

# Ghosts of Alton, Pt. 3: The Goldenrod - An Elegy

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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*Reporter's note: This was set to be a regular Ghosts of Alton story prior to its tragic and fiery conclusion. I had sent questions to Mike Ricksecker and Jake Medford regarding its ghosts and history. Before those questions could be answered, however, the Goldenrod Showboat was burnt in the night under strange circumstances.*

-Cory



KAMPSVILLE - People passing from Kampsville into Pike County on Illinois Rt. 100 would surely notice a large decaying riverboat beached on the shore of the Illinois River like the carcass of some long-dead, manufactured leviathan.

That husk and empty shell of a thing was the Goldenrod Showboat, and it was the last of its kind. As of the early hours of last Saturday morning, however, the ship was no more. It burnt throughout the rainy Bible-black predawn with flames high enough to be noticed from the Kampsville Ferry, which is three miles south from the showboat's final resting place. Fire marshals have since found Roman candles in what was left of the boat, but no further investigation into the incident is planned at this time. The showboat was condemned to the scrap heap anyway.

"It's a tragedy," Vice President of the Historic Riverboat Preservation Association Jake Medford said. "We wanted to take some more measurements of it before it was gone for a future museum or exhibit."

Luckily, some artifacts of the Goldenrod Showboat and its history have been preserved. Medford said many parts of the ship's interior are currently being held safely in storage for use in a future exhibit. Medford fought for the Goldenrod to be preserved through the Historic Riverboat Preservation Association until it was finally condemned to the scrap heap in 2015.

Tales of the Goldenrod Showboat were also immortalized through *Encounters with the Paranormal, Vol. 2* by Cleveland-based author Mike Ricksecker. That book, which features the Goldenrod on the cover as well as vignettes of paranormal investigations on board the condemned riverboat. That book is available for purchase through Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Alton's own [It's Raining Zen](#).

"It's heartbreaking, it's a tragedy," Ricksecker said of the Goldenrod's demise. "I'm heartbroken, sad and angry. They murdered the showboat. Whoever set it on fire murdered a piece of history."



A portion of Ricksecker's book sales once went towards the preservation of the Goldenrod, but will now go toward any future remembrance or elegy for the Goldenrod Showboat, he said Monday afternoon.

While it was structurally intact (somewhat), Ricksecker was able to go aboard the ship for as many as 10 paranormal investigations. Medford said he was accompanying Ricksecker one or two of those times, but he did not see anything out of the ordinary. Ricksecker, on the other hand, has several tales of strange events happening in the vacant husk of the once-great showboat.

"I've seen shadows, I've captured EVPs (electronic voice phenomenon)," Ricksecker said. "Once there was some stuff said about the captain missing one of the volunteers. There were unexplained loud bangs, and lots of lights and twinkles seen on board the ship. We would be sitting in the showroom and see a ball of light dance around the room. We called them 'little twinkles.'"

Those little twinkles were the most common anomalies, Ricksecker said, but he also said sometimes a certain ghost would play with his hair or even blow in his ear.

"There's a ghost named Annie, well her real name is Victoria Anne, but everyone called her Annie," he said. "She was the daughter of one of the captains, and she wanted to be

an actress on the boat. She had a fling with another person on the boat, and her father did not approve, so she went off into the St. Louis night, and she found her body floating next to the boat."

During one investigation, Ricksecker said he felt an entity play with his hair and ear. When a fellow investigator asked the ghost to blow in his ear if she liked it so much, Ricksecker said he felt a puff of air go into his ear from nothingness. He asked her to do it again, and he said the mysterious behavior continued.

Victoria Anne was one of at least three historically-backed hauntings Ricksecker and his fellow investigators researched. The other two involved a pair of former captains who were also brothers. Ricksecker believes the spirits of Bill and Charlie Menke walked the empty ship long after they had perished.

Ricksecker said Bill Menke, who was the captain and operator of the boat, haunts his old apartment, which was onboard. Bill Menke has left several EVPs, Ricksecker said, which are recorded using special electronic devices.

Charlie Menke may appear in a much different fashion than his brother, Ricksecker said. Unlike the lights and twinkles of most of the ship, Ricksecker said Charlie's ghost appears as a shadow walking down a corridor to his living quarters. Sometimes Ricksecker said a trail of twinkles follows as he passes.

Unlike the ghosts of Victoria Anne and Bill Menke, the supposed ghost of Charlie Menke could never be, and will never be confirmed.

"It was one of our goals if we were ever to go aboard it again," Ricksecker said.

Besides the Goldenrod Showboat, Ricksecker also has written about ghosts across the country. He said each region has its own flavor of haunting.

"I've been through the East Coast, through Maryland and Virginia, all the way through to Oklahoma and Texas," he said. "They're all haunted, but they're different. It adheres to the history. Lots of colonial and Civil War history in Maryland. You come across apparitions of soldiers. In Oklahoma, you see more Wild West and Native American spirits, like bank robbers and victims of railroad tragedies."

In Alton, Ricksecker said he has encountered many spirits including riverboat workers, people associated with the Mineral Springs Hotel and even the old federal prison, of which many buildings around Alton - especially on Williams Street - are constructed. Some of his future books will feature tales of the [Mineral Springs Hotel](#).



The Goldenrod Showboat was built in 1909 by Pope Dock Company of Parkersburg, West Virginia for a man named W.R. Markle. It cost \$75,000 at that time to construct, which would roughly equate to around \$2 million in today money. It was one of 21 traveling the Mississippi, Ohio and Missouri, but that number dwindled to five by 1938. It was the last ship of its kind on the river by 1950, when it had already been sunk and salvaged twice. It was on the St. Louis Riverfront at a time before even the Gateway Arch dared to stand there.

In June of 1962, the Goldenrod was gutted by a fire. After that, it was registered as a historic landmark in 1967, and traveled around regional river towns before banking outside Kampsville in the early 2000s after no place could be found for it in St. Louis.

Firefighters deemed the Goldenrod a complete loss after it burnt through the early morning hours Saturday. While the cause may have been somewhat determined through the discovery of spent Roman candles aboard, no further investigation is planned at this time from the Calhoun County Sheriff's Office. Calls made to the Northern Calhoun Fire Protection District regarding the fire were not returned throughout the day Monday, nor by Tuesday morning when this article was written.

For more spooky Halloween news, check out [our Halloween page](#).

