

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

Sailing days on the lakes

The summer of 1918 when the fighting of World War I in France was turning in favour of the Allies, found me a boy of fifteen years, active and strong also looking around for something more lucrative than working for my board at Grand View for the Cookson's.

About the only work obtainable in our part of Ontario was to be had in lumber mills or work in connection with lumbering which was still going strong, and especially now with the war on which created an added demand for lumber.

The year before I had tried working in the mill for the Muskoka Wood and found it not to my liking. I had often admired the steamboats which operated on our chain of lakes and envied those who worked on those freshly painted gleaming vessels. I now decided to approach the manager of "The Huntsville, Lake of Bays and Lake Simcoe Navigation Company" with the view of obtaining work on his boats.

I therefore, visited their office which was situated in part of the warehouse on the Government dock in Huntsville. I found the manager, Mr. W. J. Moore, in his office and stated my mission, also my qualifications, which were very brief, namely ability to read and write, strength and agility. He proved to be a kindly man, serious and receptive to sensible reasoning. He hired me on the spot. My spirits were elated to the point of bursting when I was informed that I would be sailing on the Algonquin and paid the rate of 26 cents per hour.

I was to report to Captain Sangster. He and several other men were fitting out the S.S. Algonquin, pride of the fleet, operating out of Huntsville. The Algonquin was moored at what was known as the Station Dock, a railroad dock on the edge of Hunter's Bay just up the Muskoka River, a short way from the Town Dock that I first mentioned.

I was so excited with the prospect of sailing on the majestic

Algonquin I couldn't wait for the next day but walked at once up to see my job. I found a conglomeration of paint pails, rags, paint remover, sandpaper and such an assortment required to get the vessel in shape for sailing. Upon inquiring I found Captain Sangster, a man short of stature, short of speech and very abrupt in his manner. He was, although a self education man, very clever. I found this out a few years later when a new Algonquin was built. It was he who took an armful of blue prints, an assortment of angle iron beams and supervised the building of a very fine vessel, an exact replica of the older vessel so that the boiler, engine and top structure could be transferred from the old boat to the new boat and fit without adjustment.

We were about three weeks engaged in painting, varnishing, cleaning, scrubbing and fitting, getting ready for the opening of tourist season on our lakes. There were five of us. The engineer, John Smith, was a very fine God-fearing man and a veteran of the North West Rebellion which was led by Louis Riel who was later hanged. Many the tale Mr. Smith told me of his days in the Canadian Militia when they fought the Indians and Metis. Mr. Smith and his fireman were busy making necessary repairs and adjustments to the boiler and engine of Algonquin while Captain Sangster, myself and another man were doing the painting and cleaning. I had the misfortune one day while fitting a piece of decking to chop off the end of my thumb. It bled profusely and I guess I really was more frightened than hurt, but the Captain sent me up town for a doctor to have it dressed. How different things were than today. I walked the mile downtown to Dr. Evan's office, holding my bloody hand aloft and as far as I can remember I even had to pay the doctor to dress it. For the next few days I worked with one hand, polishing the brass railing that was spread so lavishly around all the cabins and up the stairs. I worked from seven a.m. to six p.m. and was paid 26 cents per hour for my labour.

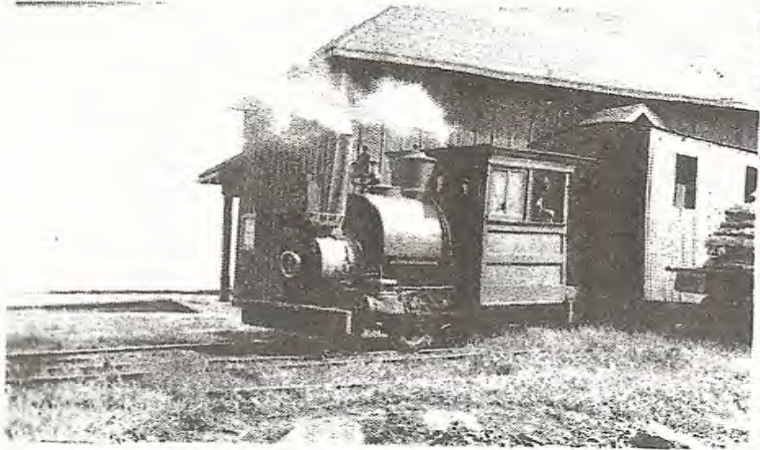
When we sailed starting June 26th, the crew had to be on hand at the station dock at six a.m. We loaded the freight from box cars which had been shunted down to the dock from the main line. The amount of freight varied but usually would be about half a boxcar load. After loading some baggage we sailed down to the town dock. Here the load would be a bit heavier and more varied. We got a variety of express mail, some baggage and a host of groceries that were delivered to us by the store delivery rigs, mostly horsedrawn



Original Algonquin.

carts. Towards the end of my sailing days, trucks meeting our boat were more common. If any passengers had arrived in Huntsville during the night they would now come aboard but most of our passengers arrived on the afternoon train that delivered them right down to the boat while anchored at the station dock. Our morning run was always lightest with several calls on Fairy Lake, and perhaps four or five on Peninsula Lake. The run through the canal between Fairy and Pen Lake was always a source of amazement to our passengers as they watched our Captain guide our vessel, of perhaps 120 feet long with a 25 feet beam, through this winding strip of water. It was also a source of worry to our Captain and mate, should they meet another vessel in the canal however small it might be. Before we entered this strip of waterway a loud blast was always given on our steam whistle. If a venturesome boat enthusiast disregarded the whistle warning and met us partway through, we sometimes would have to come to a full stop to allow him slowly to inch past.

At North Portage we were met by a little narrow gauge train also owned by our company. Two small engines pulled one box car used for freight and baggage and two open passenger coaches. This train, huffing and puffing, transported passengers, baggage, mail, freight



Portage "Flyer," Lou Thompson, engineer.

and express over the mile of portage to waiting boats at South Portage and so to continue the journey.

After our morning run when all was unloaded at Huntsville, we had to replenish our fuel supply. Our boilers took four-foot lengths of wood and the summer I started to sail with them, wood was obtained at No. 2 mill. This was a mill at the far end of Hunter's Bay, owned by Huntsville Lumber Company. Piles of hardwood four-foot slabs were available to us but the landing area was very hazardous. Someone had to leap off on a floating half-submerged boom timber, to find a suitable anchor for our boat. As I was the youngest I was elected to run the floating logs under the shouted directions of the Captain from his vantage point in the wheelhouse. After refueling we always scrubbed our vessel, both decks by hoses, brooms and soft soap. On the morning run it was my job to polish all the brass railing except that which partitioned off the engine room. There the gleaming brass pipes kept the passengers from entering and the passageway was barred by an equally gleaming brass chain. The driving steam pistons with their endless throbbing always attracted a goodly number of passengers, some of who chatted with Mr. Smith, the engineer, as he answered their numerous questions with patience and humorous wit. Just as soon as our boat docked at North Portage, Mr. Smith had his line in the water and rarely missed catching a nice string of bass.

After lunch we anchored at the town dock to receive any ex-

press or freight that would be waiting for us and then proceeded to the station dock to meet the 3.45 p.m. passenger train. There sometimes we had quite a wait if the train happened to be late. When the train from Toronto arrived it came directly down to the waterfront and our waiting boat. At the start of the summer season we could receive perhaps a hundred passengers and their baggage from the train. Everything was hustle and bustle to get loaded and underway, as the earlier we left, the earlier we arrived back in the later afternoon. On our way down the Muskoka River we passed the Anglo-Canadian Tannery and signalled the bridge attendant to swing the bridge to allow us a passage through. In those days the bridge was swung by hand as the man inserted a crank type bar and walked round and round until the bridge was open.

We now steamed across Fairy Lake, calling at necessary points to disembark passengers and baggage. After passage through the canal we did the same thing across Pen Lake. Upon our return to Huntsville, discharging our small cargo of mail, baggage and passengers, we tied up and ended our day. Some days we wouldn't tie up until eight p.m., making a very long day.

Our job brought us in contact with all kinds of people, some of whom we got to know quite well. One I remember very well an Indian man from Rama Reserve who used our vessel to transport himself, daughter and a vast amount of Indian worked baskets from birch-bark, sweet hay and porcupine quills, to the various summer hotels where he could sell his goods.

The Captain approached me with a request that I sleep on board each night. I found out later that the insurance company rules required that someone must be on board at all times. There would be no increase in pay but eager to please and thinking it might give me some added prestige among my chums to say I was looking after the Algonquin I accepted. There was a bedroom directly behind the wheelhouse on the top deck and there I moved my few belongings, thinking nothing of any danger that might befall me, such as fire on board or the danger of being mugged.

We tied up at night at the station dock, directly below the railway station where in those days most of the undesirable citizens could be found and I, of course, was just a slip of a boy.

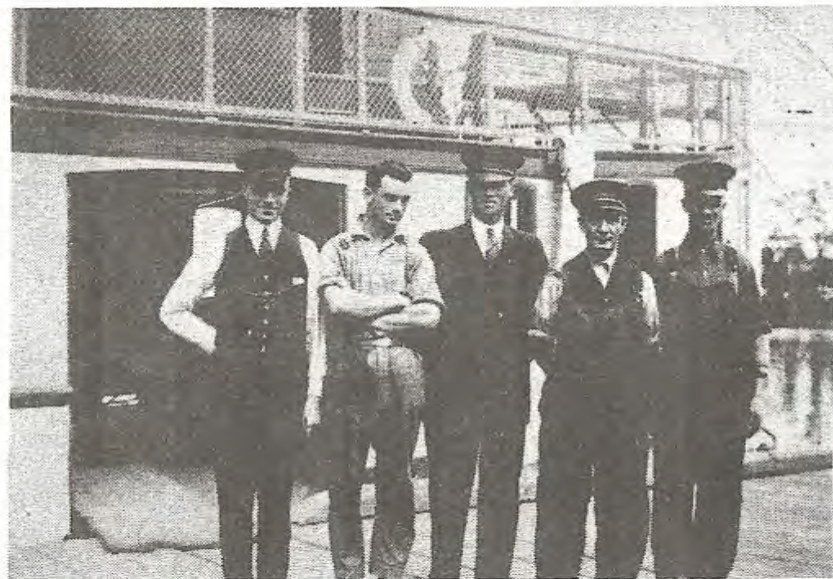
One morning while loading up we noticed a car in the siding behind the station, it was occupied by some of the most suspicious looking characters I ever saw. They were advance agents for a circus

that was coming to town and their business was to secure proper grounds for the circus and advertise the one-day stand extensively throughout the surrounding country. On our early run I met a man who was on his way to Dorset to post his signs. I was thrilled to think he would pay any attention to me and we became friends before he disembarked at North Portage. On the evening run we met again as he returned and he suggested that he would like to see the grounds where the circus would set up. I immediately volunteered to show him the way. After supper I met him as prearranged and we walked across the bridge to the old agricultural grounds where the circus would set up. It was a lonely part of town and we were quite alone. We walked down to some trees and sat on the grass and after some small talk he very candidly ordered me to take off my shirt as it was a warm night, and at the same time started running his hands over my body. Now, I was just a young green boy and the word homosexual was not in my vocabulary, but I sensed something was not right here so jumping to my feet I ran like a deer. That night I didn't sleep on the boat and next morning upon going up to the room on the boat I noticed footprints where someone had gone up and broken in the door. I suspect that it was my circus acquaintance.

Each day our cargo usually consisted of the same articles, baggage, freight, express and groceries. Several times a week we took on a number of cans of milk, shipped to Bigwin Inn from Bigwin farm at Huntsville. These cans were packed in ice and were quite messy to handle. From the same dock at Bigwin Laundry we also took aboard eight or ten large crates of laundry which went to Bigwin Inn. These crates had rope handles on each side and were very heavy to handle. We piled them two high and trucked them in and out. One day while going down the gangplank one of the boys turned too rapidly and a crate fell off in the lake—boy! was there a row over that. Once in a while an animal would be shipped via our boat. We always kept a bag of sawdust to sprinkle around the tethered animal. After the cow was unloaded we would get out the hose and hose everything into the lake. We made sure that the mess was held until we reached Fairy Lake, as we replenished our drinking water from Pen Lake. In those days pollution wasn't regarded as such a danger to mankind as it is today.

About the middle of August the inflow of passengers decreased and the outflow increased as the summer tourists departed for home. Our shipment of freight increased as various lumbering companies

and stores at Dorset began to stock up for winter. One day Captain Sangster didn't arrive for work for some reason or other, so Captain Corbett who was acting mate under Sangster, was the officer in charge. We had an extraordinary large shipment of freight. Our bottom deck was completely filled even the fantail aft. Our calls on Fairy and Pen were light so most of it went through. The passage in the first part of the canal went smoothly but when we arrived at the sharp turn just past the bridge the Captain hugged the south shore too close and we grounded. We couldn't back off under our own steam so I was delegated to go ashore to snub a rope so we would pull ourselves off. I swam ashore where I was thrown a light line, this in turn enabled me to haul out a large rope which I anchored to a piling. Using this on our winch we were hauled off in short order. All the time this was happening, quite a gathering of people stood on the bridge watching our predicament. After we got off, a big cheer went up which I regarded as a compliment to our ingenious manoeuvrability. I don't ever remember another load such as that aboard the Algonquin.

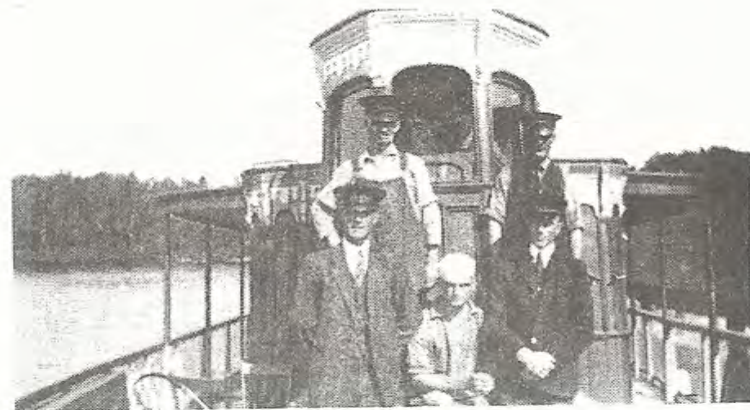


July 1928
 Left to right: John Forbes, Purser, Joe Cookson, Deck Hand, Captain Thompson, Archie Ennest, Engineer, John Lewis, Fireman. Crew of S.S. Ramona

One morning on our return run to Huntsville we were steaming at a good clip across Fairy Lake. I was engaged in polishing the brass railing around the forward cabin and I happened to notice directly on our port side the S.S. Ramona. She appeared to be stopped and as we drew closer she signalled us with a series of whistle toots. I didn't understand what it was all about but our captain apparently realized something was wrong and approached at a reduced speed. When we were within hailing distance the Ramona's Captain hailed us to say that they had trouble. After an exchange of views by both Captains, we came alongside and lashed the two vessels together. It was then disclosed that their engine suddenly appeared to "run away" and had to be throttled down. The reason was diagnosed as a lost or broken propeller. Her few passengers and load of mail bags and freight were quickly transferred to our boat. Making sure that their anchor was rigged properly so they wouldn't drift on a shoal, we left rather hurriedly in order for our passengers to catch the 10.20 train south. Our office was notified and they in turn contacted the tug Phoenix to tow the disabled vessel to drydock. This situation required careful planning as the only drydock available was at the Locks and at this time of year there was considerable traffic up and down the Muskoka River. The Phoenix towed the Ramona to the tannery dock where a diver went down to examine the damage. It proved to be a lost propeller, so one was obtained from the Muskoka Lakes Navigation Company and when all was in readiness the Ramona was towed to drydock where a picked crew of machinists with welding and cutting torches and all the necessary tools worked all night to replace the lost propeller. This job had to be done at night so as not to hold up traffic going through the locks.



TUG HAULING SCOW OF BARK, MUSKOKA RIVER—(M. CONROY)



RAMONA—Captain Thompson, Purser J. Forbes, John Lewis, Archie Ennest & Cookson.

We had our humorous moments like the time we pulled a chap out of Fairy Lake. He was sitting straddled across an overturned row boat and was laughing uproariously. It was early in the morning and he must have been partying as he was quite tipsy when we pulled him and the boat aboard.

Another time on a very windy day we had to laugh too when we came upon an overturned canoe, with two very tired boys hanging on to it. By keeping the canoe in the lee of our vessel we were able to haul the boys and their canoe aboard. It could have been disastrous.

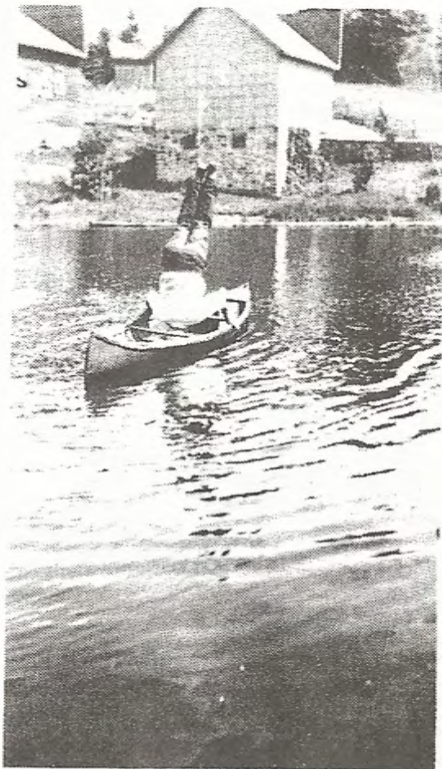
The most harrowing experience of my whole life happened during my sailing days but a few years later than those I have related. The large and grand resort of WaWa burned down the night of



WaWa, Lake of Bays burned down August 20th, 1973, with lives lost—a number injured.

August 20th, 1923. It was a horrible tragedy. Eight persons lost their lives and numerous others suffered either burns or injuries from jumping from second story windows to the ground. Doctors were rushed from Bracebridge and Huntsville and I shudder yet as I recall how we transported the bodies to the train in Huntsville as well as the injured, and grieving friends and relatives.

My first summer on S.S. Algonquin came to an end after Labour Day and I was genuinely sorry. I had met a lot of nice people, enjoyed the work and looked forward to next year. We tied up the Algonquin at the tannery dock. I helped to nail the shutters over the windows and cover the upper deck to make it weather tight for the winter.



Jas. Butta, Kinmount, Ontario, Age 80. In his birch bark canoe. (Lent by Clayton Woodcock.