



VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN ERA PASSENGER SHIPS AND THE EXTENSIVE USE OF WOOD BY BOAT BUILDERS

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From the very earliest days after the arrival of the railway in 1855, Collingwood's harbour was a major transfer point in the movement of people and goods between Toronto and "The West" a term which, in those days, meant Lake Michigan, Chicago and isolated places along the north shore wilderness of Georgian Bay and Lake Superior. That year the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Union Railway built the first of two wooden grain elevators that would stand in the harbour where ships from Chicago could unload their cargo of grain. That first elevator was relatively small and is thought to have been destroyed by fire. The railway's successor, The Northern Railway, would build the much larger landmark second wooden elevator in 1870. In addition to ship-to-shore transfers of grain, lumbering around Georgian Bay was a huge industry given the massive stands of virgin timber that covered the land and the resulting log booms for the sawmills occupied much space in Collingwood harbour. The waters of the bay were teeming with

fish creating the need for a Collingwood-based fishing fleet. All of these various enterprises involved the use of wooden boats and it was natural that the craft of wooden boat building would be carried on in Collingwood.

Long before the Collingwood Shipyard of the 20th Century existed or had even been thought of, vast numbers of fishing boats, yachts, schooners, scows, lumber barges and the tugs to tow them were all needed for the 19th Century commerce on Georgian Bay and several family surnames—Watts, Doherty and Morrill in particular—were prominent in Collingwood wooden boat building, the Watts family having arrived in 1850 when the place was known as the Hen & Chickens Harbour and the townsite was a “dismal swamp”. The supply of prime wood from the virgin forests of Simcoe County was endless in those days and these talented builders constructed their vessels in various locations on the waterfront as it then existed before much landfill created the waterfront/former shipyard land as we know it today.

The increase of both the activity in the harbour and the size of the vessels involved, eventually resulted in the need for a major repair facility. The opening of the Queen’s Drydock at the foot of St. Paul St. on Queen Victoria’s birthday in May 1883 heralded a new era of activity on a much larger scale than had been previously possible. Now, the wooden passenger and

cargo ships that linked Collingwood to all points west on the upper Great Lakes could be repaired in the drydock. The owners realized that, in addition to repair work, the drydock could be used to construct new wooden vessels of substantial size.

Unlike the era (from 1901 onward) of side launching steel-hulled ships *into* the drydock using drag chains and drag boxes to keep the ship from striking the opposite wall, in the era of wooden ship building this safeguard was not available to them simply because side launching a substantial wooden vessel using drag chains would result in the chains, when they reached the extremity of their travel, pulling the wooden planking off the side of the ship. And so, two big (for their time) wooden passenger/freight steamships, the *Majestic* and the *Germanic* were built *in* the drydock in the 1890's and "launched" simply by being floated. (Even in modern times this procedure was used to "launch" steel-hulled ships at the Port Weller Drydocks in St. Catharines.)

We have the newspaper account of the "launch" of the *Germanic* from the Collingwood *Enterprise-Messenger* newspaper: *The new steamer of the Northern Navigation Company, now being built by the Collingwood Dry Dock and Wrecking Co., is about complete, and will be floated this*

morning (Thursday, July 27, 1899), at 10 o'clock. The ship was christened by "Miss Muriel, the pretty little daughter of Mr. C. E. Stephens (Treasurer of the Drydock Company)...breaking the customary bottle of champagne and pronouncing the words "I christen this boat the Germanic, of Collingwood," when a cheer went up from the crowd, and all the steam whistles in the harbour participated in the demonstration.

The interest and importance of the occasion was greatly increased by the announcement of Vice-President Long that the Steamship Company had increased their capital to \$1,000,000.00, and that the unexpended \$600,000.00 would be used in building large vessels, suitable for the requirements of increasing volume of trade; also that in conjunction with the Dry Dock Company they had in view the establishment of a large shipbuilding industry, that would give constant employment to 300 or 400 men. This would shortly come to pass with the establishment of the Collingwood Shipbuilding Co. Ltd. for building steel ships, an enterprise that would become the mainstay of Collingwood for 85 years.

The *Germanic* was built and floated in three and a half months. The keel was laid on April 6, 1899 and the ship was floated July 27th with her first trip planned for the next day according to the newspaper: *The first trip of the new steamer will be made to Mackinac tomorrow (Friday) July 28 and those who have*

been fortunate enough to secure accommodation will enjoy six days of health-giving pleasure and luxuriant comfort. The construction was superintended by S. D. Andrews of the Drydock Co. and Captain Pete Campbell (a part-owner of the Drydock), representing the owners of the ship. The machinery for the *Germanic* had been salvaged from the ship *Pacific* which had burned at the Collingwood dock the previous November 3rd taking the Grand Trunk Railway freight shed and wharf with it. The machinery seems to have been quite a bargain. Consider the following faithfully recorded for us by David Williams of The Huron Institute: “Steamer *Emerald*, built in St. Catharines, 1875, as the *Oswego Belle*. Bought by Great Northern Transit Co. and named *Emerald*, poetic name for Ireland, birthplace of Thomas and J. J. Long, directors of the company, 1882. Discarded and machinery put into steamer *Pacific* in 1883 and in steamer *Germanic* in 1898-99”. The *Germanic*’s “new engine” already had many miles on it in 1899.

The Great Northern Transit Co. of 1880 was a reorganization by the Long brothers of Collingwood of a previous company they had started in 1876 and was one of several firms that, through a series of mergers, became the Northern Navigation Company in 1899. The Head Office would remain in Collingwood for a decade until it was moved to Sarnia by which time the business on Georgian Bay had declined and the company’s main source of revenue was the long passenger and freight run between

Sarnia and Duluth (described later in this story). The vacated two-storey building on Huron St. at the foot of St. Paul St. would become the core of the Main Office building of the Collingwood Shipyard.

The hull of the *Germanic* was entirely of white oak. Overall length was 196 feet. On page 121 in the local history book *Reflections* there is a photo of the ship under construction in the drydock showing her oak ribs. On the same page and the preceding page are photos of her twenty-five feet longer sister ship the *Majestic* which was built in the drydock and floated on April 23, 1895. The same photo of the *Germanic* under construction can be found in both of the books on the Collingwood Shipyard by George Czerny.

The accommodations on the *Germanic* were splendid for their time on this “up-to-date palace steamer”: staterooms for 200 first-class passengers, steerage accommodation below deck, smoking rooms, bathrooms, electric lighting, a grand stairway, etc. Except for machinery, wiring, plumbing, etc., it was all made of wood, a factor that would spell the death of the *Majestic* and *Germanic* during the First World War years as well as other ships like them. In fact, nine ships owned by the Northern Navigation Co. ended their days by fire. The *Majestic* burned at Sarnia on December 15, 1915; the *Germanic* burned to the water line at the dock in Collingwood harbour just after

1:00 a.m. on Friday, March 30th, 1917. The burned out hull is said to have languished in the western part of the harbour for several years before it was towed down the shore east of Collingwood and set adrift. It grounded in the general area of the mouth of the Pretty River. In the Great Depression of the 1930's the oak hull was gradually picked to pieces for free firewood—an early example of ship recycling.

The Victorian era ended with the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901 and the Edwardian era began. That same year marked a totally new chapter in shipbuilding in Collingwood as the re-invented Collingwood Dry Dock & Wrecking Company which had become the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company Ltd. embarked on a major expansion of the facilities. The drydock was considerably enlarged by being lengthened from the original 325 ft. to over 500 ft. It was also widened, provided with a new Pump House, and a shipbuilding berth was created along its eastern edge. It was from this building berth that the very first steel hull, the 340 ft. (figures given are “overall” length) *Huronic*, a beautiful passenger/freight vessel for the Northern Navigation Co., was side-launched into the drydock on September 12, 1901 heralding a new era. On November 26, 1908 her sister ship the 365 ft. *Hamonic* was launched from the same building berth, the interior finishing being completed over the winter.

The building of the *Hamonic* is shown in detail in the book *The Building of A Ship*, a 1993 reprint of a souvenir book published in 1909 by the Northern Navigation Co. Shown in the book are five views of the beautiful, ornate woodwork contained on this steel-hulled ship: the carved grand staircase, the grand saloon, the lobby, the observation room and the dining room. All of these views illustrate that even though the era of steel shipbuilding had arrived, the specialized fine woodworking skills of joinery were still very much needed. I discovered an original copy of this book in the Administration Office when I worked as an Office Boy/Messenger in the Yard in the 1960's and, with the blessing of Fred Crew, General Superintendent at the time, I took the book to Jack MacMurchy at the *Enterprise-Bulletin* to see if he could use some of the photos in it. In 2009 I was delighted to discover the reprint of this book for sale in The Collingwood Museum. Also interesting are the photos showing the hull of the *Hamonic* taking shape during the era when ships were put together with rivets. In some of the views the hull's ribs resemble a giant child's Meccano Set consisting of multiple relatively small pieces of steel with holes punched in them to receive the rivet to attach them to other pieces.

Meanwhile, the tradition of building wooden boats continued in Collingwood well into the steel shipbuilding era. Before the Shipyard started to expand westward at the turn of the 20th Century, the area between the original drydock and the

Hurontario St. slip (which would eventually become Drydock No. 2) was still occupied by the wooden boat builders. In April 1900 the Watts shop still stood on the site of what would become the Electrical/Power House building of the Collingwood Shipyard at the south end of the Hurontario St. slip. Next door was the shop of boat builder Doherty. Morrill was also building wooden tugs in this area. By the time the Shipyard created the west building berth on the west side of the Hurontario St. slip (the new Drydock No. 2) in 1910, the Watts main 2-storey building had been moved from the eastern edge of the slip farther west toward the foot of Pine St. where, during the Second World War it was sold to the Collingwood Shipyard for use as the Shipwrights shop. The water used to come right up to this building at its Pine St. location before the log boom slips of the former Toner & Gregory Sawmill were filled in and the finished boats were moved out the doors at the north end of the building and right into the water. Other wooden buildings that had stood for years between the two drydocks since the 19th Century disappeared and were replaced with substantial brick buildings that stood until the Shipyard closed in the 1980's.

The *Huronic* was retired from passenger service in the late 1930's and thereafter used just for package freight until she was scrapped in 1950 ending a near half-century career on the Great Lakes. Her younger sister, the *Hamonic* ended her days

very tragically after a career of only 36 years when she was destroyed by a fire that had spread to the ship from a freight shed on the dock in Sarnia on July 17, 1945. All the passengers managed to escape but the ship was a write-off. All the beautiful woodwork which received fresh paint and varnish every year provided an immense amount of fuel for a huge blaze which could not be stopped. Scrapping and fire, respectively, ended the careers of these two beautiful Edwardian era passenger ships built in Collingwood.

The third such ship of the Northern Navigation Company, the 385 ft. *Noronic*, was built, not in Collingwood, but in Port Arthur in 1913 in the reign of King George V. While the Edwardian era had passed, the story of the *Noronic* is important to our narrative because her tragic demise illustrates the vulnerability of steel-hulled passenger ships with wooden interiors just as well as do the earlier ships with hulls made of wood. The *Noronic* was the flagship and the largest member of the fleet of the Northern Navigation Company. She was nicknamed “The Queen of the Lakes”. The *Huronic*, *Hamonic* and *Noronic* were termed “The three sisters”. The *Noronic* died a horrible death in a disastrous fire at the dock in Toronto in the early morning hours of September 17, 1949 while on a post-summer season cruise from Detroit to the Thousand Islands. The passengers and crew together numbered 695 souls. Between 118 and 139 lives were lost as some with their clothes on fire jumped from

the ship to their death or were trampled in the panic onboard or were totally incinerated in their beds or elsewhere on the ship. Again, the beautiful woodwork decorating the ship sealed its doom. In this case the fire which started in a linen closet was fuelled by the massive amounts of lemon oil-polished wood panelling throughout the ship. Just like her sister *Hamonic*, the *Noronic* had a short career of only 36 years before being reduced to a burned-out wreck of twisted metal bound for the scrapyards.

The *Noronic* may have been the flagship of the fleet but it was also a disaster waiting to happen. Readers are invited to look up the Wikipedia page on this fire and they will be astounded at the “perfect storm” of circumstances that included the design of the ship (not one of the passenger decks had direct access to the shore), the lack of safety features, fire hoses that didn’t work and the negligent unpreparedness of the crew, all of which contributed to the loss of life and of the ship itself. This was the end of an era. The three sister ships and their Northern Navigation Co. Ltd. had been enfolded into Canada Steamship Lines in 1913 as a division of C.S.L. With the demise of all three ships in the 1940’s, C.S.L. got out of the passenger ship business on the upper Great Lakes due to both the stringent new fire regulations for passenger vessels and the general decline of ship travel on the Great Lakes as cars and

new highways proliferated in the post-war years and people wanted to get to their destinations faster.

In their prime, these three sister ships operated 7-day cruises of 1600 miles on the upper Great Lakes between Detroit, Windsor, Sarnia, Sault Ste. Marie, Port Arthur/Fort William and Duluth. A 1921 brochure with the slogan “A Week Afloat on A Wonderful Boat” lists some of the pleasurable activities onboard: dancing every weekday evening to the full ship’s orchestra followed by a singalong, Afternoon Tea presided over by the Social Hostess in the “Grand Saloon”, concerts every evening—all of this in elegant surroundings lined with beautiful woodwork produced by the Joiners Department of the shipyard. There was a daily newspaper published onboard called *Northern Navigator*. Picnic hampers from the ships were provided for shore excursions in Sarnia. Departure times were arranged so that the scenery missed at night on the way north and west was seen during the day on the return trip.

The three sisters also carried freight and the company trumpeted that the amount of freight the ships could carry would fill a mile-and-a-quarter of loaded railway freight cars (*Huronic* and *Hamonic*) or a mile-and-a-half in the case of the *Noronic*. The ships also carried automobiles provided that all gasoline was removed and the batteries disconnected and this, of course, had to be arranged in advance.

Among the Northern Navigation Co. Officials listed in the 1921 brochure was “H. R. Storey, Agent, Walker’s Dock, Walkerville, Ont. (Windsor)”. Collingwood-born Harry R. Storey (1881-1937) was the father of Dr. Bob Storey, well-known Collingwood physician. Harry’s wife was my great-aunt Zoe, the middle daughter of R. W. O’Brien of town thus making Harry Storey my great-uncle through marriage. At the time of his marriage in 1912 Harry Storey was described as “the well-known and most popular purser of the N. N. Co. steamers”. In later years he transferred to the shore when he became the company agent at Walkerville, a position he held until his retirement in 1922 after a 25-year career.

One more passenger vessel would be built on the east building berth of the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company for the Northern Navigation Co. before the Edwardian era was over. This was the 142 ft. long *Waubic* launched in June 1909 for service on Georgian Bay. The steel hull was sheathed in wood to protect the hull plates when navigating in shallow, rocky waters. This ship had several lives spanning half a century under three different names until it too was destroyed by fire in 1959 in Nova Scotia.

There is one Edwardian era Great Lakes passenger ship remaining —the S.S. *Keewatin* built in Scotland in 1907. Along with her sister ship the *Assiniboia*, she was operated by the

Canadian Pacific Railway's steamship division for passenger and freight travel, including cars, between Port McNicoll (near Midland) and Port Arthur/Fort William (now Thunder Bay) on Lake Superior, a 2 ½ day trip one way. The C.P.R. operated a "Boat Train" from Toronto to Port McNicoll where passengers would transfer to the ship. The "*Kee*", after 44 years preserved as a maritime museum in Michigan can now, since 2012, be toured in her home port, Port McNicoll, where she is on static display. Here, visitors can glimpse the grandeur of the passenger ships of that era and a feeling for what it was like travelling in style on them when life moved at a much slower pace than it does today.

These two sister ships—the first of their kind on the Great Lakes to have radar—were withdrawn from passenger service in 1965 and after a brief time in freight-only service they were retired. By the 1960's the travelling public wanted new cars to drive on new highways such as the Trans-Canada Highway in northern Ontario and to get things done faster and faster and they forsook the stately steamships which had once been the *only* way to travel long distances in comfort from southern and central Ontario to locations on the north shore of Georgian Bay and Lake Superior. (Likewise, the public forsook passenger trains on branch lines in favour of the family car, leading to the demise of another familiar form of travel.) It became uneconomical for the C.P.R. to keep up with the more stringent

fire regulations for the aging ships because the revenue was simply not there to justify the expenditure. *The Assiniboia* was to be preserved as a floating restaurant but a spark from a welder's torch set her on fire in New Jersey and she was a total loss, again due to the vast amounts of wood throughout the ship. *The Keewatin* is said to be the last of her kind anywhere in the world and she proudly floats at her old dock in Port McNicoll with her bow pointing toward Thunder Bay as she welcomes the public aboard for tours and peacefully reflects on her long-gone glory days of travel by steamship over a century ago.

To return to the start of our story, there is a gratifying footnote to the early days of wooden boatbuilding in Collingwood. A precious piece of that past has been preserved on Heritage Drive. The Watts Boathouse, after one or more moves in the 20th Century as it had to keep getting out of the way of the westward expansion of the Shipyard, was last located in the early 21st Century north of First St. between Pine and Maple Streets and just south of the former railway line. Whereas the main Watts shop became the Shipyard Shipwright's Building, the Boathouse had been used for many years as a storage building for completed lifeboats that Watts built not only for the Collingwood Shipyard but also for ship owners all around the Great Lakes. Lifeboats were shipped out on railway flatcars to distant customers. At the time that Fred Watts sold his main

shop to the Shipyard during the Second World War, the Watts business relocated to the Boathouse until his death in 1947 after which the building was owned and used privately by his son Reg Watts (of the Shipyard Rigging Dept.) for a personal boatbuilding project that played out over a 35 year period before the vessel *F. C. Watts* touched the waters of Georgian Bay in 1985.

In late February 2007 the Watts Boathouse was moved across the vacant former Shipyard property to Heritage Drive (thereby avoiding conflict with utility wires on First/Huron Streets) and then down to its present location near the Collingwood Terminals where it now serves as the headquarters of the Collingwood Dragon Boat and Canoe Club—a direct link not only with the smaller vessels that populated the harbour in Collingwood's early days but also, through the Watts lifeboat connection, with the steel freighters on the Great Lakes in later years up to the time of the Second World War. A wooden Watts-built lifeboat from 1937 is on display in the Collingwood Museum.

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