Museum boss looks for a sunken steamboat

Salley sank on way to Doniphan in 1869

By CHRIS TAYLOR
Staff Writer

Below what is now a farmers field along the muddy River Road on the way to Doniphan lies the Steamboat Salley.

If Dan Fitzgerald, Atchison's museums director, can find her and raise the money to bring her out of the ground, Salley may one day find a new home along the riverfront in Atchison.

Salley was a sternwheeler, three stories high, her dual stacks towering above the about 200 foot long body.

If Salley is intact like Fitzgerald thinks she must be when preserved life because she sank slowly. It took about two hours for the boat to go down.

"Salley sank on Oct. 22, 1869 and, from the rough listing of cargo, I've an idea what was on board. There were wagons, personal belongings, trunks and, it was mentioned on three different occasions, $90,000 in gold.

"I don't expect the gold to be on the ship," Fitzgerald continued. "They had diving bells to extract valuable cargo and they were pretty persistent about things like that. But the other stuff is intriguing enough, the wagons alone and a chance to find a wide variety of cargo and if the gold happens to be on there..."

Fitzgerald said he had explored several sunken steamboats looking for one similar to the one described in the 1869 wreck.

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The Salley went down in the mid-1860s as it was then a fairly deep channel. Fitzgerald estimates it to be from 40 to 60 feet below the ground to the bow of the ship. Since the sinking of the Salley, the Missouri River has switched course, leaving the ship and Salley's destination, the town of Doniphan, about a mile from the river today.

Fitzgerald has some advantages others who have brought up similar boats have not. He will have the advantage of modern technology and will draw on other's experience, including the Hawley family, who brought up the Steamboat Arabia, now on display in Kansas City.

"I'm going to work closely with the Hawley family and rely on the expertise they learned in their excavation," said Fitzgerald.

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Fitzgerald said he had explored several sunken steamboats looking for one prime for excavation and the Salley certainly fit the bill.

There were about five or six sunken boats on the stretch between Doniphan and Atchison," said Fitzgerald. "The Salley has the greatest potential to be intact. One of the other had a boiler explode breaking it apart. Another burned to the water line, and the others were very vague about where they sank.

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