

Tattle Tales of Muskoka

JOE COOKSON has spent almost all of his life in Muskoka, in the general area of the Huntsville community. His book has been carefully written and contains lively descriptions of Muskoka as it was in his earlier years.

Here we find descriptions of what it was like to spend the winter in a lumber camp and the author tells in instructive detail of the woods operations of the winter months and of the drive of logs downstream when spring arrived. Few others have attempted to set down in writing what this all meant to Muskoka in those bygone years.

But there is far more to this book. It narrates the experiences of a boy working in his family's tourist resort, and there are many other detailed references to the varied activities of the Muskoka summerland.

The author was one who worked on the old steamboats of an era which has now become history. He relates many incidents of his work as a deckhand on a boat which sailed the lakes near Huntsville, and also tells of how he helped to build one of the steamers.

What life was like in a Muskoka town nearly half a century ago is well recounted in his vivid descriptions of Huntsville in those times.

Joe Cookson has made an important contribution to the growing collection of Muskoka historical books. Here is a book which will delight the reader and inform him of events and conditions of Muskoka from the author's own experience and from the knowledge he fortunately gained from many of the old pioneers of north Muskoka.

TATTLE TALES of Muskoka

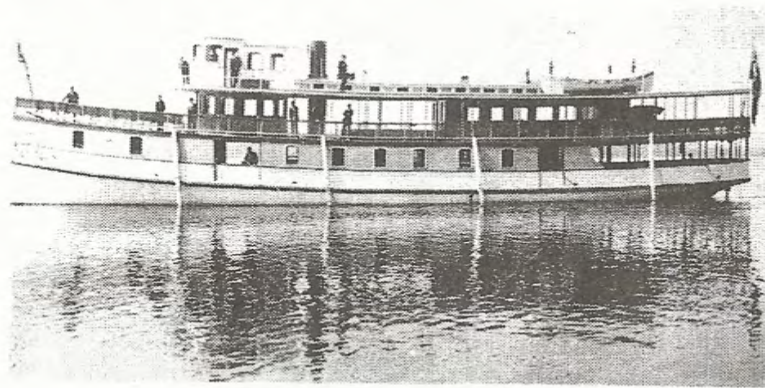
**By
Joe Cookson**

The rise and fall of a flagship

In the fall of 1926, December 2nd to be exact, we took the steamer Algonquin to the dry dock at the locks for inspection. Her planking was found to be in bad shape, so she was patched and repaired with hopes she would last one more season. After that inspection was made, the owners made plans to build another vessel, which must be an exact replica of the Algonquin so that all upper structure, boiler, engine etc. could be used.

A forge furnace as well as a cast iron bending table was set up in what was at a much earlier date, a foundry building. This building was on Anglo-Canadian Co. property, situated just off of Susan street.

A long "I" beam, 16 inches in depth and 120 feet in length, also a quantity of 3 inch by 3 inch angle iron was obtained. The "I" beam of course was to be the keel of the new ship, while the angle iron had to be heated in the furnace then bent to shape for form the steel ribs. This ship would be all steel except for the top structure and the 2½ inch white oak planking. She would be a fine vessel and fittingly known as "The pride of the fleet."



FIRST ALGONQUIN

Our first job was to straighten the "I" beam which had a slight bend in it. This was a new experience for me and was accomplished with a sledge hammer and cold chisel, hammering the web on the concave side of the bend and thus expanding, straightening the beam.

When the beam was to the satisfaction of Captain Sangster and drilled to accommodate the steel ribs already bent to the proper curvature, we moved to the site selected to build our vessel. This spot was just below the railway bridge and on the south shore. Jim Sedgwick, driving the tannery team of horses and using a hand scraper, had levelled a strip of ground along the bank of the river. There we set up a small machine shop, a steam box for steaming the oak planking, and installed an upright boiler to supply steam.

There was work all winter for the employees of the Navigation Company if they wished to have it and most of them availed themselves of the opportunity.

I should add a note here about the brains of directing the building of this new ship. Captain Sangster was the brains of the building of Algonquin 2nd. He took armfuls of blue prints, studied them and restudied them until he knew every little detail, then supervised each step of the construction. This for an unskilled man was a remarkable feat. Engineer John Smith had charge and supervised all details concerning, boiler, engine and drive shaft installation.

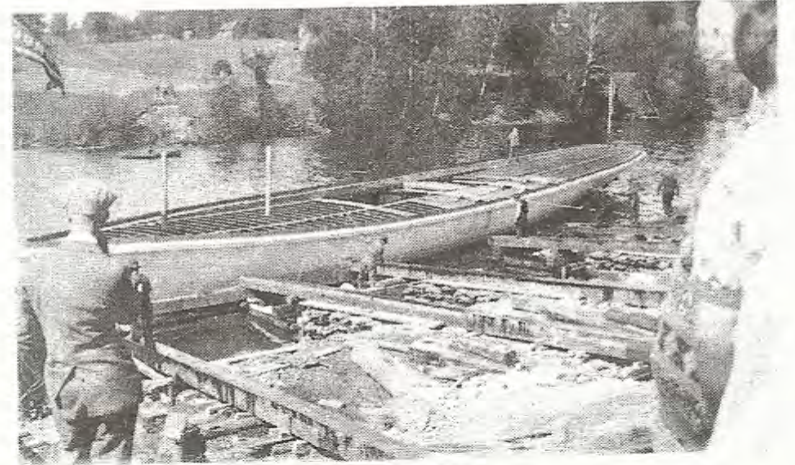
The keel was laid, ribs rivetted into place and steel plate decking laid. Now we were ready for the gang of ship builders and caulkers from Collingwood to plank the hull. The proper white oak for planking could not be found in Canada and had to be secured through the Muskoka Wood Company who brought it in from the States.

Here I will list the local men who worked on this vessel:

Captain Sangster, Captain Joe St. Amour, Captain William Elder, Vince Elder, John Smith, William Murray, Wack Thompson, Lou Thompson, Frank Winterbottom, John Lewis, John Markle, Josh Scriver Sr., Dave Miller, Archie Ennest, and Joe Cookson.

I regret to say that of all those local men the writer is the only survivor.

All planking bolted in place and seams caulked tight, the hull was ready for launching which took place June 7th, 1927. A large number of people watched from the river banks and along the railway tracks. The launching went along smoothly after the retaining blocks



June 7th, 1927

were knocked out. Helen Conway had the honour of breaking the traditional bottle against the side of the hull as this new ship started its slide into the water, saying, "I name you Algonquin 2nd," the steamer Ramona saluted the new ship's entry into the fleet with the TOOT, TOOT, TOOT of her whistle.

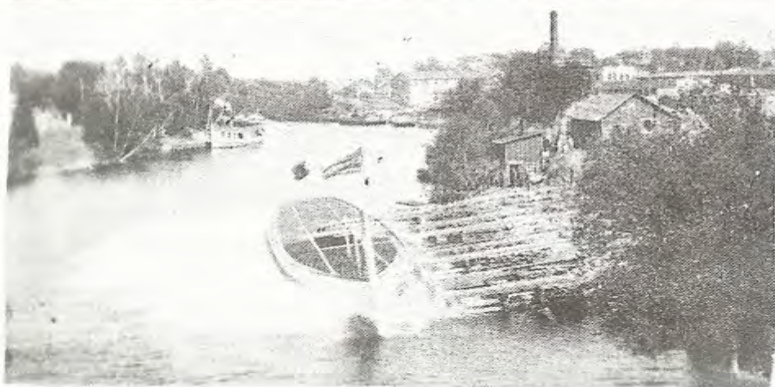
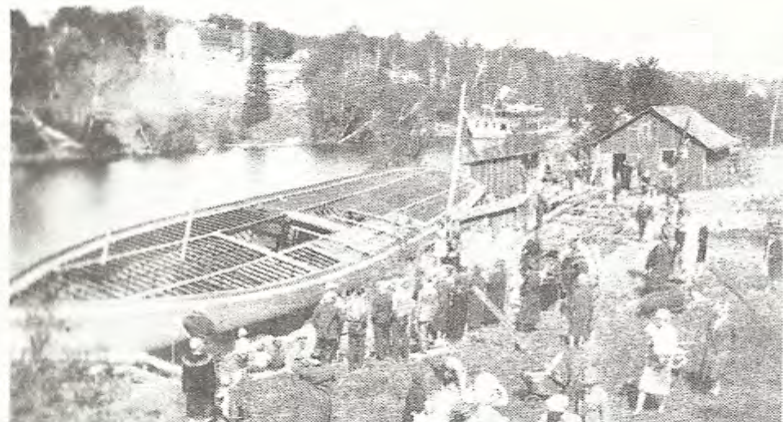
Before we get away from this part of the construction of the hull, I should relate how Captain Sangster suffered a very painful accident. It seems ironic that this man already fighting an incurable disease should have more pain and suffering imposed upon him. He was operating a drilling machine, wearing a pair of gloves, when the glove of his left hand caught in the twisting drill, winding it round and round finally breaking off his left thumb, snapping it off at the joint and pulling two cords out of his arm fully nine inches long. His face was grey with pain as I raced to the river for some water, it was hard to say who would be sick first, he or myself.

The full hull of the new vessel was moored in a berth at the tannery dock to await the end of the 1927 season, when all the apparatus, machinery and equipment would be transferred from the old worn-out Algonquin 1st.

All hands were now despatched to regular jobs of fitting out the various vessels and the Portage railway in preparation for a busy season. The steamer Ramona was sailing regular runs and had been since the lakes were free of ice.

The old Algonquin finished out the season although there was quite a bad leak around her keel which had opened up shortly after she started her run. Near the end of the season a man was kept on her each night to operate the bilge pump at intervals.

This vessel had been built at South Portage with plans to sail her on Lake of Bays. When the Navigation Company was taken over by the late Mr. C. O. Shaw, he decided to move her over the portage to operate between North Portage and Huntsville. She was only partly finished when they started to move her across. I suppose the equipment for moving a vessel of that size in those days just wasn't adequate. At any rate so the story goes, part way across her back was



LAUNCHING OF ALGONQUIN II June 7th, 1927

broken after blocking had given away. How true this is I don't know, but I do know that when she was in motion, there was a decided vibration or bouncing at her bow, giving one the impression that she was bending at her middle with each throb of her engine. This moving took place in 1906, the year before the Portage railway had been constructed, mostly by hand labour and horse drawn scrapers, at a cost of \$25,000.00. These little engines huffing and puffing as they hauled their human, mail, and freight cargos over this mile was a blessing after the horse drawn stage for passengers and wagons for the baggage and freight.

With Mr. C. O. Shaw at the head of the Navigation Company and the late Mr. W. Duperrow as Manager, the Navigation Company was a thriving business. They had quite a fleet of vessels operating. The passenger boats were at that time: *Mary L. Joe* (later moved to Lake of Bays), *Empress*, *Maple Leaf*, *Florence May* (later moved to Lake of Bays rebuilt and renamed *Mohawk Belle*), *Dortha* (later renamed *Ramona*). The new ship added at this time, of course, was the *Algonquin*. The *Iroquois* was later built at South Portage. The tugs operating from Huntsville were: *Lady*, *Phonix* and *Hildred*. These



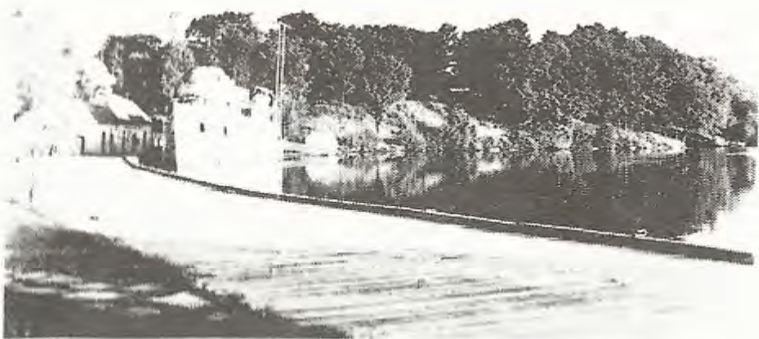
busy little tugs employed 12 to 14 hours a day towing tan bark, slabs, lumber and, of course, logs.

But to get back to the story of the new Algonquin as she was called. After the 1927 season, the old ship was moored beside the hull of the new vessel and the transfer of the boiler, engine, drive shaft, top structure and other equipment took place. Before freeze-up the old vessel was stripped to her rotten hull, she was loaded with stones, scrap iron and any old junk we wanted to get rid of. Then she was taken out to Vernon Lake, set on fire, which burned her to the water line, then the old barnacle-covered rotten hull sank, to end another chapter of a bygone era.

On June 25th, 1928, the new ship Algonquin 2nd, freshly painted and gleaming, started her twice daily run to North Portage.

The first trip for this new vessel was a sad occasion for the friends, associates and fellow workers of Captain William Sangster. He had passed away just a few weeks before his pride and joy, the new Algonquin, was to set sail. He had devoted all his working hours, and likely most of his spare time poring over blueprints and drawings to make sure this new vessel was built without a flaw. His heart was in this new creation that would sail the waters he knew and loved so well. He died without having his fondest wish fulfilled—that was to guide his spanking new ship through the waters of Fairy and Peninsula Lakes, to feel the throb of the engine-driven propeller under his feet.

When the summer of 1928 was half over I left the Navigation Company to go with Ontario Hydro. I never returned to Huntsville until after World War II.



Algonquin at Huntsville Wharf. Photo by AnnaBelle Studio.

The next time I saw the Algonquin, "Pride of the fleet," she was lying on her side in the Muskoka River, almost directly across from where she had been launched on that sunny June day so many years before. It gave me a funny feeling when I saw that old grey shabby looking ship lying there in the mud, with just the mooring lines to keep her from rolling into the deeper channel of the river. Shortly after she was sold to wreckers who dismantled her for the salvage in her.

A very sad and inglorious end for a ship that had been built with such high hopes.



Algonquin at Portage Wharf, Peninsula Lake, Muskoka. Photo by AnnaBelle Studio.



Canal between Fairy and Peninsula Lakes. Photo by AnnaBelle Studio.