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The Diamond Jo Line

You ought to see dat stovepipe brown of mine
Lak he owns de Dimon' Joseph line.

So sang W. C. Handy in his whimsical "St. Louis Blues" which appeared in 1914, three years after the famous Diamond Jo Line went out of existence. That brief period, however, had not erased from the memories of men the exploits of a line of steamboats that had plied the upper Mississippi for almost a half century prior to its sale to the Streckfus Company in 1911. In song and in story, in photography, etching, and painting, in the economic and social life of the people, the Diamond Jo Line has left an imperishable record. For sheer color and far-flung popularity no other activity of "Diamond Jo" Reynolds matched the picturesque steamboats that bore his aegis to the thriving river ports of Iowa.

The Diamond Jo steamboat company was formed primarily for the grain towing trade. Freight and passenger service was originally only a secondary consideration. As the grain trade began to decline, however, the Diamond Jo boats engaged more and more in the passenger and general freight traffic. The excursion trade,

though incidental, was lucrative, especially in the later years.

First in the long list of craft that bore the Diamond Jo ensign was the *Lansing*, an eighty-three-ton stern-wheeler. Although serving Reynolds but a short time in the grain trade between Lansing and Prairie du Chien before being purchased by the Minnesota Packet Company, the *Lansing* was long associated with the Iowa scene. On May 13, 1867, she exploded a forward boiler while endeavoring to back away from the levee at Hampton, Illinois. Six persons, including the pilot, were killed, and a number of others were seriously injured. The *Lansing* was rebuilt into a 123-ton craft at Dubuque and was used as a ferryboat at Clinton until 1874 when she was sold south.

The second towboat constructed by Joseph Reynolds was the *Diamond Jo*, a vessel built in 1864 and destined to see sixteen years of service on the upper Mississippi before being dismantled and her machinery placed in the *Josephine*. Like the *Lansing*, the *Diamond Jo* was sold to a competitor, but repurchased in 1868.

When Joseph Reynolds in 1867 entered the steamboat business in earnest, he began with the sixty-one-ton screw propeller *John C. Gault*. In the following year (1868) he made arrangements with the Chicago & North Western Railway to

carry grain to their terminal at Fulton, Illinois, opposite Clinton, using the *John C. Gault*, the *Ida Fulton*, the *Bannock City*, the *Diamond Jo*, and the *Lady Pike* to form the Chicago, Fulton, and River Line. The significance of this alignment was not overlooked by river editors. On May 3, 1868, the *Dubuque Herald* declared: "The steamer *J. C. Gault* of the Diamond Jo line, arrived at noon yesterday with a tow of five barges very heavily loaded. Her manifest shows nearly 45,000 bushels of wheat and oats, also a few hundred sacks of wheat. All for Chicago via Fulton!" This was said to be the largest tow of the season.

By 1869 Joseph Reynolds was playing the leading rôle in the grain trade and his steamers were already popularly called the Diamond Jo Line. The *Ida Fulton* passed Dubuque early in May with 1700 barrels of flour, 1880 sacks of grain, and 16,000 bushels of bulk grain, together with other "plunder". The *Bannock City* passed down in October with 55,000 bushels and 3000 sacks of grain, in addition to flour and other freight.

Although the downstream trade was dominant, the upstream trade was very heavy. In June the *Bannock City* churned north with four heavily loaded barges. She put off 140 barrels of salt and about 300 packages at Dubuque alone. In that same month the *Dubuque Herald* declared:

“Business on the levee was modestly active until the *Diamond Jo* arrived, when the clerks were crowded with work. Conway & Linehan were flying around like bees copying manifests and receipting for goods.” The *Diamond Jo* had two grain barges in tow and reshipped about 1000 packages, including 70 barrels of salt, 125 bundles of paper, 21 pieces of marble, 111 packages of roofing, and 42 boxes of hardware. Wandering down to the levee on a pleasant September day a Dubuque editor found no *Diamond Jo* boats in port to “make things lively”. A month later, however, it was necessary to charter the *Sterling* to help the five *Diamond Jo* boats.

As the grain trade expanded Reynolds added larger boats like the *Arkansas*, the *Tidal Wave*, the *Imperial*, and the *Jeanette Roberts* to his line. During June of 1873 the *Diamond Jo* boats delivered 600,000 bushels of wheat at the Fulton elevator. In the fall of that year, however, the *Fulton Journal* announced that the *Diamond Jo* offices and shipyards would be removed from Fulton in the spring because the North Western railroad had completed a track to a point on the upper Mississippi in Wisconsin and the longer boat haul was no longer necessary. Reynolds then chose Dubuque as headquarters for his company and established his boatyard at Eagle Point.

The popularity of the Diamond Jo Line may be gleaned from a study of the bills of lading issued by various grain shippers on the upper Mississippi. Between 1877 and 1880, Hermann Ihm, dealer in grain, produce, and general merchandise, and proprietor of the Guttenberg elevator, used seven boats of the Diamond Jo Line for every boat belonging to other companies. Although the North Western Union Packet Company eliminated all other upper Mississippi competitors it met an unbeatable adversary in "Diamond Jo" Reynolds, whose boats not only attained preëminence in the grain trade but actually overcame the White Collar Line in the packet trade as well.

Steamboating was on the decline before Reynolds moved his main office to Dubuque in 1874. Grain continued to be the main cargo, but fewer boats and smaller shipments were already the rule. To the natural limitations of waterways transportation — the limited season of navigation, high and low water, and the failure to improve the river — steamboats had to contend with a ruthless and unrestricted railroad competition. These, and other factors, combined to take the profits out of steamboating. In a letter on May 20, 1890, Joseph Reynolds assured Superintendent John Killeen that adverse conditions rather than the superintendent's efforts were responsible for the

boats not making money. This document disproves the statement of several authorities who claimed that the Diamond Jo Line prospered as long as Joseph Reynolds lived.

Steamboat transportation of grain had virtually ceased by 1890. Fortunately, "Diamond Jo" Reynolds had foreseen this decline. The company had turned its attention to the passenger traffic as early as 1879 when the *Libbie Conger* made several trips between St. Louis and St. Paul. In 1880, the *Mary Morton*, a 450-ton stern-wheeler and the finest boat in the line up to that time, began regular passenger service between St. Louis and St. Paul. Thereafter Diamond Jo boats afforded some of the finest packet service ever offered on the upper Mississippi.

In 1892 a Burlington newspaper urged its readers to travel to the "Golden Summer Resorts of the Northwest" aboard one of the reliable, light-draft Diamond Jo boats equipped with modern improvements and commanded by able and experienced officers. Fifteen years later Charles L. Petersen, Diamond Jo agent at Dubuque, advertised the "largest and finest vessels on the Mississippi" for a vacation trip. "The scenery is magnificent", Agent Petersen declared, "and with good meals and good music, it is an ideal outing."

The steamboat *Dubuque* was particularly popu-

lar with honeymooners of yesteryears. The *Muscatine Journal* of July 3, 1907, noted five bridal couples on that boat on its previous trip upstream. It was reported that one negro porter aboard the *Dubuque* was "kept busy nearly all the time clearing the decks of the rice which is showered upon the couples by their friends."

During the years 1897 to 1910 the dominance of the passenger traffic is attested by yearly boat receipts for the *Dubuque*, the *Sidney*, the *Quincy*, and the *St. Paul*. A sampling of twenty-six individual reports for these boats shows that \$385,008.37 was received from freight and \$659,798.96 from meals, berths, and passages. In eight seasons the *Dubuque* averaged \$21,375.65 from freight and \$26,302.13 from passengers. It was these four boats that were acquired by the Streckfus Line in the spring of 1911, together with the wharfboats and other equipment of the Diamond Jo Line. Gradually the new owners converted these boats into excursion craft, and the first three of the above mentioned vessels were renamed the *Capitol*, the *Washington*, and the *J. S.* And so they will probably be remembered by the present generation of Iowans, though some of these old boats had left their smoke trails on the upper Mississippi in the heyday of the grain trade.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN