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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Old 'Earl Grey' Still In Service

By NEIL A. MATHESON

OLDER RESIDENTS will remember the Earl Grey which must have been the best ice-breaking steamer used on the winter run between Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia in the days when the winter passage was still dangerous, and most uncertain.

The Earl Grey was sold to Russia in 1915, old records indicate, and memory tells me that the late Captain John Reid of Borden was in command on the long voyage.

The amazing thing about the Earl Grey is that she is still in service as an ice-breaker in Russia, according to a letter from Flight Lieutenant A. I. Wolfenden, public information officer with the Canadian Forces Base in Summerside.

On a recent routine check through "Jane's Fighting Ships" the Summerside officer found that "she is still in service in Russia".

Greater Beam – Egg Shaped Sides

THE EARL GREY, a steel ice-breaker, was built in 1909 and an old news clipping says "She has greater manoeuvring ability in ice, due to her greater beam and the peculiar egg shaped side which later became common to ice-breakers."

She was transferred to the Russian government in 1915, Flt.-Lt. Wolfenden found and was named the "Kanada". At some later date, the detail is not available, she was renamed the "Fyodor Litke", underwent a refitting on the Mersey River in England in 1947-48 and returned to ice-breaker service in Russia.

My thanks are extended to the co-operative officer for this information.

The information sent me digging through my files for a brief shipping history I wrote for a Montreal man in September 1965.

It indicates that the Albert, a small mail steamer, was the first to be placed on the winter service between Prince Edward Island and the mainland after the Pact of Confederation had promised Canada would maintain continuous communication between this province and the mainland. Of course the Albert proved to be inadequate – some writers of that period said the ice was 15 to 25 feet thick – and the effort was abandoned after two winters.

First Real Ice-Breaker Built

IN 1876 A Quebec firm was given a contract to build the first real ice-breaker for the service. The result was 144 feet in length, 25 feet in width and 16 feet in depth. The craft of 293 tons was powered by "a compound surface-condensing engine" of 120 horsepower and was named the Northern Light.

Old stories said the "Northern Light" made good progress at first on the Georgetown-Pictou run where she started the service in 1876-77, but later she also proved inadequate. There were long periods when she did not cross the Strait at all, it was reported.

In 1879, for example, no crossings were made between January 15 and the first of February, and the ship was out of commission for the balance of the winter after she had broken an outer bearing on her propeller shaft on her way back to Georgetown.

In 1881 the ship was stuck in the ice on January 21 and did not get back to Georgetown until February 14. Then it was laid up until March 25.

In 1882 she was unable to make any trips across the Strait from February 4 until March 28. Similar criticisms prevailed pretty well in each year and finally, in 1888, the ship was declared unfit for further service.

Sealing Steamer Was Tried

ANOTHER NOTE I found said the Newfoundland sealing steamer, "Neptune", had been tried in 1886-87 in conjunction with the Northern Light, and she had made 19 round trips between December 11 and February 3, then had to withdraw when the ice became really heavy.

The steamer "Landsdowne" had also been tried in the fruitless effort to maintain the promised communication, and she also was found to be unsuitable for the task.

It was in 1888 that a Scottish firm was given a contract to build an ice-breaker and the "Stanley" took over the service in the winter of 1889-90. The "Stanley" was a big improvement, but it also was unable to cross on occasions for more than a week at a time.

The "Minto" was added in 1900 and the service was improved with the two ships on the route, although there often were days when neither of them could make any headway in the ice-choked Strait.

In 1902 the "Stanley" was placed on the Summerside-Tormentine run and it made a total of 47 round trips during the winter season. The "Stanley" was back on the same route the following year, but she had to quit in late December, because of heavy ice, and she was sent back on the Georgetown – Pictou run.

In 1905, the old reports I found said, the service was often interrupted, and few crossings were made in the period between January 27 and late March.

'Larger, More Powerful'

THERE WAS little improvement until the "Earl Grey", a larger and more powerful ice-breaker was added to the cross-strait service. Crossings were "fairly regular" from the time of her coming into service until the Prince Edward Island car ferry took over the service in 1915 – I had the year 1916, but Flt.-Lt. Wolfenden's look at Jane's Fighting Ships indicates the "Earl Grey" was transferred to Russia in 1915, so the "Prince Edward Island" must have started the cross-strait service that year. I know that she was built on the Tyne in 1915, though she did not begin the regular car ferry service between Borden and Tormentine until the latter part of 1917.

I did not make notes on my sources of information for the material I have used here, but my research was as careful and painstaking as I could make it at the time.

FOR BENEFIT of younger readers I may as well bring the car ferry story up to date. The Charlottetown was added in 1931, and the Prince Edward Island was "retired" except for occasional summer duty. But the old veteran was back in action as the sole

link with the mainland, after the Charlottetown had been sunk in 1941, while she was on her way to dry dock at Saint John. Boards of Trade and other agencies made repeated attempts to get a new ice-breaker, but Canada ignored the plea until World War II had been completed. The Abegweit was added in August of 1947 and the Confederation was added in 1962. Used mostly for summer service the Confederation carries only motor vehicles, not railway cars.

In case someone asks about the Canso ferries, they were sent to the Borden-Tormentine run after the Canso Strait causeway had been completed in 1955. Prior to that, the Canso ferries had plied between Mulgrave on the Nova Scotia mainland and Port Hawkesbury, Cape Breton.