

# **P-29: John Hartford Collection**

**Finding aid prepared by Sean Visintainer**

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This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit

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St. Louis Mercantile Library Special Collections  
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## Table of Contents

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<u>Summary Information</u> .....	3
<u>Biographical Note</u> .....	4
<u>Scope and Contents note</u> .....	4
<u>Arrangement note</u> .....	5
<u>Administrative Information</u> .....	5
<u>Controlled Access Headings</u> .....	5

## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	St. Louis Mercantile Library Special Collections
<b>Creator - Collector</b>	Hartford, John
<b>Title</b>	P-29: John Hartford Collection
<b>Date</b>	ca. 1850 - 1980
<b>Extent</b>	130.5 Linear feet
<b>Location note</b>	Transportation archives at the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri - St. Louis.
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Abstract</b>	The John Hartford Collection is the personal collection of former riverboat pilot and folk musician John Hartford. The collection is largely focused around John's love of the inland river system of the U.S., and contains scrapbooks, photographs, books, serials, and papers relating to steamboats, river towns, inland river lore, and related subjects.

### Preferred Citation note

The preferred citation for this collection is "From the collections of the St. Louis Mercantile Library at UM - St. Louis."

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## Biographical Note

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John Hartford was one of the greatest voices of the inland rivers to emerge in the last century. John, who was born in a suburb of St. Louis, came upon his love of the river like many others - through the tutelage of Ruth Ferris, his fifth grade teacher at Community School. That Ms. Ferris had an indelible effect on John, there can be no doubt; by 1950 John had become one of the youngest ever subscribers to *The Waterways Journal*, at age 12. In an interview in the *John Burroughs Reporter*, John's mother, Mary Harford said, "For at least eight years, [John] spent most of his free time reading, visiting or dreaming of the river and in early boyhood, his wish was to be a river pilot."

At age 15, John lied about his age to get a job as the night watchman on the *Delta Queen*. In his late teen years, he worked as a deckhand on towboats on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. John had at this point also been playing music for a while - starting at age 13 with a mandolin found in his grandmother's basement, and later with a \$5 banjo purchased from Goodwill. Early into his college education, music grabbed hold of John and wouldn't let go; John dropped out of school and spent time as a disc jockey and radio announcer before landing a gig on the Smothers Brothers TV show. John's big success came when Glen Campbell recorded John's song *Gentle on My Mind*. The royalties provided John the financial freedom to produce music the way that he wanted to, and in his own meandering way, to come back to the rivers that so influenced his life and music.

On a trip to Chattanooga, John met Captain Dennis Trone. Trone gave John a job on the *Julia Belle Swain*, and John worked the summer season two weeks on and two weeks off, as a steersman and doing promotional work. Eventually, John obtained his pilot's license. During his life, John also took control of the *Delta Queen*, *Mississippi Queen* and the *Border Star*. In an interview with *The Waterways Journal* in 1978, John said of his boating ability, "I'm still not really confident, I'm in complete awe of those who do it every day."

John died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2001, at the age of 63. Even if John never got comfortable with his boating skills, he had become one of the great voices and ambassadors of the river community, through his music, work on the river, and writing (*Steamboat in a Cornfield*, *Word Movies*). Of the river, John said, "It's like one big story, but with all kinds of angles. There are the same events, the same characters. You can't help but get involved in it."

Reprinted courtesy of *The Waterways Journal*.

Visintainer, Sean D. "John Hartford: One of the Greatest Voices on the River," *The Waterways Journal* 126(13) (2012): 103.

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## Scope and Contents note

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The John Hartford Collection contains books, scrapbooks, ledgers, serials, photographs, artifacts, and papers related to the inland rivers of America, including its towns, vessels, lore, and natural science. The collection is arranged by format type; currently the photographs have been described.

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## Arrangement note

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The collection is arranged by format type. Currently, only the photographs are processed.

The photographs are arranged into three subseries; vessel, general river, and people. The vessel photographs are photos of particular boats that plied the inland rivers, ranging from the mid-19th to late 20th century, alphabetically by vessel name. Photographs of people are arranged alphabetically by last name when possible; musical groups have been arranged by band name and by last name. In some instances, identification has not been possible. In such instances, unidentified people have been named by vocation (roustabout, actor, etc.). The general river photographs have been arranged by place, alphabetically, to the most specific degree possible.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

St. Louis Mercantile Library Special Collections

### Conditions Governing Access note

**Access Restrictions:** Some of the material in Special Collection M-331 may be photocopied, digitally scanned or photographed, subject to condition.

**Copyright Information:** The researcher assumes full responsibility for observing all copyright, property, and libel laws as they apply.

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## Controlled Access Headings

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**Subject(s)**

- River Steamers
- Voyages and Travel