

Geordie Johnson

Words & Music: Geoff Drummond (3.50)

Dateline... Barmera, SA.

Visiting South Australia for the Barmera Country Music Festival last year, I spent some time exploring the Murray River. It was here that I first heard tales of Geordie Johnston, the legendary river captain and boatbuilder, who in 1855 became the first man to sail a paddle steamer from Adelaide to Albury, over a thousand miles up the Murray. Australians are, by nature, entrepreneurial and Geordie Johnston was the epitome of the bloke who was prepared to "have a go". This song of Geoff's is a tribute to one of our great pioneers; a man of whom too many Australians are largely unaware.

Geordie Johnston lived for the river, and the paddleboats he made
were crafted on the slips of Goolwa to ply the Murray trade.

He carried the bales from New South Wales and the stores to the cockies' sheds;
with half the charts in the Captains Log and the other half in his head.

Chorus: Drive the paddle, spin the wheel. Let the whistle call the tune.

Tell the river folk to spread the word that we'll be in Mildura soon.

Sound the bar, steer the bow through the waters brown and still.

We will drink our health in Echuca, if it be the Murray's will.

He was captain of the Augusta. He skippered the Melbourne too.

He took The Queen of the South through the Murray mouth
and he laughed as the breakers grew.

While the river counted victims, Geordie counted victories.

It was the lessons that he learned while the hardwood burned
that were Goolwa memories.

Chorus.

There was danger in the horror of a boiler fire
which could strip a steamer down to the water line.

The reef became a rapid when the river ran high.

You could break a boat's back in the breaking of 'the dry'.

The dreams of the inland sailers, etched in every bend,
ran aground when the railway towns brought the river trade to an end.

Now the Murray boats, they stay afloat to the roar of an 'Evenrude'.

Gone are the Geordie Johnstons and the visions they pursued.

**But fast asleep in the muddy deep, by the wake of the fibreglass keels,
lay the ghosts of the riverboats and the legend of the paddle wheels.**

Chorus.