

MANITOBA

- by Ronald F. Beaupre -
with the Editor

Shortly before dawn on Saturday, November 7, 1885, the upbound Canadian Pacific Railway Company lake steamer ALGOMA, one of three near-sisterships built on the Clyde in 1883 and commissioned in 1884, ran up onto Greenstone Rock, near the northeastern end of Isle Royale in Lake Superior. The grounding took place in near hurricane-force conditions and ALGOMA was broken in two, destroying the ship and killing 33 out of 47 crew members and 13 out of her 15 passengers. This accident, the only one involving loss of life in the entire history of the C.P.R. lake service, severely curtailed the company's service from Owen Sound to Port Arthur. It left the two remaining sisterships, ALBERTA and ATHABASCA, to operate the service, but the C.P.R. was determined to re-establish its tri-weekly sailing schedule.

The first step taken was to find a vessel to serve as a temporary replacement, and this they found in the iron-hulled, 1873-built CAMPANA, (a) NORTH. The second was to locate a builder for a permanent replacement of the lost ALGOMA. The contract was let to the Polson Iron Works, of Toronto, on June 4th, 1888, and the cost of the vessel was to be \$132,000. The C.P.R. was to provide the machinery for the new steamer.

The Polson firm had never built a ship of this nature before. Neither had anyone else in Ontario, and the entire project of constructing a large steel ship was a first for Canada. William Polson had established Polson Iron Works in Toronto in 1883, and it was his son, Frank Polson, who was the driving force behind the project to build the new ship. The first challenge was to find a location above the Welland Canal to establish a new shipyard capable of producing the new steamer. Sarnia and Collingwood were considered, but it was Owen Sound that offered the most appealing incentives. The land was donated, property taxes were waived for a period of ten years, and a launch basin would be dredged by the city.

Frank Polson quickly set to work to build the new shipyard. On eight acres of land located northeast of the town centre, three new buildings were erected. Machines for cutting and rolling steel plates were ordered from Scotland. Shipwrights from Scotland were hired and brought to Owen Sound with their families. At the peak of the activity, the Polsons employed 300 men at the Owen Sound yard. There was a deadline to be met, for the C.P.R. wanted the new ship to be ready to enter service by March 1st, 1889. However, numerous delays were encountered, as shipments of workshop machinery and steel plate were slow to arrive from Scotland. We suspect that Henry Beatty, founder and manager of the C.P.R. lake steamer service, had specified that Siemens-Martin steel from Scotland was to be used in the construction of the new ship, as it was this type of steel that had been used in the ALGOMA, ALBERTA and ATHABASCA.

The work of dredging out the launch slip was not going well either. It was discovered that the sandy soil would shift into the slip, quickly replacing the material which had been removed. The town of Owen Sound approved a further expenditure of \$15,000 to complete the work, but it was the Polson Iron Works that completed the dredging by employing a large sand pump.

Over the winter of 1888-1889, the new steamer grew on the building ways. Steel plate was cut, rolled and fastened into place on the 146 frames that stood high above the waters of Owen Sound. We quote from The Polson Iron Works of Owen Sound by Bruce Rudolph: "The mild winter of 1889 aided in the progress of the MANITOBA and by mid-January, all the plates were in position up to the main deck".

The engines, boilers and other machinery for the new ship had been recovered from the wreck of the ALGOMA. Quoting from Shipwrecks of Isle Royale National Park, The Archeological Survey by Daniel J. Lenihan, we have: "The