

S.S. Muskoka:

The Story Of A Tug Turned Steamer

As *RMS Segwun* celebrates her landmark 125th anniversary this year, it's easy to forget that at one time a century ago she was but one of a fleet of steamships sailing the lakes under the banner of the Muskoka Lakes Navigation Company. Among her many sister ships was the unheralded *SS Muskoka*, a vessel that began her existence as a tug and ended it as a passenger steamer a quarter century later. *Muskoka* celebrates her own anniversary of sorts this year: it was exactly 100 years ago that she was stricken from the Navigation Company records and broken up.

When *SS Muskoka* was built in 1881, she was one of three tugs the Navigation Company operated to supplement its fleet of passenger steamers. She stood out from *SS Rosseau* and *Lake Joseph* by virtue of her size (at 94 feet long and with a 15-foot beam she was significantly larger than the others) and her incredibly sturdiness of her construction. Her immense strength made her ideally suited to towing scows of tanbark and log booms, and meant she was also the first steamer to break through the ice in the springtime. *Muskoka's* appearance on the lakes heralded the coming of a new season for settlers and was greatly anticipated each year.

Her solid construction was a blessing. Several times she ran aground on the Muskoka River (notably in 1882 and 1897), and had several collisions with other steamships—and yet she never suffered anything more than superficial damage.

SS Muskoka was a workhorse, not a thoroughbred. She was unattractive and ungainly—her boilers pushed her along at a plodding 8 mph. Nevertheless, the vessel excelled in her role and helped the Navigation Company maintain a monopoly over towing on the lakes throughout the 1880s.

By the early 1890s, however, the Navigation Company was willing to relinquish its iron-hold on this industry. Logging in the region was on the steep decline so there was less business, and it was far less profitable than carrying wealthy tourists to summer resorts. As a result, from three tugs in 1881 the fleet dropped to two in 1893 and the last, *Lake Joseph*, was sold off in 1896.

SS Muskoka was too new, too sturdy, and too large to be a victim of this change in focus. Instead, she underwent a series of modifications that gradually saw her evolve into a passenger steamer. Altogether, she went through a least five different versions. The most extensive reconstruction occurred in 1897–98, when she was lengthened from 94 to 110 feet, outfitted with a handsome lounge, and given a new boiler that improved speed to 12 mph. *Muskoka* was now all-but unrecognizable as the tug she had once been, and while still unattractive, her capacity of 200 passengers made her a welcome addition to a fleet struggling to keep up with demand.



Top: Muskoka at Port Cockburn July 1891

Above: Muskoka at Port Carling locks



Muskoka, second version

Running out of Bracebridge, she ran daily to Bala and back, stopping at a number of ports and resorts along the way. She was ideally suited for this run, since ships operating in the Muskoka River had to plow through a Sargasso of logs that frequently clogged the waterway. Passengers worried even as the dull thuds of logs hitting hull echoed through the ship, they were secure in the knowledge that *Muskoka* was the safest ship in the fleet.

By 1907, however, that reputation had begun to falter. The aging vessel was leaking so badly that she would take on 2–3 feet of water every night and would have to be pumped out daily to stay afloat. Her replacement, *SS Cherokee*, wasn't yet ready so she endured one final, agonizing season before she was allowed to go into graceful retirement in 1908.

Muskoka remained on-hand for a few more years as an emergency fill-in for other steamers, but was officially retired from service in 1912 and broken up. Even in the end, the tired ship's vaunted strength remained: her timbers proved too much for the wreckers, and so her hulk was left to rot at the Gravenhurst dockyards over the next two decades.

—Andrew Hind



Andrew Hind and Maria Da Silva are the authors of the book *RMS Segwun: Queen of Muskoka and Muskoka esorts: Then and Now*.

Top: *Muskoka* derelict at Gravenhurst

Above: *Muskoka*, fifth and final version

Left: *Muskoka*, final version in 1904

Welcome Aboard!

The following new Members have joined the Society since the last newsletter:

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| ■ Muriel Boles and Walter Dubois | ■ Debbie and Len Howe | ■ Linda and Siggie Soudak |
| ■ Ruth and Ron Booth | ■ Diana Kellington | ■ Ron and Ruth Roth |
| ■ Drew Bridekirk | ■ John Lovegrove | ■ Bonnie Rourke and Cayley Murray |
| ■ Michael and Lois Brown | ■ Cynthia and Eric Luks | ■ Barbara Kerr and Peter Thillaye |
| ■ Dan and Conolly Cormacchia | ■ Stuart McCartney | ■ Bryden Thompson |
| ■ Derra and Scott Dunsmoor | ■ William McCaw | ■ Parker Thompson |
| ■ Patrica Hewes | ■ Gillian and Peter McMullin | ■ Joseph Virbail |
| ■ Don Hinchley | ■ Sonja and David Rickwell | |

New Corporate Members:

- Cottages in Muskoka (Royal LePage) — Catharine Inniss
- Emmer Construction Ltd. — Gladys Pentland and Ernest Merkley
- Patterson-Kaye Lodge — William Curnew