

STERNWHEELERS ON THE COLUMBIA

The sternwheelers arrived on the Columbia River south of Revelstoke as a result of mineral discoveries. The sternwheelers would come with the earliest miners and would leave as a result of improved technology in transportation. They did their job as a link between the C.P.R. system running through central British Columbia and the Great Northern system in the United States and then were dismissed to vanish into pictures in fading books and the memories of old men.

The first sternwheeler to operate on the section of the Columbia discussed here was called the Forty Nine. She was built to supply the placer mining boom in the Big Bend area of the Columbia River. Captain White, a former steamboat operator working out of Portland Oregon, was the opportunist in charge of this venture though his monetary backing had come from the Ainsworth brothers of Oregon. On her first trip in 1865 the Forty Nine was stopped by ice in the narrows between the Lower and Upper Arrow Lake. She was forced to turn back without reaching her destination. In April, 1866 the Forty Nine was able to reach the miners' supply point at Revelstoke and showed the feasibility of running sternwheelers up the Columbia providing there was business. In this case the placer boom was soon over and the Forty Nine was instantly a losing venture. On her third trip upstream in 1867 she carried only three passengers but returned with more than a hundred exhausted fortune seekers from the depleted Big Bend sandbars. The Forty Nine was out of business. In 1869 Captain White retired and died at Portland in 1870. The Forty Nine's former mate, A. Pingston, took over as her captain and ran her without profit a few more times. She was finally tied up and after a few years of stationary existence she was dismantled at Revelstoke in 1877. The placer mines were emptied of their gold and the need for sternwheelers was gone. It would not be until the C. P. R. began to put a rail line through the mountains to Revelstoke and the start of major work on the mineral deposits near Nelson and Trail that the sternwheelers would reappear on the Columbia below Revelstoke.

In 1884 the construction of the C. P. R. line through the Selkirk Range to Revelstoke prompted three Kootenay pioneers (J. Fred Hume—later Minister of Mines in Semlin's government, William Cowan, and Captain Anderson) to form the Columbia Transportation Company and to build the first new sternwheeler on the Lower Columbia since the Forty Nine. The thirty-seven ton Despatch was built and was soon busy supplying the C. P. R. construction camp at Revelstoke from its landing at Marcus in Washington State.

This rail construction also caused the C. T. C.'s only competition to develop. Two American contractors, Henderson and McCartney, desired to capitalize on the boom in Columbia River business caused by C. P. R. construction. In 1885 they built and launched the Kootenai. The Kootenai was larger and faster than the Despatch but once the railway through Revelstoke was completed late in 1885 her size proved a

hindrance. With the dwindling of business following the end of rail construction the Kootenai proved too uneconomical to run in competition with the smaller more economical Despatch. In 1886 the Kootenai was tied up at Little Dalles, upstream from Marcus, and her owners quit the Columbia sternwheeler business. The C. T. C. was left with a monopoly on the Columbia River.

In 1886 the Hall brothers discovered silver-lead-zinc deposits on Toad Mountain behind Nelson. The C. T. C. was in the perfect position to profit from these discoveries. As major mining developments began to take place on Toad Mountain the C. T. C. established, in 1888, a landing at Sproat's Landing (Brilliant). Sproat's Landing was at the end of a trail leading west from Nelson and through this landing the C. T. C. was able to supply the Nelson mines from the C. P. R. railhead at Revelstoke. A further source of business developed when the American rail baron, D. C. Corbin, pushed his Spokane Falls and Northern Railway to Marcus and then steadily northward. Corbin's plan was to establish a rail link with the newly discovered mineral deposits on Red Mountain near Rossland. In 1899 this railway reached Little Dalles and even as the sternwheelers' need expanded, their routes were being shortened by the transportation systems they were bringing into existence.

The sternwheelers became the connection between the C. P. R. rail centre at Revelstoke and the S. F. & N. railhead at Little Dalles. Business boomed and the little Despatch proved unequal to the task of supplying both Corbin's rail construction and the mining developments at Rossland and Nelson. In view of these developments the C. T. C. decided to build a new sternwheeler but the company lacked sufficient capital for expansion. It was therefore decided to bring in three new partners. These new partners were J. A. Mara, a steamboat operator on Lake Kamloops; Captain John Irving, an experienced steamboat operator; and Frank Barnard of Barnard's Pony Express. All were experienced and possessed the capital necessary for expansion. As a result of this addition to the C. T. C. a new company called the Columbia and Kootenay Steam Navigation Company was formed.

In late 1889 the coast ship builder, Alexander Watson, was brought by the C. K. S. N. to Revelstoke to build a new sternwheeler. In 1890, with a great deal of fanfare, the Lytton was launched for service on the Columbia. Among the notables who travelled on her maiden voyage, July 2, 1890, was W. C. Van Horne of the C. P. R. The old Kootenai, which had been unused since 1886, was also purchased in this period of expansion. The C. K. S. N. could not afford to pay the import duty on her and so Captain Sanderson smuggled her past customs at night. The purchase of the Kootenai was warranted by the fact that D. C. Corbin's rail line had now reached Northport where he planned to build a smelter to process Rossland ore. Again, business had expanded but the distance travelled by an increasing fleet of sternwheelers was shortened by the advent of railroads. The Lytton was placed on the Robson-Little Dalles run while the Kootenai was sent to work between Sproat's Landing and Revelstoke, hauling supplies to the newly started C. P. R. backed Columbia and Kootenay Railway between Nelson and Robson. There was plenty of work for the sternwheelers as the Kootenai's

schedule showed. Every Monday and Thursday she left Revelstoke for Sproat's Landing. On Tuesday and Friday she made round trips between Sproat's Landing and Little Dalles helping the Lytton. Every Wednesday and Saturday she left Sproat's Landing for Revelstoke.

On May 31, 1891 the Columbia and Kootenay Railway was opened for service. The new railhead was at Robson and therefore the C. K. S. N. was forced to move its landing from Sproat's Landing to the Robson railhead. The Kootenai brought hundreds of tons of supplies from Revelstoke to Robson to be transported to the Nelson mines. D. C. Corbin, meanwhile, had completed his railway to Northport and, again, while he increased business by starting the construction of a smelter at his new railhead he also shortened the travelling distance of the sternwheelers. New business was appearing everywhere and so a decision was made to invest in another sternwheeler. Alexander Watson was sent to Northport and from this location, in 1891, he launched the Columbia. This sternwheeler was placed on the Robson-Northport run. Activity had become so intense on this run that in the next year, 1892, until autumn only the Despatch was working between Revelstoke and Robson.

In 1892 another series of mineral discoveries, this time in the Slocan Valley, opened up new business opportunities for the sternwheelers. The Columbia, in the fall of 1892, was placed on a semi-weekly run from Revelstoke to Northport with stops at the newly developing transport centre, for the Slocan Valley, Nakusp. In 1893 the small Despatch began to be unprofitable because of age and her tiny capacity. She was dismantled and her engines were placed in a new sternwheeler, the Illecillewaet, launched from Revelstoke. This action was necessitated by the start of construction on the Nakusp and Slocan Railway in 1893 and the subsequent development of Nakusp as a rail centre on the Upper Arrow Lake. This development of Nakusp was predicted by an early traveller on the Columbia River.

Nakusp will naturally become the distributing point for the rich Slocan country behind it, with its numerous and extensive mining camps . . . 1

In 1894 the C. K. S. N. was struck with two disasters which almost brought its service to a standstill at a time when all of the sternwheelers were needed most. On July 26, 1894 the Lytton was damaged by fire at her berth in Nakusp. A week later, August 2, 1894, the Columbia burned at Columbia Gardens, down river from Trail. The boat, on whom the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria had travelled from Revelstoke to Robson in 1893 during his "coming of age" journey around the world, was a total loss. Steel for the construction of the Nakusp and Slocan Railway was necessary and so repairs on the Lytton were hastened. In late August of 1894 she was back in service between Revelstoke and Nakusp. In October of 1894 the Nakusp and Slocan Railway was able to start daily service from Nakusp to Three Forks with construction continuing toward Sandon.

In 1895 when Heinze, the youthful American monetary wonder, started work on a smelter for Rossland ore at Trail Creek Landing the C. K. S. N. was again hard pressed to provide adequate service to this undertaking. The Illecillewaet remained on the Revelstoke-Robson

run while the Lytton was returned to work between Robson and Northport. This arrangement proved unsatisfactory and a new sternwheeler, the Nakusp, was built and launched at Nakusp. She was more than twice the size of the Lytton but even so the sternwheelers were barely able to keep up with the great demand for their service as the following excerpt from The Miner states:

The new steamer Nakusp is unable to cope with the amount of freight offering on the Columbia river, even with the aid of the Kootenay. Though the Nakusp makes two trips a week and her capacity is 300 tons she still has to leave a quantity behind at Revelstoke.

It is contemplated therefore to build another boat. This is inward freight and includes large quantities of machinery for the Hall Mines and for War Eagle and other Trail Creek mines.²

The demand for the sternwheelers was tremendous but again disaster struck. Soon after the Nakusp was launched the Kootenai was wrecked. She sank after striking a rock near Cotton Wood Island, while bringing supplies for a proposed Arrow Lakes Railway between Wigwam, on the upper Columbia, and Bannock Point. She was raised but her hull was too waterlogged and she was finally dismantled at Nakusp in 1897. In view of this loss the C. K. S. N. needed a new sternwheeler. On July 11, 1896 the Trail was launched from Naskusp. She was immediately put to work hauling Crowsnest (Canmore) coal from Revelstoke to Trail in preparation for the start of operations at Heinze's Trail smelter. The first furnace at this operation was "blown in" in Feb. 1896 and the C. K. S. N. rejoiced in this business that was created for its sternwheelers. Again with business increasing the sternwheelers' travels were shortened by the completion of a C. P. R. line between Revelstoke and Arrowhead. The sternwheelers now did not need to travel up to Revelstoke, picking up their cargo at Arrowhead instead.

The sternwheelers were not always used solely as workhorses. Often they were used as combined pleasure and business craft. The Trail Creek News described such a journey in May, 1896:

When the steamer Nakusp steamed into Trail Monday afternoon, gaily decked with flags and bunting there stepped ashore a small party of Trail citizens who had been investigating the north country, along the lakes of the Columbia River; . . .

The hulls of the sternwheelers were wooden and ice often forced the boats to be laid up for weeks or even months in winter. The spring "break-up" was always a topic of local interest, as it reflected in this excerpt from the Trail Creek News in March, 1899:

The lakes are still covered with fifteen inches of ice, making navigation impossible. Captain Troupe thinks the boats will be running between Arrowhead and Robson in about two weeks.³

But even with problems of nature and man the sternwheelers continued their much needed service.

Late in 1896 developments occurred which would cause the C. K. S. N. to change ownership and the sternwheelers to enter a new stage in their

history on the Columbia. Heinze had started smelter operations at Trail and he desired preferential rates on the coal being hauled from Revelstoke to Trail. The C. P. R. wished to control this traffic but found that while the C. K. S. N. was in control of transport on the Arrow Lakes the C. P. R. could not ensure that its desires would receive priority treatment. The C. P. R. began negotiations with the C. K. S. N. for the purchase of the company and all of its assets because the C. P. R. deemed it uneconomical to build a rail line along the Arrow Lakes, and thus needed the sternwheelers to take advantage of the business boom at Trail. Heinze realized that such a change of hands would put him totally at the mercy of the C. P. R. He, therefore, began construction of his narrow gauge Columbia and Western Railway from Trail to Robson in an attempt to link up with Corbin's Fort Shepherd and Nelson Railway, extending from Northport to Nelson, via the Columbia and Kootenay Railway. This would have allowed Heinze to place the Great Northern system with its agent Corbin in northern Washington and the C. P. R. to the north in a state of competition for business with Heinze at Trail, thus allowing Heinze to benefit from cheap rates resulting from such competition. The C. P. R. continued with its plan to purchase the C. K. S. N. and on February 1, 1897 the C. P. R. paid two hundred and eight thousand dollars and in return received ownership of the C. K. S. N. The new owner immediately began construction on two sternwheelers to be used on the Columbia.

In April, 1897 the C. P. R. launched its first Columbia River sternwheeler, the Kootenay, which replaced the dismantled Kootenai. On August 26, 1897 Heinze's line to Robson was opened for service and the C. P. R. was effectively cut off from Trail. The C. P. R. continued with the construction of its second sternwheeler but it saw that some new method would have to be used to force Heinze to fall into line. Therefore, the C. P. R. threatened to build a bridge across the Columbia from its railhead at Robson and to run a standard gauge line directly to Rossland where a smelter would be built. With this new threat Heinze capitulated and in 1898 he sold all of his assets including the Columbia and Western Railway to the C. P. R. The C. P. R. decided that the Columbia and Western would not be able to carry enough equipment to Trail and so it was concluded that the threatened bridge and railway to Rossland and then into the Kettle Valley be built. On May 6, 1898 the Trail Creek News reported the following:

The construction of the Columbia and Western railroad from Robson to Midway is well under way.

The construction of the bridge was relegated to a time when the rail line would be almost completed to Rossland because it would take longer to plan the bridge but less time to construct it than it would take to construct the railroad.

While the rail construction was progressing the sternwheelers were still needed to supply both the railway and the smelter operations at Trail. In April, 1898 the second C. P. R. built sternwheeler was completed. She was named the Rossland and was launched from Nakusp.

The new steamer Rossland, the fastest and handsomest in the C. P. R. service, made her initial trip to Arrowhead last Sunday, taking the place of the Kootenay, which is tied up

at Nakusp for repairs. When renovation is completed the Kootenay will replace the Lytton, the latter boat taking the Big Bend run.⁴

At this time another sternwheeler inadvertently ended up on the Columbia. A steel steamer had been built in Toronto for the C. P. R. to be used on the Stikine River. Before the sectioned vessel could arrive in the Stikine area and be reassembled the gold boom which had prompted her manufacture was over and she was rerouted to the Columbia to be reassembled at Nakusp.

The new steamer being built by the C. P. R. at Nakusp is to be called the Minto in honour of Canada's new Governor-General. She is a sister boat to the Moyie, just launched at Nelson, and will take the winter run of the Rossland.⁵

The first phase of sternwheeler activity with the C. K. S. N. was over and the second phase would be part of the C. P. R. transport system. The sternwheelers, though still necessary on the Arrow lakes where the C. P. R. found it unprofitable to build a railway, at this time started to decline in usefulness and presence on the Columbia River.

The only attempt at creating an independent alternative to the C. P. R. monopoly came from Revelstoke. Many people from Revelstoke and further upstream desired convenient river service which the C. P. R. would not provide. As a result of this four Revelstoke businessmen formed the Revelstoke Navigation Company and then launched the Revelstoke. This sternwheeler operated until 1915 when she burned at the Comaplis' mill fire. She was never replaced and the C. P. R. had complete control over sternwheeler activity.

In 1900, with the Columbia and Western Railway almost completed to Rossland, the C. P. R. began construction of the bridge over the Columbia at Robson. The Lytton, on her last job, was put to work ferrying supplies across the Columbia for the bridge construction. In 1901 the construction was going at full speed as the following statement from the Trail Creek News shows:

The new railroad bridge under construction crosses the Columbia at a point about 1½ miles this side of West Robson, where the river is comparatively narrow only about 450 feet wide at low water.⁶

The bridge was completed on March 10, 1902 and traffic moved directly, by rail, to Rossland. Consequently there was less need for sternwheelers. The Illecillawaet was sold to be used as a barge. The Lytton, her career as a ferry over, was beached above Robson and finally dismantled for fire wood by local citizens. As a result of the bridge completion, service was discontinued below Robson and the sternwheelers now ran only between Arrowhead and Robson.

In 1911 the C. P. R. launched its last new steamer on the Arrow Lakes. This boat was the steel Bonnington. She was built at Nakusp and was the largest sternwheeler to ever operate on the Columbia. She was two hundred and two and one half feet long, had a gross weight of seventeen hundred tons, created twelve hundred horse power with piston rods slightly over twenty-four feet in length. Her main business, and the

main business of all the remaining sternwheelers, was tourism and the fruit industry along the Arrow Lakes. In 1915 the C. P. R. finally completed the Columbia and Western Railway into the Kettle River Valley. In the fall of 1915 the service between Robson and Arrowhead was reduced to three trips per week.

As business for the sternwheelers died; the boats one by one disappeared from the Columbia River. In the winter of 1916-1917 the Rossland sank at her berth in Nakusp. She was raised and dismantled in March, 1917. In 1919 the Kootenay was retired. In 1920 she became Captain Sanderson's private houseboat. The Trail had been taken out of service in 1906. There remained only the Bonnington and the Minto, the two steel sternwheelers on the Arrow Lakes.

A new development in transport, the highway, would finally end the careers of the remaining boats. In 1931 a highway through the Slocan Valley was completed to Nakusp. A direct link was thus created from Nelson, through Nakusp and Needles, to Vernon.

As a result of competition from a new form of transport the C. P. R. cut its Arrow Lakes service to two trips a week between Arrowhead and Robson. In 1937 the Bonnington's travels came to an end. She was tied up at Nakusp. In 1942 she was sold to the government of British Columbia which was unable to find use for her. One June 15, 1944 she was sold to the Beaton Boat Company to be used as a barge.

The longest running sternwheeler of them all, the Minto, was the only one left. The fruit industry was in a decline and the highways drew heavily on the tourist trade. With rising labour and repair costs and and no means of making itself pay the Minto neared the end of her career. On April 24, 1954 she made her last trip from Robson to Nakusp. At Nakusp she was sold to the Nakusp Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce for one dollar plus sales tax. Railways, highways, and tug-pulled barges had defeated the sternwheelers. The saga of the Columbia River sternwheeler was over.

FOOTNOTES

1. Molsen E. Spragge, "The Eldorado of British Columbia," Canadian Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb. 1894), p. 329. This article describes travels in the Columbia River basin between Arrowhead and Robson.
2. The Miner, 26 Oct. 1895, quoted in H. Weber, ed., Excerpts on Local History, Esp. Castlegar and District (Castlegar, 1971), p. 2.
3. Trail Creek News, 18 March 1899.
4. Ibid., 6 May, 1898.
5. Ibid., 24 Nov. 1898.
6. Ibid., 9 Feb., 1901.