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## When the Steamboats Left Tampa Bay

E. A. Smith

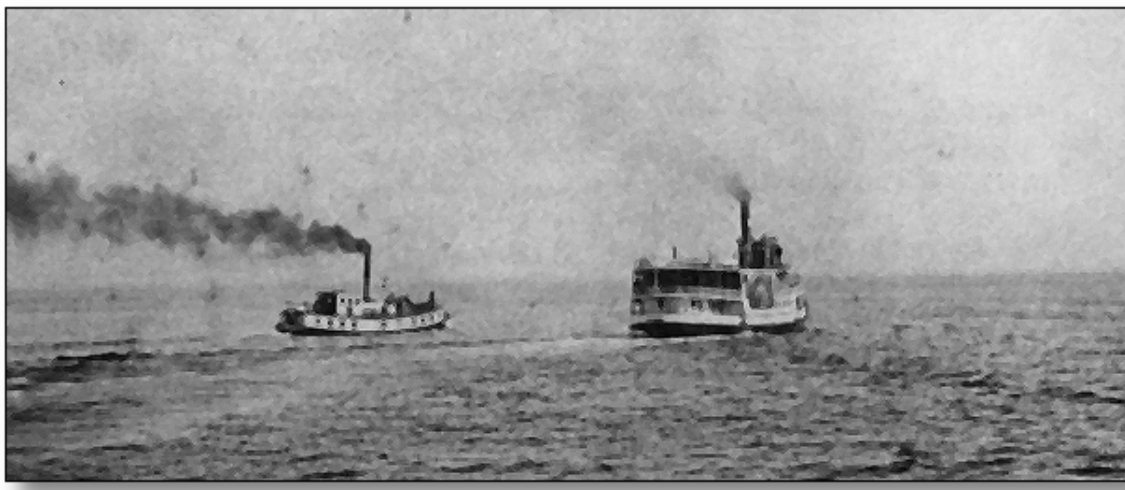
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**Steamers in Tampa Bay, 1895 view from the St. Pete Wharf.**

(courtesy of USF Special Collections)

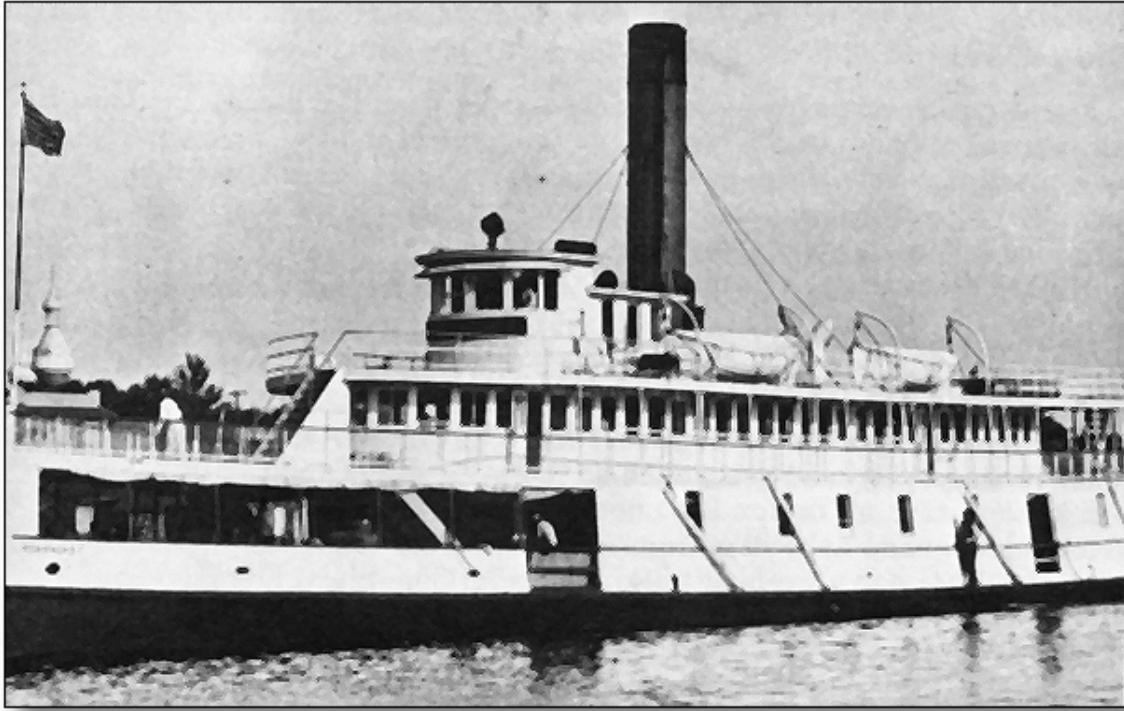
## **WHEN STEAMBOATS LEFT TAMPA BAY**

By E. A. "Frog" Smith

No other town in the Sunshine State can boast of as great a graveyard of ships as Tampa, and its history is more colorful than most. In Tampa's last resting place for all kinds and sizes of ships that sailed the seven seas, there is also a respectable number of smaller boats that knew no other home than Tampa Bay. Only one of the many vessels whose bones have bleached on Seddon Island or soaked in the brine at the mouth of the Hillsborough River carried a "ghost" that is still with us today. That is the ghost of the pirate Jose Gaspar whose spirit is the patron saint of Gasparilla Festival in Tampa today.

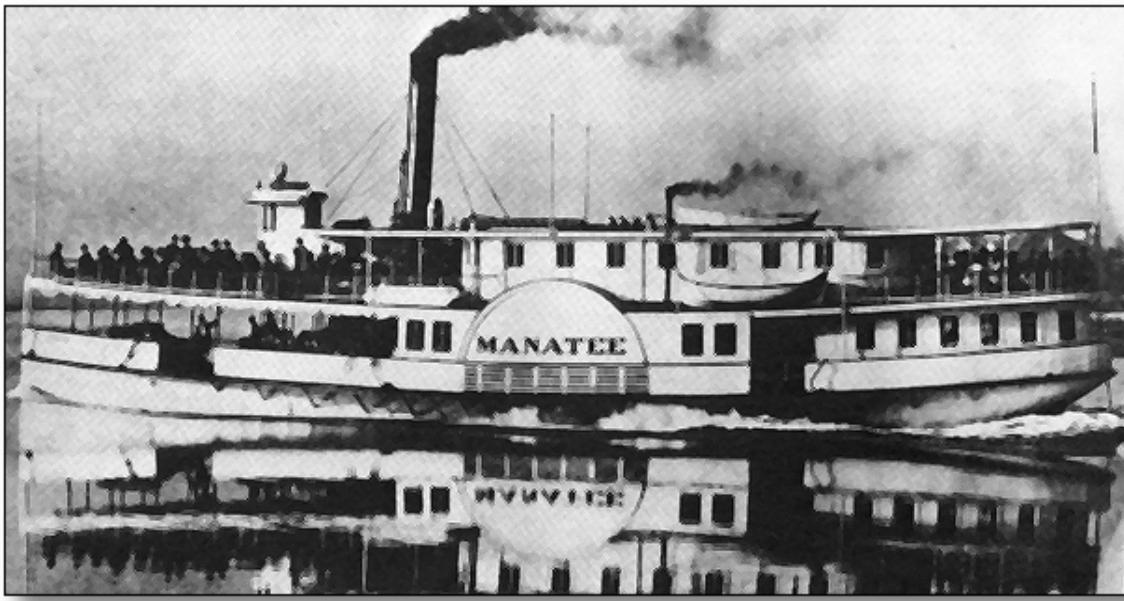
Not too many people today know the difference between a steamboat and steamship, except that the steamboat is smaller. Most steamboats of long ago were built for service on rivers and coastal waters while the larger steamships had to keep sail in deeper waters. Big steamships may be more impressive, but the smaller craft are best remembered because they were closer to nature and run by people familiar to all. That is why it was such a sad day when the two finest and best known little steamers left Tampa Bay, never to return.

At the beginning of the year 1925, there were several small packets sailing or steaming in Tampa Bay. Queen of the fleet was the giant sidewheel steamer *Mandeville*, a beautiful vessel from Lake Ponchartrain, Louisiana. An oil-burning ship, she was unsullied by coal dust, and her bright brass trimming shone like gold. The next finest and more sleek was the *Favorite*, which was known to all the old-timers of three score years ago. Both steamers were in service between St. Petersburg and Tampa. Two other smaller steamers, the *Pokanoket* and *Manatee*, ran between Tampa, St. Petersburg and the Bradenton-Palmetto area.



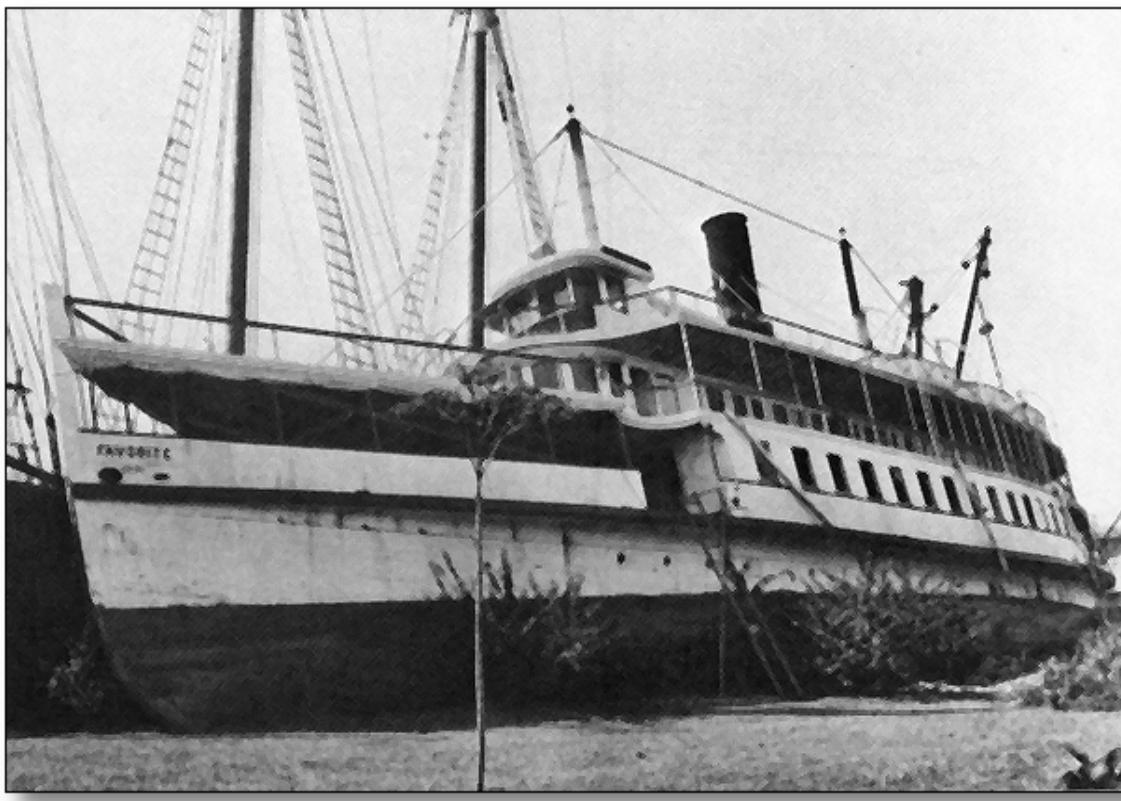
**The Pokanoket in 1925**

(photo from *Yesterday's Tampa*, courtesy of Hampton Dunn)



**The Steamer *Manatee* in 1909.**

(photo from *Yesterday's Tampa*, courtesy of Hampton Dunn)



**The *Favorite* washed ashore in Plant Park on Nov. 3, 1921 due to a hurricane**

(photo from *Yesterday's Tampa*, courtesy of Hampton Dunn)

Except that the *Manatee* and the *Pokanoket* spent their final days tied up in Tampa, finally sinking at their moorings, there is little to recall of their last days. Then came the sad news that the *Favorite* and the *Mandeville* had been sold and would soon leave Florida. The morning papers carried the story, but the news bit harder when the steamers' big deep-toned whistles blew longer and more mournfully on the day they steamed up the bay for the last time. They were both bound for Wilmington, Delaware, and St. Petersburg people who had known and loved both would never see either again.

As the two steamboats slowly backed away from the pier in Bayboro Harbor, plumes of black smoke rose above the funnels and the melodious whistles blew a sad farewell. Hardened workmen from three big shops left their work to mingle with scores of people lining the shores of the harbor, all taking a last long look before turning away with lowered eyes. The St. Petersburg waterfront would never be the same after the two beautiful boats were gone.

Although motor-driven boats took the place of the larger *Favorite* and *Mandeville*, they were never so colorful and well-loved as were the steamboats with their tall funnels and musical whistles. The *Narwahl* carried freight and the motorship *Jeanette* carried passengers, but there was no halo above them. Smaller diesel-powered boats such as the *I. W. Riggs* and the *Genevieve*

also plied the waters of Tampa Bay, but it was the *Genevieve* that left the most gruesome legend of the bay.

For many years there was a legend of the infamous pirate Jose Gaspar, who is still celebrated as ruler of Gasparilla Festival in Tampa, and how he wrapped an anchor chain about his body and jumped overboard when his pirate ship was sunk by an American gunboat. More than fifty years ago, the legend came alive with startling suddenness.

As the legend goes, the ghost of the pirate still lives beneath the waters of Tampa Bay. When he becomes lonely, he rises to the surface and pokes his grisly head above the side of some passing boat. Then with a wicked smile he would crook his bony finger at one of the crew, and the luckless fellow would follow the pirate down to Davey Jones' locker at the bottom. The lonely ghost of the old pirate acted somewhat in the same manner as did "Grog Barrell Joe" of the British Navy during the eighteenth century. When the ghost of Grog Barrell Joe appeared aboard a British warship and served rum to his equally ghostly shipmates, someone died that night. Like the ghost of Jose Gaspar of Tampa Bay, Grog Barrell's victims were never seen again. Nor was Captain Borden of the *Genevieve* ever seen again.

Late one moonless night in 1925, the *Genevieve* was churning her way between Tampa and St. Petersburg when the engineer on duty below the deck felt that the ship was going in circles. He called the pilot house, but nobody answered. To satisfy his mind he went up on deck to find the crew asleep, but Captain Borden was gone. Only one of the captain's shoes was ever found. It was a saddened and frightened crew that told the story when the *Genevieve* landed. No one knew anything for sure. There had been no outcry or other sound of foul play. But one thing was sure, Captain Borden was gone. Could it have been the wickedly grinning spirit of Jose Gaspar, the bloodthirsty pirate of more than a century ago, who crooked his bony finger at Captain Borden and led him to his death? Who knows, it was and still is, one of the mysteries of the sea.