

A Hundred Years of Steamer Navigation On the St. Lawrence

(By J. Miller McConnell.)

Of the several centenary celebrations of the present year, that of most interest to Canadians is the one hundredth anniversary of the introduction of travel by steamboat. The birth of such famous men as Lincoln, Darwin, Gladstone, Tennyson, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Fitzgerald, Poe and Holmes made the year 1809 of intense interest to the present generation. The centenaries of several of these have already been fittingly observed, while those of others are yet to take place.

It is consequently fitting that a centenary of such importance to the Dominion of Canada should receive that attention which its importance merits, and preparations are already under way at the instance of public bodies which will guarantee giving the event that historical place which it is due.

In that celebration the name of Hon. John Molson, one of Canada's captains of industry of the past century, will be indelibly linked as it was he who conceived the idea of applying steam to boats which then carried on the limited transportation on the River St. Lawrence between Montreal and Quebec.

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One can very well imagine the crude nature of the berths which would be provided on a pioneer vessel of that kind under the circumstances, as well as the difficulties which would be experienced in catering to the gastronomical necessities of the passengers. For a long time after the inauguration of the service, many people were afraid to risk their lives in travelling by that means. They preferred the discomforts of a land journey by wagon along the river bank or the tedious passage of a batteau.

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The company did not accomplish all that in a short time. It participated in a great struggle and the early years of its participation in the river traffic, were among the most memorable and exciting of the history of St. Lawrence steamboat navigation. It was in 1856 that the Richelieu Company put steamers on the line between Montreal and Quebec, the pioneers being two small boats called the Napoleon and Victoria. With the Molson and Torrance boats this made three lines on the same route, and a little later on Tate Brothers put on two boats, forming the fourth line.

Naturally there was keen competition which in due course developed into a great race war when passengers were carried for nothing or next door to it. It is related that the steamer passage was down to 12 1/2 cents, while the first cabin fare was reduced to \$1.00, which included berths and meals.

There was a good deal of racing done by the boats of the different lines to get the credit of landing passengers ahead of the others, and there was much excitement among all those concerned in the business. How long the enormous competition would have lasted it would be difficult to tell had it not been for the Montreal disaster in June, 1857.

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The third steamboat accident, of which there is a record, was that of the Montreal, which was lost in a snow storm near Batiscan in November, 1853.

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Contrast that with the measurements and accommodation of the present palatial boats which nightly carry hundreds of passengers between Montreal and Quebec and vice versa. For this purpose it will be most interesting to take the latest addition to the fleet of the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation Company plying on that small section of its famous route. This is the steamer "Montreal," which has the distinction of being the largest steamer in existence of Canadian register. She is 360 feet long, her hull is 44 feet wide, while the width over her guards is 75 feet 6 inches. Her engines are triple expansion, 3,000 horsepower, and she has side wheels fitted with feathering curved-steel buckets.

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