

A Journey even Huck Finn would admire...



**SOUTH
TO**

Alaska

From the Heartland of America
to the Heart of a Dream

10,000 Miles to Alaska

Nancy Owens Barnes

SOUTH TO ALASKA

REVIEW COMMENTS

“An amazing and inspirational tale...”

—*Midwest Book Review*

"Told with grit, like her father's journey. Through illness, loneliness, storms, even thievery and threats of jail from Mexican authorities, the tale keeps one riveted to Alaska."

—Bryan Martin, *Kodiak Daily Mirror*

"What is it about the indomitability of the human spirit that propels some in pursuit of their dreams despite all odds? I don't have a ready answer to that question but I do know that upon reading *South to Alaska*...I was touched deeply and moved by the spirit of one such man; and by his daughter's telling of his story."

—Clyde W. Ford, *PassageMaker Magazine*, Books & Boats Blog

"Like most of us, Melvin Owens dreamed as a youngster of being part of his own great story. But where most of us leave our childhood fantasies behind, Owens made his come true in a way that even Huck Finn would have admired."

—Dan Webster, *The Spokesman-Review*

"Melvin's dream, told so well by his daughter, speaks of this couple's courage and need to step beyond, to find peace and fulfillment, while carving out a life in a new frontier."

—Bill Parlatore, Editor-in-Chief, *PassageMaker Magazine*

"Author Nancy Owens Barnes is an able harbormaster, masterfully retelling her father's journey from landlocked Oklahoma and Arkansas to the wild Alaskan shore."

—Nancy Steel, Special Sections Editor, *Southwest Times Record*

"Rarely do I find a book so compelling that I can't put it down until I've reached the very last word. But the quixotically titled "South to Alaska," by Nancy Owens Barnes, is that rare book ... Owens, although born far from Alaska, typifies Alaskans. He saw a frontier and ached to explore it, and even though it took 50 years for him to arrive, once he did he fit right in. Our world is richer for his journey. "

—Libbie Martin, Book Reviewer, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*

"A riveting tale, in the tradition of the best seafaring yarns. A story that needed to be told."

—Jennifer Lamont Leo, *Northern Reach Magazine*

"A beautiful reminder that life begins where your comfort zone ends."

—Holly Chase Williams, *Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living Magazine*

SOUTH TO ALASKA

From the Heartland of America
to the Heart of a Dream

by
Nancy Owens Barnes

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Front cover photos:
Melvin Owens and dog, Oklahoma, circa 1926.
View from Pennock Island to Ketchikan waterfront. Photo © 1995 Jerry Owens.
Interior photos by Don Owens, Jerry Owens, Nancy Owens Barnes and others.
Maps: Art Attack Design and Sign

“Hook your wagon to a star...”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following story emerges from first-hand accounts, research, interviews, and entries from the *Red Dog's* ship log. Some suggested I fictionalize the story. By doing so would allow me to drive drama to a higher level and to void my worries about maintaining truth. But I felt turning the story into fiction would detract from my primary intent: to give my father credit for his achievements, which was never in his nature to claim for himself.

Even though I interviewed my parents extensively, none of us can remember exactly what we or others did or said moment by moment after so many years. But by knowing the circumstances of certain situations, the habits and character nuances of the people involved, and with my parents' review of the manuscript, I feel I have presented an accurate rendering of events.

Excerpts from the ship's log remain as my father entered them, with only occasional minor revisions for clarity and consistency of format. Because he made the majority of his journey aboard the *Red Dog* alone, I have drawn from a variety of sources to help illuminate the backdrop of his travels, such as references on sea life, geography of Central America and Mexico, profiles of various ports of call, and seamanship. Two valuable resources included David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914*, and *The Oceans: Their physics, chemistry, and General Biology* by H. U. Sverdrup, Martin W. Johnson, and Richard H. Fleming.

South to Alaska takes the reader on two journeys. On one, the reader becomes a passenger aboard the *Red Dog* as it makes its way from Arkansas to Alaska in 1973. On the other, the

reader follows a dream that begins in a one-room, Oklahoma schoolhouse in 1926, and ends decades later on an island in southeast Alaska.

To the outside world, some would have considered my father a common rural carpenter. To those of us who knew him, though, he was a gentle genius—not of mathematics, science, or literature, but of determination, resourcefulness, and independence.

Here is his story. Here is how the manifestation of one boy's dream came about.

ROUTE OF THE RED DOG



PROLOGUE

Dawn of a Dream

AT THE SOUTHERNMOST surge of land rising from the vast footprint of the Rocky Mountains, a tall fin of peaks known as the Sangre de Cristo Range straddles the Colorado-New Mexico border. From the chain's eastern face the terrain tumbles, dropping and flattening to form a swath of interior plains that tilt and sprawl eastward across Oklahoma. Near the border of eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas, the land again lifts, elevating into the Ozark, Boston, and Ouachita highlands before sloping down into the Mississippi River basin and the Atlantic plain of the Gulf of Mexico.

Snowmelt and rains drain from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, collecting and growing into the Cimarron, North Canadian, and Canadian Rivers, each etching its watery path across the arable and pastoral lands of Oklahoma, then washing into the Arkansas River at the eastern edge of the state.

Melvin's story began near the center of Oklahoma where the North Canadian River wigwags through Oklahoma County. Oklahoma County once held a place in the Unassigned Lands, a donut-hole of land surrounded by the Oklahoma Territory when the territory served as a reservoir for relocated American Indian tribes in the 1800s. After President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862, the Unassigned Lands opened to homesteaders in the Land Run of 1889 when, in April of that year, thousands lined its boundaries and, at the boom of a canon, rushed to stake their claims. Some homesteaders encountered "Sooners" who snuck past U. S. Army cavalry patrols the

previous night to claim prime land. Many of these encounters gave rise to cuss fights, fist fights, and occasional gun fights as the homesteaders pushed toward their dreams of one-hundred-sixty acres of free land. Overnight the area billowed into a tented city of thousands, a city that some say was “born grown” and became known as Oklahoma City. Next to Oklahoma City, across the North Canadian River where it loops to the south and many homesteaders landed, sprouted Capitol Hill.

In the early 1900s, a bricklayer named George Owens purchased two lots at the edge of Capitol Hill. Using salvaged lumber from a relative’s construction job, he built a twenty-by-twenty-foot box house for his wife Nellie and himself. There, they raised two children: their daughter Marguerite, and her older brother Melvin.



Melvin Owens, circa 1918

Melvin possessed an innate sense of adventure, and at Lee School in Capitol Hill in 1926, a single photograph sparked the point around which his life began to pivot.

“Alaska...,” his fourth-grade teacher had said.

That was the only word among the long string of others that caused ten-year-old Melvin's slouch to straighten and his dusty leather shoes to shuffle and rest flat against the wood plank floor beneath his desk. He leaned over the geography book and eyed the photograph to which his teacher had referred. His hair—black as a mine shaft—stuck out from the crown of his head where his mother had cut it too short.

He studied the black and white photo. A cabin sat at the edge of the woods where snow had tucked it in with a thick comforter of white. A bundle of fur traps hung outside the door above an orderly stack of firewood. Smoke curled from the chimney like a genie from a magic lamp.



*Melvin at Lee School, Capitol Hill, Oklahoma, 1923
Second row from front, third from right.*

Melvin had heard relatives talk about what life would be like in Alaska, a place so far beyond their reach there was little danger anyone would prove them wrong. Their imaginations still stirred by stories of the Klondike Gold Rush less than thirty years earlier, they talked dreamily of wilderness, abundance, and independence. Melvin envisioned the cool rush of rivers in the distant north, of having his own cabin one day, of living near the

mountains with lakes and streams where he could hunt, fish, and trap. He imagined scouring untamed land for game and surviving on his own know-how and inventiveness.

Though Melvin had heard of Alaska, he had never seen any pictures of the place. Now one lay on the desk before him, the incarnation of all he wanted: the woods, the mountains, the wild, the undiscovered. It was an image that would never fade, one that raised the first ripple in a watery world he knew little about, to get to a world he could not forget.

Melvin was my father.

SECTION ONE

Fort Smith to Galveston



1
A Watery Highway

Hartford to the Mississippi River

A FEW DAYS after pulling away from the dock at Fort Smith, Arkansas, and heading east along the Arkansas River in November of 1971, Dad stepped to one side of the steering wheel in the pilothouse and looked at me.

“Think you can take it for a while?”

Wearing brown-leather fisherman slip-ons and his usual garb of dark-green J. C. Penny work pants and shirt, his body stood like the trunk of a tree—straight and stout, but not too tall. His black, shiny hair, slick as a raven, lay straight back from his wide forehead. Against his fifty-five-year-old olive skin, his eyes became tropical waters.

It looked easy enough; I had watched him do it for three days now. No other river traffic was in sight; in fact, because we began our journey so late in the year, we had encountered very little watercraft since leaving Fort Smith.

“Okay,” I said with a quick grin at the prospect of steering the boat for the first time.

I scooted into the captain’s seat, pushed my hair behind my shoulders, and focused on the river ahead. A thin veneer of Montana tan still darkened my arms as I took hold of the spokes of the steering wheel.

“Just keep us headed downriver and don’t get too close to shore,” Dad told me. “The speed is good where it is.”

He stood nearby and watched me steer a few minutes before thumping down the steps to the galley. Shortly after he

left me alone in the pilothouse, I angled the forty-seven-foot *Red Dog* around a wide bend of the river to find two barges loaded with freight coming upriver toward me. Pushed by tugboats, the barges moved side-by-side as one passed the other on a long stretch of river.

Only my father, my mother Cecil Marie, and I, their twenty-two-year-old daughter, occupied the *Red Dog*. And with no navigation experience, I was oblivious to the hazards of cruising too close to tugs and their barges in narrow waterways. I didn't know that the tremendous suction created when a tug's huge propeller pulls water into it could draw a smaller boat toward the tug's hull. I had no idea that a blind spot sometimes extended hundreds of feet in front of the pilot of a tug pushing a loaded barge. I had never heard of "wheel wash," a strong underwater current caused by powerful tugboat engines. And I didn't realize the risk and difficulty for tugboats with barges to change course, that they needed to maintain speed in order to steer, and that it could take them a mile or more to stop.

Sounds of rattling flatware and something sliding across the galley table drifted from the main cabin below as my parents prepared sandwiches from the ham Mom had cooked that morning. I chose not to disturb my folks by calling for my father when I saw the barges coming toward us. Instead, wanting to handle the situation myself, I began to move the *Red Dog* to one side of the river to avoid the monster vessels.

But the tugs and barges moved upriver faster than I expected, approaching so quickly I suddenly feared steering the *Red Dog* across the path of either to get to one side. So, with what looked like a reasonable amount of space between them, I decided to stay on course.

It was a dangerous decision.

...

My father had constructed the *Red Dog* in the backyard of our Hartford, Arkansas, home. After selling our farm near Perkins, Oklahoma, in 1965, where we had lived off and on for the last twenty years, he had built our house on a small hill at the edge of Hartford, a community of seven-hundred-nineteen residents according to the city limit sign near our driveway. Tucked into the rolling hills of western Arkansas, the town's modest homes clustered around a handful of businesses that lined a single street and closed at noon each Wednesday. Small, isolated farms and an occasional long, white, broiler house where thousands of chickens cheeped and squawked until ready for market, dotted the rural terrain along dusty back roads and cutoffs. The community rested at the northern edge of the Ouachita National Forest, which spilled into the area and sprinkled the land with tall, airy pines.

The catalyst for building the *Red Dog* was my folks' second trip to Alaska the spring of 1968 when they spent the summer in Ketchikan. Situated on one of hundreds of islands in the Alexander Archipelago in southeast Alaska, Ketchikan fascinated my parents. They loved its forested terrain, inland waterways, fishing boats, float planes, historic architecture, and small-town flavor. They reveled in its mild summer weather, glad to escape the scorching heat of Oklahoma and Arkansas where they had lived most of their lives. Before returning to Arkansas, they decided Ketchikan would, one day, become their Alaska home.

That fall, behind our house, the epicenter of my father's dream began to rattle and bang as he stacked sheets of steel, piled steel bars and clamps, shuttled the welding machine into place, and prepared to build the *Red Dog*.

By then I had entered my second year of college at Arkansas Polytechnic College, a ninety-minute drive from Hartford. When I returned home one weekend, I found my father under the shelter of our carport, studying the blueprints

for the boat where he had spread them across a makeshift table of plywood and sawhorses.

“Where’d you get those?” I asked as I walked around the table to get a better look.

“Pete made them for me. They’re a copy of some he ordered from some boating magazine.”

Pete had worked for my father for several years and had dreams of building his own boat, but had not yet done so.

The backgrounds of the plans were as dark blue as the deepest seas. The thin white lines of the boat’s framing plans arced and stretched delicately across the sheets, symmetrical and parallel as they ticked along the line of the keel like the fine bones of a fish. Fore and aft cross sections, construction details of the keel pipe, the escape hatch, and various connections crowded the sheets with lines, notes and figures.

I read the title block of the drawings.

“Forty-two-foot, twin screw, steel patrol boat.”

“I’m going to just put in one engine,” Dad said, “and I’ll probably add five feet to the length so we’ll have more room in the cabin.”

Dad also planned to add trawling outriggers, hoping to make a living commercial fishing in Alaska.

As days passed, my father made plywood templates from which he cut the ribs, keel, and connectors from flat steel bars and welded them one by one into a skeletal grid. Because I returned home only on weekends, visual progress on the boat jumped at me like an old-time movie. Within weeks the steel grid jerked its way high above the ground and diced the sky behind our house into triangles, squares, and wedges. Dad then began the difficult task of cutting, clamping, and welding the large steel plates to the frame to form the hull.

“Well...errrats,” he often said, always using some form of “rats” whenever things didn’t go right.

The band of his cap would darken with sweat as he strained to pull each sheet of steel in at the prow where it needed to

curve against the ribs. The plates weighed around three hundred pounds. Always working alone, he used cables, come-alongs, pry bars, jacks, and “a truckload of clamps” to maneuver and hold each cumbersome piece. One by one, he welded the plates into place.



Melvin building the Red Dog, Hartford, Arkansas, 1969.

The construction of the house-sized *Red Dog* in our backyard, hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean, drew a trickle of onlookers who noticed the boat then turned into our driveway for a closer look.

“I have a friend who built a steel boat, and it was no good,” one man said.

Some folks stopped by, asked a few questions, and nodded pleasantly, but obviously felt my father had undertaken a crazy endeavor. Others liked looking at the boat and enjoyed the adventure it brought to mind.

“You’re starting something you’ll never finish,” my father was told.



*Melvin building the Red Dog,
Hartford, Arkansas, 1969.*



Red Dog, Hartford, Arkansas, 1970.

Not the chatty, gregarious type, Dad usually answered such comments by washing them away with a polite laugh. Even though he worked as a construction superintendent in charge of a crew of tough laborers, his soft-spoken manner fell upon others as easy as a gentle rain, able to nourish the fields without the thunder.

Mom, too, who became the only wife in town whose husband took on the task of building a boat in their backyard, fielded questions from passersby.

“Is your husband a genius?”

“Does your husband help with housework?”

She heard my father called everything from “Noah” to “that queer old duck on the hill.”

Skepticism settled on many who saw Dad building the *Red Dog* in our yard. The shy son of a mason born and raised in the dusty heart of Oklahoma, my father had never crossed the southern border of the United States, had never even ridden on a boat in the open ocean, and had certainly never navigated a homemade watercraft for thousands of miles in the Caribbean and Pacific.

“Learn by doing,” he often said.

Some believed he would never make it. They were almost right.

...

My mother did not appear, at first glance, the type of person one expected to be easily excited by a move to Alaska. With the slim, straight-lined, high-collared dresses she wore and the way she fretted about people seeing her without her “earbobs,” she exuded an elegant aura. Her short, dark-brown hair matched her eyes. My father often called her “Pretty Lady.”

But regardless of her delicate appearance, my mother shared Dad’s adventurous spirit and, like him, longed to live in the north. She studied maps and read books and articles about

Alaska, the Yukon, and the north country, excited by its wildness and history. After reading Laura Berton's *I Married the Klondike*, she spoke with admiration of Martha Black, a stylish Victorian woman from Chicago caught in the feverish Klondike gold rush, a woman with a frontier sentiment not unlike her own.

My mother, however, was, by her own admission, a landlubber and strictly a calm-water sailor. She didn't mind riding on a boat as long as the water lay calm, but became wide-eyed nervous if it did not.

"I'd just as soon stay on shore," she would say.



Cecil Marie Owens, circa 1965.

Mom's wants and ideas contrasted with those of my father in other ways. Unlike Dad who preferred to stay home and felt ill at ease whenever out of his element and around other people, Mom liked Saturday night card games with friends and keeping in close contact with relatives and acquaintances. Dad liked to read newspapers, Mom loved to read books. Dad preferred wearing his work clothes and Mom liked feeling stylish, which did not always fit well into the environment of construction sites

and boat-building. Dad believed in learning by doing and Mom believed in learning by studying. She took classes on handwriting analysis and purchased books on art, famous quotations, the origins of words, history and adventure, with a craving to learn all she could about the world.

“The two most important things in life,” she sometimes said, “is loving and learning.”

Although my mother stood solidly at the heart of our family beside my father and proudly praised his accomplishments, her actions sometimes hinted for more out of life.

...

My father first learned to build boats when he and Mom lived for two years in Seattle, Washington, during World War II. His earlier experience building a wartime Oklahoma gunpowder plant and assisting his father with masonry and construction projects helped earn him a job as shipwright for Barbee Marine, a Kenneydale shipyard. Located on a bulge of land along the southeastern shore of Lake Washington, Barbee Marine produced wooden, ocean-going government tugboats and barges for the war.

Working with the tugboat crew, Dad studied tug drawings in the expansive loft of the shipyard building, then helped his coworkers lay out the keel and set up the ribs for the tugs below. He watched lines on the drawings become lines on the tugs as they grew from a single timber into one-hundred-fifteen-foot boats. He admired the intelligence and experience of his coworkers and tried to understand everything they did, why they did it, and to think through their methods and reasoning.

“They’re real smart men,” he would say.

...

Dad worked on the *Red Dog* in what he called his spare time, which included several hours every evening after work and all day Saturday and Sunday. He rigged up lights behind the house where we often saw his dark silhouette amid the flash and spray of welding sparks well into the night.

Fabricating much of the equipment and workings of the boat himself, Dad made his own steering wheel and pieced together the entire steering assembly from wheel to rudder. He cut the control console from steel plating and did his own instrument wiring using World War II surplus airplane switches for the pumps, alarms, fans, lights, temperature gauges, and other controls. Purchasing a surplus 6-71 Patton tank engine from a mechanical trade school in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, he gave the owner five-hundred dollars for the engine, heat exchanger, manifold, fuel filters, gear box, clutch, and anything else they found that would help him put the boat together.

Piece by piece, month by month, season by season, the piles of materials in the yard transformed into the *Red Dog*. Figuring the boat would provide both home and livelihood in Alaska, my parents made it as homelike as possible. The main cabin contained the galley and eating area on the port side, and the living area on the starboard side where a flower-print, hide-a-bed couch sat against the bulkhead. Near the center of the cabin stood a small Franklin wood stove, intended for cold Alaska nights. Three portholes dotted each side of the bow where the forward sleeping cabin and head, complete with bathtub, fit snug below deck.

A short set of steps led from the main cabin up to the pilothouse. The steering wheel, control panels, and built-in chart table filled the front of the pilothouse. A double-sized bunk spanned the back.

Dad covered the floors of the cabin, galley, companionways, and pilothouse with bulkhead-to-bulkhead, plush, burnt-orange carpeting. Mom sewed curtains for the

windows to match. Regular, non-marine, thermal-insulated house windows glazed the cabin and pilothouse.



Interior of the Red Dog, Hartford, Arkansas, 1971.

Above the waterline, Mom and Dad painted the boat white with a light blue roof. A deep, marine blue coated the boat from the waterline down. After completing the United States Coast Guard Master Carpenter's form and mailing it to Memphis to register the boat, my father carefully painted in tall black letters across the stern:

RED DOG
MEMPHIS

My folks named the *Red Dog* after a well-known saloon in Juneau they had read about in stories of Alaska. Mom liked the name for the image of adventure it invoked, and Dad for its simplicity and brevity.

"I don't want a fancy name," he said. "If I'm ever in a distress situation, I want to make sure the Coast Guard doesn't have any trouble understanding the name of my boat."

After three years of work, the completed boat housed a fuel capacity of two-thousand gallons and a two-hundred-gallon water tank. Dad calculated the boat to weigh about eighteen tons.



The Red Dog completed, Hartford, Arkansas, 1971.

The *Red Dog* surprised many who drove over the rise of the hill by our house to find a large ocean-going vessel sitting high and dry. My father knew that people who saw the *Red Dog* thought they were seeing the beginning of a journey. But like the stout-bodied cicada that finally emerges from its seventeen-year slumber to unfurl its wings and let its long-hushed song rise and fall in hot summer air, the past was hidden from them by time. They couldn't see that the *Red Dog* would be my father's song, and the final unfolding of a dream that had slumbered against his thoughts for many years.

...

On a sunny September day in 1971, family and a few neighbors stood anxiously to one side and watched men load the *Red Dog* onto a long, house-moving trailer. Dad had built the boat on skids and a crib that supported the sides at the front and rear sections. After lowering the tail of the trailer, the truck driver switched on the winch. The winch whined then groaned as it pulled the boat forward and onto the trailer.

“Looks good back here,” someone yelled just before the winch stopped.

Not long after the movers secured the boat to the trailer, the bulk of boat, truck, and trailer moved as one across the slope of our yard toward the highway, swaying and listing as it maneuvered the contours of the yard. Once on the highway, it followed the winding, forty-mile drive to Fort Smith; then, with the help of a police escort, crept across town to the Paul Latture Marina and Park on the south bank of the Arkansas River. My folks would keep the *Red Dog* docked at the marina while they completed the sale of their house and settled their belongings.



Hauling the Red Dog to Fort Smith for launch on the Arkansas River, 1971.

Dad hadn't called the newspaper; never wanting to draw attention to himself, that's the last thing he would ever do. But there, poised on the riverbank with note pad and camera, stood a reporter from the *Southwest Times Record*. The young man had showed up with forty or fifty other strangers who saw the huge boat sloth through the streets of Fort Smith, then gathered to watch its launch. The reporter worked his way over to my father and stood beside him.

"Melvin Owens," Dad said when the reporter asked his name.

"So you're goin' to Alaska huh?"

My father answered the reporter's questions, keeping his eyes focused on the truck as it positioned itself to begin backing toward the river. With the *Red Dog* nearing water for the first time, Dad worried about its launch. But as he stood on the bank of the river with his hands in his pockets and talked with the reporter, it was difficult to tell.

As the truck moved closer to the river, my father made an apologetic escape from the reporter and motioned to the truck driver.

"Easy now."

His forearm pivoted back and forth at the elbow as he moved near the edge of the water and signaled the driver to back into the river. The tail end of the flatbed trailer dipped into the water as the front wheels of the cab crackled across gravel.

My father worried about how the boat would sit on the river—whether the painted waterline around the perimeter of the steel hull would match the surface line of the water; whether all of the angles, lengths, and bends he had figured, measured, and welded would now rest in stable equilibrium on the river, or if the nose of the boat might dip downward; and whether, in full view of family, friends, and the crowd of strangers, the boat he spent the last three years building would list to one side like an old barn.

As the trailer backed slowly into the river, the stern of the *Red Dog* slanted into the water.

“Right there’s good,” he yelled to the driver when the river steeped a portion of the boat.

The truck stopped. Dad and some helpers began to undo the ropes and straps that anchored the *Red Dog* in place. Most were undone when the eighteen-ton boat slipped on the trailer. A rope snapped, springing like a set trap as the boat lurched backwards.

“Look out!” Dad shouted.

The boat popped the remaining ropes, picking up speed as it slid on the trailer, the huge bulk of steel now out of anyone’s control. We watched helplessly as we heard the rudder of the *Red Dog* rasp against the river’s bottom. Then, as the stern began to float, the bow of the boat sloughed from the back of trailer, causing a large but soft wake to roll to shore. Men hurried to grab the ropes to keep the boat from drifting away. Once the men had the boat under control, the crowd cheered.



Launching the Red Dog on the Arkansas River, Fort Smith, Arkansas, 1971.

When the surface of the water calmed, the *Red Dog* rested easily in the water. Unruffled by its hasty entry, it floated on the river like a shiny white duck.

“You’re all welcome to have a look,” my father said, waving bystanders on board.

Despite his concerns, the painted waterline on the boat lined up evenly with the surface of the water, no tilt in any direction.

“How’d he know where to paint that line while it was sit’in in his yard?” Someone asked.

It was September 27, 1971. The *Red Dog* was launched.

...

In the 1800s, Fort Smith served as a gateway for folks migrating west. The town became a new gateway for migration when, weeks after the launch, my father eased the *Red Dog* from its dock on the south bank of the Arkansas River and began his long journey to Alaska.

Dad planned to navigate the *Red Dog* down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico, along the Caribbean coasts of Mexico and Central America, through the Panama Canal, then north along the Pacific coast to Ketchikan, Alaska, my folks’ final destination. Following this route meant that, before heading north, my father would first cruise the *Red Dog* more than 4,000 miles to the south.

With my three older brothers busy with their own jobs and families, I remained the only one of us kids still floating around and available to go on such a trip. After quitting college in early 1969, I spent two years working in Arkansas and Florida during the winters, and in Montana’s Glacier National Park during the summers. Fresh from Montana and with no steady boyfriend to fret about, I gladly joined my folks for a trip on the *Red Dog*.

Although Mom feared “rocky” waters, she looked forward to cruising aboard the *Red Dog* from Fort Smith to Galveston,

Texas, a route that would take us down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers, then west along the Intracoastal Canal—a relatively calm-water trip. She knew, though, that the trip from Galveston to the West Coast in the ocean would be a far cry from a float on a pond, and had already declined that portion of the journey. So once we reached Galveston, after wintering on the boat, Dad and I planned to leave for Alaska the following spring, while Mom returned to Arkansas to stay with my brother Gene, who lived in Fort Smith. When the *Red Dog* reached Bellingham, Washington, Mom would again board the boat for the final leg of its journey north along the Inside Passage between Bellingham and Ketchikan. A series of calmer, inland waterways that runs from Puget Sound through southeast Alaska, the Inside Passage would no longer require sailing on the open ocean.

The trip from Fort Smith to Galveston would take two to three weeks, depending on weather and sightseeing. After the flutter of hands by family and well-wishers waving from shore subsided, the excitement of the departure from Fort Smith had settled into a quiet calm by the time we encountered our first Arkansas River lock.

“I heard you were coming! I read it in the paper!”

The lockmaster yelled down to my father from a door of the J. W. Trimble Lock where he controlled the gates. He had apparently read the article written weeks ago by the reporter who attended the launch. Not wanting to carry on a conversation of shouting, Dad looked up and waved out the door of the pilothouse as he moved the *Red Dog* toward the lock chamber.

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers had completed the Arkansas River lock and dam project, or the McClellan-Kerr Navigation System, only a year earlier. The four-hundred-forty-eight-mile waterway included seventeen locks and dams between the Mississippi River and the Tulsa, Oklahoma, port of Catoosa, allowing boats and barges to climb four-hundred-twenty feet east to west up the Arkansas River Valley. For the

Red Dog, though, beginning at Fort Smith and traveling west to east, the trip down the Arkansas River to the Mississippi River amounted to a thirty-story drop through twelve locks over a distance of about three-hundred miles.

Maneuvering through the locks seemed like navigating through an egg carton as my father slid the boat into the first gray chamber. Filled to the upstream level, the massive concrete chamber, large enough to accommodate a towboat with eight barges, opened and closed with King Kong-sized, steel miter gates at each end. Dad shut off the engine and the *Red Dog*, the only boat in the lock, floated freely inside the chamber. The lockmaster then closed the upstream gate and allowed the water to drain from the lock through gravity-flow valves at the downstream end.

“Better hold us off the wall,” Dad warned when our boat drifted toward one.

“I’ll go to the front,” I said as I exited through the starboard pilothouse door and walked along the railing to the bow.

Dad remained in the pilothouse in case he needed to restart the engine, and Mom headed downstairs and through the main cabin to the stern.

When the boat drifted near the wall, I pushed at the concrete mass with my hand. I saw my mother at the stern holding off the wall with the broad end of a broom. Once the water level matched that of the lower outlet, the downstream gate opened and we continued downriver.

The second lockmaster appeared less congenial than the first. When the lockmaster waved his arm, Dad steered toward the entry gate.

“Get out of the way,” the lockmaster yelled with a sour face and a quick flip of his arm.

“Errrats.”

Realizing the lockmaster’s wave was not a directive to enter, but to clear the way for a tug and its barge coming

downriver behind us, my father put the boat in reverse and backed out of the way until the vessel passed.



Cecil on the Red Dog inside an Arkansas River lock, 1971.

After learning to maneuver the locks, we cruised the *Red Dog* casually between the shores of the smooth river, severing the state as we moved toward Arkansas' eastern border and the Mississippi River.

The *Red Dog* pleased my father. All systems worked well and the boat rode easily through the water.

"Runs real nice," he told my mother.

"Not much noise at all," she added, knowing the trouble he had taken to insulate around the engine for sound.

Dad spent hours standing in the pilothouse navigating the *Red Dog* downriver. Gripping the spokes of the steering wheel, his hands looked as wide as they were long and flecked with red where he cut, jabbed, or scraped himself while working on the

boat. Whenever he tired of standing, he sat in his captain's chair, sometimes pushing it backward against the double-wide bunk that spanned the rear of the pilothouse and propping each foot on a spoke of the wheel to steer with his feet. A cup of M&M candies sat within his reach.

Mom usually sat on the edge of the bunk and looked forward past my father's shoulder. Although she didn't share Dad's love of boats, she did like the uniqueness of sailing down the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers and enjoyed seeing the country from this new perspective. But always anticipating disaster, she scanned the river ahead as far as she could stretch her vision for any possible danger such as shallows, outcrops, and other river traffic.

I, however, shuffled from place to place aboard the boat as we traveled. I would sit beside my folks in the pilothouse, or lie flat on the roof of the cabin and watch the sky as we cruised. Sometimes I leaned into the farthest point of the bow and let the wind whip the hair from my face. At other times I sat on the back deck and watched the wide furrow of water flowing from the stern as the boat plowed a deep path along the river.

In the evenings my father tied the *Red Dog* to abandoned riverside docks if he could find them; if not, we anchored in wide parts of the river to overnight. At Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where my brother Jerry lived, we docked at the Island Harbor Marina. Jerry had called the owner of the marina to let him know that his father would be piloting his homemade craft through Pine Bluff on the way to Alaska and would need a space for the boat. It apparently surprised the owner to see us arrive in what he considered a professionally constructed craft that appeared more than seaworthy.

“When I found out that somebody was bringing in a homemade job, and that he wanted to sail it around the coast through the Panama Canal to Alaska,” he admitted, “well, I was looking for something constructed from orange crates, or something.”

...

My father had turned the wheel over to me and gone downstairs to eat lunch with Mom after leaving Pine Bluff on a clear morning with no other boats in view.

Having decided not to disturb my parents and to steer the *Red Dog* between the two tugs and their barges coming upriver toward me, I centered the boat on the band of river between the tugs as they rumbled closer. Head to head, bow to bow, the *Red Dog* faced hundreds of feet of iron and steel; a ripple facing a crushing wave.

As the *Red Dog* moved closer to the channel between the barges, the murky water displaced by the barges as the huge vessels pushed it forward and outward began to boil around us.

The blare of fog horns surprised my father as he sat at the galley table, but the sight of the bow of a barge passing threateningly close by the port window of the main cabin, then a second one appearing almost simultaneously outside the starboard window, sent him scrambling to the pilothouse with Mom close behind.

“Where’d those come from?” he blurted.

“They came faster than I thought they would,” I said, keeping my eyes trained forward.

We could do nothing except continue on course. Dad stood motionless beside me. He watched to make sure I kept the boat centered between the menacing tugs, ready to take over if the *Red Dog* began to stray toward the hull of either. My mother stood wide-eyed but silent beside him.

The water frothed around us as the tugs’ propellers churned above the muddy riverbed. Powerful engines growled at their heavy loads. Fog horns blared from both tugs in a chaos of noise. The *Red Dog* wobbled its way between the tugs, the water grabbing and pulling at the boat from below as we pressed our way through roils of turbulence.

In minutes it was over. The tugs had passed, their horns had fallen silent, and the *Red Dog* was out of danger.

Dad raised his eyebrows. “Well, we made it through that one.”

“I was afraid to try to cut across them,” I said sheepishly as I relinquished the wheel.

My father’s face softened and he grinned in relief while quietly taking his place in his captain’s chair.

Mom put on her brave face. “I don’t think I’d care to do *that* again,” she said in her good-humored way, but still scared.

Dad adjusted the cap on his head. “Well...if that’s the worst of what’s ahead, we’re in pretty good shape.”

But a few hundred miles to the south, as the *Red Dog* hummed toward the broad waters of the Mighty Mississippi, worse waited.

(End of Chapter 1)

South to Alaska is available in both print and ebook formats through online booksellers such as Barnes & Noble and Amazon, your local bookstores, and the author’s websites:

www.southtoalaska.com
www.nancyowensbarnes.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Award-winning author and freelance writer Nancy Owens Barnes' is the author of three books. Her first book, a biographical travel memoir titled *South to Alaska* was published as a trade paperback in October 2007, with a second edition published in 2009. Barnes was featured in the Winter/Spring 2010 issue of Coeur d'Alene Magazine as one of nine North Idaho authors who have achieved acclaim for their work. Her writing has appeared in a variety of magazines and literary journals such as *We Alaskans*, *Idaho Magazine*, *Northern Reach Magazine*, and in a number of literary journals such as *The Ledge*, *The Lyric*, and *Snowy Egret*, the oldest independent journal of nature writing in the United States. In 2008 she received the Zola Award when her poetry won first place the Pacific Northwest Writers Association Literary Contest. Barnes received her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Vermont College of Norwich University where she studied creative writing.