

Centennial Showboat

By Reggie McLeod

The Centennial Showboat was towed more than 100 miles down the Mississippi this fall to begin a new career in Winona, Minn.

The showboat, which is actually a floating theater, was moored across the river from downtown St. Paul at Harriet Island for 17 years, where the University of Minnesota used it as a theater for student productions until 2016, when the city bought it. A non-profit corporation, the William A. Thompson Dredge Museum, founded by Bob Harris and Dave Belz, bought it from the city in 2018. Difficult river conditions

The showboat is currently tied up next to the Dam Saloon, just downriver of Lock and Dam 5A.

thwarted attempts to move the boat until September.

“The worst part’s over,” said a relieved Harris.

He credits Brennan Marine, a La Crosse, Wis.-based marine construction company, for successfully moving the boat from St. Paul.

The showboat is currently tied up next to the Dam Saloon, just downriver of Lock and Dam 5A, 5.5 miles downstream of Fountain City, Wis. Harris owns and manages the saloon.

The nonprofit’s name was recently changed to Minnesota Centennial Showboat and Marine Museum. Harris is president and Belz is vice president. Both men are Winona residents.

The Centennial Showboat’s theater seats 225, and broad walkways encircle the boat on both of its decks, providing great views of the dam, river and nearby bluffs. The boat can carry 500 passengers.

It’s decorated in Victorian style. A chandeliered grand staircase connects a reception area on the main deck to the theater’s balcony and another reception area on the second deck. The boat is 175 feet long by 50 feet wide and has no engines or steering hardware, so it needs to be moved by a towboat.



Above: Bob Harris and Dave Belz on the showboat’s walkway. (Reggie McLeod)

Left: The 225-seat theatre is decorated in Victorian style. (Reggie McLeod)



Two small towboats guided the showboat 111 miles from St. Paul to Fountain City, Wis. (Bob Deck)

Harris and Belz plan to move the boat about 2.5 more miles downstream to Winona and moor it to an abandoned railroad bridge approach on Latsch Island, across the Main Channel from downtown Winona and near the Highway 43 bridge. They plan to have plays, concerts and other events on the showboat. They are also considering taking it to other river towns for events.

When asked what the first event will be, Belz was quick to reply “my birthday, in June.”

The Marine Museum referenced in the organization’s name will consist of memorabilia and displays from Harris’

collection of river and marine artifacts.

“I’ve collected river stuff my whole life,” Harris explained.

The owners will also seek interesting items from other collections to display.

The boat has an elevator and is fully accessible. They plan to use a 60-foot floating ramp to connect it to the shore. Sewer and water service will be self-contained and not require any hookups to shore.

The Minnesota Centennial Showboat and Marine Museum is currently raising funds for the next phase of the project. 🚧