

## From the Archives:

### **S.S. Rosseau — A Working-Class Steamer**

She wasn't the prettiest steam boat to sail the Muskoka lakes. She was described as having 'boxy' cabins and an ungainly stack. She was rarely used to carry passengers and was easily outshone by other, fancier ships on the lakes. After all she was a working boat. A blue-collar tug that towed scows loaded with tan bark or rolls of leather.

The steamer *Rosseau* was built in Gravenhurst and launched in 1879. She was 70 feet long with a beam of 11'-6" and weighed almost 34 tons. She was owned by the Muskoka Lakes Navigation Company and hauled log booms, brought scow-loads of bark to the tannery at Bracebridge and rolls of leather from the tannery to the railhead at Gravenhurst. In the early 1800s, there was little competition for the Navigation Company.

But the lumbering operations, the mills and other enterprises soon looked for their own ships to meet their transportation needs.

In the spring of 1884, *S.S. Rosseau* was sold to the Muskoka Leather Company, owned by the Beardmore family. And according to the manager's daily log, the newly purchased *Rosseau* arrived at the Bracebridge tannery on May 19, 1884. She would remain with the tannery until 1899 when she was sold to private interests.

During her time with the tannery, *S.S. Rosseau* was a steady and reliable work boat. And the key was work. Reading the daily log of the tannery manager, it seems that *Rosseau* worked all day, every day. Every day, that is, except Sunday. There isn't even a day listed in the 1884 and 1885 diaries for Sunday. A copy of the hand-written diaries is available for viewing in Archives at Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre.

On Tuesday of her first week with the tannery, she travelled to Lake Joseph and Lake Rosseau, shopping for bark from hemlock trees that was used in the tannery. She and her crew arrived the following evening. On Thursday, the crew took her to Bala and Torrence and back. On Friday, she towed the scow *Jumbo*

with 115 rolls of leather to Gravenhurst and returned with 810 hides for the tannery. The following Monday, *Rosseau* took 100 empty carboys to Gravenhurst, returned in the afternoon and left at 8:00 p.m. with a loading crew and scow in tow to load more bark. She arrived back in Bracebridge Tuesday night with 41 cords of tan bark from Skeleton Bay, Lake Rosseau. According to the diaries, this was a typical schedule for *Rosseau* and her crews. They worked six days a week. And, it seems, they worked night and day towing scows loaded with bark or rolls of leather.

Along with the long and difficult working conditions, the crews of *S.S. Rosseau* had to deal with bad weather, fog and ice in the early spring and late fall.

Sailing the lakes in the late 1800s was a real challenge without the navigation aids and radio communications boaters rely on today. And accidents did happen. Ships ran aground or



*Rosseau* hauling tan bark



*Rosseau* avoiding a log boom



*S.S. Rosseau*



floundered in shallow bays. Log booms were a constant threat. And sometimes other ships were the real danger.

*Rosseau* was nearly cut in two by the steamer *S.S. Muskoka* near Bracebridge on the night of September 11, 1895. According to Richard Tatley's book, *The Steamboat Era in the Muskokas*, *Rosseau* was hit directly opposite the boiler room, dislocating some of her steam pipes. The smaller *Rosseau* was disabled and had to be towed back to the tannery dock. If *Muskoka* had not reversed her engines and slowed her progress prior to impact, it is very likely *Rosseau* would have suffered very heavy damage and likely would have sunk.

*S.S. Rosseau* was a working boat on the Muskoka lakes and continued in service until about 1915. You can learn more

about this ship and the many other steamboats that plied the lakes by visiting the Archives at the Muskoka Boat and Heritage Center.

—Ray Windsor,  
Archives Volunteer



*Rosseau at Port Carling*



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