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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Wooden Steamship Wasn't Much Good

By NEIL A. MATHESON

F.W. WESTHAVER, Borden wrote me some time ago about the steamer Northern Light, the first of the craft sent here by Ottawa in an effort to keep open winter communication with the mainland of Canada.

Mr. Westhaver observed that the Northern Light could not have been much good, and that is correct, apparently.

I didn't know the answer at the time but a magazine, Transport, loaned to me by E.K. MacNutt, formerly in charge of the district for the department of transport, Marine division, has some facts on her.

She was built by E.W. Sewell of Levis, Quebec for \$50,000 and was a wooden steamship of 144 feet in length. She was designed for a speed of 14 knots, though it is doubtful if this was ever achieved, the magazine piece notes.

Thomas Appleton, Marine historian, department of transport is the man who wrote the article and he says:

"The high hopes which had surrounded the advent of the Northern Light were dashed somewhat when she arrived at Charlottetown under command of Captain A. Finlayson on December 7, 1876.

"On her first passenger trip the steering gear failed at the entrance to Pictou harbor and throughout the winter of 1876-77 she required constant repair to counteract ice damage.

"Despite these troubles", Mr. Appleton adds, "the service from Georgetown to Pictou was maintained at a cost of \$13,000 while the purser of the Northern Light took in \$2,357.06 in passenger fares, freight and mail charges."

In the winter of 1887-88 the Northern Light was found to be badly strained and was withdrawn from the service. She was sold in 1890.

Protesting Vigorously

BY THIS TIME, Mr. Appleton notes, the people of Prince Edward Island were protesting vigorously that the promise of an efficient winter ferry service, which had been one of the conditions of Confederation, had not been met.

"With feelings running high, the province brought the matter to the attention of the Imperial Parliament at Westminster, claiming compensation of five million dollars against the Canadian Government for breach of contract."

Britain referred the matter to Ottawa, without taking direct action and the federal government appropriated the sum of \$150,000 for the start of a new service to be maintained by up-to-date vessels."

THE FIRST was the CGS Stanley, "forerunner of a fleet which for comfort and capability in winter passenger navigation was then unique," Mr. Appleton notes.

She made her first run from Charlottetown to Pictou on December 18, 1888. Built in Scotland, "The Stanley was made of high tensile steel to Lloyd's special survey . . .

With her triple expansion engines of 2,300 indicated horsepower the Stanley was a powerful ship for her day and could steam at 15 knots.”

In 1900 the Stanley – the ships were named for the men who were Governors General – was augmented by the Minto. Somewhat larger than the Stanley, she had a straight stem and cruiser stern, and was fitted with steam reciprocating machinery of 2,900 indicated horsepower.

Island Captains

ISLAND CAPTAINS were in command, Captain Angus Brown of the Stanley and Captain Allan Finlayson of the Minto. The Appleton story suggests Finlayson had not only been captain of the Northern Light but in 1900 he was senior master of Marine and Fisheries service. Both the Island men were from Belfast.

But Appleton notes, “despite the power of the two new steamers there were times when the ice was so thick recourse had to be made to the old ice-boat service. This was between Cape Traverse in this province and Cape Tormentine in New Brunswick. I have referred to this service several times in the past, in this column, to the ice boat days and the hardy men who manned the boats on the cold and often stormy cross-strait trips.

By 1909, Mr. Appleton states traffic had increased to the point where two winter ships were inadequate for the Prince Edward Island run and it was decided to add a third and large ice-breaking steamer.

Earl Grey Is Added

THE NEW SHIP, the Earl Grey, was added.

Built in 1909 by Vickers Sons and Maxim at Barrow in England, the Earl Grey was designed by Charles Dugout, who was the naval architect of the Marine Department in Ottawa.

Captain Angus Brown was transferred from the Stanley and went to England with his crew to take over the Earl Grey. She was a very powerful ship, having triple expansion engines of 6,500 designated horsepower supplied with steam from four boilers, and had a speed of 17 knots.

The Earl Grey was comfortably and attractively furnished, Appleton indicates. Her accommodation was fitted to the highest standards of the day, the public rooms being furnished in mahogany paneling with white enameled deckheads. She had velvet plush upholstery, electric lights in brass and cut-glass mountings, and was steam heated. “She was a magnificent passenger ship by any standard”, Appleton writes.

She was fitted with an extra suite of rooms suitable for distinguished official guests. Lord Grey, for whom the ship was named, used the ship on several occasions, including a voyage to Hudson Bay.

Sold To Russia

THE EARL GREY, I have always heard, was the most efficient ice breaker in the service at the time, so it is natural to wonder why she was sold to Russia in 1914. It

was not until 1917 that the Prince Edward Island went into service between Borden and Tormentine.

I asked Angus Brown at Wood Islands, himself a veteran of the sea, holder of a First Mate's certificate and a son of the Captain Angus Brown mentioned in the Transport story.

Mr. Brown does not have any official reason, but he thinks that icebreakers were in such demand at the time – Russia was one of the Allies in 1914 – that the icebreaker was sold to the Russians as a part of the war effort, or words to that effect.

Chased By Germans

A ROYAL NAVY crew under Captain Charles Trousdale, took the Earl Grey to Russia and a crew member told Mr. Brown that she had narrowly escaped being sunk by the Germans on the way across the Atlantic.

Sam Ireland told the story. He was leading Stoker on the trip and tells what saved the Earl Grey.

There was a strong wind blowing against the steamer, and also against the two German destroyers that were trying to sink her. The Grey was opened up to capacity and she ran away from the Germans. I don't mean that literally, but she did have enough power and speed to get away at a pace the destroyers could not match.

Ireland was on the Arranmore with Brown some years later, on a trip to Hudson's Bay – he was bosun at the time. That's how Mr. Brown came to hear the interesting story.

The Stanley stayed on the cross-Strait service until the Prince Edward Island arrived on the scene. The Minto followed the Earl Grey to Russia in 1915 but is believed to have been wrecked on the Norwegian Coast, Mr. Appleton writes.

The Russians changed the name of the Earl Grey to Kanada after she was handed over to the Imperial Russian Government at Archangel.

About the time of the Revolution her name was changed again, this time to III International and still later to Fedor Litke. She had a long and distinguished career under the Russian flag before being broken up for scrap in 1959, Mr. Appleton relates.

Her wheel house is preserved in the Maritime Museum in Moscow.

I'll probably refer to other phases of the "Transport" story in a future column.