

In July of 1984 the **Pembroke Observer** newspaper published a special insert called the "*Ottawa River Gazette*". This article about travel by water on both the Ottawa and the Muskrat, in the second half of the 1800s, was featured on the front page.



## Story of vanished fleet on Ottawa-Pembroke run

*"Hull down - hull down and  
under - she dwindles to a speck,  
With sound of pleasant music  
and dancing on her deck."*

This is the story of a vanished fleet. Its stately ships have long since rotted at forgotten ports of call. But they made history on our Ottawa River and brought the amenities of civilized living to frontier settlements.

More than that, these steamers were the carriers of an immense river-borne commerce on the Ottawa that was the life-line of the country's economy.

Today their names are almost forgotten in the surge of a civilization whose transportation is powered by motor driven sources, and in flight by jet aircraft.

From about 1860 to the advent of the Canada Central Railway successively to Sand Point, Renfrew, and Pembroke, river transportation on the Upper Ottawa enjoyed its most popular and profitable period.

In 1868 so extensive was the patronage of the river travellers, that the Union Forwarding Company, which owned a fleet of palatial steamers, issued a brochure entitled "Tourists and Travellers Guide to the Upper Ottawa."

### DE LUXE TRAVEL

According to this guide, "first class omnibuses" left the various Ottawa city hotels every morning during the week to connect at Aylmer with steamers leaving that place upon the upward voyage at 8:30 a.m. The passengers enjoyed the novelty of eating each meal during the day upon a different vessel. They breakfasted on board the "Ann Sisson" shortly after leaving Aylmer, dined upon the "Alliance," and had tea in the course of the trip from Cobden to Pembroke on the "Jason Gould," or "North Star."

It should be explained here that the

steamer journey upriver was interrupted at the foot of the Chats Rapids, and passengers, were transferred to one of the most unique railways then in operation anywhere. This horse car railway was about two miles long and was conducted on trestle-work in a steep gradient that took the line along the Quebec shore right over the Chats Rapids to the steamer landing at the foot of Chats Lake, where another boat conveyed the passengers to Arnprior and Sant Point.

### PORTS OF CALL

In half an hour after the steamer "Alliance" left the foot of Chats Lake, Arnprior was sighted, a prominent feature being the residence of Dan McLachlin with its terraces extending to the water's edge.

When the steamer "Alliance" reached Gould's Wharf opposite Portage du Fort, those who wished to proceed to Des Joachims left the craft and were driven in covered stages to Cobden, where the steamer "Jason Gould" lay waiting to take them to Pembroke. To those who could not afford the time to make the Des Joachims trip, the management recommended the Calumet side-trip. Instead of disembarking of Gould's wharf, such passengers remained upon the "Alliance" and proceeded to Portage du Fort, whence they were conveyed eight miles to Havelock (now Bryson). At Pembroke the steamer "Pontiac" or "Pembroke" left at 7 a.m. every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday for Des Joachims and left that place upon the return at 2 p.m.

### THREE-DAY TRIP

The entire trip to Des Joachims and return to Aylmer was accomplished in three days. After leaving Aylmer the following were the stops made: March, Kelley's Landing, Dadham's, Onslow (Quyón), Pontiac, Union Village, Arnprior, Sand Point, Bristol, Bonnechere Point, Farrel's, Gould's

Landing, Cobden, Pembroke, Petawawa.

The fare, meals included, from Aylmer to Chats Rapids and return was \$2; to Portage du Fort and return, \$4; to Pembroke and return, \$7.50; and to Des Joachims and return, \$10. Children under 12 years of age were carried at half fare.

In the decade immediately after Confederation, Pembroke was the home port of the fleet of the Union Line. These steamers - such as the "Forest Queen" and the "C. O'Kelly" - were palatial craft equipped with mahogany cabins and bar.

### PEMBROKE SHIPYARD

The Pembroke shipyard was noted for its craftsmanship in turning out the pride of the river fleet. The christening of these river steamers was a social event.

When the "Forest Queen" left the ways at the Pembroke shipyard on May 6, 1872, according to a news writer of that day there was present "a large proportion of the beauty and fashion of the town."

When Mrs. O'Kelly, wife of the vice-president of the Line, cracked a champagne bottle over the bows of the "Forest Queen" she and the ship were applauded by the socially elite of the town which included: the Whites, Dunlops, Suppes, Irvings, Moffatts, Loucks, Murrays, Copelands, Dicksons and Morris'.

But the "Forest Queen" burned at Cushings Island two years later. However, the company soon had another ship (the "C. O'Kelly") and the town was all ready for another

launching. This time we read that the christening job was performed by "the fair and accomplished Miss E. Munro, daughter of the Captain of the vessel." Afterwards the guests boarded the "John Egan" where the ladies and gentlemen "partook of champagne refreshments."

### FARTHEST CAMPFIRE

The last port of call for the "Pontiac" in that wilderness era was at Des Joachims (now the location of the great Hydro power plant) of which a river chronicler of that period wrote:

"Here the traveller can find himself at home at Tiberius Colton's most hospitable hotel. But this is the extremity of civilization. If he be valiant, be indifferent to the dangers of rapids, able to do his share in paddling and portaging, have a Spartan contempt for all the luxuries of life and a fierce affection for pork and biscuit and be able to procure canoemen - then he can go ahead to see the wild Roche Capitaine and the Deux Riviere, and make his farthest campfire at the head of Lake Temiscaming."

### FADE INTO HISTORY

But those old days of mid-Victorian glory and splendor on our river have gone. No longer the plume of black smoke and the echoing bellow of the steamers' whistle proclaims steamboat round the bend. No longer are the big boats met at the quay by silk-hatted "quality" and red-shirted rivemen.

Motels and superhighways, "Vista Dome" silver trains and fancy airports now cater to the impatient tourist.