

HIAWATHA

In the past few issues, we have featured relatively modern, steel-hulled bulk freighters, and so it is time that we took another trip back in time to share with our readers the story of a much earlier lake vessel. Over the past several years, with the help of our members, we have brought to you the stories of several of the wooden-hulled passenger steamers of the South-western Ontario region, and now we have another of them for you.

The vessel we have chosen is the old steamer HIAWATHA, one of a number of vessels that have carried that famous name over the years. This particular steamer, however, was especially well known for her many years of ferry service across the St. Clair River between Sarnia and Port Huron, although we would be remiss if we did not recognize her stalwart service in other trades as well.

HIAWATHA, which bore Canadian official number 92982 and was registered at Sarnia, was a wooden-hulled propellor, built of oak in 1874 at Dresden, Ontario, by Captain Henry Weston. She was constructed at the shipyard of Joseph A. Jenkins, and was built to the order of W. B. Clark, of Sarnia. She was intended for service between Dresden and Wallaceburg on the Sydenham River, and Sarnia, with stops at various points en route, and early reports described her as being well adapted for the carriage of passengers and freight, and for the operation of special excursions.

Originally a wood-burner, as were many of the steamers of that period, HIAWATHA was 92.7 feet in length, 20.0 feet in beam of hull (24.0 feet over the guards on the main deck), and 7.2 feet in depth, with tonnage of 163 Gross and 111 Net. The steamer was powered by a high-pressure, non-condensing engine with a single cylinder of 18 inches diameter, and with a 20-inch piston stroke. The engine was built by Farrar and Treft at Buffalo, New York.

Some records indicate that HIAWATHA was built as a "tug". We do not, however, believe that we should read into this any indication that HIAWATHA was a tug in what we now would interpret as the usual sense of that word. The term "tug" was frequently used, in those early years, to describe vessels like HIAWATHA because, in addition to the other facilities they offered, they also were fitted with the equipment necessary for them to do towing chores when required.

The earliest photograph we have of HIAWATHA shows a passenger steamer typical of the many such ships that then operated on the lakes. She had two passenger decks, with the main deck closed in at the forward end, and with a closed wooden bulwark around the rest of that deck. There were two gangways on each side, and a port at the bow through which the anchor could be hoisted if it needed to be dropped. There was a cabin on the after part of the main deck, with a promenade around its outside, and canvas weathercloths that could be dropped to close in that portion of the deck if the weather became inclement.

On the upper deck, there was a closed rail forward and an open rail around the rest of the deck. There was a small enclosed cabin, at the forward end of which was an ornate, octagonal "birdcage" pilothouse, with a decorative finial surmounting its domed top. A large canvas awning often was spread over the foredeck (completely obstructing the view from the pilothouse, so how the steamer was navigated, we do not know) and there was a broad overhang of the boat deck over the after section of this upper deck, again with canvas drops to be used in nasty weather.

There was a tall steering pole at the bow, a prominent jackstaff aft, a short foremast abaft the pilothouse, and an even shorter mainmast stepped well back down the hurricane deck. Each of these four poles was surmounted by a decoration which is unclear in the photo; it may have been a ball, but more likely would have been an acorn, the symbol of good fortune for a