

9500 words approx

SACRAMENTO RIVER DREDGING.

*Bumpkin Pathology*  
*My family - (Lundensline)*

by J. H. SMYTHE.

---

It was in the spring of 1911 that I became a dredgeman. I had left Mexico just after Xmas, the curiosity which had prompted me to wander down there well and truly satisfied.

Things were not too healthy down there at the time, one of the periodic revolutions being in full swing with neither party in anyway particular who or what it shot so long as it got a crack at somebody or something.

Now I have a rooted objection to being made a target of so I assure you I did not linger to say goodbye, but went, rapidly and without advertising my departure and even then I just managed to cross the border about two jumps ahead of trouble in the shape of some revolutionaries who obviously had designs on my person. However, I reached San Francisco safely after a time and my first concern on arrival was to find work, for my Mexican trip had been the <sup>reverse</sup> ~~reverse~~ of profitable and all I had gained was experience and a mighty poor opinion of the way the country was run.

Well my search for a job finally brought me into contact with a dredger skipper who was in town looking for hands for river work.

Now dredging is not what one would term a gentlemanly occupation, but then I was no gentleman and besides beggars cannot be choosers, so I had no qualms about accepting the 70 dollars a month and found which Captain McDonald offered me, in fact I grabbed the opportunity with both hands as the saying is and that same night I went up river with the old skipper as the latest recruit to his navy of mud scoops.

So it was that I became a dredgeman on the Lisbon Reclamation District, Sacramento River, California and another occupation was added to a long and varied list, acquired during 20 odd years of wandering around the world.

Well my future home was the biggest steam dredger on the river - that is of the clam shell or bucket type, being a huge hulk of one thousand tons, with a bucket load capacity of 10 tons.

The boom was 160 feet in length from butt to bridle chains and rose to a height of 80 feet above the river and could be swung left or right to practically right angles to the dredger bows.

The bucket was worked by two cables a port or over haul and a starboard or hoisting cable, the whole being operated from a pilot house by an engineer or as he is called in dredging parlance, a runner. No doubt most of you have seen a crane at work or a ship unloading coal by means of a derrick and scoop so I need not enter into any detailed description. The principle

is the same only on a dredger such as the one I was on everything was on a far bigger scale. I would just like to mention that the Lisbon Reclamation District was one of several such undertakings on the river which were engaged in damming back the waters of the great Yolo basin by raising the height of the river bank where low and closing breaches in other places, the enclosed water being subsequently pumped back into the river itself and the ground thus reclaimed made available for cultivation.

Well our job at the moment was deepening the navigation channel and at the same time levelling off the top of the levee or bank prior to the advent of a navy squad who were to lay the foundation of the Northern Electric Railway which now runs along its entire length. There were three of us engineers or runners working in shifts of 6 hours on and 12 off and dredging continued day and night without a break except 15 minutes each shift to allow of oiling up the boom gear, a job by the way which called for a cool head and a sure foot.

Believe me it was not all bread and honey making your way out to the end of that 160 foot stick on a dirty night, a big oil can slung on your back and an equally big spanner in your hand, especially if the runner was in playful or impatient mood and jarred the boom into motion by opening the throttle a trifle.

You may think it was a monotonous job, this continual swinging in, dropping the bucket, grabbing a load swinging out,

opening up and dumping 8 to 10 tons of mud on top of the bank, and in a way it was, yet never the less there was a certain fascination about it for you never knew what you might bring up and one was continually on the watch for something other than mud.

I remember once swinging out a load and thought when I dumped it that it appeared rather out of the ordinary so called to the deck hand to slip over in the skiff and investigate. He did so and found that I had dug up several cases of lager beer lashed together with wire. You may be sure it was not long before my find was aboard, the mud hosed off and the contents sampled.

Now all finds were the perquisites of the crew and shared equally by the 10 members of the dredgers' staff excluding the skipper who was not supposed to participate, but on this occasion he exercised his right and drank bottle about with the rest of us.

I think that was the most acceptable and coolest drink I ever had for the Sacramento River in summer is a mighty hot place, but I never quite forgave the skipper for curtailing my enjoyment by four bottles of glorious lager. How the beer came to be in the river I found out from a fellow who had had a hand in the same sort of game at one time.

Nearly all the goods for Sacramento and other points on the river came up from San Francisco on barges, usually two or three one behind the other in tow of a tug, each barge having two of a crew who steered in turn. These bargees were in league with friends on shore and at night when opposite their confederates place one of the bargemen would dump anything not liable to spoil by immersion, over the side, first attaching a float to it. A flash of a lantern told the watchers ashore that something awaited them and a boat was soon launched and headed towards the spot where the signal had been seen. Usually little difficulty was experienced in finding the booty for they were adepts at the game and the reason my informant gave me why the beer had not been recovered was that probably the float had come adrift or got cut off by a passing steamer before the shore party had had time to row out to the spot. That was an exceptional find, however, and it was seldom anything so valuable or acceptable came up from the depths, though we did have a fairly regular source of revenue from finds of another sort, though the means by which we came by them were not strictly legitimate.

These were schooner anchors. The schooners used to tie up at various points on the river to allow of loading the baled hay, onions and potatoes or honey which were the principal exports at that time and most of the boats dropped an anchor astern to

keep them from swinging broadside on to the bank.

As the anchors were mostly attached to an ordinary rope and some times just a grass one, it was a simple matter for one of us to slip along in the dark when everyone was either asleep or ashore and cut the rope. Then when in due course we came along it was bad luck if we did not run across the 200 lb. kedge. They were worth a cent a pound at the scrap merchants but for the most part we sold them back to the owners, taking a slight reduction for cash.

Our finds were not all pleasant or profitable however.

One night I was having a cup of coffee in the galley before going on the midnight to 6 a.m. shift when I suddenly heard the deck bell signal "steam off".

I knew by the lift of the dredger that Costa the Portugese runner had just raised a load and was wondering what had caused him to hold it when there was a clatter of feet along the deck, and Costa and Tony the dago deckhand burst into the galley both white as sheets and looking as if they had seen the devil or worse.

They stood there speechless, and crossing themselves with a rapidity that made me blink, while I stared in amazement and speechless also. Then all at once both burst into speech and a veritable torrent of Portugese and Italian filled the galley.

Knowing little of either language I was still at a loss to understand what the trouble was, but gathered that it had something to do with the bucket and its load, so leaving the two still hard at it I went forrad to investigate. What I saw in the glare of the electric boom light nearly sent me head long to join my friends in the galley and made my hair stand up stiff as the quills on a porcupine.

Hanging from the jaws of the bucket by one foot and swinging gently now in the light, then in the shadow, was the body of a man, bloated to an enormous size and with the river mud still slowly dripping off it. Believe me it was a ghastly sight as the body hung there head down the sightless face framed in the down flung arms and the free leg swinging this way and that with the motion of the dredger and it was little wonder my two superstitious companions bolted. Well we swung the body ashore and sent for the police, who immediately started to make inquiries.

At the inquest it transpired that the dead man was a dredger hand known as Scotty Smith and believed to hail from Edinburgh in Scotland.

He was one of the crew of a small dredger which had been working ahead of us repairing breaches in the levee but had left that particular part of the river about three weeks before we came along and was now tied up some miles further down. Her work

for the time being finished the crew had been paid off except Scotty and the Jap cook who had been retained as watchmen and cleaners. The two had been seen at various times in the village near to where their charge was tied up but no one at the inquest could say definitely when Scotty had last been seen or could anyone give any information as to how he came to be in the river, but a search of the dredger and the doctor's evidence was pretty conclusive.

In the galley were found several empty whisky bottles, there was a knife wound in Scotty's chest and the Jap cook had disappeared. Speaking of whisky reminds me of the stuff sold under that name in most of the river saloons at the time I was working there. It had a kick in it that the strongest spirit ever brewed in Scotland never possessed and even brought tears to the eyes of the hardest boiled dredgerman on the river if it did not ultimately lay him out altogether, but it was an awful libel on the genuine article. I expect it was the fight exciting potency of this "made to-day and sold tomorrow", brew that was poor Scotty's undoing.

Don't think, however, that dredging was all just a matter of digging up cases of bear, anchors or dead men - far from it - these were only incidents in the ordinary course of work, but which however added a spice of excitement and interest to the rather prosaic business of scooping mud from the depths of the Sacramento river.