as it rushed out of the north to tug at everything and drive the rain to hammer the ferry like bullets on stone. The noise of the storm almost drowned out the base rumble of the swollen river churning around the sharp bend just to their west. It was the noise of the water cutting a new path. They were going to be washed away by morning. A close lighting strike deafened them with a thunderclap that rattled every nail, screw, and bolt on Betty. The shock of it broke Jim free of his contemplation of the storm.

"Calm down Nate and help me find the lantern."

"I got it right here Jim, I spilled the carbide trying refill and get it lit. I think the striker is wet." In the near constant lighting flashes Jim could see the other man fumbling with the little metal can.

"Yeah I can smell the gas, don't try to stri-" A white flash obliterated his world.

For a just a moment, or maybe it was an eternity of moments, Jim did not exist. Nothing did.

Soon, a cold wet sensation began to intrude on the nothingness that was Jim. Then little stinging needles of sensation began to punctuate the cold wetness. It was raining, hard. Eventually nothingness Jim became aware of the pain of a flash burn on his hands and face, as well as a constant ringing in his ears. Nothingness Jim pushed himself up onto his elbows to look around. His eyes hurt and his head felt like he'd been hit square in the face with a coal shovel. Every flash of lighting was a stabbing pain that made him flinch. Through slitted eyes he could see by those flashes that he was by an angry river and there was a storm overhead. Just down the beach, maybe twenty feet away, there was what looked like a ferry boat. Nothingness Jim thought he recognized it. It was his boat. Nothingness Jim was actually Captain Jim and the boat was the Big Wheel Betty. Something was wrong though. It looked like someone had taken a chunk out of the port side wheel shed.

It all came back in a rush. Beaching the ferry, the storm, the acetylene gas from the carbide lamp... NATE! Despite the concussion from being blown through a clapboard wall Jim jumped to his feet and ran to the boat on wobbly legs hollering.

"NATE! NATHANIEL! OH GOD NATE YOU ALIVE?" Something caught his foot in the darkness and he went down hard. Laying there face down in the mud he began to sob; he knew what it was that had tripped him. Memories of men shouting in German, clutching a rifle with no bullets, and artillery shells falling like rain in the dark blotted out the storm and all Jim could do was cry and scream into the mud. He did that for a while until the sound of his ferry shifting on the rocks brought him out of his misery.

Slowly, very slowly, he pushed up to his knees and felt back along his path to find what he kicked. A long bolt of lightning lit the sky like daylight. Nathaniel's right arm ended just above the elbow in a charred stump. His chest and guts were a mess and most of his face was too badly burned to be recognized. Jim didn't look again.

He turned away from the body and continued on; nothing to do for his friend now. He climbed up the side of the ferry into what was left of his tiny bunk room. The gas explosion had blown the thin clapboard siding clear off the timber frames. The only thing that had saved Jim's life was that Nate had been mostly turned away from him when he struck the carbide lamp. The poor man had soaked up most of the explosion with his body. Jim's few meager possessions had been scattered into the storm. Severed Linkages and control cables dangled down from the exposed wheelhouse overhead. They swung and banged against one another in the howling wind. Even if they could float the Betty again, he had no way to drive much less steer her now.

Fighting off more sobs he staggered through the wreckage to the trucks. The one closest to the shed was missing all its windows. A weak light was coming from the cab of the other one. Jim made his way over to it's passenger side and fumbled with the handle until Hadley let opened it from the inside. Jim climbed up and slammed the door closed on the storm then just sort of deflated in the seat.

"The hell happened Jim? That sounded like lightning hit us." Jim just shook his head as tears ran from his eyes, not that Hadley could tell crying from rain in the anemic glow of his tin flashlight.

"Gas... it was the carbide."

"Carbide?"

“Nate knocked over the lamp and carbide powder trying to get it lit. Too much gas built up in the room and when he lit it...” Jim covered his face with his hands.

“Oh... so, Nathaniel’s gone huh?” Jim could only nod. Pete started to whine in that high-pitched noise dogs make when they’re more worried than scared. The blocky gray dog edged over to Jim and just leaned on the man. Instinctively he wrapped an arm around the dog and pulled him closer, soaking up some of his warmth. The three of them just sat there in the howling darkness and thunder of the storm as Big Wheel Betty rocked in the wind. Somewhere along the line Jim dozed off again.

---

He didn’t dream this time so he wasn’t nearly as confused when the rocking of the truck cab jolted him awake. His head bounced off the window hard and he came fully alert. “Hadley! What?”

“It’s the river Jim, it’s come up in the dark! The boat feels like it’s trying to float.” Sure enough the cab tilted and shuddered like the keel of the Betty was lifting off the bank.

“They must have opened up Lock and Dam 25 up at Winfield. There’s a wall of water headed this way. We gotta get out of here and up the bank.”

“I think it’s shallow enough for us to drive out if we leave the trailer behind.” Jim hadn’t seen the bank to the east, but Hadley must have if he was making the suggestion.

“Do it! I’ll get the ramp down.” He shouted over his shoulder as he flung open the door and leapt down from the cab. Hadley cranked the truck and turned on the headlamps to give them some light to work by. Jim grabbed up a wrench that had been left out on deck and brought it down on the ratchet crank for the ramp cables. The ramp, as big as a barn door, fell with a wet thud sending up a brown wave of flood water. He almost wished they’d left the headlamps off, at least then he wouldn’t know how bad off they were. Behind him he heard the trailer unlatch as the truck jerked forward. He turned and ran back to the cab. Climbing in he tried to speak between gasping breaths.

“O.K. Hadley... Water’s already covered the dirt here... We aint got much time... b’for the wall gets here.”

Hadley didn’t bother replying he just popped the clutch and mashed the gas to the floor. The tires barked, then caught, and the unburdened tractor trailer rig was nearly launched off the end of the barge. They splashed down into water so heavy with silt it may as well have been mud. It was nearly up to the axels and slowed their progress noticeably. Hadley wasn’t having it though. He jockeyed the gas and transmission like an old road hand in his prime and swung the truck east to try and climb out of the path of the flood water.

They were too late. Just as the truck began to climb up out of the silty water onto the muddy gravel banks. A rumbling noise began to drown out the sounds of the wind and rain. As the front tires reached the edge of level ground something swatted the rear axel of the truck like a toddler kicking a toy. They spun to point their lights into a river of death. Neither man had time to utter a prayer as the water slammed into Jim’s side of the rig and rolled them under with the rest of debris.

There was no up or down or air or light. Just an endless noisy tumbling cold brawl. He became Nothingness Jim once more. When there was air he breathed, when there wasn’t he tried not to, but the

water and mud still got in. The truck was gone along with Hadley and Pete. Nate was surely washed away too.

At one point when he was breathing, he hit something, or something hit him. Either way Nothingness Jim clung to it as it seemed want to be above water like he did. He and the thing floated there in the water turning and bobbing as the flood wore itself out cutting a new path for the river. His heels began to drag along the bottom, then the backs of his legs, until finally he was sitting on a wide flat rock with a piece of a rail-road tie across his lap. He knew what it was because he could see it. The sun was coming up somewhere behind those clouds. Nothingness Jim came to himself.

Though, he was just plain old Jim now, captain of nothing but a long hunk of wood. He sat there watching the river churn in the morning light.

A rhythmic splashing sound drew his attention. It was footsteps. "Hey mister. You breathin' over there?"

It was a young man's voice. Jim looked around until he saw the soldier standing a little way off. A long line of rock extended into the distance behind him. The soldier was standing on levee. Jim looked back the other way to confirm that he was sitting on the same bit of earthworks; to make sure he wasn't dreaming, to make sure he was alive.

"Mister, can you stand up? We need to get you away from here, rain ain't stopped yet and they might open another dam. You need to get to a doctor." The soldier had come closer. He bent down and gently helped Jim heave the wood from his lap. Standing took a bit more effort though and Jim nearly pulled the young man down into to mud with him before he got his legs working again.

"I was a soldier once... then I was a captain..." Jim half muttered to himself.

"Come on sir, I've got a truck just down the levee. There are some blankets in the cab, and Sarge got the heater working this morning so we'll get you warm in no time." Jim shook his head in response to the sir.

"Wrong kind of captain." He muttered.

"Huh?" said the soldier.

"Not a sir, just a staff sergeant. Was a boat captain after though." Jim said wistfully.

The man had a shoulder under Jim's arm as he guided him down the slope. It was a short walk to the old army canvas backed truck, but it felt like a ten-mile march over bad ground. Once there the soldier almost had to bodily lift him up into the high cab. The familiar smell of military issue paint and grease sharpened Jim's grip on reality, but only briefly. For a moment he was back in Europe, shell shocked in the back of a flatbed as it jounced along a muddy road with dead and dying piled alongside him. An artillery shell landed near the road and rocked the truck as shrapnel whistled by and through some of the bodies.

Jim screwed his eyes shut against the memory.

When he opened them again he was in the cab of the truck, staring out over the rain soaked flood plain, numb. He was shivering, though not all of it was from the cold. Looking around he found a lumpy pile of wool blankets in the center of the bench seat. Jim fumbled at them for a moment before he realized

they were wrapped around something. He tried to unwrap it but whatever it was started moving. He snatched his hands away as it grunted then sat up. A familiar blocky head shook free of the cloth and turned to look at him.

“PETE!” Jim exclaimed, the pit bull half barked half yelped in excitement. He leaped into Jim’s lap wriggling and whining. Licking the man’s face as he pressed against him with desperation. Jim did his best to hold onto the excited dog, just relieved to see something familiar had survived. Eventually the animal calmed down enough for him to get the blankets wrapped around the two of them. Pete was a huge dog to hold in a lap, but Jim didn’t care right then. Before the young soldier could get back into the truck the two survivors were asleep. The big dog looked like he was smiling with his jowly chin resting on the man’s shoulder. They didn’t wake until the old truck squeaked to a stop in front of an army tent set up in a hospital parking lot.

Jim didn’t know where he’d go from here. Hell, he didn’t rightly know where “here” was. But he’d survived that hell in France, and he’d survive this too. He thought back to the start of the journey and how times were changing; about how he was getting too old to be running a homemade ferry on the river. Jim looked down at the exhausted dog dozing in his arms. He had someone else to take care of now. Maybe he’d start driving trucks. If Pete was any indication Hadley seemed to have done ok. Jim could smell bacon and coffee from somewhere... It was time to get started again.