

EARLY STEAMBOATING ON THE SAINT JOHN RIVER DESCRIBED IN AN INTERESTING MANNER

(By F. H. Phillips, of Fredericton, in The Canadian Magazine).

Why is it that mention of steamboating invariably brings to mind pictures of the old Mississippi, of sugar cane and cotton wharves, or leather-necked boatswains and negro stevedores? It is purely a matter of long established association. We are prone to ascribe any mentioned activity to some particular locale. Which may also explain why people usually think of the St. John River in New Brunswick in terms of the Loyalist period of its history, follow that up by endeavoring to trace their own ancestry to that hardy band of patriots, and then politely ease away from the subject and leave a wealth of river lore still undiscovered. The truth of the matter is that although the St. John has long been associated with the Rhine for scenic beauty, the river also holds much in common with the Mississippi through having been, during another day, a main artery of transportation for the folk who settled along her banks.

The first steam propelled craft that plied the river were crude affairs but one day there came a tight little vessel whose appearance was shortly to revolutionize steam navigation the world over. For, be it known, the first vessel to utilize the compound marine engine was not built in the shipyards of Europe; she was built and launched in the St. John River opposite Fredericton. Her name was the "Reindeer" and it was Benjamin Tibbitts, a Queens country boy, who built her. But that was not until 1842.

Early Steamers

Steam navigation of the river began with the launching of the "General Smith" at the Portland Point, Saint John, in April, 1816. Story has it that her arrival treated a panic. It was a big day for her crew and, wishing to herald her entrance to the harbor, they sounded a triumphal blast on her siren. Not being used to such noises, the townfolk got a bit uneasy. The most prevalent rumor was that the Judgment Day had come and that Gabriel's Trumpet was sounded. Throngs of the devout made for the churches but one young man, more material-minded than most people of his day, advanced the idea that a fabulous sea monster had become caught in the mouth of the city sewer and even insisted that party be sent to investigate. Before the party could be organized, however, more blasts had been sounded on the siren and the folks on shore became enlightened as to the sound which was soon to play such an important part in their daily lives.

With an eye to the possibility of navigation on the river, the Provincial Administration in 1826 engaged Robert Foulis, famous as the inventor of the steam fog horn, to survey the channel from Fredericton to Grand Falls. In exactly two months he had submitted his report which was very detailed, giving by levels the drop in the river for the entire distance covered. The report being favorable, Foulis was immediately engaged afterwards by Messrs. Ward of Saint John to superintend the building of the "John Ward."

A String of Boats

In short order there followed a string of boats—the "St. George," the "Fredericton," the "Saint John," the "Meteor," the "New Brunswick," and the "Water Witch." These old boats were slow in speed and jerky in movement. Cylinders were then of the oscillating type. In those days the jointed piston rod had not been invented and the cylinder was set on a pivot so that it could turn a bit each way, or oscillate, in order to affect the rotary motion of the stroke. The oscillation opened and closed the valve and steam expanded only in one end of the cylinder and, since the strokes were timed so far apart, the old hulks would creak from stem to stern with the vibration of each fitful puff. To complete the picture, the old engines could not be thrown into reverse because the cylinder was in a position to receive steam only when the piston was set for the forward stroke. That was "floating power" a century before the expression was coined.

Although the 85-mile run between Saint John and Fredericton proved too long for their successful operation, they were successful for their successful operation, After attending school for four years

there was one attempt made to put a horse boat on the route. She ran for one season concurrently with the steamers mentioned, but her owners were glad to give up the undertaking. For a number of years, however, horse boats were used to carry wood for short distances from the sawmills along the river banks, and also as ferries. These horse boats should not be confused with tow boats. In the former case the horses were actually aboard the boats and power was produced by harnessing the animals to long bars which radiated from a driving box. The driver was dignified by the title of engineer which, to the old river men, came to be a standing joke. The chief qualifications, as they put it, were an ability "to shovel manure and holler whoa."

The Upper Route

From Saint John to Fredericton the river is mostly wide and deep and the current slow and steady; but above Fredericton the stream soon grows narrow and the channel swift. Indeed, the nearness of the banks often led river travellers to remark that they were sailing through farm yards. But to vessels of light draft the upper river was easily navigable up until the years which opened the present century. By that time the cutting of the forests of the valley had removed a natural reservoir which formerly maintained the water at a fair sailing level.

Although the little steamer "Woodstock" had made a failing attempt to reach the town for which she was named as early as 1832, successful navigation of the up-river route was not realized until five years after. On April 30, 1837, the "Novelty" completed the one hundred fifty-odd miles between Saint John and Woodstock between morning and evening. On another occasion she made the 170-mile round trip between Saint John and Fredericton in a day. The "Novelty" was a high pressure boat owned by James Whitney of Saint John. Although she was speedy she was aptly christened for beyond being a novelty she was of little use. Long hull and narrow across the beam, she was swift but unwieldy and hence impractical for regular service. Especially was she the bane of the Red Coats garrisoned at Fredericton. For some years the troops there regarded it almost as a part of routine duty to embark in flat boats and assist in refloating the "Novelty" from the sand bar opposite the town.

Up River Service

Regular service between Fredericton and Woodstock was not established until 1845. That year the Craigs of Saint John launched the "Carleton" for George Connel, barrister, of Woodstock. Her light draft and powerful engines fitted her admirably to glide over the bars and shoals and through the rapid water of the upper St. John and for some years she dominated the carrying trade of the route. In the words of the old captains, "You could sail 'er on the morning dew." for she drew but fourteen inches of water.

Always the growing river traffic called for the launching of more boats. Connell soon launched a second, a side-wheeler called the "John Warren." In attempting to achieve larger carrying capacity Connell defeated his purpose. Being of too heavy construction to compete with the lighter craft on the swift current, the "John Warren" was a financial loss to her owner.

Prior to the middle forties all the boats had been side-wheelers but toward the close of that decade the stern-wheelers began to appear. The first of these, the "James D. Pierce," was soon followed by such other stern-wheelers as the "Richmond," the "Bonnie Doon," the "Tobique," the "Highlander," the "Gazelle," the "Ida Whittier," the "Andover," the "Florenceville," and the "Aberdeen." But meanwhile Benjamin Tibbitts had launched his famous "Reindeer."

Tibbitts' Compound Engine

Benjamin Franklin Tibbitts, youngest son of Andrew Tibbitts, was born in the Parish of Cannis, Queens county, New Brunswick. After fire had destroyed the homestead in 1822 the family moved to Grand Lake. Eight years later the family made a second move this time to Fredericton. After attending school for four years

young Tibbitts was apprenticed to the watch-making trade, first under a Mr. Robertson of Woodstock and later under Benjamin Woolhopter of Fredericton. It was during these years that his inventive genius first envisioned an engine that would combine steam under both high and low pressures. His zeal for wider experience soon led him to the United States and, after apprenticeship in various workshops and foundries, he perfected plans for his compound engine.

Now it was one thing to perfect plans on paper but it was quite another to crystallize them in wood and iron. For in order to prove his theory Tibbitts found it necessary not only to cast an engine but also to build a boat in which to install it. It was then that the young inventor learned why the sage of old had remarked that virtue is its own reward. As a ship builder the investing public rated him a fair watchmaker. But just when things looked darkest Tibbitts found an able supporter in Thomas Pickard, father of a former principal of Sackville Academy, and at that time a wealthy citizen of Fredericton. Through the winter of 1842 Tibbitts labored at the construction of the "Reindeer" on the river shore opposite the town—and then with spring came launching day. On a sunny afternoon the townsfolk came forth, the more friendly to doubt, the majority to scorn this ridiculous creation of a watch

maker's day dreaming. But at the appointed time the grey puffs began to belch from her stack and her paddle wheels began to spin as the little white vessel held her course into the channel. The compound marine engine had been given to the world.

The First Voyage

The "Reindeer's" first voyage was an excursion to Grand Falls under the command of Captain Horation Nelson Drake. On the up-river run the Woodstock Band was taken aboard and the merrymaking seems to have done full justice to the occasion. Returning a stop was made at the village of Tobique where Benjamin Beveridge, father of the community, donated a fine pair of antlers to deck the gallant "Reindeer." A ready speech of acceptance was made by the engineer, Thomas Pickard, Jr., son of the owner, and the antlers was set on the front of the pilot house, where they remained for years.

In 1846 Tibbitts and a brother, Henry M., built the "Benjamin Franklin" for service between the City of Saint John and Grand Lake points. Some years later poor Tibbitts, still in early manhood, lay upon his deathbed in his old home on the shore of the Lake. That night the "Benjamin Franklin" ablaze to the water's edge and deserted by her crew was seen drifting in the direction of the old homestead and in the same hour the man and his work, once things of life and beauty, became but as dust and ashes.

The Steamboat Races

In the halcyon days, steamboating was more than just a means of shipping Carleton County potatoes down to the port of Saint John with perhaps a return cargo of flour and ploughshares for the farmers upriver. Steamboating was also a big thing in a sporting way. This was when men took their boat racing seriously. Years ago it was no uncommon occurrence to see two or more boats ploughing the water for all that was in them, decks lined with bewhiskered gentlemen resplendent in frock coats and ruffled shirts, and after a good number of hoop-skirted ladies, as well, who had come along to see the race to a finish. And since the steamboats were at once contestants and grandstands, a real good sport it must have been at that—so long as your boat did not blow up.

Pride of the Fleet

For upward of a decade after 1850 the name of Hatheway & Small was one of first importance in the carrying trade on the St. John River. They built the steamer "Union" at Carleton and the "Anna Augusta" at Fredericton in 1850, while the steamers "James D. Pierce" and "Richmond" also flew the pennant of the H. & S. Line. But the pride of the fleet had already been launched before the two men entered and in the same hour the man and his work, once things of life and beauty, became but as dust and ashes.

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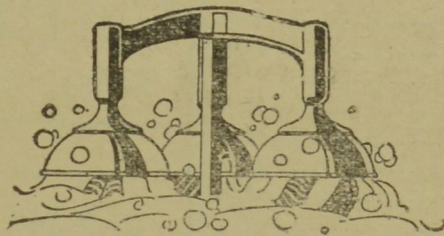
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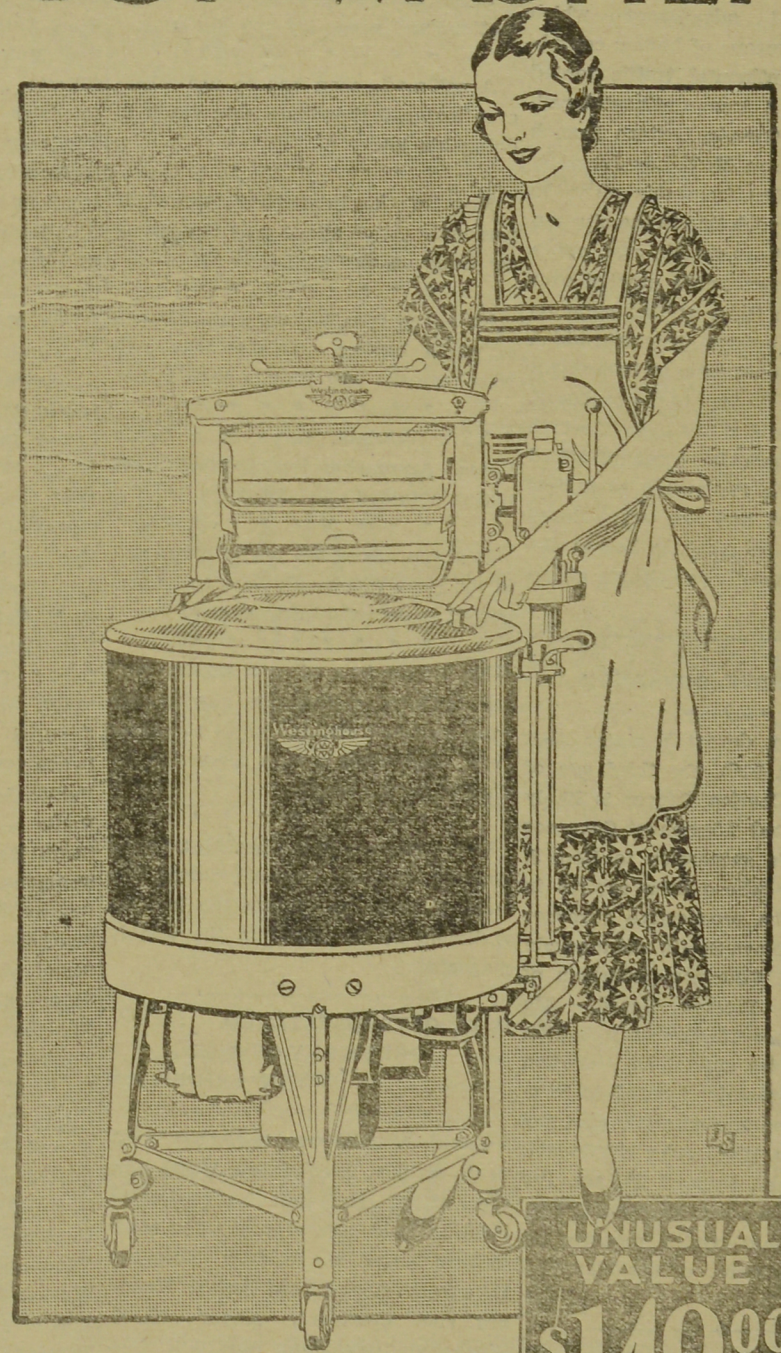
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