Until the early 1880s, Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana represented a formidable barrier, an obstacle to easy access into the upper Flathead Valley. Travel along either the east or west shore was extremely difficult even after the first primitive roads had been built through the rugged terrain bordering the lake.

Limited agricultural activity took place north of Flathead Lake in the 1870s, but it was not until the 1880s that settlers began to arrive in any numbers. Prior to 1885, all of the traffic to and around the lake was by team and wagon. However, in 1887, travelers and settlers rode the Northern Pacific Railway from Missoula to Ravalli. Stages left there three times a week, connecting with the little steamer US Grant at Polson.

In 1886, Fred Lingren, Neil and George Nelson, and Hugh F. Sinclair built the Swan, a sailboat that could carry twenty tons. Uncertain, unreliable winds on the lake and especially on the river caused the men to install steam machinery, and once rebuilt, they renamed it the US Grant, with Captain James Kerr, former Lake Superior commander, as the skipper. The success of this boat led to the construction of others - the Pecos River (1886), the

The "Mendota," a Kootenai word for coyote, was the last boat to carry passengers and freight schedules between Somers and Polson.
Toni Carter (1890), the Mary Ann (1891), and the freight barge Dora (1890).

The Crescent and the Steere of Montana, both launched in 1891, were built with the idea of navigating the Flathead River as far up as Columbia Falls, but this plan, obviously, was not practical. Poison was the southern port on Flathead Lake, and for a short time Denersville, a few miles up the Flathead River, was the northern terminus. Between 1889 and 1892, materials for construction of James Hill's Great Northern were shipped by Northern Pacific Railway to Ravalli, hauled by wagon across the reservation to Flathead Lake (30 to 90 four- and six-horse freight wagons operated continually between Ravalli and Poison), and sent by steamers to Denersville. In just five days in April 1892, the steamer Toni Carter unloaded 586 passengers at Denersville.

The hauling of supplies and equipment for the construction of the Great Northern line down from Missoula, across the Flathead Valley and on into Idaho and Washington created a boom for steamboats on Flathead Lake in the early 1890s. At the same time, ever-increasing numbers of farmers, merchants and others were making their way into the upper Flathead Valley, and the need continued for additional boats. Eugene Hodge formed the Hodge Navigation Company and built the Rhondolet in the early 1890s. This boat plied the lake until 1913 when it was rebuilt and renamed the New Rhondolet. Making the trip to Poison three times each week, the Rhondolet left Denersville at 6:00 AM in the morning. Dinner at Poison, passengers crossed the reservation on stagecoaches and reached the Northern Pacific depot at Ravalli at 6:00 PM that same evening.

With the completion of the Great Northern Railroad into the Flathead Valley in 1893, the end for steamboats on the lake was only a matter of time. The steamboat business, however, received a shot in the arm in 1910 when the Flathead Indian Reservation was opened to settlers. By this time boats no longer traveled up the river to Denersville, and Somers became the principal port at the north end of the lake. Both the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific used the Flathead Lake steamboats as a connecting link between the two railroads, and travelers often made the trip west on one line and east on the other.

Many of the livestock from the farms and ranches south of Poison was shipped on barges towed by the boats to Somers where the cattle were loaded on Great Northern freight cars for shipment to various markets. In 1915, a bumper crop of 150,000 bushels of grain was shipped to Somers by large from the elevators in Poison. Freight traffic was heavier on the northern run from Poison to Somers, a distance of 95 miles, because the rate was 50 cents per ton (hundredweight). From Poison to the rail depot at Ravalli, approximately the same distance, the overland rate was 90 cents per ton. In 1919, Kalsuch considered getting in on some of the lucrative steamboat freighting through a plan to dredge a channel from the mouth of the Stillwater River to the eastern edge of Kellogg. Such a project would have allowed steamboats to travel up the Flathead River to the front door of Kellogg, but nothing ever came of this engineering scheme.

In addition to serving the practical needs of the area, the Flathead steamboats also provided a social function in the form of excursions to favorite picnic spots along the shores of Flathead Lake. Barges were often favorite places for moonlight dancing on summer nights. More than one couple was married on a barge in the middle of the lake on what was known as the "special marriage excursion boat."

The last two of the large steamers were both launched in 1905—the Montana (not to be confused with the State of Montana) in April and the New Rhondolet in May. The Montana, 86 feet in length, was built by J.W. Swanson from the Wisco, which had been damaged by fire. The New Rhondolet, built by Grace Hodge, was 100 feet in length and was capable of carrying 105 passengers and 140 tons of freight. On its run from Somers to Poison, the Montana stopped at west shore landings: Fensender's, Coram's, Stoner's, Broderick's, Angle Point, Table Bay, Rollins, and Dayton. On the return trip, the Montana stopped at landings along the east shore: Yellow Bay, Woods Bay, and Bigfork.

As the need for large vessels declined, smaller and speedier boats were built and put into service—the City of Poison (launched in 1910), the Flagg (1910), the Flyer (1910), the Kellogg (1911), the Express (1911), and others. The City of Poison was regarded as the fastest boat on Flathead Lake, making the Somers to Poison trip in two hours, 20 minutes. The Flagg was the last boat to maintain a regular freight and passenger service. It operated from about 1920 to 1929.

The Northern Pacific completed a branch line to Poison in 1917 and, for all practical purposes, steamboat transportation was over by the 1920s. The Somers Lumber Company and the Dowsie Lumber Company tugboats continued for another twenty years.

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