

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 8, 2017

Steamboat Services in North America in the Mid-20th Century: As a young travel agent in 1949, I had to learn fast about travel opportunities everywhere. I was helped along in great measure by my partner, Alexander M. Burton, who had about 15 years' experience in the industry, working much of the time for the American Express Company in New York. Although transatlantic crossings and ocean cruises (along with tours) were the life blood of travel agents before the influx of the airline industry, a lot of domestic steamboat cruises were still available, offering a sailing experience and good meals in old ships at very reasonable rates.

The Eastern Steamship Company, nearing the end of its operations, still offered East Coast trips on an old ship named the "Evangeline" from Philadelphia to Boston and on to Halifax, Nova Scotia. At an earlier time, the Merchants and Miners Steamship Company had passenger steamers serving most ports along the Atlantic coast. There was also lively competition on overnight steamers from New York to Boston, but this service was terminated in the 1930s.

The Hudson River Day Line was the survivor of many steamboat services on the Hudson River between New York and Albany. At one time, competition existed among lines operating river steamers speeding from New York to Poughkeepsie, New York to Kingston, etc. The Day Line offered excellent scenery for most of its 150-mile trip, but by 1950 it had been cut back to only special excursions to Albany and more numerous shorter trips from New York to Bear Mountain, etc.

Canada Steamship Lines, based in Montreal, had three or four old passenger steamers in service on the St. Lawrence River. The flagship of this group was the "S. S. Richelieu," and service from Montreal was offered to Quebec City, Tadoussac, the scenic Saguenay River, and a luxury company-owned hotel at Murray Bay, Quebec.

The Baltimore Steam Packet Company (the "Old Bay Line") operated very old passenger steamers on the Chesapeake Bay from Baltimore to Old Point Comfort, Portsmouth, and Norfolk, Virginia. Boats like the "State of Maryland," and the "State of Virginia," made it convenient to make the overnight journey, certainly more comfortable and with better food than on the railroads' sleeping cars.

When the first Glidden Tour Revival (a progressive tour) was staged in 1946, a Philadelphia-New York contingent joined the Boston contingent at Albany, New York, and traveled together to Buffalo, where they boarded (cars and passengers) one of the Detroit and Cleveland Navigation Company's Great Lakes steamers for Detroit. The D & C had several ships offering summer passenger service to Cleveland, Chicago, Mackinac Island, and Duluth, but this service was terminated in the early 1950s. My mother and her niece Elizabeth (Betty) Roberts took a cruise in the early 1930s from Erie, Pennsylvania, to Duluth and return. Offering competition to the D & C was the Georgian Bay Line, with more modern ships named the "North American" and the "South American." This service continued until the late 1960s. I saw one of these ships anchored off Mackinac Island in 1958.

Steamboat service on the Mississippi River and its tributaries has lasted nearly 200 years, but for the latter half of that time, vacation cruises have kept the service going. In the 19th century, steamboats could ply the Missouri River as far northwest as Fort Benton, Montana, some 40 miles downstream from Great Falls. In 1950, the Greene Line was still operating passenger paddle-wheel steamboats from its headquarters in Cincinnati on the Ohio, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers. Its older ship, the "Gordon C. Greene," was soon retired, but its "Delta Queen," built in 1926, was possibly the most famous paddle-wheel steamboat in North America. Eventually, the company changed its name to the Delta Line, and the "Queen" received many grandfathered reprieves from Federal regulators before being retired finally about 2000. When Ruth and I went on the new "American Queen" from St. Paul to St. Louis in 1995, cruises were operated from St. Paul to New Orleans on the Mississippi, from Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville on the Ohio, and from Nashville on the Cumberland River. Occasionally, trips were made up the Tennessee, Arkansas and Red Rivers, and along the Texas coast. While many new river boats are in service today, most of them having paddle-wheels, very few if any are operated by steam engines.

On the West Coast, paddle wheel steamboats operated on the Sacramento River from California's capital to San Francisco, and coastal services from the Northwest to Alaska were very popular. The Alaska Steamship Company, probably owned by the western railroads, had service from Seattle to several Alaskan ports including Seward, the port for Anchorage. Canadian Pacific was also very active along this coast, with a group of "Princess" steamers operating from Vancouver to Skagway, where a connection was made with the narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon Railroad, carrying

passengers into the Yukon Territory at Whitehorse on the Yukon River (originally navigable for steamboats). In 1972, the "Princess Louise," then retired from active service, was tied up and operated as a restaurant in Long Beach, California. I enjoyed a very nice dinner aboard with my California friends, Anthony and Ollie Rippo.

While the standard for food and service was probably inferior to that on ocean-going cruise ships, these river, lake, and coastal trips, usually sold in connection with a railroad ticket to and from, offered interesting ports and activities at a very reasonable cost. I sold group tours on the Canada Steamship Lines to the Harmony Grange and to the Avondale Young Adult Group, and Marshall & Burton ran our own rail-and-steamship tour to Alaska in 1953 using the Northern Pacific Railroad and Alaska Steamship Lines.