

Old-timer recalls 1st trip on ferry

Oscar Stensby is spending the days of his retirement in a one-room converted children's playhouse on the Clute Road.

Few people realize the prominent place that Oscar has in Cochrane's folklore.

It was the summer of 1936, when the provincial highways department finally decided to put a cable ferry across the Abitibi River at the Gardiner crossing. Oscar was working, hauling fill from the river banks, in an attempt to lessen the grade on hills on both sides of the river. When the ferry was put into the water, Oscar, his team of four horses, and their load of fill were the first customers to use it.

Today, Oscar recalls, "The horses didn't mind being driven onto the ferry. But when they saw that ferry start moving away from the shore, they were a little scared, all right."

In those days ferries were common in Cochrane. They were cheaper to use crossing the Frederickhouse and Abitibi Rivers, than building bridges.

Getting the province to put a ferry in the Abitibi at Gardiner however, took years of persuasion by the local residents.

At the time, Oscar owned a small homestead north-west of the crossing, and he and other residents had to use a rickety old boat to cross the Abitibi River.

"It was just an old row boat that leaked like the dickens," Oscar says.

"In the spring of 1936, two fellows were crossing the river in that old boat when it sank right out from under them. One guy drowned, and another swam to shore."

"It wasn't too many days later when the lumber was delivered to the shoreline to build a ferry. Every year we tried to get them to put a ferry in,

and get rid of that old rotten row boat. It took something like a drowning to get them to do it," Oscar points out.

Oscar remembers the first ferry as being very small. It was operated by a Finn, who had to turn a crank by hand to get the ferry along the cable across the river.

"That ferry was pretty small, all it would carry was a team of horses and a wagon. It could carry one car, but few cars were used. They couldn't make it up the clay banks on either side of the river," Oscar says.

The second ferry was a little larger, and it too was built in Cochrane. After it was in service for a couple of years, a small tractor motor operated the crank to pull the ferry across the river.

Years later, when a new ferry was acquired for the Abitibi River at the East Highway crossing, the old steel ferry was moved over to Gardiner. And when the bailey bridge was built over the Abitibi, the steel ferry, that is presently in use, was transferred to Gardiner.

It is not enough that Oscar was the first passenger on the Gardiner Ferry, he was one of the former ferry operators, working on the swing shift one day per week, starting in 1970 and working until his retirement in 1974.

It was just one of many jobs Oscar held during his illustrious career in the Cochrane district.

He was born in Norway, and in 1926, when he was 17 years old he was working on a farm in his homeland, when he noticed an advertisement calling for bushworkers in Canada.

Bushworkers were offered a salary of \$45. a month, which is three times what Oscar was making in Norway.

He gathered together his life's

savings and got on the boat for Canada, setting his feet on Canadian soil for the first time on Oct. 3, 1926. He then travelled by train from Quebec City to the bush west of Kapuskasing, where he immediately began working for Hawke Lake Lumber Co., which one had its headquarters in Cochrane.

By the spring of 1927, Oscar was "fed up" with bush work, and moved back east of Cochrane, where, for years he worked during the winter felling trees.

During the 50's and 60's Oscar worked as a tractor operator hauling logs out of the bush.

"I have worked around Cochrane all my life. I like it here, that is why I am staying," Oscar says.

In his retirement, Oscar lives in his one-room house on the Clute Road, travelling into Cochrane once a week with his friend Jim Linklater.

"I prefer to stay here, but next winter I might have to move into Cochrane. Winters are a little harder in a place like this," Oscar says.

Right now, he is trying to build up his supply of firewood for the winter. Last year he bought a log splitter, which he admits splits wood a lot easier than using an axe.

And he still has fond memories of the Gardiner Ferry.

"They say it is the last cable ferry in Ontario, so I hope they keep it. There aren't many but there aren't many people living across the river anymore," he says.

There are plans to extend Blount Road into the Gardiner forest to accommodate logging trucks. That would provide an alternative to the ferry.