

HISTORIC RIVER VESSELS

European Network of River Museums



WILLI A PÉNICHE KEPT AFLOAT BY VOLUNTEERS

The péniche (a French type of inland barge) with the current name WILLI was built in 1909 by the brothers Piet & Adriaan van Gelder, shipbuilders in Deest (Netherlands) as a towed ship without a motor. From 1909 to 1928, the name of the ship, the place of register, the nationality and the owner are unknown.

Documents provided by the Musée de la batellerie et des voies navigables in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine (France) show that in 1929 the ship was registered in Paris under the name SAINT-JOSEPH and belonged to the widow of Henri Ghislain in Condé-sur-l'Escaut (France).

In 1956, Damian Salm from Gersweiler, now part of Saarbrücken (Germany), bought the barge at the shipyard Napoleon Island in Mulhouse (France) and named it after his son WILLI. He mainly transported reinforcing steel rods from the Saarland to Paris, and grain on the way back. WILLI was converted in Saarbrücken in 1961. The ship was equipped with a metal hatch roof, a new dwelling, and a mechanical rudder. For the first time it was motorized: it got a 120 hp (88 kW) 4-cylinder diesel engine.

In the early 1970s, construction activity in Paris slowed down and less steel was needed. Damian Salm therefore signed a contract for the transport of phonolite from Brohl on the Rhine to various destinations in France. For the rides on the Rivers Rhine and Moselle the 120-hp-engine was too weak. Therefore, Damian Salm replaced it with a 200 hp (147 kW) 6-cylinder diesel engine and a Reintje gears. This work was done in Frouard near Nancy (France).

In 1983, Damian Salm died. WILLI was shut down and was to be scrapped. The Gesellschaft zur Förderung des deutschen Rheinschiffahrtsmuseums (Society for the Promotion of the German Rhine Shipping Museum) in Mannheim took over the barge to preserve it as a technical monument. Until the completion of the berth on the River Neckar in Mannheim, WILLI lay in a gravel pit near Speyer. In October 1992,

the ship was handed over to the Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit (today called TECHNOSEUM) in Mannheim and placed near the old crane on the River Neckar.

Because the museum was short of money for the required technical examination in 2004, WILLI was again destined to be scrapped. The Mannheimer Schiffsverkehrsverein sought to prevent this. A new association, the Verein Historische Binnenschifffahrt in Muttenz (Switzerland), was found

ed in July 2004 to adopt WILLI. Starting in August 2004, the ship was restored by this association. Today WILLI is capable of navigating again. Every summer the barge is travelling in Central and Western Europe. Anybody who becomes a member of the association can join the ride and spend interesting days and nights with the ship's crew on the waterways.

Ship data after the re-motoring in the 1970s:

Overall length: 39.36 meters	length of the hull: 38.66 meters	width: 5.01 meters
maximum draught (loaded): 2.10 meters	maximum load: 307.862 tons	



Damian Salm and his wife Elfriede shortly after the purchase of the barge, 1956



Damian Salm on his ship, before 1961



WILLI as a museum ship on the River Neckar in Mannheim, 2004



WILLI at the Schiffshebewerk Henrichenburg during one of the canal cruises of the Verein Historische Binnenschifffahrt, 2018