


CROWN
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CONTINENT
and the
GREATER
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University of Montana field course class on mountain geography in Yellowstone. Rick and Susie Graetz

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Cover photo: The village of Polebridge snuggles up against the northwestern border of Glacier National Park. Rick and Susie Graetz



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PRESS



STEAMBOATS ON FLATHEAD LAKE

Edited by Henry Elwood



Band concert on the NEW Klondyke complete with band.

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 1884, 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 *Pocahontas* (1886), the



The "Skincoots," a Kutenai word for coyote, was the last boat to maintain passenger and freight schedules between Somers and Polson.



Remnants of the Demersville docks on the Flathead River. Rick and Susie Graetz

Tom Carter (1889), the *Mary Ann* (1891), and the freight barge *Dora* (1890).

The *Crescent* and the *State 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. Polson was the southern port on Flathead Lake, and for a short time Demersville, 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 50 four- and six-horse freight wagons operated continually between Ravalli and Polson), and sent by steamer to Demersville. In just five days in April 1891, the steamer *Tom Carter* unloaded 586 passengers at Demersville.

The hauling of supplies and equipment for the construction of the Great Northern line down from Marias Pass, 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 *Klondyke* in the early 1890s. This boat plied the lake until 1910 when she was rebuilt and renamed

the *New Klondyke*. Making the trip to Polson three times each week, the *Klondyke* left Demersville at 6:00 AM in the morning. Disembarking at Polson, 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 1892, 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 Demersville, 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.

Much of the livestock from the farms and ranches south of Polson was shipped on barges towed by the boats to Somers where the cattle were loaded on Great Northern stock cars for shipment to various markets. In 1915 a bumper crop of 417,000 bushels of grain was shipped to Somers by barge from the elevators in Polson. Freight traffic was heavier on the northern run from Polson to Somers, a distance of 35 miles, because the rate was 10 cents per cwt (hundredweight). From Polson to the rail depot at Ravalli, approximately the

same distance, the overland rate was 50 cents per cwt. In 1907, Kalispell 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 Kalispell. Such a project would have allowed steamboats to travel up the Flathead River to the front door of Kalispell, 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 service 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 1909—the *Montana* (not to be confused with the *State of Montana*) in April and the *New Klondyke* in May. The *Montana*, 86 feet in length, was rebuilt by J. W. Swanson from the *Wasco*, which had been damaged by fire. The *New Klondyke*, built by Gene Hodge, was 120 feet in length and was capable of carrying 425 passengers and 118 tons of freight.

On its run from Somers to Polson, the *Montana* stopped at these west shore landings: Fessenden's, Coram's, Stoner's, Broderick's, Angel 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 Polson* (launched in 1914), the *Bigfork* (1911), the *Flyer* (1911), the *Kalispell* (1910), the *Eva B.* (1908), and others. The *City of Polson* was regarded as the fastest boat on Flathead Lake, making the Somers to Polson trip in two hours, 20 minutes. The *Skinkoots* was the last boat to maintain a regular freight and passenger service. It operated from about 1926 to 1929.

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

"This article, "Steamboats on Flathead Lake," is taken, in a slightly revised form, from the last chapter of the book, SOMERS, MONTANA - THE COMPANY TOWN, which was published in 1976 by the English Department of Flathead High School of Kalispell and edited by Henry Elwood.



The Demersville.