

# FEATURE

## Historic churches visited on steamboat cruise

By Melanie Radzicki McManus  
Contributing writer

Puffs of steam sputtered and wheezed from the calliope's pipes as the instrument began to warm up. Soon a few ear-splitting squeaks could be heard, followed by off-key groans and whistles. A moment later the piercing sounds were transformed into a lively rendition of "Cruising Down the River" as the calliope sprang to life.

It's steamboat tradition to play the calliope when approaching a town, said John Bernadot, the musician entertaining us on board the *Julie Belle Swain*, one of just five authentic steamboats left on the Mississippi River. In the mid- to late 1800s — the steamboats' heyday — their arrival at riverfront settlements was an exciting event no one wanted to miss, for the boats brought people, supplies and news of the outside world.

Based in La Crosse, Wis., the *Julie Belle Swain* plies the waters of the upper Mississippi from June through October each year, offering dinner and lunch cruises and overnight excursions. The white, gingerbread-trimmed vessel, with its baby blue decking and gigantic red paddle-wheel, is a faithful replica of the riverboats operating on the upper Mississippi more than 100 years ago. Although the *Julie Belle Swain* was crafted in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1971, she boasts twin reciprocating steam engines that were built in 1915 and originally installed in the steamboat *The City of Baton Rouge*. The engines have logged more than 1 million miles.

Having grown up in eastern Wisconsin on the shores of Lake Michigan, I was anxious to commune with the mighty Mississippi that forms most of Wisconsin's western border. A leisurely steamboat cruise seemed the perfect way. I opted for the La Crosse-to-Winona, Minn., trip, one of the boat's two standard overnight cruises (the other one steams south to Prairie du Chien, Wis.)

While the boat is showing signs of wear, she is still quite impressive. Her main deck, which would have carried cargo or indigent passengers 100 years ago, contains tables and a wealth of chaise lounges for relaxing. The second level features the dining salon, complete with fancy floral carpeting and a hand-carved, hand-painted mahogany bar, while the third level houses a quiet, enclosed sitting area and the calliope. Perched on top is the pilot house, where you'll find Capt. Carl Henry steering the vessel with a massive 7.5-foot teakwood pilot wheel.

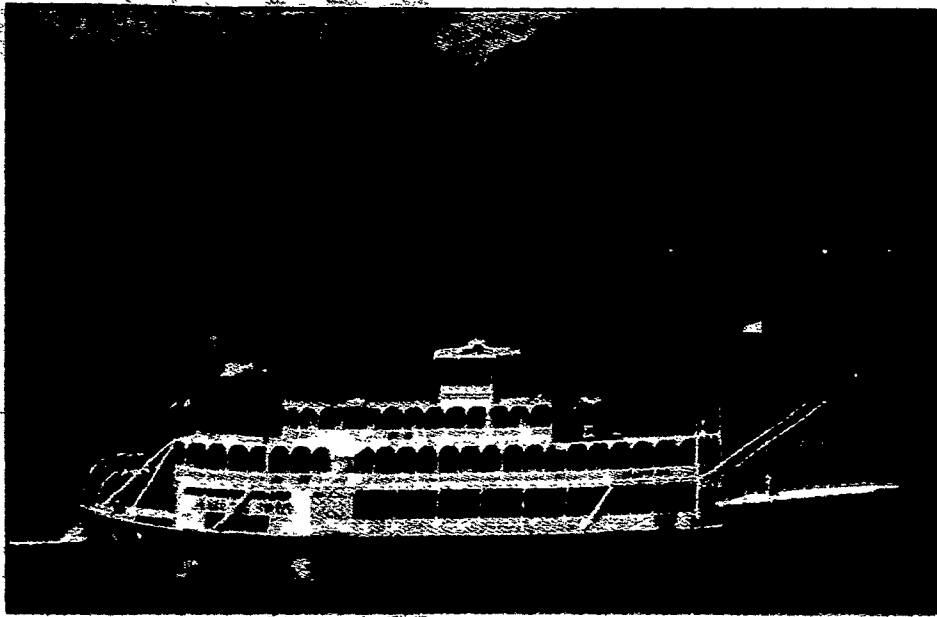


Photo courtesy of Joan Collins Publicity

The steamboat *Julie Belle Swain* offers cruises on the upper Mississippi River.

While I had planned to catch up on my reading during the six-hour cruise, my eyes kept wandering from the pages of my book to the gorgeous scenery slowly passing before my eyes. The towering Mississippi bluffs always hold me captive, and even though the day was gray and gloomy, it didn't diminish their beauty. We also steamed through two locks, an interesting process.

Then Capt. Henry, a 21-year river veteran, invited everyone to visit him in the pilot house. I promptly climbed up there, and was regaled with steamboat and river history galore, all while getting a birds-eye view of the stunning bluffs.

All too soon we docked in Winona, although this charming town of 25,000 proved to be an excellent respite. Part of our cruise package included not only meals and overnight accommodations here, but tours of the Winona County Historical Society, the Conway Universal Stained Glass Factory, the Watkins Museum and St. Stanislaus Kostka church.

Steaming back to La Crosse the next afternoon, I didn't even open my book. I just settled in on a bench back near the paddle-wheel, content to listen to its rhythmic churning and the gentle puffing of the boat's large black pipes while watching the bluffs glide by.

### Religious sites

Before you leave LaCrosse for your steamboat ride, head for Mary of the Angels Chapel, located in the beautiful Romanesque St. Rose Convent, 912 Market

fore you get back on the boat the following morning, you'll be treated to a tour of the landmark church St. Stanislaus Kostka, 625 E. 4th St. Poles first came to Winona in 1855, mainly from the Kaszubian region that borders the Baltic Sea. Initially, the immigrants worshipped at St. Joseph's, the city's German-language parish. Many Kaszubians spoke the language because the homeland region was near Prussia. But the Poles wanted their own church, and in 1873 they built St. Stanislaus Kostka.

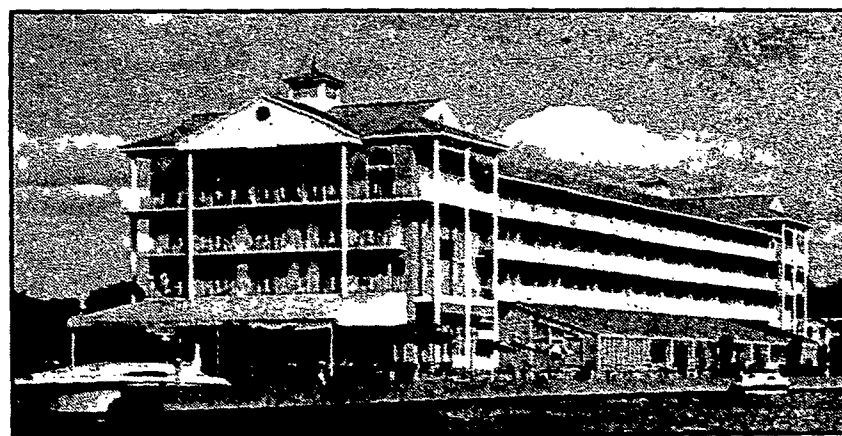
The first building was modest, but the parish grew so rapidly a new structure was soon necessary. In 1894 a magnificent new basilica opened, built on the same site. It is based on a Greek cross plan and contains Romanesque and Baroque elements. Its crowning feature is a silvery dome placed atop a high drum and crowned by a statue of St. Stanislaus Kostka; the dome can be easily seen as you enter town from any direction. Today the church is one of the city's main tourist attractions. Call 507/452-5430 for more information.

Besides being home to an impressive basilica, Winona is also home to five stained-glass companies, one of which provides tours for *Julie Belle Swain* travelers — Conway Universal Studios of Stained Glass, 503 Center St. Conway produces leaded stained-glass projects for churches, governments and companies nationwide. During the tour visitors get an up-close look at artists in various stages of the stained-glass process.

For more information, call the Great River Steamboat Company at 800/815-1005 ([www.juliabelle.com](http://www.juliabelle.com)); the La Crosse Convention & Visitors Bureau at 877/LOVE-LAC ([www.explorelacrosse.com](http://www.explorelacrosse.com)); or the Winona Convention & Visitors Bureau at 800/657-4972 ([www.visitwinona.com](http://www.visitwinona.com)).

St. La Crosse's second most popular tourist attraction and the central place of prayer for the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the beautiful chapel features a spectacular white marble altar accented with gold leaf, mother-of-pearl and a Venetian glass mosaic. Soaring behind the altar is a portrait of Mary surrounded by numerous angels. Just behind this chapel is the community's 24-hour adoration chapel. The sisters began perpetual adoration of the Eucharist on Aug. 1, 1878; since then, there have been at least two members of the community kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament and praying for the community, city, church and world. For a tour, call 608/782-5610.

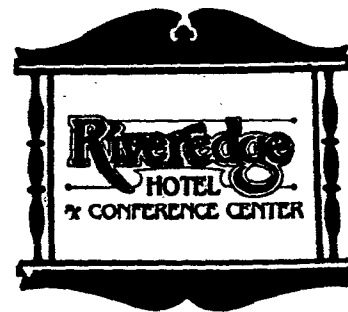
Once on your steamboat tour, you will stop in Winona, Minn., for the night. Be-



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