

THE LOST WOLFE ISLAND FERRY SERVICE

- by Capt. Gerry Ouderkirk -
with The Editor

As early as 1960, the residents of Wolfe Island, the largest of the Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River, were calling for the replacement of the aging (1946) ferry WOLFE ISLANDER (II) as she was incapable of servicing the island on a year-round basis. The venerable steam tug SALVAGE PRINCE had been chartered for years to break a channel for the ISLANDER and her predecessor, between Kingston and the town of Marysville, but due to her draft, the PRINCE could not get right up to the dock. Passengers often were boarded and landed on the ice half a mile from shore, and shuttled the rest of the way by sleigh - or else they walked. Islanders demanded that the Ontario government service them better. (A history of the Wolfe Island ferry service and the first WOLFE ISLANDER appeared as Ship of the Month No. 82 in the issue of March 1979.)

Many island residents were farmers or small merchants, but some commuted by ferry to Kingston for work or school. With the closing of navigation each winter, maintaining the route to the island became crucial. Air service was optional but costly, and crossing the ice was hazardous, as many Wolfe Islanders found out the hard way when their cars, trucks and sleighs broke through the ice; there were casualties.

The "B word" was bandied by Wolfe Island Council, referring to a permanent link across the three-mile stretch of water between Kingston and the island, and another bridge to connect the island across the St. Lawrence River to Clayton, New York. Wolfe Island, 21 miles long and seven miles wide, neatly divides the river between the two nations. Ferry service between Horne's Point on the island and Cape Vincent, N.Y., has been operated for many years by the Horne family with the ferry WILLIAM DARRELL. The bridge issue still is on the Wolfe Island agenda of developers who look at the 33,000 acres of mixed agricultural farmland lying off Kingston and dream of waterfront condos within minutes of downtown.

A series of events transpired in 1962 and 1963 which made Wolfe Island ferry service a political issue. Winter tug service had become a burden to the island, with the Township picking up a third of the cost and the province paying the balance. SALVAGE PRINCE failed to pass certification in 1963 due to boiler problems. Kingston's Pyke Salvage firm had been swallowed by the larger McAllister Towing, of Montreal, and the new owners saw diesel tugs as their future. They had no plans to repair the aging SALVAGE PRINCE, and she was retired after almost 40 years of hard service. McAllister-Pyke replaced the PRINCE at Kingston with another venerable steam tug, GRAEME STEWART, but she was unsuitable for icebreaking on the Wolfe Island route. The contract for icebreaking during the winter of 1963-1964 was awarded to Capt. Harry Gamble, of Port Dover, who utilized his diesel tug DOVER.

Plagued by an "out of kilter" tax assessment, the Wolfe Island Council sought greater financial assistance from the Ontario government. Highways Minister C.S. MacNaughton's department was asked in the spring of 1963 to assume all costs for icebreaking. A delegation of islanders met with William M. Nickle (MLA - Kingston and The Islands) after council disclosed to Capt. Gerald Naish that its finances prevented signing of the 1963 contract. McAllister-Pyke's tug rate had been set at \$450 a day plus \$90 an hour for use in excess of eight hours. Capt. Naish was quoted in the "Kingston Whig Standard" as saying: "We've pared our costs to the bone. We can't operate at a deficit, and actually, we've only a moral obligation to clear a path for the ISLANDER." Captain Naish, former master of the Foundation Company of Canada's famous ocean tug FOUNDATION JOSEPHINE, had moved from Halifax to become manager of McAllister-Pyke's Kingston office, but many former Pyke employees hailed from Wolfe Island, as had the company's founder, Captain Grant Pyke.