

NORONIC REMEMBERED

Anniversaries are generally regarded as happy events, when pleasant times from the past are remembered with fondness. But in the early morning hours of Friday, September 17th, 1999, there will occur the fiftieth anniversary of the one local event that still brings chills of horror to those Torontonians who can recall it. And, despite the fact that he was but an infant at the time, your Editor does remember the holocaust that he witnessed from across Toronto Bay, taken down to the water by his father, who was himself awakened by the shrilling sound of a ship's steam whistle sounding continuously until there was no more steam, and some even less agreeable sounds blended in with the wailing of the sirens of fire trucks and ambulances.

For, in the early hours of Saturday, September 17th, 1949, the Canada Steamship Lines Ltd. upper lakes passenger and package freight steamer NORONIC was gutted by fire whilst lying along the west side of the company's passenger pier at the foot of Yonge Street (where the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel now stands). To make matters worse, the fire which destroyed the ship while she was on a post-season cruise with mostly U.S. residents aboard, was of "mysterious" origin, and claimed more lives than any other single event ever to occur within the confines (then or now) of the City of Toronto.

We have never made NORONIC a "Scanner" Ship of the Month, and will not do so now, for we have no desire to do our usual in-depth story of event which brought so much grief to so many people, and which produced some of the most shocking press photographs that we ever have seen. They will remain enclosed in our Northern Navigation photo album, while we recall the less newsworthy events of NORONIC's life, and enjoy viewing two of the best photos we ever have seen, taken by Jim Kidd as the steamer passed upbound underneath the Ambassador Bridge over the Detroit River on June 3rd, 1949. They show the ship in happier times, with carefree vacationers on her decks, about to enjoy a scenic trip up the lakes.

NORONIC (C.134014) was built as Hull No. 6 of the Western Dry Dock and Ship Building Company Ltd. at Port Arthur, Ontario, and she was launched on June 2nd, 1913. She was 362.0 x 52.0 x 24.8, 6905 Gross and 3935 Net, and was powered by a four-cylinder, triple expansion engine having cylinders of 29½, 47½, 58 and 58 inches bore, and a stroke of 42 inches. Steam was provided by four coal-fired, single-ended Scotch boilers each measuring 15'6" by 11'0". All of the machinery was manufactured by the American Ship Building Company at Cleveland, Ohio.

NORONIC, unlike her handsome running-mates HURONIC, of 1902, and HAMONIC, of 1909, was not a beautiful racer, but rather was a high, boxy and almost sheerless vessel with little open promenade space. Indeed, she soon proved to be unstable, and in 1915 was taken in hand by the American Ship Building Company at Lorain, Ohio, and was "bustled out" six feet in breadth at the waterline to give her more stability. This did nothing at all to better her appearance, but it did improve her operation, and she proved to be a reliable and popular vessel, serving the route from Windsor and Sarnia to the Canadian and American Lakeheads for over forty years. After the opening of the new Welland Ship Canal to vessels of more than old-canal dimensions, NORONIC was a regular post-season visitor to Toronto, carrying many charter passengers to this city over the years. A new and higher pilothouse was fitted aboard NORONIC in the last few years of her life and, in our opinion, this did improve her appearance somewhat.

There will be those who will dwell on the extremely unfortunate events of fifty years ago. We, however, prefer to recall a long-serving passenger steamer which served a very popular route, and which brought much happiness to those who cruised the lakes on her decks for so many years. Let us keep those pleasant thoughts in mind as we view the photographs that Jim Kidd took so long ago from a bridge, as a passenger steamer, bound for the scenic wonders of the upper Great Lakes, passed beneath.