



THE “BIG CANOE” WAS BUILT IN COLLINGWOOD

H. David Vuckson

Many people are familiar with the ferry *M. S. Chi-Cheemaun* which links the Bruce Peninsula with Manitoulin Island, carrying passengers and motor vehicles between southern and northern Ontario. The name of the ship which means “Big Canoe” in Ojibway, was the winning entry in a naming contest. Many people, myself included, entered the contest, the winning entry being submitted by the late Donald Keeshig.

The *Cheech* as she is known to many, replaced three older, smaller ships that had served for many years on the run between Tobermory on Highway 6 at the top end of the Bruce Peninsula and South Bay Mouth on Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron/Georgian Bay (see my May 2019 story *Veteran Ships of the Tobermory/Manitoulin Island Run—Where Are They Now?*). The *Chi-Cheemaun* is operated by the Owen Sound Transportation Company, an agency of the Ontario Government, established in 1921, now celebrating a century in business.

Like her predecessor sisters, *S. S. Norisle* and *S.S./M.S. Norgoma*, the *Chi-Cheemaun* was built at the Collingwood Shipyard. On July 16th,

1973 the Shipyard laid down the keels for two new vessels on the building berth at the foot of Hurontario St. Hull # 205 would become the *Chi-Cheemaun* at 365'5" long and Hull #206 would become the *Algosoo*, a St. Lawrence Seaway size freighter of 730 feet in length. This presented a difficulty because the larger ship would need to occupy the entire length of the building berth. This led to the ferry being launched long before it would normally have been done.

A video posted by Jason Booth on the Facebook group *Collingwood's Past* shows the *Chi-Cheemaun* being launched on a snowy January 12, 1974. In the video, the ship's hull is unpainted except for the underside where it rests on the keel blocks and launch timbers and would later rest on the keel blocks in drydock. Its two propellers are missing as are the rudders. Customarily, the day of a ship launching reveals a ship fully painted on the hull and superstructure, and one or more propellers and rudders in place and streamers and flags flying. Since the *Chi-Cheemaun* took exactly half of the length of the building berth required for the *Algosoo*, it was imperative to get the ferry into the water as soon as possible so that the space she occupied on the building berth could be cleaned up and readied for completing the other half of the hull of the big freighter. Near the end of the video of the launch of the ferry there is a distant glimpse of the hull of the *Algosoo* that had been assembled right up close to the bow of the ferry. The *Algosoo* was launched on July 24th, 1974.

Soon after her launch, the *Chi-Cheemaun* was moved from the launch basin into the drydock so that the finishing trades (electricians, tinsmiths, carpenters, etc.) could start their work. Photos of the ship in drydock over the next five months still show an unpainted hull as late as the end of July when the *Algosoo* was being fitted out in the launch

basin. With the drydock emptied, much below-the-water-line work was carried out including installation of tail shafts, propellers, rudders, motion stabilizers and priming and painting the hull, all of which would normally have been done prior to launching.

There were problems with some of the finishing procedures. Items produced in the shop according to the blueprints, did not fit when taken aboard the ship for installation. My father was the Sheet Metal Foreman at the time, his department responsible for ventilation, galley work, etc. He told me that he had about 100 hours of rework to make things fit. The drawings were said to be from the west coast.

The *Chi-Cheemaun* was christened while in the drydock on a rainy day in the summer of 1974. The usual dignitaries were present as were many umbrellas, rain caps and raincoats. After several Shipyard workers lifted a banner revealing the ship's name, the customary bottle of champagne was smashed against the hull following a short speech by the lady chosen for the honour. Mayor Harry Bell was all smiles and sporting his chain of office. The ship entered service in September of that year.

In late August 1976 the *Chi-Cheemaun* returned to the Collingwood Shipyard for some repair work after hitting the dock in Tobermory in heavy winds and suffering some damage to her bow (which opens like a giant jaw) as well as damaging the loading ramp, what we on the west coast call "a hard landing". In the winter of 1981-82 more car carrying capacity was added by installing two mezzanine decks.

Originally powered by two Ruston 16-cylinder diesel engines, after 32 years of service, the *Chi-Cheemaun* underwent a mechanical upgrade during the winter season of 2006-07 as part of a \$10 million refit. With

the Collingwood Shipyard being just a memory by this time (it closed in 1986), the ship went to Central Machine & Marine in Sarnia where four new low-emission, fuel-efficient 8-cylinder Caterpillar diesel engines were installed, connected to new gear boxes to drive the ship's two propellers. Mechanical and control systems were upgraded to the latest technology that was not available when the ship was built in 1974. The refit also included new generators, a new exhaust system, a new bow thruster for manoeuvring at the dock and the redecoration of the vessel's public areas.

In late September 2009, while on a visit to Collingwood, Pam and I experienced this multi-million dollar refit. We drove up to Tobermory and made the crossing on the *Chi-Cheemaun*, continuing across Manitoulin Island on Highway 6, over the swing bridge at Little Current leading back to the mainland and on to Sault Ste. Marie to take the Agawa Canyon scenic fall colours train ride, then retracing our route back to Collingwood two days later. Both crossings on the ferry were smooth and pleasant, unlike my experience on the old *Normac* fifty years earlier when the fish of Georgian Bay had a feed of the breakfast of pancakes I ate at Harriet's Lunch at the Tobermory dock and then lost during a very rough crossing (detailed in my May 2019 story).

Some of the ships built in Collingwood have gone into service many thousands of miles from where they were constructed: across the Atlantic during two world wars, down the east coast to the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean and South America, to France and Africa (last month's story) to the Mediterranean, Scandinavia, north to Hudson Bay, to the west coast and the Arctic and even to the Far East and South Pacific. Others have sailed the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway (and still do) but only a few have spent their working lives

relatively close to the Collingwood Shipyard where they were born. In this latter category are the *Norisle* and *Norgoma* (both long-retired) and their modern-day sister the *Chi-Cheemaun*, providing a useful transportation link/shortcut from southern Ontario to Northern Ontario via Manitoulin Island. Long may the Big Canoe sail!

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.