

*Sixty Years of the C.P.R.
Great Lakes Fleet*

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Title: Sixty Years of the C.P.R. Great Lakes Fleet

Date of first publication: 1945

Author: Fred Landon (1880-1969)

Date first posted: Aug. 12, 2023

Date last updated: Aug. 12, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230823

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Sixty Years of the C.P.R. Great Lakes Fleet

By FRED LANDON

Inland Seas, Volume I, #1, 1945

The year 1944, just passed, marked the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment by the Canadian Pacific Railway of its Great Lakes fleet.

It was in the spring of 1884 that the steamers *Algoma*, *Alberta* and *Athabasca* made their initial trips from Owen Sound on Georgian Bay to Port Arthur at the head of Lake Superior, fitting into the great transportation scheme, then nearing completion, to link the distant Northwest with Eastern Canada. Of the three vessels which came on the lakes at that time the latter two remained in service until the close of the season of 1943. Late in 1944 they were advertised for sale. The *Algoma* was lost in her second season.

When British Columbia entered the Dominion of Canada in 1870 the building of a transcontinental railway became a national obligation. As part of the terms of union the federal government agreed to link the Pacific coast province with the East within ten years. This daring promise, made by the government of which Sir John Macdonald was prime minister, brought many predictions that it would be an impossibility to carry out the bargain. And, indeed, it seemed for a time as if the doubters were right for the Macdonald government was thrown out of office in the federal election of 1874, largely because of a scandal in connection with the proposed railway, and the Liberal administration of Hon. Alex. Mackenzie which succeeded did but little towards fulfilling the promise made to British Columbia.

Only after Macdonald was returned to office in 1878 was real progress was made. A contract was entered into at that time with a syndicate which included George Stephen (later Lord Mount Stephen), Richard B. Angus, William C. Van Horne, Donald Smith (later Lord Strathcona), and for a short time James J. Hill, though Hill soon dropped out in order to give full time to his schemes in the American West. These men lost no time in undertaking the construction of the road and carried it through with such energy that early in November 1885 a passenger train went through from Montreal to Vancouver.

The story of the building of the C.P.R. is a record of financial and construction problems overcome by sheer grit. These were times when the

whole undertaking was saved from bankruptcy only by generous aid from the Canadian government and by the promoters throwing in their personal fortunes. Nor were the physical difficulties less. The Rockies had to be pierced and a vast mileage of uninhabited country traversed. North of Lake Superior it was necessary to bridge a way over swamp and morass “so voracious,” in the words of one historian, “that today in one muskeg area seven layers of C.P.R. rails are buried, one below the other.” Elsewhere in this same area a way had to be blasted through miles of Laurentian rock so massive and unyielding that a dynamite factory had to be built on the spot. Half to three-quarters of a million dollars per mile was the cost on more than one stretch of the road.

The Lake Superior section of the railway was still under construction when the three new vessels arrived on the lakes. Indeed, it was not until more than a year and a half after their arrival that any regular train service was provided over this section. But before this, it had become necessary to provide transportation for the many people who were seeking to enter the West and to move the great quantities of supplies required by the railway construction gangs. Arrangements had accordingly been made with the Owen Sound Steamship Company to operate three vessels between Georgian Bay and the north shore of Lake Superior. Many of the earlier settlers in the Canadian Northwest were thus transported over this portion of their journey. The steamers so operated were the *Magnet* and the *Sparton*, sidewheelers, and the propeller *Africa*. An advertisement appearing in the *Toronto Mail* in 1884 describes this service as “An enchanting 10-day trip. Cheaper than hotels.” The *Sparton* was later wrecked on Caribou Island but was salvaged and with the *Magnet* operated for many years out of Toronto and along the St. Lawrence River. The *Africa*, rebuilt as a steam barge, was lost in an October gale on Lake Huron in 1895.

These were not the only steamers plying over this upper lakes route in 1884. The Collingwood-Lake Superior Line had in operation the iron steamer *Campana*, originally built for the cattle trade between South America and Great Britain, the paddle-wheel steamer *Frances Smith* and the propeller *City of Owen Sound*. Both lines found plenty of business in the boom period produced by the building of the C.P.R. The railway promoters had already decided, however, that the company must have its own fleet and contracts had been let for three steamers of a superior type to be built on the Clyde in Scotland. Their construction was personally supervised by Henry Beatty, an experienced steamship man and father of Sir Edward Beatty, who in later days became president of the C.P.R.

It was determined that these new vessels should be of the most modern type and particularly suited to Great Lakes trade. And so they were. Their arrival in 1884 brought widespread admiration of their qualities and appearance. "No such vessels," said the *Toronto Globe*, "have ever been seen on the Great Lakes, but their excellence lies not in gorgeousness of their furniture or the gingerbread work of decoration but in their superiority over all other lake crafts in model, construction and equipment, and in their thorough adaptability for the business in which they will engage." The new vessels were 270 feet in length with a beam of 38 feet. They could carry 2000 tons of freight and had accommodation for 130 first class cabin passengers and bunks for 200 steerage passengers, though at times many more of the latter class were carried. Their cost was about \$300,000 each.

All three crossed the Atlantic in the fall of 1883. On arrival at Montreal they were cut in two and towed through the St. Lawrence canals. Lake Ontario and the Welland Canal to Buffalo where they were put together. They were then taken to Port Colborne to be fitted out. Early in May, 1884, they proceeded to Owen Sound, the *Algoma* entering that port on the 10th, the *Alberta* on the 11th and the *Athabasca* on the 13th. No time was lost in putting them in service. The *Algoma* cleared for Lake Superior within twenty-four hours, having on board no less than 1100 passengers, mostly immigrants from the British Isles and from Sweden who had been awaiting with impatience the opening of navigation. On May 13 the *Alberta* moved out with 400 passengers and two days later the *Athabasca* followed. Thereafter there was a tri-weekly service from Owen Sound.

If the navigation season of 1885 had been exceptionally early, or if Louis Riel, the half-breed leader of the armed outbreak of that year in the Canadian Northwest, had held his hand for a few weeks, the new C.P.R. lake vessels would have been able to render a signal service to the Dominion of Canada. Trouble broke out on the western prairies in March when the rebels seized stores and occupied the government post at Duck Lake in Saskatchewan. An encounter between the half-breed force and a party of police and volunteers ended in defeat for the latter. News of this affair roused the hitherto apathetic government at Ottawa and over three thousand troops were sent to join two thousand raised in the West. The men from the East had to be taken over the half completed road north of Lake Superior, marching across the gaps in the railway or carried in sleighs along rough snow-covered roads.

The return journey was more pleasant. When the uprising was quelled the volunteers from the east were taken to Port Arthur where they boarded

the new vessels of the C.P.R. and were carried to Owen Sound. It has often been remarked that the demonstration by the railway of its usefulness to the Dominion government in connection with the Riel affair was a turning point in history. Thereafter there was less criticism of the extensive financial aid which had been given to the project.

November 7, 1885, was an important date in the history of the C.P.R. for on that day Donald Smith drove the last spike to mark the completion of laying steel. The place selected was Craigellachie, in the Eagle Pass of the Rockies. There was no golden spike such as had been used elsewhere on the continent. Instead, it was a very business-like ceremony. Donald Smith raised his hammer and gave a few strokes. He and others made a few remarks appropriate to the occasion. Their task, so often on the edge of failure, had succeeded. But even while the ceremony was under way the fine new steamer *Algoma* was pounding to pieces on the rocks of Isle Royale in Lake Superior with a loss of nearly forty lives.

The vessel had left Owen Sound on Thursday, November 5, passed through the locks at the Soo early on Friday and at midnight was thought to be about fifty miles from Port Arthur. The *Algoma* carried sails on two masts and had her canvas spread while crossing Lake Superior. At four o'clock on Saturday morning, with a northeast gale blowing and with rain and sleet and occasional snow making visibility bad, Captain John Moore decided to take in sail and head back into the lake. The change of course had scarcely been completed when the stern of the *Algoma* struck the rocky shore, smashing the rudder and rendering the vessel unmanageable. Soon after the whole forward portion of the *Algoma* broke off and disappeared. A few of the crew had been able to reach shore in one of the lifeboats but other survivors remained on the wreck constantly fearful that it would slide off in deep water. Not until Sunday morning, when a raft was put together, did they leave the wrecked vessel. All were taken off the island on Monday afternoon by the *Athabasca*.

Following the loss of the *Algoma* the *Campana* was chartered from the Collingwood-Lake Superior line and operated by the railway until replaced by the new steamer *Manitoba*, which was built in 1889 in the Polson shipyards at Owen Sound. When this company established its plant a number of experienced men were brought out from the Scottish shipyards. Families of some of these men still live in Owen Sound. The *Athabasca* and *Alberta* were later lengthened, the work being done at Collingwood in 1910 and 1911 respectively, while in 1914 new boilers were installed at the Port Arthur shipyards. Meanwhile two other vessels had been added to the fleet,

the *Assiniboia* and *Keewatin*, built on the Clyde in 1907 and placed in service in the following year. These two, with the *Manitoba*, now comprise the lakes passenger fleet, the two older vessels having been used only for freight since 1916. Beginning in 1933 they traded between Georgian Bay and Milwaukee and Chicago, but were not in commission during this past season.

Until 1912 the eastern terminus of the lakes fleet was at Owen Sound but in that year it was transferred to Port McNicoll. Long before this the lakehead terminus had been changed from Port Arthur to Fort William, following a dispute with the former municipality over a matter of taxation. At both Port McNicoll and Fort William the rail way has extensive terminal facilities in docks and elevators.

In the sixty years during which it has operated steamers on the lakes the C.P.R. has had many well-known masters, none perhaps better remembered than Captain James McCannell, who retired from the service at the close of the season of 1936, concluding forty-seven seasons on the lakes and thirty-three as a master mariner. Through this long period of sailing he had acquired a remarkable knowledge of the history of Great Lakes shipping and had carefully recorded much of it. He was most painstaking in his desire for accuracy and articles which he contributed to the Collingwood *Enterprise-Bulletin* and elsewhere are now sources of the highest value. In addition to his writings he frequently gave illustrated lectures. He was an easy speaker and never failed to hold the attention of his audience. He died on June 28, 1939. He had first come to the C.P.R. service in 1907 as a mate but the next year became master of the *Athabasca*, then the flagship of the line. Five years later he was transferred to the *Assiniboia* where he carried on in command for twenty-three years until his retirement in 1936.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Sixty Years of the C.P.R. Great Lakes Fleet* by Fred Landon]