

# Burlington County Times

## SPLASH of fun

Last week, I found myself aboard a boat on the Delaware River at Lambertville. Not just any boat, but an honest-to-goodness steam-powered paddle boat, a replica of an 1880 sternwheeler.

SPLASH, it's called. A floating classroom and nonprofit foundation. For a decade, school children and adults have signed on for two-mile excursions ([www.steamboatclassroom.org](http://www.steamboatclassroom.org)) to learn more about the river.

I came aboard with 30 adults from the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen literacy program and their GED tutors.

A bell rang, steam blew from the stack and the boat pushed off from the Lambertville dock. The sun was shining and a gentle breeze blew across the water as we headed for the Lambertville New Hope Bridge. Not a bad way to spend a morning.

"Makes me think of Mark Twain," said a tall, thin 40-something GED student who opted, as I did, for a bench on the boat's lower level. Others climbed narrow stairs to an upper deck where the crew strung a blue tarp for shade. Bart Hoebel, the man behind SPLASH, would have gotten a kick out of the Mark Twain reference. Friends agree Bart, who died on June 11 at 76, was "a 21st century Tom Sawyer." A man with a zest for living and little aversion to risk.

A Princeton University professor and internationally renowned psychologist, he was interested in the brain mechanisms that control appetite and body weight, and studied under renowned behaviorist B.F. Skinner at Harvard. In 2010, Hoebel's team studied the link between high-fructose corn syrup and table sugar and weight gain in rats. In his free time, Bart sought adventure. He was among other things a hot air balloon pilot, Christmas tree farmer, and once built a steam calliope into a fire truck for parades.

Then, in the late '90s, he purchased this steam boat in Ohio. For the fun of it. Along the way he turned the boat into a nonprofit foundation so he could share his love of the boat and this river. He involved friends and family in the adventure. Guys like Bob Schuster, a retired electrical engineer for Lockheed Martin who now captains the boat. Eric Clark, a longtime family friend schedules the group outings.

There's Pete Burns, a mechanical engineer, who uses vacation days to engineer SPLASH. He draws on 20 years of U.S. Navy experience. Pete says while people are most familiar with the grand, three-decker river boats of the Mississippi, those versions of the steamboat are "fake." The paddles are for show. The ship is moved by diesel-fed propellers. Not SPLASH. That wheel is working, he said. The steam drives it.

On this day, as he explained the work of reciprocal pistons, his audience was more interested in the boat's wake and the blue sky and, well, just the fun of being on a boat. That would have pleased Bart, too.

"You know we shouldn't do this unless we're having fun," Bart would tell Bob as the two worked for hours scraping the hull so it could be repainted.

"Fun," Bob says, rolling his eyes, was rather a strong word.

He and Eric and Pete, though, do remind me of boys playing boats, each dressed in cargo shorts, a T-shirt and red suspenders this morning as they keep alive Bart's spirit.

On board, too, are history buff Bob Barth of Somerville who talks about the history of the river and its canals; and Dennis Liana of Stockton, an environmental student who lectures about the health of the river.

In between, passengers chat about the speed of the craft (just 5 mph), fishing and what to do if the boat sinks.

"I'm swimming that way," says one man, pointing to the woods of the Lambertville shoreline.

"Go that way, and they'll get you for trespassing," he explains with mock seriousness pointing to the large homes on the Pennsylvania side. His fellow students laugh.

"Almost drowned in this river when I was a kid," says Mark Twain. "Remember it like yesterday. Finally, I learned to swim."

Someone's radio is tuned to Motown and a woman is quietly singing along. Another takes a long drag on a cigarette and lifts her face to the sun. The mood is light hearted. Relaxed.

That might have pleased a man such as Bart Hoebel most of all.

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