

SOUTHERN BELLE

The summer of 1992 has been one of the coldest and wettest on record in the Great Lakes area, and most residents of the region have spent their rainy weekends dreaming of those perfect, long and hot summers of the past. Those of us who are shipping enthusiasts not only remember those more comfortable summers, but also those during which we could while away the hours on the decks of a passenger steamer.

Those palmy days, however, are receding ever farther into distant memory for those of us who were privileged to enjoy them firsthand, and many of our younger members never did enjoy the pleasures of riding the passenger boats, much less hearing the pounding of paddlewheels in some of the big steamers.

On Lake Ontario, the large, cross-lake, passenger steamers have been gone for many years, and it is difficult for those of us who knew her so well to realize that even the propellor CAYUGA went out of service 35 years ago come Labour Day! So as we already have featured CAYUGA in these pages, we thought that we should remember in this issue another Lake Ontario passenger vessel of the past, and we chose the early sidewheeler SOUTHERN BELLE which, interestingly enough, was broken up exactly one hundred years ago. We suspect that many of our readers have never heard of this most important steamer.

SOUTHERN BELLE began her life back in 1861, when she was built at Renfrew, Scotland, by William Simons & Company. Christened (a) ROTHESAY CASTLE, she was an iron-hulled, sidewheel steamer, with a length of 191.5 feet, a beam of hull of 28.9 feet, and a depth of 8.4 feet. We have no information concerning the breadth of her main deck over the guards. Her original tonnage was recorded as 177, but notation was lacking as to whether this was a Gross or Net measurement. Considering her style of construction, there would not have been a great deal of difference between those methods of calculating tonnage.

ROTHESAY CASTLE was, in the fashion of the day for such steamers, powered by oscillating machinery. There were two identical engines, each with a cylinder of 40 inches bore and a 46 inch stroke, and these were connected to a single paddleshaft, at either end of which were radial (non-feathering) sidewheels of 26-foot diameter.

Oscillating engines were totally unlike anything seen in these parts in recent memory. Whereas most sidewheelers were powered by vertical beam engines, or else by inclined compound or triple expansion machinery, in each of these types the cylinders being fixed in position and exerting power to the shaft by means of connecting rods attached to the cranks on the shaft, an oscillating engine featured a cylinder which was hinged at one end. Thus the whole cylinder rocked up and down as the piston moved in and out, hence transmitting motion directly to the cranks on the paddleshaft. Perhaps the other most famous example of this type of machinery on the lakes could be found in the famous Niagara steamer CHICORA, which actually was very similar in origin, vintage and type to ROTHESAY CASTLE. CHICORA, however, enjoyed a much longer and more successful career.

ROTHESAY CASTLE originally was owned by Alexander Watson, of Lanarkshire, Scotland, who operated her on the River Clyde in a fast service between Broomielaw, in the environs of Glasgow, and Rothesay, a popular excursion destination. She performed so well in her intended duties that she was able to establish a speed record over the 60-mile run of 2 hours and 28 minutes. ROTHESAY CASTLE carried mostly deck passengers, although some light freight probably was moved as well, when required.

She was a typical excursion steamer of her day for the British Isles. She had a long and low-slung hull, with a very marked sheer to her deck. She had a straight stem, a finely-cut counter stern, and almost no superstructure above the main deck. She had two very large paddleboxes to house her big radial wheels, and her two heavily-raked smokestacks were set far apart and in tandem. Her single tall, finely-raked and heavy fidded mast was set forward