

Paddlewheel Riverboat

On a recent afternoon, an Anderson family tradition played out in St. Charles along the Fox River much as it has literally thousands of times during the past 65 years.

Just like his father before him, Capt. Richard Anderson sat down at the helm of the St. Charles Belle paddlewheel riverboat to steer it away from the dock at Pottawatomie Park with sightseers aboard for a 4-mile, 50-minute trip along the river.

"My dad did it until he was in his 80s," said Richard Anderson, 61, of his father Chet. "I don't think I'll want to do it for that long. I'll do it for maybe another 10 years."

Chet Anderson, who retired as captain in 1987, founded the St. Charles Paddlewheel Riverboats company in 1945. It operates as a concessioner to the St. Charles Park District.

Richard Anderson said he helped out with the riverboats when he was a child, but eventually grew up and moved away.

"I lived in Ohio for 15 years," he said. "I came back just to keep the family business going... I like working outside and I get to meet a lot of interesting people."

However, Richard Anderson isn't sure what will happen to the riverboats after he retires because he's "got three kids and so far none of them are showing any interest."

His mother, Barbara, has been a part of the family business from the start. She and Chet Anderson had been married for one year when he began offering riverboat cruises. These days, she greets passengers and answers the riverboat telephone hotline from her home next to Pottawatomie Park near the riverboat dock.

"I thought it was a good idea," Barbara Anderson said of her husband's decision to offer riverboat cruises. "Back then, the park was busier than it is now."

Aboard the St. Charles Belle, Richard Anderson paused the lilting ragtime music that played over speakers and launched into the friendly chat he started providing for passengers just three years ago: "Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome you aboard the St. Charles Belle..."

He spoke to passengers now and then during the trip, explaining the depth of the Fox River and its dam system, facts about Ferson Creek Park and Norris Woods Nature Preserve and the namesake Indian tribe that used to live on the site of Pottawatomie Park.

Pleasure boats and wave runners zipped by the St. Charles Belle, but Richard Anderson said problems are rare during cruises.

"I've seen people look at the riverboat and crash into the shore," he said.

The chop-chop-chop of the riverboat's paddlewheel is strictly for show. The boat is actually powered by two engines and two propellers, and is licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard to carry passengers on both an enclosed deck and an upper, open-air deck. The St. Charles Belle's sister riverboat, the Fox River Queen, is primarily used for private group charters.

The average amount of passengers is 50 a trip, but that can rise to more than 100 during the height of summer. On this particular trip, the St. Charles Belle carried 40 sightseers, including families, couples and a group of Red Hat Society ladies.

"We were just taking a walk here in the beautiful park and we saw the boat and we thought it would be a wonderful thing to do," said John Sodemann of St. Charles of his family's choice to board the riverboat. He and his wife, Pamela and their two daughters, Angel and Amber, sat in the upper deck of the riverboat, joking with one another and pointing at sites along the river.

Pamela Sodemann said she wanted to go on another cruise in October to see the colors of the fall leaves from the river.

"Let them watch their Chicago Bears games," Pamela said. "We're going for a boat ride."