

Desperate times

The redundant Paddle-steamer towered above him as Thomas picked his way over the debris that had been thrown down from the upper deck. The once proud ship had plied the Mississippi from New Orleans to Venice, but its demise was inevitable as steel hulled screw-driven ships took over. The great recession had sent the scrapyard workers to the soup kitchens and now the yard was silent.

Drizzle clogged his jacket, his feet were soaked from puddles oozing through his worn-out soles. Selected by a short straw, he was the lucky one. Someone was needed to patrol the yard to stop looters stealing anything of value to feed their families. A dangerous job considering how desperate some fathers had become.

On the other side of the rudder, Thomas heard a noise. Should he ignore it, pretend he hadn't heard it, it was probably rats anyway, or should he investigate and chance being beaten up? His work ethic was too strong, he had been chosen to do a job and that is what he would do.

He crept around the edge of the stern-post and spotted two men, one in his thirties, about 250lbs and holding a sledgehammer. The other smaller and older, a sack in one hand, rummaging in a wooden box used to store brass fittings.

Hands shaking, Thomas raised the old Colt 45 he had been given for protection. "Hold it right there, you 'aint got no right to be messin' with those things."

The two men saw the weapon pointing in their direction, looked at each other and sprinted as fast as they could towards the yard entrance. As they disappeared into the street, Thomas pulled the trigger ... click ... it was a good job he hadn't any ammunition, someone might get hurt one day.