

Ferry skipper sails into sunset

After 42 years at the helm, Earle Willard sets a course for retirement

The crew of the MS Amherst Islander spent their second night on board, stuck in the middle of the channel between the island and the mainland. Captain Willard reported the ship still had enough fuel on board to keep the crew quarters warm for two or three days.

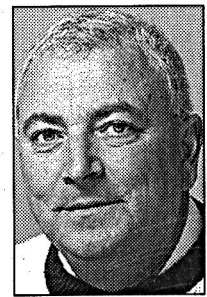
— Kingston Whig-Standard
February 6, 1964

“Being a ferry captain isn’t the easiest job in the world, you know.”

— Captain Joe Sisty
MS Wolfe Islander, 1950

THE AFTERNOON SUN FILTERS through the tall evergreen trees lined along the Millhaven shore at the outer edge of Bath Road. The west-bound commuter traffic out of Kingston has all but stopped on the Loyalist Parkway for another summer day.

High up on the bridge of the Amherst Island ferry *Frontenac II*, Senior Captain Earle Willard adjusts his cap to shield the sun from his eyes as he prepares to depart the mainland dock.



BRIAN JOHNSON

Stepping between the control consoles, he swings the forward steering column out and watches the dial as the indicator shows the huge propeller unit coming around.

Gently, the big ferry swings away from the dock, with seven cars, several passengers and five crew members all bound for nearby Amherst Island, directly across the channel.

Earle is the last of us ferry skippers to wear the traditional navy blue officer’s cap with the shiny black peak complete with the Canadian Merchant Marine badge.

But he wears it well; it fits the character of a guy who has spent the better part of his life as a ferry captain. An individual who, by the nature of his work, ensures his neighbours get to mainland jobs, their children get to school, sick and injured get to hospital and everyone gets across the sometimes tumultuous channel safely. No matter what the weather.

Now, after 42 seasons of calm summer nights, late fall gales with heaving seas and spray followed close by sometimes harsh winters and moving ice, Captain Earle Willard is finally ready to hang up his cap.

“Yeah, I guess it’s time,” he says, pausing for a minute to look out the side window one more time at another beautiful sunset from the bridge of his ship.

Crew member Dianne Marshall relieves the captain from his steering duties.

“I didn’t start with the ferry until the winter of 1965,” says Earle, taking a chair by the edge of the window.

“I wasn’t aboard when the Amherst Islander was stuck that time in ‘64.”

The captain back then was the late Captain Eldon Willard, a distant cousin. Even so, the winters continued to be harsh on both crew and vessel and Earle had his turn the following winter.

“We were about 700 feet off the dock in Millhaven when we lost the shaft on the ferry, due to ice,” he remembers.

“We got a 700 foot length of line, I know, I walked it back from the dock to the boat. We tied it to the boat, took a turn around a tree on shore and hooked on to the end of a snow plow. We got her in, eventually.”

Joining the ferry service was really just a walk down the road.

“Well, I needed a job,” Willard says, with a laugh. “So, I signed on as a deckhand, under Captain Norman Brooks. He was a nice guy, with a wooden leg.”

Later in the season, young Willard would learn just what it was like to be a sailor.

“We had just cleared Fish Point on Amherst Island,” he remembers.

“The wind was blowing hard, oh, gale force, I guess, from the northeast. Well, the Amherst Islander got in the trough of the waves and she laid over so far, her lifeboats touched the water, if you can believe it. Everything flew everywhere. I almost fell out the wheelhouse door and Captain Brooks



Diane Willard photo

Senior Captain Earle Willard, shown aboard the Amherst Island ferry, will hang up his captain’s hat after more than four decades at the helm.

had to hang on to both the spinning steering wheel and the Chadburn to stay upright. But you know, I knew then she would never upset.”

The 34-car ferry *Frontenac II* is the Amherst Island ferry today. Captain Willard has most of his memories with the former boat, Amherst Islander (3), with her gleaming black hull and white superstructure.

This sturdy 18-car vessel, built at the Kingston Shipyard in 1955, replaced the former Second World War Tank Landing Craft Amherst Islander (2), which had been in service since December, 1947. She, in turn, replaced the worn, wooden hulled smaller ferry of the same name which came from Midland, Ont., in 1929.

Appointed to captain in October, 1968, Earle never took the daily routine of his job for granted, then or now.

“If you let your guard down, even once,” he points out, “the ol’ boat would catch you, every time. Your perfect set-up with the dock could change with a sudden gust of wind. One time, on the Amherst Islander, setting out from the island, the wind was blowing southwest somewhere around 60-70 knots. We were almost sideways, going across. She’d ride right up on one wave, lean over hard, then almost disappear in the trough. She didn’t have quite enough power. It was a struggle holding her up, into the sea.”

The long hours for the ferry crews were different then, too.

“There were just two crews back when I started,” Earle says. “You worked seven days in a row. On Sundays, you did a double shift then switched to night shift for six of them. You worked until Sunday morning, and then started the whole thing over again on Monday.”

Approaching the dock at Stella, Captain Willard watches as Dianne brings the *Frontenac II* alongside, using time honoured “marks,” long established by the captains of yesterday.

Down below on the car deck, the crew throws the mooring lines with practised ease, the large “eyes” connecting perfectly with the dock bollards.

“You know, I’ll miss the crew,” Earle says, watching the cars drive off.

“They’ve been good to me, over the years.”

“What are your plans, Earle?” I ask, somewhat anxiously, because, after all, just where do retired ferry skippers go, after you’ve rung “finished with engines” for the final time.

“My wife Donna has set that up,” he says, laughing.

“I’ve been told I’ve got to help out more in the kitchen.”

Well, well. Maybe I better polish up on my culinary skills too, for that final day, sometime down the road.

Yeah... right!

One long and two short blasts, Earle. Have a Happy Retirement!

□ Brian Johnson is the Captain of the Wolfe Islander III.

‘If you let your guard down, even once, the ol’ boat would catch you, every time.’

— Senior Captain Earle Willard

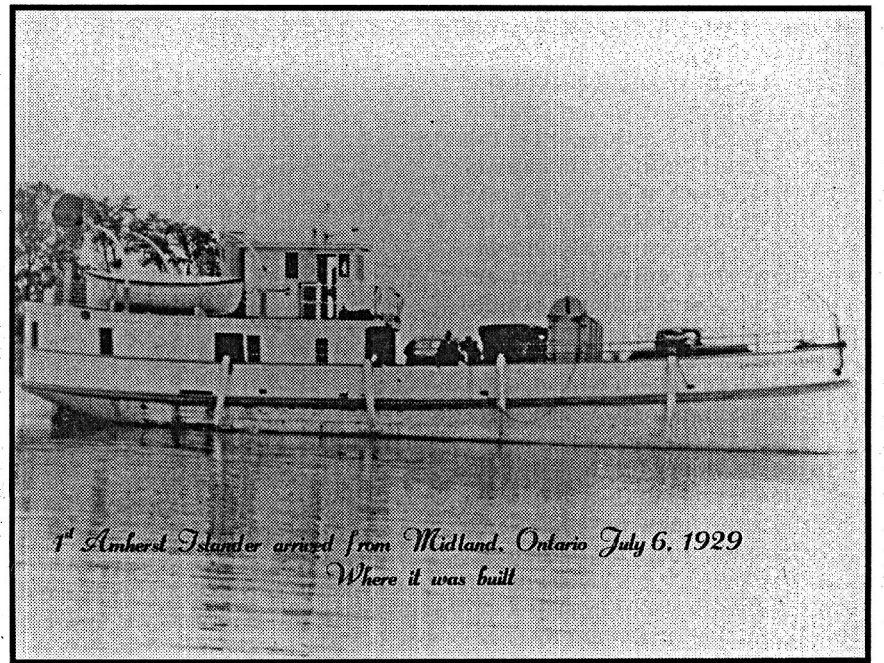


Photo courtesy Brian Johnson

The first Amherst Islander, which was built in Midland, Ont., was a small, wooden-hulled ferry that came into service in Loyalist Township in 1929.

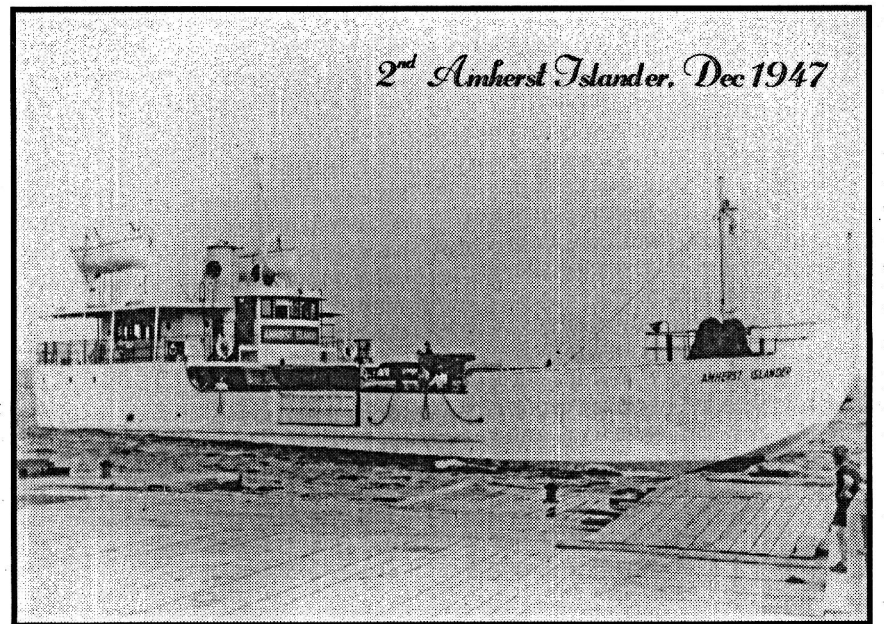


Photo courtesy Brian Johnson

The second Amherst Islander is shown in December, 1947. It was a former Second World War tank landing craft.

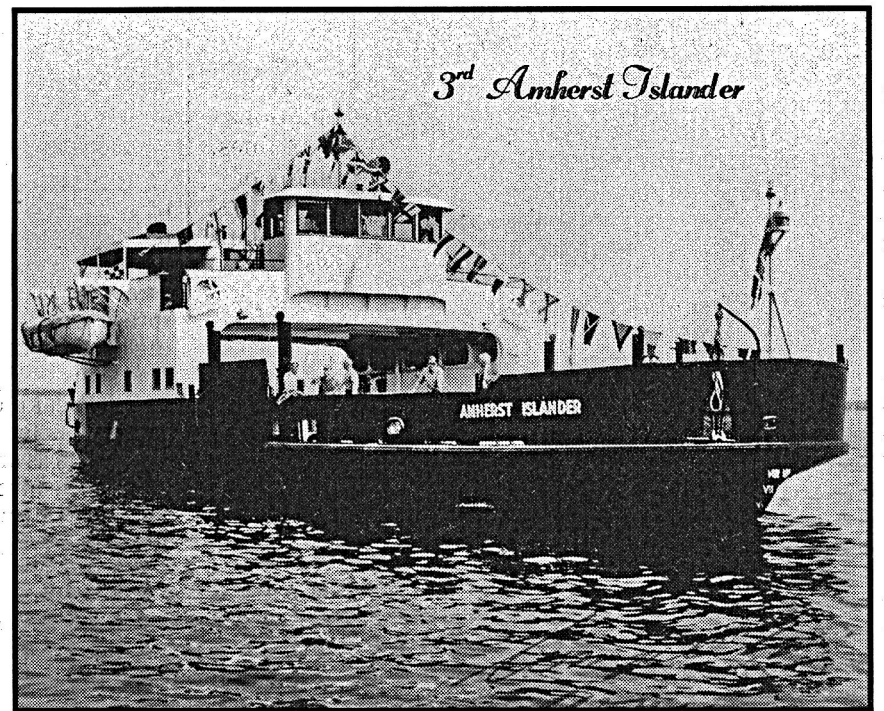


Photo courtesy Brian Johnson

The third Amherst Islander was a sturdy 18-vessel boat, built at the Kingston shipyards in 1955.

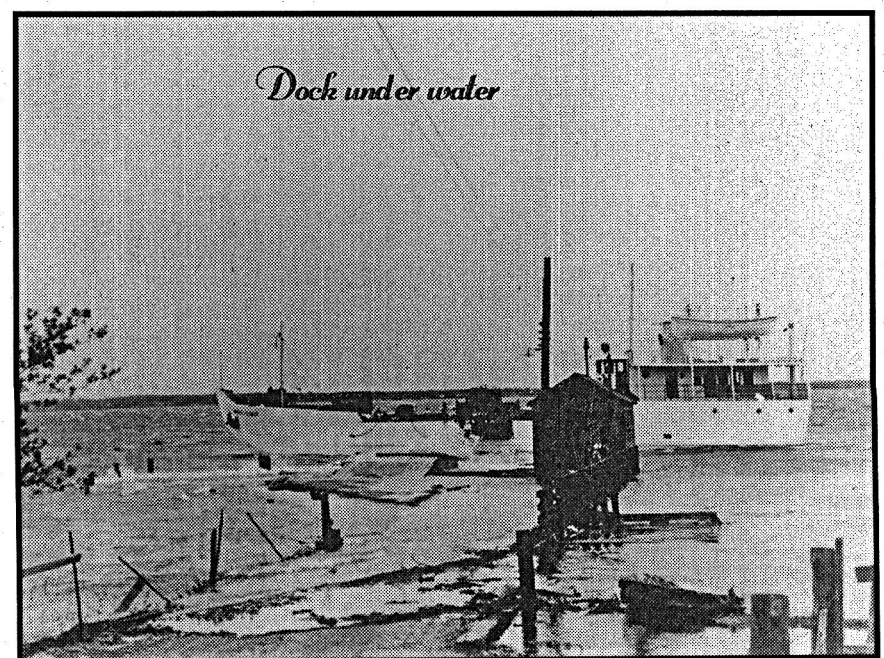


Photo courtesy Brian Johnson

High water levels in the summer of 1951 resulted in the ferry dock on Amherst Island being submerged.