

The Day of the Supply Boat: An Early Shopping Convenience

Suppose you were a prosperous Toronto resident living in the late Nineteenth Century.

And suppose you were getting tired of the noise, and the rush, and the grime and dirt and pollution of city life and were hankering for the peace and quiet and fresh air of the country, where people were still close to the world of Nature. And suppose further that you had heard that the far-away District of Muskoka was a place where a man could enjoy good fishing, or the occasional 'shoot' and a camp-

fire and sing-song with congenial friends, right in Nature's bosom. Perhaps you'd even have been to Muskoka to see for yourself, and had stayed at Edward Prowse's Beaumaris Hotel or some other rustic resort where all these things were available—and you wanted more.

So you've decided on the novel idea of buying a lot on an island somewhere on the Muskoka Lakes, where you'll hire some of the locals to put up a simple shanty to serve as a summer cottage. And perhaps in time you start to improve it, so that your wife and family can come along and enjoy it also, without too many discomforts.

So you do all these things. You install a woodstove to take off the night chill, and to cook simple meals. You bring in bunks and furniture. Naturally you have a punt for getting around. Maybe you even have glass windows and mesh screens to keep out the bugs. Everything seems to be working out nicely.

But there's still a problem. You keep running short of supplies like milk and eggs and bread and vegetables. The local settlers have these things for sale, but the nearest farm is two or three miles away. That's a long row! You may need fresh lumber for that new wing you're building, or new shingles for the roof or more spikes and nails and tools, and the nearest store is in Bracebridge or Gravenhurst or Port Carling, maybe eight to twelve miles away. The roads are bumpy and muddy and go up and down over the hills. And it takes at least a day to get a wagon team into town and back—if you can even find one. Sure, sometimes you can place an order for provisions and get them delivered by the local steamer, but they're too big to call at your tiny dock and you have to pick everything up at the nearest government wharf, which is three miles away. How do you cope?

Enter the Muskoka supply steamer. Occasionally it's a large steam launch filled out by a local settler to make calls around the lakes, delivering grub and victuals to campers and cottagers. More often it's a fairly impressive double-decked vessel about 75 to 80 feet in length, with a little wheelhouse and stack on top, fitted out by some merchants in Bracebridge or Bala or



*Above: Alporto and her store of groceries
Below: Lady of the Lake in very early times
Right: Newminko*



Rosseau or Port Carling to peddle food and hardware. It has an icebox section up in the bow, a grocery section amidships and a dry-goods section aft. Everything is freshly loaded early in the morning and any victuals left unsold are unloaded late at night. Soon there are several boats in service, so a day never goes by that you don't see one passing (except on Sundays). You know what time to expect them and you make sure that you get your dock upgraded so that they can call. Whenever you want them to stop, you just run up or wave a white flag as a signal. Of course, you know the captain and crew personally and if you want something that they're not carrying, you just place an order and they'll bring it around the next time. Many of the neighbours congregate at your dock to take part in the fun. Excited children are clutching dimes and nickels to exchange for candies and ice cream and sometimes you spot a worm seller whose wares are guaranteed to catch the biggest bass in the lake. The highlight of every summer's day at the cottage is the arrival of the supply steamer. Some of them even take a few passengers, provided that they stay on the upper deck out of the crew's way.

The first supply steamer was probably the little *Lady of the Lake*, rented by the Hanna Company of Port Carling as early as 1886. And the last one was *Newminko* which handled the boat division of the Hanna firm for over a quarter of a century. No other merchants persisted so long on the waves. It was not until 1942, after an unusually rough season with frequent pile-ups on the rocks, that little *Newminko* was finally retired—to languish at the Port Carling docks for another twelve years. By that time the roads had been improved and the automobile and the outboard motorboat had arrived so that people could get into town at the own time and convenience.

The supply steamers were a uniquely Muskoka phenomenon, created in response to the pressing new needs of the cottagers and campers upon whom the local economy was coming more and more to depend. And for over 60 years they met those needs splendidly.

—Richard Tatley, *Steamship Historian and Society Member* ⚓



Chamberlain TIM-BR MART:

Featured Corporate Member for February, Doug Chamberlain

It is appropriate that with this edition of *The Real Muskoka Story*, which brings in an anniversary year for the Society, we have chosen to profile one of our Corporate Members, Chamberlain TIM-BR MART, who is also celebrating a significant milestone of their own in 2011—60 years in business!

Originally started in 1951 as Chamberlain Sawmill by Tom Chamberlain, the business has grown from a local sawmill to a full building centre, and one of Muskoka's leading lumber and building materials suppliers, servicing the needs of both contractors and builders as well as the weekend DIYer. As a member of TIM-BR MART, Chamberlain's is part of the biggest independent buying group in Canada, which enables them to offer lower prices and better selection to their customers. Chamberlain TIM-BR MART is now operated by Tom's grandsons, Doug, Bob and Rick, all from Gravenhurst, and is open year round.

Chamberlain's have been a member and active supporter of the Muskoka Steamship & Historical Society since 1998. Doug feels that as a good corporate citizen, it is very important to support an organization such as our Society which works to maintain the history and heritage of the area. In addition, Doug points out the importance of tourism to all aspects of the local economy and how the Ships and the Heritage Centre continually attract large numbers of visitors to the area. Doug appreciates the benefits of being a member, including the discounts off cruise fares and gift shop items.

It is interesting to note that along with a long history in the area, Chamberlain's have a shared history with the Society. For a number of years, Chamberlain's milled the wooden bumpers for *Segwun*—first from locally grown elm, and then from locally grown oak.

Adam Doucette,
*one of the friendly
and knowledgeable
sales associates
from Chamberlain
TIM-BR MART*

