

T. P. PHELAN REVISITED

Our Ship of the Month No. 182 in the April issue was the steamer ROSAMOND BILLETT, which was built as a sandsucker for Lake Winnipeg service, which was broken up and reassembled at Trois-Rivieres as the C.S.L. canaller T.P. PHELAN. She later became a sand boat once again and ended her days in tragic manner on Lake Erie under the name HOWARD S. GERKEN. We are pleased that our members once again rallied 'round when we requested further information and photos of this elusive vessel, and we are happy to present the results of their efforts in this issue.

Donald McCartney, of Toronto, came up with a postcard which shows ROSAMOND BILLETT moored at a pier with a lighthouse on it, and we presume that it was taken at the entrance from Lake Winnipeg into the Red River. The BILLETT seems to be the object of some considerable interest, judging by all the people gathered on the pier, and we wonder whether they might actually have been out on an excursion aboard her. The photo is significant in that it confirms that the BILLETT had two spuds, one forward on the port side and one aft on the starboard side.

Another photo of the BILLETT, likewise taken from a private postcard, comes to us from Rev. Raymond M. Donahue, of Algonac, Michigan. It shows the BILLETT in the act of digging sand, and illustrates not only the suction pipe slung out over the fantail, but also the contraption of pipes raised into position and carrying dredged material forward to the hold. Of particular interest is the large pile of cordwood on deck beside the after cabin. This was fuel for the steamer, as coal was not then readily available in the Winnipeg area for steamboat bunkers.

This photo also makes us wonder whether the house atop the after cabin actually was the pilothouse. We begin to suspect that the steamer was navigated from the cabin on the forecastle, while the upper house aft may have been used by the pumpman during dredging operations.

The photo of T. P. PHELAN, the best we ever have seen of her, comes to us from Don Boone, of Collingwood. It is a Hayward photo, taken at Montreal, and Don advises us that the date on the back of the photo is 1920, indicating that it was taken during her last year of C.S.L. service.

Ron Beaupre, who originated the feature on the PHELAN, advises that T.M.H.S. member George Ayoub, of Ottawa, has found that the "steam barge" T. P. PHELAN went aground on September 15, 1918 (shortly after her commissioning), at Ile Hartelle, between Montreal and Quebec City. She apparently was refloated without significant damage. This report was taken from the wreck reports contained in the 1919 Sessional Papers.

A substantial amount of information concerning the August 17, 1920, stranding of T. P. PHELAN at Iroquois comes to us from William P. Palmer, formerly of Ogdensburg, New York, and latterly of River Falls, Wisconsin. Correspondence from Mr. Palmer was forwarded to us by T.M.H.S. member C. Patrick Labadie, of Duluth.

Mr. Palmer, a young boy at the time, was summering at Iroquois when the PHELAN suffered her 1920 stranding. The incident occurred just after dawn, when young Palmer, admittedly, was still "in the arms of Morpheus", and so he did not see the ship go ashore. He did, however, speak with local cottagers who witnessed the grounding and they said that the PHELAN made two complete circles in the wider reach of the river above Iroquois Point before fetching up on a shoal some 150 feet or so and with her bow facing upriver in the nine-mile current.

Press reports indicated that the ship was 400 feet from shore, but Palmer is quite certain that such was not the case, or else the PHELAN would have been in the channel, and there was no buoy out there marking any shoal in the navigable channel.