

Gilbert "Dib" Harmon on board the Sistersville ferryboat *Elinor D*. The man and boat represent the end of an era in West Virginia.



The Last of Its Kind

Dib Harmon and the Sistersville Ferry

Text and Photographs by Will Daniel

There is nothing modern about the Sistersville ferry, the diesel towboats that provide its power, or the venerable ferry pilot, Gilbert "Dib" Harmon. The history of this Tyler County operation goes back a long way, and the equipment and ferryman all have stories of their own.

The Virginia General Assembly passed an act in 1818 authorizing the Ohio River ferry service that today transports 100 or more vehicles daily between Sistersville and Fly, Ohio. The boats themselves date back more than 50 years. The *Elinor D* and the barge it tows were built in 1938, and the backup boat *John F III* in 1939. And Dib Harmon? Well, this 44-year veteran Ohio River ferryboat pilot is one uncommon individual — and no spring chicken himself.

At 71, Harmon works 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and scorns retirement as if it were an affliction. His Sistersville ferry is the last on the Ohio River anywhere between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. That makes Dib Harmon the last ferryboat captain in West Virginia, so far as anyone seems to know.

The City of Sistersville has owned the ferry since 1980, and has had difficulty keeping the service afloat in recent years due to problems arising from the age and condition of the boats. The ferry must be self-sustaining, the fares from the vehicles it transports providing its only source of revenue. The city currently just breaks even, and doesn't have the funds to keep up major service on the outdated diesel engines.

Although Harmon performs minor maintenance on the boats and barge, a Wintersville, Ohio, company, Western Branch Diesel, has for years maintained the boats' engines. According to Everett Skinner, Western Branch service manager, the company "patches 'em up and keeps 'em running." The *Elinor D* recently received a minor overhaul, but really needs a new engine, Skinner said. A new engine would cost \$10,000.

Keeping the boats running is a labor of love for Skinner, who admits his company often loses money on service it provides for the ferry. "It means a lot to me because it's the last one. It has historical value," Skinner said. "I hope they are able to continue it."

Dib Harmon, with his slow, deliberate speech and ever-so-slight West Virginia accent, enjoys talking about the river and his work. He's got plenty to say, as you might imagine. Although it normally takes him six to eight minutes to cross, for example, "with a baby case it takes about two and a half minutes." A baby case? "Pregnant women," the pilot



The equipment changes but the idea remains the same. The above photo shows the *Kiwanis*, which served from 1925 to 1956, preparing for a departure from the Sistersville landing. Below, the *Elinor D* heads back from the Ohio side on a recent crossing. Photographer and date unknown for old photo, courtesy Walter McCoy Collection, Tyler County Library.





explained. "I don't waste any time crossing the river with them, and I haven't had a baby born on the ferry yet."

Although the ferry officially operates on a 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily schedule, Harmon accepts baby cases and other emergency calls at any hour. He explained that for many nearby Ohio residents the closest hospital is in West Virginia. When the time comes, expectant fathers on the Ohio side call the Sistersville police, who alert Harmon of the request for emergency service. Usually, he said, he's waiting for the anxious couple when they arrive at the Fly ferry landing. Harmon lives in a mobile home adjacent to the Sistersville landing, and isn't bothered by middle-of-the-night emergencies, he said.

Some of his emergency customers can't pay the \$1.25 fare, but he's never turned one away. Often they will give him something in return for the favor, Harmon said. One such customer two years ago gave him a brand new pair of bib overalls that were large enough for two of him, he recalled. "My fault," he laughed. "I told the man I'd take the largest size he could get."

The ferryman is glad to help out in

Above: Harmon's ferry barge at the Sistersville landing. Cars drive forward onto the barge, then off the other end when the crossing is over.

Below: Ferry traffic was heavier a century ago, during the oil boom. These freight wagons await service by the steam-powered *W. C. Pusey*, which began operating in 1889. Photographer and date unknown, courtesy Walter McCoy Collection, Tyler County Library.



true emergencies, but he knows where to draw the line. He recently had his phone disconnected so he wouldn't have to contend with what he termed "nuisance calls" from less-than-sober patrons on the Ohio side of the river, for example. "They go over there to drink that 'high-test' beer, then call me at 2:00 a.m. to come get 'em," he said. There will be no more of that, unless the drunks also want to route their calls through the Sistersville Police Department.

Harmon has his theories about drinking habits and other affairs in the Buckeye State. The town of Fly was until the turn of the century known as Stringtown, so named because of the way the houses were "strung out" along the river bank, he said. How it became "Fly" is the subject of conflicting local legends, but Harmon likes the one that involves bootleg whiskey. According to this story, two men who owned a tavern in Marietta purchased some illegal spirits in the local area for resale at their place of business. When asked where the whiskey came from one of the tavern owners responded, "a town no bigger than a fly." And so the name stuck, according to Dib Harmon.

Most of Harmon's customers know him by name, and many are second or third generation patrons. It's not unusual for a customer to get out of his car to engage in friendly conversation during the short trip across the river. Some even climb onto the towboat for a closer chat with the pilot.

Some of his customers are in a hurry to cross the river, so Harmon pulls away from the landing as soon as the last vehicle has boarded. "As long as we're moving they don't seem to mind how slow I go — just as long as we're moving," he shrewdly observed. "Everybody's in a big hurry now. I was in a hurry once and got married," he added. Harmon lost his wife to cancer nine years ago, and it's a mark of the man that he can treat her memory with humorous affection.

One customer was so impatient she drove her husband's car into the protective steel railing on the barge, Harmon recalled. Her husband returned later that day to have a word or two with the skipper, only to find that it's not easy matching wits with Dib Harmon.



The *Kiwanis* offered 24 hours service and a roomy passenger cabin. The boat was sunk by a large floating log in 1956. Photographer and date unknown, courtesy Walter McCoy Collection, Tyler County Library.

"He told me I should pay for the damage to his car, but I told him he owed me about a quart of paint for the railing," Harmon said. His friendly smile changed to a broad grin, then to a belly laugh as he continued. "He asked me what's that railing for anyway, and I told him it was there to keep his wife from driving his car into the river!"

Harmon once owned the ferry service, but shut it down in 1977. He now operates the ferry as an employee of the City of Sistersville, which reopened it in 1981 with the help of a \$40,000 Governor's Partnership Grant. Mayor William Gilligan calls Harmon "obstreperous and cantankerous," which the ferryboat man knows to take lightly.

In fact, Gilligan and Harmon have been good friends since the early 1960's, when Harmon owned and operated the now defunct New Martinsville ferry up the river in Wetzel County. Nonetheless, the mayor wants Harmon to slow down a little, and train another pilot to keep the service operating whenever he is sick.

Mayor Gilligan quibbles about irregular service, but Harmon counters that his customers understand when he has to shut down for a day. "They just drive around, that's all," he said. But Bill Gilligan frets that many of the customers who are forced to use the bridges at St. Marys or New

Martinsville may not come back to Sistersville.

The mayor and the ferryman keep the banter going, no harm intended. Dib Harmon has a final rejoinder for his boss. "Don't believe nothing Bill Gilligan says about my personal life," he cautioned. "If I had as many lady friends as he says I do, I'd be dead!"

Still, the situation regarding the Sistersville ferry is a serious one. The service has struggled to break even the last few years, with unexpected engine breakdowns eating away at available funds. To hire a second pilot and increase the ferry's operating hours would further erode those funds, Harmon fears.

Another factor that makes hiring a second pilot difficult is the availability of qualified pilots who have passenger carrying licenses. Riverboating is largely cargo service nowadays, and there simply aren't that many passenger pilots available, Harmon said. Under existing licensing procedures, however, an apprentice pilot may operate the ferry. Harmon had been training his son as a pilot under the apprenticeship procedures, but he had to quit for medical reasons.

Harmon loves being the center of attention, and as the last remaining ferryboat captain in West Virginia he gets a lot of press. But he's just like everybody else, he says — no better and no worse. Money means nothing

to him, the riverman claims. "Millionaires loaf with me here," he said. "Sometimes I have to chase 'em off." Sistersville still has a disproportionate number of millionaires per capita, Harmon maintains, due in part to the 1890's oil boom.

Although heavy north-south barge traffic on the Ohio sometimes causes minor delays for the ferry, the possibility of a collision is remote. Most of the barge captains call Harmon by radio as a precaution. They know him by name, he said. "They'll call and say 'Where you at, Dib?' I'll tell 'em what side of the river I'm on and they look out for me." Even in fog he doesn't worry about barge traffic. They all have radar, he explained, and know about the ferry operation.

Earlier ferrymen had no such conveniences, Harmon knows. He has a good working knowledge of the history of the Sistersville ferry, and his current tenure was handed down directly from earlier operators. The ferry was born January 28, 1818, when the General Assembly of Virginia passed an act granting the ferry franchise to John McCoy. McCoy's wife Sarah assumed ownership when he died, and deeded it to their son Thomas Jefferson McCoy in 1870.

T. J. McCoy died three years later. He had established a trust that would allow the ferry to continue, the revenue it generated to be used for care and support of his children until his youngest came of age.

John Hanford McCoy and George McCoy, presumably T. J. McCoy's children, in 1894 sold the franchise known as the McCoy Ferry to Frank D. and A. S. McCoy, and Ezbia Talbott for \$4,000. Sistersville was then in the midst of the oil boom, the first well having been drilled in 1891 at Polecat Hollow on the Joshua Russell farm. Demands on the ferry are said to have grown by leaps and bounds during the 1890's.

Until 1889, the ferryboats in use had been mostly paddlewheel boats powered by a horse on a treadmill. In that year, the ferry's owners purchased the steam-powered ferryboat, the *W. C. Pusey*. The *Pusey* was built at New Martinsville, and was 85.7 feet long and 18 feet wide.

The *Orion*, built in 1884 at Belle Vernon, Pennsylvania, went into service at the Sistersville ferry in 1886.

Although it was 25 feet longer than the *Pusey* and six feet wider, neither boat was able to keep pace with the ever-increasing traffic. In 1907 a new hull was built at Clarington, Ohio. The superstructure and machinery of the *Orion* were transferred to the new hull, and the boat was named *Daniel*. The *Daniel* ran until 1917, and later was used as a passenger ferry at Parkersburg.

In 1920 the Sistersville Ferry Company reorganized into a stock company under state laws in effect at that time. In 1937 Everett Tuel acquired the stock formerly owned by the descendants of Ezbia Talbott. Tuel sold his interest to Joe Witten in 1955. It was



Generations of travelers have entrusted their Ohio River passage to the watchful eye of Dib Harmon. He expects that to continue.

Witten who bought out the last of the McCoy interests, in 1960, and he who sold the ferry company to Dib Harmon in November 1964.

The *Dora T*, also built at Clarington, went into service in 1917. It was named for the wife of Frank D. McCoy, and was a sternwheeler. Unlike its predecessors, the *Dora T* had a gasoline-burning engine. Its owners were concerned with the fire hazards associated with gasoline, and sure enough, the *Dora T* was in 1925 destroyed by a fire that ignited during refueling on the Ohio side.

The *Dora T* was also used to transport baseball players from town to

town. Every town along the river had its baseball team, according to Harmon, who said, "It was a big thing back then." He also reported that one of the ill-fated *Dora T*'s pilots is known to have frequently piloted the ferry drunk. Sell Dawson on one occasion ran the *Dora T* aground on the Ohio side of the river, colliding with a wooden oil derrick that collapsed atop the ill-fated ferryboat, Harmon said.

The *Kiwanis* was built at Clarington as a replacement for the *Dora T*. It ran until 1956, when a large log floating in the river punctured the side of the boat, causing it to sink. The *Rides*, a boat named after a local family, went into service after the sinking of the *Kiwanis*. The *Rides* operated until 1977, when the ferry temporarily discontinued service.

Ownership has continued to change hands in recent years. After buying the ferry from Joe Witten in 1964, Harmon ran it until 1973, when he sold it to Doris McCoy. In 1975, Harmon bought the ferry back, only to shut it down two years later.

With no ferry service at Sistersville between 1977 and 1981, Harmon went to work as a barge pilot. He retired in 1982, but only for five weeks. He claims he'll never do that again. "I don't like retirement," he declared. "Five weeks of retirement is about all I could stand." He hasn't the slightest idea what he would do if he couldn't pilot the Sistersville ferry 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

Approximately 22 regular customers ride the ferry to and from work every day, accounting for 44 of the average 100 daily fares, according to Harmon. Ridership remains fairly constant except for the summer influx of tourists who pass through Sistersville, he said. He's not making any claims, you understand, but perhaps he and his boat are among the attractions that bring them there. After all, the boat is the last of its kind in West Virginia and Dib Harmon the last of a breed. ♣

The Sistersville ferry operates daily from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and waiting time is minimal. It crosses the Ohio River to connect West Virginia Route 2 with Ohio Route 7. Fares are \$1.25 for passenger autos, 75 cents for motorcycles, 50 cents for walking passengers and \$5 to \$6 for tractor trailers.