

Museum Introduces New Towboat Simulator

By JIM ROSS

The Point Pleasant River Museum and Learning Center in Point Pleasant, W.Va., introduced its new towboat pilot simulator to the public following a brief ceremony April 21.

Jack Fowler, executive director of the museum, said the ceremony was an introduction, not a dedication. The new simulator is next to a smaller one that opened in 2011.

Since the two pilothouses interact, how a pilot on one bridge acts affects how a pilot on the other reacts. The two can use portable radios to communicate with each other as one overtakes or passes the other.

The pilothouse for the new simulator was modeled after the pilothouse layout in the new AEP River Operations boats, including the split console. It has six monitors providing a front view out of the simulated pilothouse and one providing a rear view. As with the older one, the new simulator provides situations in varying types of light and weather conditions. Pilots can use two radars and electronic navigation charts to assist them.

The new simulator was built with volunteer labor except for the electrical work, Fowler said.

Fowler said the museum has two goals for the new simulator. One is to create a revenue stream for the museum. The second is to help train river personnel.

“Our goal here is to do some training for some of our fellow mariners out there,” said Capt. Clifford “Butch” Leport, president of the Point Pleasant River Museum Foundation. The museum would like to add radar training, both

the one-day and three-day courses, he said.

Also speaking at the introduction ceremony were Capt. George L. Boone III, commanding officer of the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit in Huntington, W.Va., and the Rev. John Holland of Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church, who led the prayer of blessing.

The ceremony was followed by demonstrations in which participants tested scenarios at Point Pleasant and New Orleans. Capt. Steve Pearson began the demonstration on the bridge of the new simulator while Capt. Robert Shaw took the helm of the old one, but they soon handed the sticks over to others.

One participant was Charles Jones, chairman and president of Amherst Madison. He steered a boat up the Ohio River and into the mouth of the Kanawha River while the Queen of Mississippi was coming out of the Kanawha and down the Ohio. He joked he was trying to not hit the Amherst Madison dock at Henderson while he steered up the Kanawha.

The demonstrations ended with two Coast Guard cutters racing down the Ohio River from the mouth of the Kanawha to the ice

piers at Gallipolis, Ohio. That race was won by a 15-year-old veteran of video game racing, with advice from Capt. Shaw.

Fowler said the new simulator cost \$225,000. About \$180,000 was provided by a grant from the Federal Highway Enhancement Fund through the the West Virginia Department of Transportation. The museum needed \$45,000 to match the federal grant. That was provided by \$20,000 from the Gordon and Mildred Jackson Foundation, \$15,000 from the Robert and



—photos by Jim Ross

Jack Fowler, executive director of the museum, in the new pilothouse simulator.

Louise Claffin Foundation and \$5,000 from the J. Mack Gamble Fund. Other sources were the Parkersburg Area Community Foundation, the Mason County Community Foundation, Amherst Madison and AEP River Transportation.

The foundations contributed because the simulator provides education and economic development, Fowler said.

One company already has inquired about when the simulator will be ready for use in training pilots. Companies will have to provide their own trainer because the museum does not have a trainer on staff, Fowler said. The museum has a person who can provide training, but not for certification, Fowler said.

Eventually, if you work on the river, you will be able to pay a fee to spend time on the new simulator with a trainer, Fowler said.

The older, small simulator will remain open to the public as it always has, but the new one will not, except for group tours, Fowler said. Access to the new one will be restricted because the public can be pretty rough on the simulator controls. The museum has had to replace the steering levers on the old simulator three times because of abuse, he said.

After the introduction ceremony, Greg Walburn, a port captain for AEP at Lakin, W.Va., said of the new simulator, “I’m just amazed at the graphics on this.” Pearson, while helping a visitor navigate through New Orleans, said, “I ran this area for 28 years, and everything is there, like the Harvey Canal, the lift bridge, the lock...all that stuff.”



Charles Jones, chairman and president of Amherst Madison, steers a towboat pushing barges up the Kanawha River during a demonstration of the new pilothouse simulator at the Point Pleasant River Museum and Learning Center.