



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Office of Marine Safety

Interview Summary – DCA21FM028

Interview of: David Dewey – captain of the towing vessel *Mary Lynn*
Date/Time: July 30, 2021 – 0805 to 0925 CDT
Location: Telephonic/Conference call
Interviewed by: LT [REDACTED] – USCG and Adam Tucker – NTSB
Attendees: None
Accident: May 18, 2021, engine room fire aboard the towing vessel *Mary Lynn* at mile 176 upper Mississippi River, St. Louis, Missouri.

This interview summary has been compiled based on Coast Guard and NTSB investigator notes taken during the interview of Mr. David Dewey, the captain of the towing vessel *Mary Lynn*.

- Mr. Dewey has been working on towing vessels since he was 17 years old. He became a pilot on a line haul boat in 1972. Since then, he has worked as a pilot, captain, as a port captain, towing vessel company owner/operator and as an instructor for towing vessels in Paducah, KY. After working as an instructor, he retired at the end of 2017 and since then he has worked part time on an as needed/as available basis for short trips for which he does not work over two weeks at a time. Over the last few years, he has worked on towing vessels ranging from 1800 to 8000 horsepower and small tows to tows with 35 loaded barges. He has worked in the Mississippi river from Grafton to New Orleans and has also worked the Illinois, Ohio, and Missouri rivers. He holds a master of towing vessels for western rivers and the Great Lakes.
- The *Mary Lynn* normally runs on the Missouri river. It is a challenging and swift river.
- On the trip leading up to the casualty, they had come off the Missouri river with nine loads which is pretty much the maximum tow size. They started out at mile 256 on the Missouri River at a grain and fertilizer facility called Agri Services of Brunswick. They dropped off some loads there and stood by for a few days to unload and reload. They took four barges from the Brunswick River terminal down to Hermann, Missouri at mile 94 at the Hermann sand and gravel facility. They dropped the barges there and then went back up to the Brunswick River terminal to get four more barges to bring to Hermann. From Hermann, on the early morning of May 17, they took 9 loaded barges down to the mouth of the Missouri River. At mile 176 they dropped a couple of the barges. At around midnight on May 18 when he got off watch, they were getting ready to take two or three barges down about 3 miles and drop the rest of the tow there.
- When Mr. Dewey came back on watch at about 0600 on May 18, the tow had been dropped and they were tied up at the ARTCO fleet taking on fuel from the Economy Boat Store fuel boat and barge. They were tied up alongside the ARTCO fleet where they had dropped the remaining barges. Their first two northbound barges were tied off just below

where they were. After they took fuel, they faced back up to the two barges to continue their trip upriver.

- When Mr. Dewey took over the watch, the fuel boat was just finishing, and he thought they may have been taking on some fresh water and wrapping up the paperwork.
- Once notified things were complete with the fuel boat, they moved up to the barges and faced up to them in the fleet. They then started to shove up into the river and away from the fleet. There was a lot of current, so it was easy to get away from the fleet. The barges were breasted with the square on the forward end of the tow and the rakes aft which the *Mary Lynn* was faced up to. Pushing the square ends upstream meant they had to “shove pretty hard” because of the current. The tow was configured this way because the remainder of the tow they were to pick up were three miles upstream. Those barges were already made up so they could shove up to them, make a coupling and then continue onward. The barges were 70 feet across when they left the ARTCO fleet. It was inefficient to push the square ends of the barges, but it was only 3 miles to get to the remainder of the tow.
- They got in the river and started shoving, and that is when Mr. Dewey noticed the rpms on the starboard engine were not coming up, so he called the deckhand on the radio to pass along the message there was a problem to the chief engineer. The chief engineer asked Mr. Dewey to tie back up so he could check out the problem. Mr. Dewey maneuvered the *Mary Lynn* back to the fleet above the one they had departed from, and they tied up there. A little while later, the chief engineer then called and told Mr. Dewey that everything should be ok, so they departed and got underway up the river. Everything ran normally and Mr. Dewey estimated that was for about 15-20 minutes. He had both engines set to nearly full ahead and they were making between 2.5 to 3 miles per hour.
- Mr. Dewey’s first indication of any problem came from an Osage marine boat which was lightboat and overtaking (on one whistle) the *Mary Lynn* on their starboard side. The Osage boat was on the Illinois river side and the *Mary Lynn* was more in the center of the river. When the Osage boat was about even with the *Mary Lynn*, he called over the radio and said, “*Mary Lynn* you’re on fire”. At that point Mr. Dewey had no indication of any problems. He had no alarms, and there was no change of speed of the engines. He immediately turned around and looked aft to see flames shooting up from the ventilation ducts on the deck aft of the wheelhouse. He saw flames and black smoke shooting out of the open ventilation windows. Mr. Dewey then hit the general alarm button and about the same time, the chief engineer yelled on the radio “we’re on fire”. That came just after the Osage boat called him.
- After sounding the general alarm, Mr. Dewey steered the tow to starboard away from a fleet ahead of them into the river. He knew that if he had kept on the same course and lost power, he would have slammed into the fleet.
- Other boats in the area also heard the call over the radio from the Osage boat that the *Mary Lynn* was on fire, which prompted many of the boats to either get underway or deviate to assist the *Mary Lynn*. Boats at the ARTCO fleet got underway towards the *Mary Lynn*.

- Once the *Mary Lynn* and barges were steered away from the fleet, it was not long before they lost generator power and the main engines. There were only five crew on board the *Mary Lynn*. The pilot, who had just gone to bed, arrived in the wheelhouse after hearing the general alarm. Mr. Dewey was on the radio and trying to steer, so he told the pilot to go down and assist the other crew and make sure the emergency fuel shutoffs had been pulled. By that time the responding boats started to arrive with fire hoses charged and when they got close enough, they started to fight the fire from their boats.
- Mr. Dewey called the US Coast Guard on the phone to report the fire at about 0705, and he was informed they had already been notified and that the St Louis Fire Department (SLFD) boat was on the way. The fire boat arrived about 0715. The SLFD declared the fire out at about 0810.
- Mr. Dewey made notes that the fire started between 0645 and 0650.
- When asked if they were pushed in or still in the river during firefighting efforts, Mr. Dewey said they were still in the river and two ARTCO boats had gotten a hold of the *Mary Lynn* and held it. Those boats came from the ARTCO fleet that was next to the *Mary Lynn*. There were two big linehaul boats and three or four harbor boats that aided. The Osage boat came alongside them. One of the ARTCO boats was faced up to the stern of the *Mary Lynn*. The boats had their fire hoses charged and they were putting water into the engine room of the *Mary Lynn*. As the fire got under control, crews from those boats got onto the *Mary Lynn* where they could put hoses directly into the engine room via the windows.
- The *Mary Lynn* was not tied off until the fire department declared the fire was extinguished. They were tied off on some dry cargo barges that were on the Illinois side of the river which was a safe place in case anything flared up again.
- When asked how he got a hold of the chief engineer when he initially noticed the starboard engine not coming up in rpm, Mr. Dewey said that the chief engineer was back in the engine room, and he knew he wouldn't have heard him, so he called the deck crew via radio so they could inform the chief engineer of the problem. The chief engineer then called up and asked the captain to go back alongside so he could troubleshoot the problem. They were only alongside a few minutes before the chief engineer said it was ok to get back underway. After that the engines ran normal.
- When asked about the barges, Mr. Dewey said they were 70 feet wide with an overall length of the tow being about 350 feet. The barges were 200 feet by 35 feet. The boat is 150 feet. The push knees of the boat were against the rakes of the barges. The barges were covered hopper barges with dry fertilizer in them.
- When asked about the rpm he was running the engines at the time the fire broke out, Mr. Dewey said it was in the range of 750-770. The maximum rpms would have been 800 for those engines. The river was about 15.2 feet on the St Louis gage and rising. There was a lot of current. If they had departed with the full tow, they would have run at full or near full ahead. It was routine to run at those rpms; full ahead or near full ahead.
- When asked of any problems or conditions that existed with the *Mary Lynn* before the fire, Mr. Dewey said there were none and that it was a routine trip. While they were on the Missouri river at mile 256, there was routine maintenance done on the engines like

fuel filter changes. The boat ran great. Mr. Dewey had not been on the *Mary Lynn* for about 2 years since he joined the vessel but had been on it extensively in years past and it was performing very well. There were no problems with the boat. All operations leading up to the casualty were routine. He had been on board of the *Mary Lynn* for 13 days and he was scheduled to be relieved the following day.

- When asked of the crew on board, Mr. Dewey said there was him, the pilot, two deckhands and the chief engineer.
- When asked about the Osage boat's call to the *Mary Lynn* informing him that the boat was on fire, Mr. Dewey said he did not recall the name of the boat but thought it might have been the *Wendy Ann*. Everything was normal at that point, and he had no alarms or noticed no problems with the engines. He noted that about the same time the chief engineer called up to say they were on fire, the *Mary Lynn*'s fire detection system went off as well.
- When asked where he saw the flames coming from, Mr. Dewey said there was a vent that ran longitudinally along the engine room, and he could see it from the wheelhouse which was above it when he looked aft. It was on the top of the main 01 deck.
- When asked of the draft of the *Mary Lynn*, Mr. Dewey said it was about 8.5 feet.
- When asked about the time of the chief engineer call versus the time of sounding the general alarm, Mr. Dewey said he activated the general alarm within seconds of the chief engineer calling. As soon as he saw the flames, he hit the general alarm button at the forward console. He recalled putting out a call for assistance over the radio as well.
- When asked about his request of the pilot to make sure the fuel shutoffs were pulled, Mr. Dewey said he thought it was the pilot that pulled them.
- When asked if the crew of the *Mary Lynn* started any firefighting efforts, Mr. Dewey said no because they had lost power so there was not much they could really do since there was no firefighting water. Also, the other boats got there quickly and some of them had their fire hoses charged and ready to go once they were within reach.
- When asked if there were any injuries to the *Mary Lynn* crew, Mr. Dewey said the chief engineer had a minor burn on his left forearm. He was in the engine room between the engines when the fire started. The fire department looked at his injury, but he kept working. He did not know if the chief engineer got medical attention after they left the boat.
- When asked of any injuries to other boat crew or firefighters, Mr. Dewey said there were two firefighters that had smoke inhalation. One as he understood had been taken off but came back, and the other one had been taken off and did not return.
- When asked about of any release of pollutants into the river, Mr. Dewey said he was not aware. He recalled that there may have been some water pumped out of the voids, but there was nothing pumped out of the bilge. The Coast Guard pollution officer was there.
- When asked of the fire detection system and the types of detectors they had in the engine room, Mr. Dewey said he did not recall what they were. The system was inspected. He noted that he disconnected the batteries for the main unit of the fire detection system in the wheelhouse after the fire broke out to try and silence the alarm which was going the

whole time. The chief engineer finally came up and was able to silence the fire detection system alarms.

- When asked how long he had been working with the chief engineer, Mr. Dewey said the first time he met him was when he joined the *Mary Lynn*. He had worked with the pilot previously and knew one of the deckhands from a prior hitch.
- When asked during his time on board if they did any other fueling evolutions, Mr. Dewey said they had not.
- When asked of the primary internal communications on the *Mary Lynn*, Mr. Dewey said VHF was used. He recalled when he initially called for the chief engineer regarding the rpm not coming up on the starboard engine, the deckhands were right there to relay that to the chief engineer.
- When asked if any fire drills were done on the *Mary Lynn* during his hitch, Mr. Dewey said they had done one while he was on board. They did a general alarm test every Sunday around noon. He also recalled speaking with the crew about low water groundings and normal stuff that happens on the Missouri river. When he joined the vessel, he did a pre departure inspection of the boat and did a voyage/trip plan before they left Hermann.
- Mr. Dewey noted the chief engineer was very competent with many years of experience. He was “old school” and had a high work ethic. He worked very hard and was constantly cleaning and checking the engines. Mr. Dewey was very comfortable with having him as an engineer and was impressed with the way he worked and his knowledge. They worked well together.
- When asked if the *Mary Lynn* had flanking rudders, Mr. Dewey said they had two steering rudders and 4 flanking rudders.
- When asked of the current speed, Mr. Dewey said it was hard to answer because it changes depending on the side of the river one is on, in the point or in the bend. It was swift, and rising so he estimated it was about 4 to 5 mph.
- When asked of the weather, Mr. Dewey recalled the visibility was clear and it was sunny. Early in the morning it may have been raining. In the afternoon it was all cleared off.
- When asked where the crew mustered, Mr. Dewey said he couldn’t see where they mustered but thought they were on the head deck since the fire was in the engine room. The crew knew immediately where and what the problem was.
- When asked of any fueling procedures in place, when the *Mary Lynn* took on fuel, Mr. Dewey said the chief engineer would have handled that. The Economy Boat Store would have done a declaration of inspection as well.
- When asked of logs on the *Mary Lynn*, Mr. Dewey said the logs were kept on a computer.
- When asked of the watch rotation, Mr. Dewey said he worked the 0600 to 1200 and 1800 to 2400. The pilot worked the 1200 to 1800 and 2400 to 0600 watch.
- When asked what time they got off the *Mary Lynn*, Mr. Dewey said they got off the boat around 1630.
- Mr. Dewey noted the boats that responded and came to their aid did an exceptional job and were very professional. They were very accommodating to him and his crew. He also

noted the SLFD helped keep the *Mary Lynn* from being completely consumed. He speculated the fire may have migrated through the wire passageways from the engine room into the accommodation. The SLFD knew how to handle the situation and kept the fire from getting worse and doing more damage.

End of summary