

[The Lewis Family and their Floating Home]

1

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Helen S. Hartley

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Mr. D. J. Lewis

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THE LEWIS FAMILY AND THEIR FLOATING HOME.

Written by Helen S. Hartley.

Three years ago Mr. D. J. Lewis bought a twenty-eight foot cabin launch which was driven by a four cylinder motor so that he may be able to enjoy the sport fishing that the Mobile waters abound in, as he had at that time a job with the nearby Southern Kraft Paper Mills at Sibert, a suburb of Mobile. After fixing the boat up to look like a new one, which required quite a bit or repair work, a coat of fresh paint and adding a finishing touch here and there. When the boat was throughly finished and glistened like new, his wife decided it would be nice to live on board and by so doing save the expense of house rent and the necessary monthly bills. Mr. Lewis acquiesced, and soon the two young people, who make an ideal

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couple, were comfortably arranged on board the little launch as if in a home out in the great open spaces and in God's good sunshine.

Mrs. Lewis grew to love the waves as they rippled and seemed to laugh as they passed on by their boat in the warm sunshine, and when the blue Southern sky would suddenly become bedimmed and the sun seen only dully through a grew veil and the water that had been so smooth and silent was cut by large ripples caused by a wind that had sprung from nowhere, she knew by all those signs that a Higher Power was controlling it all, and was looking down especially upon them in their comfortable little floating home. 2 Mr. Lewis is in his late thirties, he stands about five foot, nine and one half inches and weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds. His hair is very dark and his long heavy and dark eyelids cover his light brown eyes. He is a well educated man and an interesting and humorous talker, so that a smile seems to hover about his mouth at all times. He was born in Louisiana and lived there until ten years ago when he moved to Mobile where he has resided ever since.

Almost every Sunday the Lewis couple had some one visiting them on their little cruiser, some were just visiting sitting and chatting, while others wanted to enjoy the sport of fishing, and more than all else to eat the delightful Sunday dinners that Mrs. Lewis was proud to prepare for them, which usually consisted of heaped platters of freshly caught fish cooked in various ways and served with potato chips or the equivalent.

Often though it was money-making trips that Mr. Lewis made, taking a crowd of fishermen up the small bays end bayous north of Mobile, where they could fish to their hearts content for brim, trout, goggle-eyed perch and fresh water catfish. Once he took a crowd of sixteen men out for a days fishing, while his wife remained in the City. Another time it was a mixed crowd of fourteen boys and gills with Mrs. Lewis, who is still terribly young herself, acting as hostess and chef. It is real interesting to the observer to watch the antics of the 3 various groups that are gathered for trips of a days outing. The men seem to go on a trip of this kind just for the sport of fishing and particularly for the enjoyment of the good

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dinners they knew they would enjoy, as one of the requirements ere, that there be plenty of provisions for the trip and an early start is also another request of all sport fishermen, that is, leaving the city during the night and arriving on the fishing grounds before the dawn breaks. The mixed crowds go for a days outing and for the pleasure of being together, spending their time talking and enjoying themselves generally in their carefree way, for they usually went to go on some special holiday such as Labor Day, or when the gang gets rounded up, but their one requirement is that there would be plenty of fried chicken on hand for dinner. The particular crowd of fourteen boys and girls previously spoken of, said Mrs. Lewis, demanded seven chickens brought along among the other provisions for the trip. So fried chick chicken, with a side dish of fried fresh water fish, potatoes and cold slaw with good strong coffee, made up a feast that would be long remembered for a day spent outdoors in the glorious Southern sunshine always whips up a keen edge to one's appetite.

Mrs. Lewis is a wizard in the culinary aft, and amid such pleasant surroundings which is indeed a fairyland, with the far stretch of clear water, which seems to be bordered by hedges of different colored foliage, from the Bay Trees and the Willows, while the thick 4 underbrush and shrubbery finishes the picture.

The Lewises looked forward to the private fishing and hunting trips that they would enjoy to the fullest extent up the river into the different bays and bayous, when they, together with the family, the brindle cat and the German Police dog, are alone and loll around the boat in a truly luxurious fashion. Of course, when the fish were striking good they would put in the full day fishing and then they would always head the cruiser back to the City if they were not already to leave and had made other plans, and continuing to the market would sell the output of freshly caught fish. They were not dependent at that time on the cruiser making their livelihood by fishing, for Mr. Lewis had his job still with the Southern Paper Mills and the boat was their home and also served as a pleasure boat for them, yet it helped them

Library of Congress

earn many a dollar. So theirs was truly an independent life, where happiness, tranquility and leisure abounded.

Their private parties often included one of Mrs. Lewis' sisters, who also loved the water and the fun of fishing, but lacked the agility of getting quickly from one boat into the other. One day while she was visiting them on a trip up to Oak Bayou, which is about a fifteen mile trip, the two girls decided to go fishing along, as Mr. Lewis had previously taken a skiff and was quietly fishing 5 about two hundred yards from the cruiser, Mrs. Lewis was getting everything in readiness for the trip, the rods and reels, a water jug and the bait. The launch was drifting from the end of the anchor cable while the small skiff was pressing its side, when Mrs. Lewis' sister suddenly decided to get into the skiff, which she proceeded to do. First having caught the skiff's line she edged it in, so that she could get aboard, then she balanced herself on the cruiser's deck and climbed into the skiff. She had succeeded in planting one foot firmly in the skiff while the other foot remained on the deck of the larger boat, when to her horror the skiff darted away and she slipped overboard with a splash, screaming and crying out all the while. When she hit bottom and slowly arose to the surface and finally righted herself, much to her chagrin, she found herself in water only waist deep. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis at once set to work to lift her out of the water which ordinarily would not have taken much effort, but the muddy bottom caused the sister to have to do a lot of squirming and wiggling to free her feet from the sticky mud. This set all of them laughing so much that they were nearly in hysterics by the time they were back on the deck of the main boat, and the proposed fishing trip had been completely forgotten in the excitement.

The brindle cat, who was part of the crew on this little cruiser, was a fool about water also and when twilight was gradually falling, 6 the frogs croaking in their dismal fashions and the murmur of the waves as they gently touched the side of the boat, was fast lulling the Lewis couple to sleep, the brindle cat climbed to the top of the cabin and, curling herself in a round ball of soft fur, was soon asleep. Sometimes the cat did not awaken in the place of her choice on the top of the cabin; for in the night when the wind was blowing strongly,

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the boat rocked heavily and at times seemed to try to tear itself away from its anchorage in order to escape the angry waves that were splashing upon its sides, and the brindle cat would fall overboard into the water and swim to the banks beside which the boat would be lying. If a plank were out from the banks, the cat would walk up the plank to the boat and cry until someone let it into the cabin to dry, and she would feel so big and proud she was not immediately put out again because of her wet condition.

Mr. Lewis remembers with such pleasure another paid trip that he made to Dog River on the fourth of July, when he carried a family party of seven. Again Mrs. Lewis was called upon to assist, which she did with such evident pleasure, she and her husband soon found themselves to be accepted as part of the family. The day was spent in fishing and bathing, but mostly by just lounging around enjoying a leisure day. They did not leave Dog River until they had seen the display of fireworks at Bay View Park, which lit up the entire sky in 7 gorgeous colors, so it was almost 10:30 when they finally landed back in the City.

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis lived from fifteen to eighteen months on this little cruiser that they had grown to know as their home, and in all that time never did they have an accident of any kind.

One day an offer was made for their boat that would net them a good profit. The thoughts of the city loomed brightly before their mind's eye, and thinking that a change might be beneficial in every way, they sold their pleasure-going craft, that had served them both as a home and as a money maker; but more than all else the little boat had stood as a symbol of the life they had both loved. But it was sold, the money collected, and the couple soon found themselves in a small rented apartment in Mobile.

Mr. Lewis remained with the Southern Kraft until one day three months ago a message came from his wife's people asking them to come and make them a visit. Before they left Mobile, Mr. Lewis was careful in getting a leave of absence from the Paper Mills for a week. The enjoyment of being united with his wife's family again made the time slip by so

Library of Congress

quickly that he awoke to the fact that he had over-stayed his time and upon his return to Mobile learned that his place had been filled at the Paper Mill during his absence, by a man who needed the job more than he, so he quietly allowed him to keep his place. 8 Mr. Lewis counted up his savings, although they had been very frugal with their expenditures, yet after paying all their obligations and thoroughly cleaning the slate, as it were, he found that they had very little left to provide them with the necessities of life until he could get other work. Mr. Lewis is an extraordinary man in some respects, for he has the manners of the Southern chivalrous gentleman of olden days, for he refuses flatly to allow his wife to find work of any kind out in the business world as long as he is able to care for her, as he thinks it is a man's duty to care for the woman he married.

He found to his amazement that he could not find work at all in any line, and when he had counted their savings, he knew that steps must be taken to provide for his dearly beloved wife, and that if they continued to rent an apartment and eat only the necessities of life, the little money they had left would soon be consumed. So he decided to look around them in a serious and careful manner in order to find a place that they might call their home, which would be free or rent and the monthly bills of light, water, etc, and if possible save enough money, or work for it in some way, maybe a day's work, to pay up his Poll Tax that he had been so unfortunate enough to fall behind on and at the same time have his wife register in order to vote, as she had not done so far. They are both strong Democrats 9 and admires Mr. Roosevelt as the greatest man the country has ever known.

They were fortunate in finding a barge that could be bought cheaply with a newly built house on it. The size of the barge is 12x24 and the size of the house itself is 10 x 20 and about 8 feet high. Feeling that they could not let the chance slip they bought the barge, as they had not seen anything else that would do. The house is built as one room with a door leading out on a deck or porch at either end, with two good-size windows on either side. The barge is lying besides the banks on the north side of the first span of Cochrane Bridge from the Mobile side.

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A large Red Star Range stands in one corner of the room, while in the other is a double bed which is covered with an embroidered spread, and reclining in the exact center of which is Dollie, a darling little kitten that has taken the place of Mrs. Lewis' brindle cat. Dollie is a year old kitten, and is covered with a thick coat of glistening black fur without one white hair anywhere to be found, except her whiskers are now turning a lighter shade but are still far from white. Mrs. Lewis takes great pride in Dollie, who showed utter indifference to her surroundings in a kitten's imprudent way by gazing in the distance, while all the time she seems to be looking up at the ceiling at a sun-beam.

10

A round dinner table, covered with a clean white table cloth which hung almost to the floor, occupies one side of the cabin while attached to the well and under the table are stationary seats. There is a water cooler at one end of the dining table, the water used on the house-boat is carried from Magazine Point, a distance of about one half mile. Also ceiling-high cabinets, built in-to the wall which contain their dishes, condiments etc., and their pots and pans, making them handy to the stove. These are all in one end of the cabin. On the same side of the room stands a dressing table and the bed, while on the other side a comfortable studio couch is up against the wall along side a small table and dresser. A rocking chair is in the center of the floor. Each article of furniture is covered with a fancy piece of some kind and all so very clean, while the floor gleams in its whiteness and the furniture blends together, proclaiming to the world that an ideally happy couple are its occupants.

Buster, a young collie puppy six months old, arrived from some unknown journey which had taken up all of his time for the past few hours. His long light colored hair is sprinkled with tar, but the pleasure he evinced by whining and wagging his tail vigorously and in every way tried in his canine way to show that he was very happy to be home with those he loved. Buster seemed to try and tell his master that the tar had gotten on his coat

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without his knowing it, and was 11 begging Mr. Lewis to wash him all over again carefully so that he would be thoroughly dry before night-time.

The sheep-skin rug that has served as Buster's bed since his birth was hanging on the outside of the cabin, where Mrs. Lewis had hung it after carefully brushing and shaking it well. When it was time for the family to retire, the sheep-skin was laid carefully on the floor for Buster to retire on, but in the night he often awoke to find that he has a bedfellow, for Dollie had eased herself along beside him on his sheep-skin bed sometime during the night. He has long since, however, ceased to remonstrate with her, so he turns over and yarns and again drops off to sleep. If for any reason Mrs. Lewis has not put his bed down in the special place that Buster has long since recognized, he whines and begs until it is placed, then he immediately lays down upon it.

On the over-head timbers of the room are a single shot gun, the life belts and other sundry articles, while in a corner are resting the rods and reels.

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis as yet have no launch with which to move the house-boat around, but have acquired an engine, so as to be ready for the day when there is money enough to buy a boat to put it in, so that once again they may move up to the fishing grounds, taking their 12 home with them, where they can enjoy the great open spaces away from the noise of the City, and where once again that feeling of a strange sentiment seems to take possession of them, which makes them feel that they are amongst the favored and that the Eternal Father is near and over them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis in their houseboat, Monday afternoon, November 21st, 1938.