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Steamboats On Okanagan Lake

Okanagan History Vignette



Okanagan men going off to war

S.S. Sicamous departs from Okanagan Landing during World War I

Photo courtesy Kelowna Museum

STEAMBOATS ON OKANAGAN LAKE

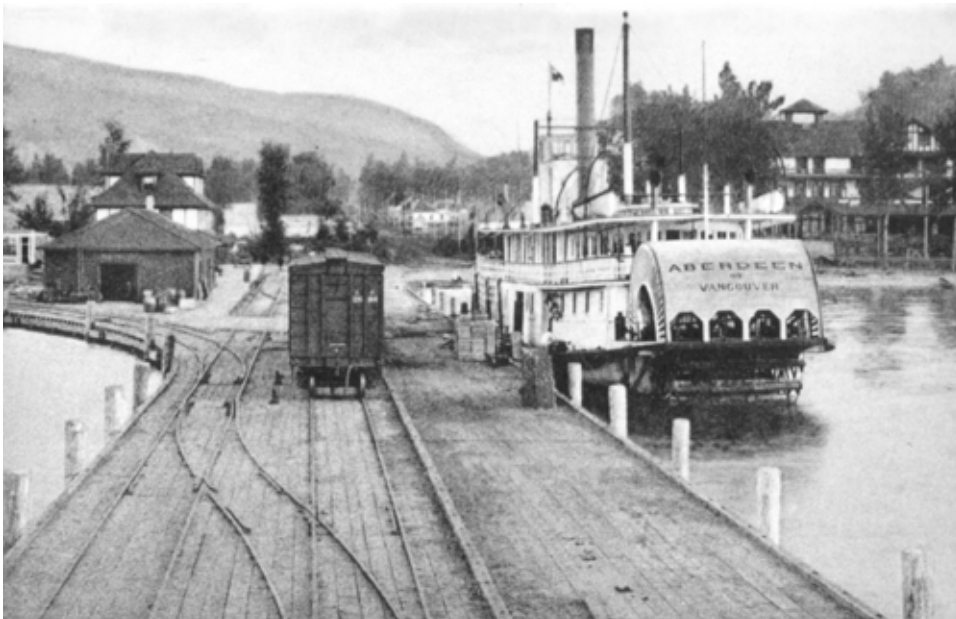
The Importance of Water Travel

Lakes, rivers, and oceans have been important for thousands of years. People have used waterways as a means of exploration and transportation. Exploration opened up new lands. Often, new settlements were built near waterways. Once people settled in new areas, they needed a way to get supplies in and trade goods out. This need for transportation was true on Okanagan Lake in the late 1800s. There were not many white people in the Okanagan Valley at that time because there was not an efficient transportation system in place. But as more commercial boats travelled on Okanagan Lake, more people settled on the lake's shore. Water transportation helped to settle the Okanagan Valley.

Dawn of the Steamboats

The *S.S. Aberdeen* and the *S.S. Okanagan* were the first Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) sternwheelers on Okanagan Lake. S.S. stands for steamship. The CPR sternwheelers used steam power to drive the large paddlewheels at the back, or stern, of the boats. These boats were also called paddlewheelers because of the large paddlewheels. The sternwheelers were used to transport people, food, supplies, tools, clothes, and mail. They also carried horses, cattle, and

machinery. They were a very important means of transportation in the Okanagan Valley. The CPR built the *Aberdeen* and the *Okanagan* because there was a need for regular transportation from Okanagan Landing, which was at the end of the Shuswap & Okanagan Railway line, to Penticton at the south end of Okanagan Lake. This was a trip of about 65 miles (105 kilometres). The sternwheelers brought provisions to the people of the Okanagan Valley and took fruit and produce from the Okanagan Valley to the world.



S.S. Aberdeen at the wharf in Penticton

Photo courtesy Kelowna Museum

For many early settlers, the steamboats were the only way to reach their homesteads for both themselves and their freight. There were very few roads in the Okanagan Valley at the beginning of the

1900s. So, the *Aberdeen* and *Okanagan* were welcome sights for Okanagan Lake pioneers. If settlers along the lake wanted to stop the CPR paddlewheelers, they only had to put out a white flag on a pole or start a fire on the beach to get the captain's attention. If settlers had an emergency and they wanted the paddlewheeler to stop quickly, they would light two fires. The sternwheeler was well suited for these stops where no dock was available. The ship's bow could pull almost all the way onto the beach, and then a gangplank would be used to bridge the short stretch of water between boat and land. Although the boat would not stop for long, this contact with the *Aberdeen* and the *Okanagan* made the early settlers feel less isolated.

The CPR steamboats were mainly freight boats, but they also provided first-class service to passengers. On the *Aberdeen* and the *Okanagan*, there were staterooms, smoking rooms, ladies' saloons, and dining rooms. A stateroom was a private room that included a bed. Passengers could book a stateroom in which to sleep during the trip, or the stateroom could be booked and used just for privacy from the rest of the passengers. Male passengers used the smoking room to smoke their pipes, cigars, or cigarettes separate from the women. The ladies' saloon was a room especially designed for the ladies to travel in comfort, away from the smoke and away from the sometimes coarse men. The

Aberdeen and *Okanagan* dining rooms provided excellent food. On the *Aberdeen*, people could have a meal for 50 cents, which was expensive in the 1890s. However, people who travelled on the CPR steamboats reported that the meals were well worth the money. To make a trip on a steamboat was a treat for settlers in the Okanagan Valley.



The ladies' saloon on a CPR steamboat

S.S. Aberdeen

The *Aberdeen* was built at the CPR shipbuilding yard in Okanagan Landing, and she cost \$50,000 to build. The boat was 146 feet long and 30 feet wide (44.5 metres long and 9 metres wide). She could carry 200



Crew of the S.S. *Aberdeen*
Photo courtesy Kelowna Museum

tons (181,440 kilograms) of cargo. This sternwheeler originally burned wood to produce her steam power, but later she was changed to burn coal. The *Aberdeen* made her first trip in 1892, and she continued to operate until 1916. The *Aberdeen* made the return trip from Okanagan Landing to Penticton three times a week. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she went south. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, she went north. The Okanagan Valley people said the *Aberdeen's* timetable was "south today, north tomorrow." In the winter, the schedule was sometimes less regular due to poor weather and water conditions. In February 1907, the Okanagan Lake was nearly frozen

over. A tugboat had to be used to keep a path of water free of ice so that the *Aberdeen* could continue to make her tri-weekly trips.

S.S. Okanagan

There were so many people travelling and so much freight being transported on the *Aberdeen*, that in 1907 the CPR put another sternwheeler into service. This new boat was called the *Okanagan*, and she also travelled between Okanagan Landing and Penticton. She was 193 feet long (59 metres) and carried 250 passengers. She could travel at 15 miles per hour (24 kilometres per hour). When she was launched in 1907, Vernon's mayor declared a half-day holiday. A grand ball was also held at the Strand Hotel in Okanagan Landing to celebrate the launch.



S.S. Okanagan at Okanagan Landing
Photo courtesy Greater Vernon
Museum & Archives

The *Okanagan* was much faster and more luxurious than the *Aberdeen*. She could go from Okanagan Landing to Penticton in 3 hours and 15 minutes. The newspaper *Okanagan Semi-Weekly* called her a "greyhound."

She was known as the express boat because she stopped only at Kelowna, Peachland and Summerland on her trip south. The *Okanagan* made better time than the *Aberdeen* because she had fewer stops to make. By 1907, freight business was so brisk on Okanagan Lake that the *Okanagan* made a return trip daily, except Sundays. This was in contrast to the *Aberdeen* that ran only three times per week. The S.S. *Okanagan* operated until 1932.

S.S. *Sicamous*

In 1914, along came a new CPR sternwheeler called the S.S. *Sicamous* to join the *Aberdeen* and *Okanagan*. The *Sicamous* was the biggest and most luxurious of the three CPR steamships on Okanagan Lake. This steamboat was powered by coal. The *Sicamous* was built in Ontario but was put together at Okanagan Landing. This boat was three decks high, over 200 feet long (60 metres), and could carry up to 500 passengers and 900 tons (816,480 kilograms) of freight. The bottom deck carried the freight and mail. She could carry several train-carloads of fruit on her lower deck without any problem at all. The lower deck also housed the crew members. The upper two decks had staterooms, a smoking room, an observation room, a ladies' saloon, and a dining room.

The S.S. *Sicamous* was a magnificent boat. It cost \$180,000 to build with \$14,000 spent on furniture alone. She was built with a great deal of wood, including BC cedar, Douglas fir, Australian mahogany, and Burmese teak. The boat also had brass hardware fittings from Scotland. The dining room would seat 50 to 70 diners, and there were 36 first-class staterooms. The staterooms were numbered 1 to 37, not 36, because there was no number 13 stateroom. The staterooms were steam heated and had electric lights. Private staterooms cost \$2.50 per night. In a shared room, a lower berth would cost \$1.50, and the upper berth would cost only \$1.00. There was no running water on board, but there were several bathrooms. Two of the bathrooms had bathtubs in them. Heated water for bathing could be purchased for 50 cents. These prices were quite expensive in the *Sicamous*' day. However, the first-class service more than made up for the expense.

In those early days, many people saw a trip on the *Sicamous* as a mini-holiday. People did not have the time or money to do much travelling, so a half-day boat trip was often a nice break from everyday routines. Also, occasionally the *Sicamous* was used for moonlight cruises and dances that provided entertainment for Okanagan Valley residents. In 1915, meals on the *Sicamous* cost 75 cents. By 1920, the



S.S. Okanagan approaching the Kelowna wharf
Photo courtesy Kelowna Museum

rates had risen to \$1.00 for breakfast, \$1.25 for lunch, and \$1.50 for dinner. Children paid half price. Eating on the *Sicamous* was expensive but well worth the money. There were linen napkins, fine china, sparkling crystal, and silver cutlery in the large dining room. There were even silver finger bowls! Waiters wore white coats and bow ties. The meals were always delicious.

The Launching

The *Sicamous* was so well liked and delivered such first class service that she became known as the “Queen of the Okanagan Lake” or the “Great White Swan of Okanagan Lake.” But she was

certainly not like a queen or a swan on the day of her launching. On May 19, 1914, she was eased into the water, and she promptly got stuck in the mud. She was stuck for most of the day but was finally freed with the help of the *Aberdeen* and the *Castlegar*. Once she was out of the mud, Captain George L. Estabrooks invited everyone to come aboard for a free ride. Reports say that over 400 people took him up on his offer.

A trip on the *Sicamous* took approximately half a day from one end of the lake to the other. The boat would leave Penticton about 6:00 a.m. and would arrive in Okanagan Landing in mid-afternoon. Some passengers would rent staterooms so they could board the boat the night before. That way they didn't have to board at 5:30 in the morning. These overnight guests would be soundly sleeping when the boat got



Construction of the S.S. *Sicamous* at Okanagan Landing
Photo courtesy Kelowna Museum

underway in the early hours. The boat made the return trip from Penticton to Okanagan Landing every day except Sunday. This CPR sternwheeler made 28 stops during her return trip, stopping at places like Hall's, Rainbow Landing, and Sunnywold. These are the old names for Westbank, Okanagan Centre, and Carr's Landing. The boat's arrival in Okanagan Landing would be at the same time as the train's arrival from Vernon. Passengers and freight could then be loaded directly from the train onto the *Sicamous*. The boat schedules sometimes had to be changed to wait for a late train. Generally though, the paddlewheeler would arrive back in Penticton around 8:00 p.m.

Winter Travel

The steamboats ran all year round on Okanagan Lake except in those rare years when the lake froze over. Then, lake travel was very difficult and dangerous. Sometimes the full trip could not be completed although a tugboat would attempt to keep one path free of ice. In the extremely cold winter of 1915-1916, the *Sicamous* could not make the trip all the way to Penticton. Eventually, she had to stop her run at Summerland because the south end of Okanagan Lake was completely frozen. For over eight weeks that winter, the *Sicamous* was unable to make all of her regularly scheduled stops due to ice on the lake. Even



S.S. *Sicamous* stuck in the ice during the winter of 1915-1916

Photo courtesy Greater Vernon Museum & Archives

when the lake was not frozen over entirely, the winter weather could still cause trouble. For example, the paddlewheels could end up covered in a thin sheet of ice from water spray. This ice interfered with the ship's ability to operate properly. Severe winter weather always was a concern for the CPR steamboats.

The *Sicamous* made her last run in 1936. Part of the reason that the CPR stopped using the *Sicamous* was because she was a very expensive ship to operate. The CPR was losing \$200 per day. Finally, the CPR beached the *Sicamous* at Okanagan Landing where it sat unused for nearly fourteen years. In 1949, the City of Penticton bought her from the CPR for \$1.00. In 1951 she was towed to West Lakeshore Drive in Penticton where she now sits as a museum. The boat is being

restored to what she looked like in 1914. The people who are working on the *Sicamous* estimate she will cost 1.7 million dollars to be fully restored. Considering it only cost \$180,000 to build in 1914, it now will cost almost ten times that much to restore this old sternwheeler.

End of An Era

As more roads were built, and cars and trucks became even more widely available, the need for the steamboats slowly came to an end. The sternwheelers made the Okanagan Lake a commercial highway from 1892 until 1936. In their time, the steamboats were the fastest way to travel. Orchardists, farmers, and business people knew that they could get their produce and goods quickly to outside markets. The steamships helped the Okanagan Valley enter the 20th century.



The restored S.S. *Sicamous* on the beach in Penticton

GLOSSARY

brisk	lively, active
coarse	crude, rough, harsh
contrast	to compare in such a way as to show differences
cutlery	knives, forks, and spoons
dawn	the beginning
efficient	capable, competent
express	fast, quick
freight	goods transported by air, land, or water
gangplank	a plank or movable board used to board a ship
interfered	got in the way
isolated	to be alone, away from others
launched	to move or slide a boat into the water
luxurious	elaborate, comfortable, full of luxury
magnificent	splendid, noble, grand, majestic
provisions	needed supplies, especially food
routines	regular activities
saloon	a room on a passenger ship