

## *Fire Canoe: Prairie Steamboat Days Revisited – Talking Points*

### **Basic Storyline**

Their captains had been seafaring skippers who migrated inland. Their pilots were indigenous people who could read the shoals, sandbars, and currents of Prairie waterways. Their operators were businessmen hoping to reap the benefits of commercial enterprise along the shores and banks of Canada's virgin lakes and rivers. Their passengers were fur traders, adventure-seekers, and immigrants opening up the West. All of them sought their futures and fortunes aboard Prairie steamboats, decades before the railways arrived and took credit for the breakthrough.

Aboriginal people called them "fire canoes," but in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century their forward-thinking and often eccentric operators – **Anson Northup, James Hill, Norman Kittson, Peter McArthur, William Robinson** and the Hudson's Bay Company – promoted them as Mississippi-type steamship queens delivering speedy transport, along with the latest in technology and comfort. The frontier "fire canoe" carried thousands of passengers and tonnes of freight to the farthest reaches of the British Northwest Territories and even went to war!

Then, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, steamboats and their operators adapted. Entrepreneurs – such as **John Walter, Mosher and Coates, Winton Brothers, William Pearson, J.K. Cornwall** and **Hamilton Horatio Ross** – focused on local ports-of-call across the Prairies. They launched smaller, more tailored steamers and focused on a new economy of business and pleasure in the West. By day their steamboats chased freight, fish, lumber, iron ore, real estate, and gold-mining contracts. At night, they brought out the Edwardian finery, lights, and music to tap the pleasure-filled excursion market.

Once reserved for the pen of **Mark Twain** and his fiction, the true story of steamboating in the Canadian West comes to life in the voices of the captains, owners, pilots, engineers, stevedores, firemen, and passengers aboard the river paddlewheelers and lake steamers that plied waterways of the Prairies. First published in 1977, **Ted Barris's** original creative non-fiction work returns to life in this new volume, together with additional and enhanced photographs, notes, and maps. *Fire Canoe* offers readers another of the author's patented you-are-there histories.

*Fire Canoe* contains the original maps and charts, but now includes two sections of additional and higher-resolution photographs.

## Fire Canoe Summary

### 1) Steamboats were first

- the common misconception is that the Canadian Pacific Railway opened western Canada to commerce, immigration and settlement; nationally recognized historian **Pierre Berton** wrote two famous books (*The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*) about the expense, logistics and politics of the coming of the CPR in the 1880s – the CPR came on the heels of the steamboats and their arrival was hampered by as much same problems.
- in fact, steam navigation of the Canadian West from the extreme northwest corner of the Great Lakes all the way to the Rocky Mountains, predates the “coming of steel” by a quarter of a century; beginning in 1860, steamboats moved north on the Red River into Fort Garry and west from the mouth of the Saskatchewan River as far northwest as Edmonton and as far southwest as Medicine Hat – they were the immigration pipeline in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when as many as two million newcomers moved to the western half of the North American continent, seeking fame, fortune and roots.
- in case there’s any doubt, the steamers that navigated western rivers in Canada (then the British Northwest Territories) were as large, as powerful and fast, as maneuverable, and as celebrated as any that plied western rivers in the U.S., i.e. the Mississippi or Missouri.
- as important then to western settlement are such names as Red River Transportation Co., Hill Griggs and Co., Winnipeg & Western Transportation Co, William Robinson Line, and the major player across the West, the Hudson’s Bay Company.

### 2) Paddlewheels at War

- in the spring of 1884, Ottawa responded to emergency call from Mother England; colonial forces up the Nile River into Sudan under **Gen. Charles Gordon** were under siege from rebels; it was decided to send 400 voyageur boatman and the Saskatchewan River’s four most prominent steamboat captains – **John Segers, Jerry Weber, Aaron Russell, William Robinson** (at \$50/month) – to lead a relief expedition to Khartoum; while the mission succeeded getting through, it failed because rebels had already killed Gordon and the entire garrison.
- meanwhile, back in Canada, steamboats participated in the making of Canada in another crucial way – serving the Canadian forces in the Northwest Rebellion (1885); no fewer than half a dozen of the massive Mississippi-style steamers were commandeered by **Gen. F.D. Middleton** to supply and transport the thousands of troops brought into the middle of Saskatchewan territory to confront **Louis Riel** and **Gabriel Dumont**.
- the climax for both rebellion and steamers was the Battle of Batoche (May 9, 1885); Middleton actually came up with strategy to send two Hudson’s Bay Co. steamers *Marquis* and *Northcote* into the key battle versus the Metis fighters turning point in Riel Rebellion; Metis defenders knew steamers were coming and nearly corralled them with a lowered ferry cable; had they succeeded the entire rebellion might have had a different outcome (on board *Northcote* firing back at the Metis troops was none other than the son of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald).

### **3) Tramp steamers for business and pleasure**

- after the demise of Mississippi-style steamboat queens, around the year 1900, workhorse steamers and hard-nosed businessmen put steamers at the forefront of resource development across the West.

- **John Walter** began as an Orkney Island H. B. Co man in Edmonton, but developed an entire marine enterprise based along the North Saskatchewan.

- **Rufus Mosher** and **Fred Coates** had seen the explosion of commerce and immigration that had come to the Klondike in the gold rush; they envisioned the same happening in north-central Saskatchewan and built one of the largest dredges designed to dig gold from the bed of the river.

- **William Pearson** saw the potential of the Palliser Triangle (rich, fertile farmland of Saskatchewan) not as the promise land for the inexperienced settler/farmer, but as a destination for experienced and well-financed American and Ontario agriculturists to build prairie yields and permanent towns on the prairies; his Pearson Co. used steamboats to build that dream.

- **Charles and David Winton** (Winton Brothers) recognized the appetite for building coming to western North America and staked the timberland of northern Manitoba & Saskatchewan to feed that need; for half a century, Winton Brothers lumber used steamboats to bring out raw lumber.

- **J.K. Cornwall** was another Klondike refugee; but he settled in the Peace River country of northern Alberta; he saw the potential for land and forest around Lesser Slave Lake north to the Peace River to attract farmers and a permanent population; he decided to use his Northern Transportation Co. steamboats and a new tool of the new century “the travel junket” to sell the idea – by inviting all the great frontiersmen and magazine writers of the day to come to explore his corner of the world; “Peace River Jim” became the father of the North.

- **Hamilton Horatio Ross** was a remittance man (paid by his family to leave home in Britain and to seek his fortune other than by staying home to collect the inheritance); he too travelled the world but settled in Medicine Hat and established Ross Navigation Co. first to run excursions on the Saskatchewan River, then to build pockets of commerce across the prairies and into the North; along the way he precipitated “the greatest marine disaster in Saskatoon history,” (sinking of the steamer City of Medicine Hat in 1906); his Ross Navigation Company would crash and burn to rise again, as principal steamboat fleet developing resources (fish, lumber, ore) in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

### **4) Steamers of the inland lakes**

- isolated from the powerful influence of railway networks and even aviation connections into the North, the three larger inland lakes of Manitoba – Winnipeg, Manitoba and Winnipegosis – gave steam navigation new life by providing means for the transport of fish, furs, precious ores and lumber from the rich resource areas of the northern prairies

- but in the Edwardian era (roughly the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century leading up to the First World War) also stimulated an almost unexpected enterprise for the Edwardian leisure class – steamboat excursions; at nights and on the weekends, when the steamers finished hauling raw materials, they took on people as freight and packaged the trips as excursions – with music, food and moonlight; lake and river excursions were unique to the era and provided business well into the new century. (MORE TO COME)

### **5) The Mad Fin**

- chapter documenting the story of **Tom Jaanus Alankola Sukanen – Tom Sukanen** – was the first ever study and revelation of the unique tale of a Finlander coming to America around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, immigrating to mid-western United States, searching farther inland (north to Saskatchewan) for more profitable farm land, his ultimate frustration with a system that he believed kidnapped his family, and his quest to flee his oppressors and loneliness by the best means he could – by building a steamship to carry him home to Finland.

- in the most desperate decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Dirty Thirties – Sukanen begins to assemble the building materials – timber, steam engines, rolled steel and cladding – to build a steamer that (after being floated in pieces to the nearest ocean seaport on Hudson Bay) would carry Sukanen home to Finland... his steamer *Sontainen* became his vehicle of hope and ultimately his downfall; while WWII raged in Europe, Sukanen is arrested on a technicality, hauled off to an institution and left there to die in 1943.

- his story is threaded together by the reminiscences of Moose Jaw resident **Lawrence “Moon” Mullin**, who came across the abandoned remains of *Sontainen* and begins the equally singular process of salvaging both Sukanen’s ship and his story to reside permanently at the Moose Jaw Pioneer Museum on the outskirts of Moose Jaw, Sask.

Ted Barris is an award-winning author, journalist, and broadcaster. For 40 years his writing has appeared in the national press, as well as in history, news and arts magazines. He has worked as host/contributor for many CBC Radio, CTV, and TV Ontario programs. He’s a full-time professor of journalism at Toronto’s Centennial College. Barris has authored seventeen non-fiction books. In 2014, his book *The Great Escape: A Canadian Story* received the national Libris Non-Fiction Book of the Year Award.

### **Critics’ praise for the original *Fire Canoe***

“Ted Barris has done for the steamboat what Pierre Berton did for the railway...” – *Globe & Mail*, 1977.

“[This book] will surprise Canadians who weren’t aware that on the bald plains, riverboats once turned cities like Winnipeg, Prince Albert, and Edmonton into thriving ports.” – *Toronto Sun*, 1978.

“Barris’s best subjects are the personalities of the era – those adventurous and eccentric steamboat captains, traders and pioneers...” – Canadian Press, 1978.

“The book deserves a place in the library of those interested in the history and development of western Canada.” – *Alberta History*, 1978.

“An exciting narrative of the extension of the Canadian frontier across the prairies ... with stories of over 100 steamboats that have never appeared in any other book.” – *Steamboat Bill* magazine, 1977.