

FIVE LITTLE FERRYBOATS

The Toronto Island ferries long have been popular amongst the residents of this city, for whom they have provided welcome respite from the heat of the summer on the city's streets. Despite the inner city's reputation as being one of the "greenest" of large North American cities, the prevailing winds hit the city from the landward side, rather than coming in off Lake Ontario, and summer days frequently are not "temperate". As a consequence, the city's residents long have appreciated the relief available on the low-lying Toronto Islands, a crescent-shaped archipelago of sandy islands formed by the long-shore drift of the lake from the detritus deposited into Lake Ontario by the Scarborough Bluffs, which are located on the north shore of the lake, east of the city. Lake Ontario is very deep at its centre, and thus its waters are cold and provide natural air-conditioning on the Islands, which are separated by a bay about a mile wide (at its widest point) from the downtown core.

The Toronto Islands have provided open park space, summer cottage and tenting areas, and amusement park facilities for visitors from the city. The Islands (then still attached to the mainland at their remote east end, as they would be for more than twenty years more before being severed by a storm) were first served by a horseboat named SIR JOHN OF THE PENINSULA, which began running in 1833. A major amusement park, with a large hotel (the Hotel Hanlan), was developed on Hanlan's Point in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, but most of it was destroyed by fire in 1909. (Sadly, the tail-end of the fire also claimed the elegant, "gingerbread" Hotel Hanlan.) Centre Island had a big summer community and uniquely antique "business district" of shops for many years until it was flattened by Metropolitan politicians in favour of hundreds of acres of grass and trees in 1960. Rows of Victorian-style cottages had been built from the 1880s into the 1920s in various parts of the Islands, but all were levelled for sterile parkland through the 1960s. All that now remains of housing on the Islands is a small, former-tentsite cottage community on Ward's Island, together with the neighbouring Algonquin Island, which was filled in the late 1930s with houses barged over from the West Island Drive sandbar area of Hanlan's Point when the Island Airport was built and the old Regatta Lagoon was filled in.

Over the years, there were horse-powered ferries to the Islands, steamers and diesel-powered ferries, and even a cable-ferry across the Western Gap to the Island Airport. There have been large boats and small, sidewheelers and propellers, double-enders and single-enders, side-loaders and end-loaders, and even ferries which could load on both the main and upper deck at the same time.

But regardless of the fact that larger vessels, such as the big double-ended sidewheelers MAYFLOWER and PRIMROSE (of 1890) had been running on Toronto Bay for many years, joined in 1906 by the magnificent BLUEBELL and in 1910 by her near-sister TRILLIUM (today's only survivor of the glory days of the ferry service), the most popular ferries for many years were the smaller steamers, with which the travelling public could more readily develop a personal affinity. One of the poems in a small book of verse entitled The Island, by Estelle M. Kerr, which was distributed at one Christmas early in the twentieth century by Lawrence J. "Lol" Solman, long the principal of the Toronto Ferry Company (as well as the Hanlan's Point amusement park, the Toronto Maple Leafs triple-A baseball club, and operator of the Hotel Hanlan as well as the Royal Alexandra Theatre in the city), stated in part:

"The Island fathers then, who missed
The single morning boat must row,
But two boats plied each afternoon;
Perhaps they were a trifle slow,