

KAKABEKA

In the spring of 1885, Toronto shipbuilder Melancthon Simpson was in the process of constructing yet another steam ferry at his shipyard on the Don River, fulfilling a contract let to him by the firm of Thomas Marks & Company, of Port Arthur. From this shipyard, he already had launched in 1882 the famous Gooderham family cutters AILEEN (the first yacht on the Great Lakes with a lead keel) and CONDOR, and in 1884 the steam ferry MAZEPPA, which would run at Hamilton and Toronto, and later was owned at Owen Sound. The steam ferry QUEEN CITY, (b) ONGIARA, also came from this yard in 1885.

The new ship was christened KAKABEKA, a name closely associated with the Canadian Lakehead area and, in particular, with a spectacular waterfall located there. The origin of the name was described in Picturesque Canada, which was compiled by George M. Grant in 1899. "We have said that 'Kakabeka' is a perversion; the true name, as enquiry from our intelligent guides tells us, is 'Kakapikank', the 'A's' having the sound of a 'W' as in Chippewa. The name signifies 'high fall'; it is evidently the same word as 'Coboconk'. Jean Pierre assures us that there is no such word as 'Kakabeka' in the Indian tongue; 'White man can't say it right'. That is the origin of the mistake."

KAKABEKA was enrolled under Official Number C.92611. She measured 75 feet in length overall, with a beam of 18 feet, and she had a draft of 7 feet. She registered 113 tons. Her launch went unreported in the local Toronto press, however the "Cleveland Marine Record" of April 23, 1885, reported that "the steam ferry KAKABEKA, built by Melancthon Simpson, of Toronto, with machinery manufactured by the John Doty Engine Company, of the same city, is now ready to launch, and will leave Toronto as soon as the ice will permit. This fine steamer will ply between here (meaning Port Arthur) and Fort William, and will also be engaged on excursion parties during the season. It will be the first vessel registered at Port Arthur. In order to facilitate the ferry accommodation, an addition has been built to Marks' Wharf, 80 x 20 feet, and about two feet lower than the regular dock."

The navigation season at Toronto opened on April 21st, 1885, with the arrival of the small schooner MINNIE, of St. Catharines. Captain Hare got the traditional top hat for being skipper of the first vessel into port. Shortly after April 23rd, KAKABEKA quietly slipped into the waters of the Don River. The first newspaper advertisement for the ferry steamer appeared in the "Port Arthur Daily Sentinel" on April 27th, nearly a month before her arrival at the Lakehead.

The 1885 spring opening of the Welland Canals took place on May 7th, but KAKABEKA was not ready for service, and she remained in Toronto another week, departing for the Northwest on May 14th. (It was on that very same day, at Batoche, Saskatchewan, that the famous Metis leader Louis Riel was captured, effectively ending what had become known as the Northwest Rebellion.) Not being registered as yet, KAKABEKA sailed under special permit from Captain Harbottle, government steamship inspector at Toronto, with Captain Edward McGregor in command of the ship. KAKABEKA's one and only Welland Canal transit was not reported in the Toronto papers, and the St. Catharines newspapers of the day are not available. It can, however, be assumed that KAKABEKA crossed Lake Ontario in a few hours and entered the canal at Port Dalhousie. Her trip to the Lakehead encompassed the next twelve days. She would have spent a good deal of time butting through the spring ice, and no doubt faced her share of fog and rain during the trip.

KAKABEKA was a beautiful little steamer. Her cabin space was all on the main deck, and most of the cabin was fully enclosed out to the sides of the ship, with large, square windows admitting light. Loading was through a large port on each side. There was a small open area around the stern, providing a narrow promenade protected by a closed wooden taffrail. The hull featured a stem that curved backward as it rose, and a finely-cut counter stern. Protection for the hull was provided by fenders which were suspended from the