

THE CRUISE OF THE STEEL STEAMER:  
*SS Beaver on the Lower Fraser River Route,*  
1898–1926

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**I**N BRITISH COLUMBIA, newly named vessels earn the “Beaver” matronymic under the weight of great expectations. This single word swells with the spirit of colonial-era trading and exploration, arising from the first such-named vessel, the original *Beaver*, a steamer built in England in 1835 and owned by the Hudson’s Bay Company. This wooden side-wheeler plied the rivers and oceans of precolonial British Columbia before being marooned upon the rocks at Prospect Point, near Vancouver, in 1870. As she rotted and was slowly looted, this much-photographed steamboat was only beginning to be transformed, through the tributes and eulogies given by historians, into a cultural icon of the frontier exploration and conquest of British Columbia by newcomer settlers. Because of the heritage and culture embedded within the name “Beaver,” only one paddlewheel steamer could be given the same name of this evolving cultural icon, and such a boat had to be known as a special vessel, even before it was built.<sup>1</sup>

In 1898, at Albion Iron Works, in the inner harbour of Victoria, British Columbia, “a new shipyard has sprung into existence, in which the first stern-wheeled, steel vessel ever put together in this province is to be built!” This was an unprecedented year for shipbuilding in British Columbia, where several new sternwheel boats designed to conquer the Yukon rivers were being assembled in Victoria and New Westminster. Of course, most boat builders were also woodworkers, but this new steel steamer being built for Canada Pacific Navigation (CPN) mainly needed ironworkers

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the HBC-owned *SS Beaver*, please read William Hageland, *The Dowager Queen: The Hudson’s Bay SS Beaver* (Surrey: Hancock House, 2004); or James Delgado, *The Beaver: First Steamship on the West Coast* (Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1993).

to build the hull, which was made of “fifteen watertight compartments of steel.” From this newly erected shipyard arose “the deafening noise from the mechanics working on the new CPN steamer” as boat builders loudly drove rivets into steel instead of hammering fastenings into wood. This riverboat was important for Victoria and was necessary to demonstrate to the century that still lay ahead that “Victoria is as capable of producing steel vessels as of any other kind.”<sup>2</sup>

At that time, James Rebbeck, an engineer with Albion Iron Works, wrote to his friend to brag about the innovations he had embedded in this new but yet unnamed steel steamer: “She is the only stern wheeler in this country and probably in North America built without hog posts and chains!” A feature common to all wooden sternwheelers was the “hog posts,” or “king posts,” that poked through the centre of the top deck and were connected by iron rods called “hog chains.” These hog posts and chains were often decorated with flags or lights, and they were also vital to wooden, low-draft riverboats for maintaining the strength and shape of the boat, and keeping the bow and stern from sagging. These were also the parts of the riverboat that commonly broke when steamers grounded on sandbars – a frequent hazard on the Fraser River. The new steamer, with its unique hull, didn’t need these posts or chains, and Rebbeck reasoned that this was because of how little the steamer vibrated while on the river. This boat was intended to be both fast and “way ahead of anything else in these parts in fuel economy.”<sup>3</sup>

On the evening of 23 April 1898 at Albion Iron Works, “a crowd of about 1000 had collected, lining both wharves and filled the yard, also crowding the deck of the boat” in anticipation of the official launch of the new steel steamer. But merely having a strengthened hull was not enough to explain the public interest in this new riverboat. CPN already owned three steel, steam-powered, ocean-faring vessels, but in 1898 a steel-hull, low-draft steamboat was still a rarity, and such vessels were mainly built in shipyards far away, not on the west coast of Canada. After the launch and public festivities, newspapers noted how the vessel remained unnamed, and speculation that evening turned to its being named the SS *John Irving*, after a man who, alongside his father William,

<sup>2</sup> Eleanore Dempster, “Gold and Steam Engines, Pt 2,” *British Columbia Genealogist* 24, no. 3 (1995): 56–61; Edward Affleck, “Navigation on the Stikine River, 1862–1969,” *Sea Chest* 32, no. 1 (1998): 42.

<sup>3</sup> British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Carl Timms, tape T2195:1; BCA, MS-3254, Earl Marsh Collection, box 7, file 6; Dempster, “Gold and Steam Engines,” 56–61.



Figure 1. The SS *Beaver* on the Fraser River. Photo courtesy of BC Archive and Record Service, Item B-08438.

controlled the Fraser River shipping industry for decades from his New Westminster base.<sup>4</sup>

With high anticipation and before an assembled crowd of admirers, Captain John Irving named this boat after the most famous steam-powered boat in British Columbia known up to that point: the SS *Beaver*. Short-term nostalgia for the pioneering HBC vessel had already been forming: two major books had already been written on the first SS *Beaver*, and there were many more to come. Although being a namesake boat is intended as an honour, the contributions of this long-standing Fraser River steamer are unacknowledged and overlooked due to the abundance of historical literature on the wooden HBC vessel. By being a namesake ship, the SS *Beaver* embodied the heritage of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Irving family throughout the Fraser Valley, and dominated Fraser River shipping in a similar manner.

#### SS BEAVER: AN INTRODUCTION

Maritime historians treat the SS *Beaver* as the standard-bearer of steamers on the lower Fraser River route, between New Westminster and Chilliwack Landing, based on a comparison of length and quality

<sup>4</sup> "The Waterfront," *Victoria Times*, 23 April 1898, n.p.; "More New Vessels," *Victoria Daily Colonist* (hereafter *VC*), 19 January 1898, 8; "The Local Shipyards," 24 April 1898, 8; Mills Marine List No. 005040, "SS *Beaver*."

of service. For fifteen years, this steady, alcohol-abstaining boat bumped past the tree snags and sandbars that consistently harmed its maladroit competitor, the SS *Ramona*, among other riverboats. Each of her six captains was grand and distinctive as part of their job required them to use their character and reputation to build relationships and to promote the business of the steamer in face-to-face encounters with the farmers located close to the Fraser River. In an era that lacked workplace comfort, the rugged SS *Beaver* crew (comprised of Stó:lō, Métis, and settlers) commonly unloaded items knee-deep in mud, slept overnight on the boat deck, or worked many overtime hours when a competitor boat had broken down. Later, for three years the SS *Beaver* competed head-to-head with the BC Electric Railway (BCER) for Chilliwack customers, a circumstance that historical geographer Cole Harris believes happened only “rarely” in BC transportation history.<sup>5</sup>

The new steamer was born into a family of ships navigating under the CPN, which was an 1883 amalgamation of the assets of Captain John Irving and HBC managers, backed financially by a long list of affluent Victoria shareholders. From the 1880s onward, railway service had been gradually supplanting Fraser River steamers in communities along the northern bank, though steamboat travel thrived for decades in riverside communities like Fort Langley, Port Hammond, Port Haney, Clayburn, Mission, Sumas, Whonnock, Deroche, and Chilliwack Landing. According to Harris, by the twentieth century, riverboats had become an “inexpensive complement” to railway companies, as the competitor boat SS *Ramona* aligned more closely with the British Columbia Electric Railway (BCER) through these years.<sup>6</sup>

#### CAPTAIN ODIN ACCEPTS THE CALL

The tenure of the first master of the SS *Beaver*, Captain Pat Hickey, was very short due to disagreements over wages, and it was another master, Captain George Odin, who commanded the steamer when it first entered Fraser River service. The steel steamer began service immediately after the mainstay steamboat to Chilliwack Landing, the SS *Gladys*, was involved in starting the destructive New Westminster fire of 1898, which destroyed both the steamer and most of the downtown area. The SS

<sup>5</sup> Cole Harris, “Moving amid the Mountains, 1870–1930,” *BC Studies* 58 (Summer 1983): 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; David Farrell, “Keeping the Local Economy Afloat: Canadian Pacific Navigation and Ship-owning in Victoria, 1883–1901,” *Northern Mariner* VI, no. 1 (1996): 35; University of British Columbia (UBC) Special Collections, British Columbia Electric Company Fonds, box 97, file 97-11, Glover to Buntzen, 7 March 1902.

*Beaver* watched the famous fire on 10 September 1898 from across the Fraser River, where it was safely docked at Brownsville while awaiting service. For weeks during the chaotic aftermath of the blaze, until their competitors could find a replacement for the SS *Gladys*, the *Beaver* and the *Transfer* (the other CPN boat) enjoyed most of the Fraser River steamer traffic. Eventually, the SS *Beaver* officially took over the lower Fraser River route between New Westminster and Chilliwack Landing.<sup>7</sup>

CPN company ownership changed in 1901, when railway giant Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) purchased it and appointed a new superintendent, Captain James W. Troup. This former riverboat captain from Oregon had long been involved with managing steamships for John Irving on the lakes of the BC Interior. Months after the purchase, Troup recommended the following strategy for the SS *Beaver*:<sup>8</sup>

If a sale can be found for this steamer at any time I would recommend selling her as I do not consider that we are sufficiently interested in the New Westminster–Chilliwack route to maintain her excepting at a profit. We have competitors on that route who are the principal merchants of New Westminster, who own a steamer and who are more interested in maintaining a steamer service on the Fraser River than we can possibly be.<sup>9</sup>

Upon CPN's purchase in 1901, the new owners inherited only two Fraser River steamers – the SS *Beaver* and the SS *Transfer* – the remainder of the fourteen vessels being larger, ocean-faring ships. Troup “began to plan additions to the fleet as soon as he took charge,” according to Norman Hacking and W. Kaye Lamb, by purchasing additional ocean-faring liners to form the Princess fleet. Throughout the early 1900s, the CPR boats under Troup “handled the lion’s share of the coastal trade” because he prioritized ocean vessels and long-distance shipping, which brought in more revenue than Fraser River shipping. By 1904, the *Beaver* was the fastest steamer on the route, according to managers from Canada Public Works department, and “the best loved of all the boats” working on the Fraser River, according to historian Barrie Sanford. However, under Troup, Fraser River shipping had become of secondary importance.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Vancouver Maritime Museum (hereafter VMM), Hickey Collection, box 1, Assistant Manager to Hickey, 8 August 1898; “Local and Other Items,” *Chilliwack Progress* (hereafter *CP*), 14 September 1898, 1; BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Capt. Hollis Young, tape T6696:1&2.

<sup>8</sup> BCA, MS 3254, Earl Marsh Collection, box 7, file 11; Harris, “Moving amid the Mountains,” 14.

<sup>9</sup> BCA, MS-3254, Earl Marsh Collection, box 7, Troup to McNicholl, 25 September 1901.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Hacking and W. Kaye Lamb, *The Princess Story: A Century and a Half of West Coast Shipping* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1974), 186, 190, 191; Library and Archives Canada



Figure 2. *Beaver* under way. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Maritime Museum, Item LM2019.999.058.

In 1901, the new company owners made an important change to the SS *Beaver* – a change that mattered much to alcohol abstainers, particularly in the political context of the unfolding progressive era in British Columbia. According to the *Chilliwack Progress*: “It is generally known in Chilliwack that the *Beaver* does not sell intoxicating liquors.” This change was intended to appeal to the cluster of alcohol-abstaining Methodists who lived in Chilliwack. Historian Robert Smith informs us that the political power of the local Methodists was used to block Chilliwack drinking establishments and muster large majorities in favour of alcohol prohibition when plebiscites were offered. These Methodists were the very farmers to whom the SS *Beaver* wished to cater – people who knew well which riverboats served alcohol and which did not. This being the case, drinkers and young people generally travelled on the SS *Ramona* throughout these years, while the SS *Beaver* was known to carry the abstainers, thus having more cargo but fewer passengers.<sup>11</sup>

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(hereafter LAC), RG 11, vol. 4018, 13 October 1904, Keefer to Lafleur, Letter 641; Barrie Sanford, *Royal Metal: The People, Times and Trains of New Westminster Bridge* (Vancouver: National Railway Historical Society, 2004), 99.

<sup>11</sup> “Local and Other Items,” *CP*, 29 May 1901, 1; Robert Smith, “Bibles and Booze: Prohibition in Chilliwack in the Late 1800’s,” *BC Historical News* 12, no. 3 (1979): 8.

## CAPTAIN REID ENTERS THE PILOTHOUSE

After Frank Reid was promoted from mate to captain in 1902, newspapers suggested that the SS *Beaver* would “increase in popularity in the hands of the new captain,” suggesting that Reid possessed a more genial personality than did Odin. Captain Reid was born into a large established family from the Albion–Fort Langley area, but through his years on different Fraser River steamboats, he always claimed Maple Ridge as his home. His obituary recalled him as “one of the outstanding figures in the Fraser Valley in the heyday of river traffic” between New Westminster and Chilliwack Landing. However, given the hazards of his occupation, his career was not without blemish. His tenure with the steel steamer was generally steady until August 1906, when the SS *Beaver* spent a whole month in the newspapers.<sup>12</sup>

Captain Reid nearly capsized the SS *Beaver* with over 280 people aboard and, in so doing, helped attract public attention to the unregulated world of pleasure boating. During the early 1900s and earlier, riverboats commonly organized day-long excursions to nearby lakes in the Fraser Valley on weekends. While on a private cruise to Pitt Lake on 18 August 1906, the SS *Beaver* veered into the swing span of the new railway bridge that crossed the Fraser River at New Westminster. The boat was passing under the bridge before the span was entirely open and a log had jammed its rudder. Reid could not reverse the engine quickly enough to avoid colliding with the bridge and thereby almost capsized the steel steamer. Water entered the *Beaver* as it heeled over, causing it to lose “the upper part of its pilot house and occasioned a temporary panic amongst the passengers.” Fortunately, the final tally of damage only included one passenger who had been concussed by a falling flagpole, two people who had passed out from fright, and the damaged upper half of the pilothouse, which had smashed against the railway bridge arm while Reid was standing in it, steering the boat. “How Captain Reid managed to hold his position at the wheel and come out alive is a mystery,” one newspaper mused. Reid was later credited for correcting the direction of the SS *Beaver* in the final moments. Although the *Beaver* was able to return to service the next working day, this incident is cited as what, after months of investigation, eventually cost Captain Reid his job.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Local and Personal,” *CP*, 12 February 1902, 5; “Letter to the Editor,” *CP*, 9 April 1902, 4. Opposite the City website, <https://oppositethecity.wordpress.com/2016/03/19/abraham-reid-to-captain-frank-reid/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Beaver Collides with the Bridge,” *New Westminster Daily News* (hereafter *NWDN*), 20 August 1906, 2; “Suspend Captain Reid from Steamer Beaver,” *NWDN*, 14 December 1906, 1; and Sanford, *Royal Metal*, 82.

## STRIKES BY RIVERBOAT CREWS

“A spirit of revolt must have been in the air,” explains Norman Hacking, selecting the derogatory Chinook Jargon term for Salish people – “Siwash” – to emphasize the First Nations involvement with the “Siwash Strike” of August 1906. A week after the SS *Beaver* collided with the swing bridge, its deckhands, together with those of the SS *Ramona*, struck in protest against the long hours of work that were being imposed upon them by their respective captains. Historian Andrew Parnaby notices the paucity of organized labour unions on British Columbia’s waterfronts throughout most of this first decade of the twentieth century. In Vancouver, pioneering longshoremen formed Local 526, nicknamed “Bows and Arrows” because it was comprised mainly of First Nations men. That same year in New Westminster, dedicated longshoremen did not yet exist, a fact that was related to why the SS *Beaver* was on strike. Since the steamer crews in 1906 had acted as longshoremen as well as performing their crew duties, they wanted an additional forty cents per hour for work done after 8:00 p.m. And, to everyone’s surprise, CPN acceded to this demand – sort of. Records of wages paid to the SS *Beaver* crew suggest that, in August 1906, deckhands’ wages were increased to forty-five dollars per month and that four dedicated longshoreman positions were created at the New Westminster docks to unload boats in the evenings.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of longshoremen outside of New Westminster for Fraser River steamers meant that boat crews had to work both too late and too early, and commonly had to live and sleep onboard their vessels. One *Chilliwack Progress* story opens by describing the SS *Beaver* crew sleeping on the deck of the boat, while Norman Hacking narrates how the members of the *Beaver* crew who could not go home would sleep on the deck “on a pile of hay.” The twenty-hour workday was a problem common to all the Fraser River steamers: one deckhand on the nearby SS *Strathcona* recalled working “until sweat ran out of the heels of our boots.” Cowan McLeod remembers, on a competing boat, “sleeping on the freight deck with a case of canned salmon as a pillow.” Another SS *Beaver* crew member, Garnet Willis, recounted how the day began very early for riverboat crews at Chilliwack Landing. He described to

<sup>14</sup> BCA, MS-3254, box 10, file 8 “BC Coastal SS Service, List of Employees,”; “Local News Briefly Told,” *New Westminster British Columbian*, 9 August 1906, 7; Andrew Parnaby, *Citizen Docker: Making a New Deal on the Vancouver Waterfront, 1919–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 8–9; Norman Hacking, “Later Days of the Fraser River Sternwheelers,” *Sea Chest* 22, no. 3 (1989): 125.



Imbert Orchard the rush to load the SS *Beaver* before “that steamboat whistle every morning ... at 7:00 that old steamboat would be whistling.”<sup>15</sup>

#### STÓ:LŌ AND MÉTIS RIVERBOAT CREW MEMBERS

In a certain light, the SS *Beaver* appears to mimic the societal inequalities of its era, with newcomer settlers paying to lounge on the top deck while Indigenous men labour on the bottom deck. Historian Keith Thor Carlson, however, offers a sunnier vision of the work Stó:lō men performed during this colonization period (Stó:lō = “River and People of the River” in Halq’eméylem). He suggests the fact that they received adequate wages is proof of societal respect for their labour. Carlson believes that local Chilliwack Landing boats, like the SS *Beaver*, are an example of “the successful adaptation of Stó:lō people to the new economy. Economic opportunities were so great that Stó:lō men were able to demand relatively high wages for their skills.” In the larger pattern, the labour Stó:lō men performed on river steamers is but one example of how these Coast Salish people consistently worked and lived along the Fraser River.<sup>16</sup>

Garnet Willis described the sheer swagger of the riverboat crews at Chilliwack Landing. He recalled how “it was always a wonderful experience for me ... watching the deckhands. The deckhands were great big husky fellows as a rule, mostly big halfbreeds.” Willis told Imbert Orchard about the masculine persona of the riverboat crews, how these young men would show their strength by walking up the gangplank “with half a ton” of flour bags. After loading, Willis recalled how the crews would “have nothing to do until the next landing, and they’d lay around on the forward deck there at the bottom, and us kids would be up top, trying to pick out the huskiest one.” Willis describes his affinity for watching these riverboat crews, which inspired him to work alongside them on the SS *Beaver* later in his life.<sup>17</sup>

Surviving SS *Beaver* crew lists from 1906 and 1910 mainly show a different set of crew members for each year, of young men who generally do not appear in census records. The single exception is a Stó:lō man – Dan Milo from Skowkale First Nation, near Chilliwack – who is the

<sup>15</sup> “Freight Overboard,” *CP*, 23 October 1907, 1; Hacking, “Later Days of the Fraser River Sternwheelers,” 129; “Ship and Shore,” *Vancouver Province*, 26 March 1965, 13; “Local News Briefly Told,” *NWDN*, 11 August 1906, 7; BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Garnet Willis, tape T1096:1.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Carlson, ed., *You Are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada’s Pacific Coast History*, (Chilliwack: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 1997), 118.

<sup>17</sup> BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Garnet Willis, tape T1096:1



Figure 3. Chilliwack Landing and Skow. Image courtesy of the Chilliwack Museum and Archives, AM 203, “Chilliwack, the Garden of British Columbia.”

only deckhand to appear on both surviving employee lists for the *Beaver*. Another constant fixture aboard the SS *Beaver* was purser William Nesbitt. Only a bout of typhoid fever, which lasted for several weeks, kept Nesbitt from having a perfect attendance record on all the *Beaver*'s sailings. Nesbitt began on steamers during the 1890s, spent fifteen years with the SS *Beaver*, and was part owner of the last steamer on the lower Fraser River route, the SS *Skeena*.<sup>18</sup>

#### WESTERN TERMINUS: CHILLIWACK LANDING

While Frank Reid was the captain, a new Chilliwack home for the SS *Beaver* and the SS *Ramona* was built at Skwah First Nation. Construction of the new 1905 Chilliwack Landing facility coincided with the emergence of a new chief, Harry Stewart. Both Chief Harry and the previous chief, “Captain” Bob, are believed to have enjoyed friendly relations with the steamboat captains as they received an annual pass for free travel on all CPR boats. The New Westminster Indian agents regularly collected \$2.50 per month each from the SS *Beaver* and the

<sup>18</sup> BCA, MS-3254, box 10, file 8 “BC Coastal SS Service, List of Employees”; Chilliwack Museum and Archives, MS-24, file 21 “SS Skeena”; “WH Nesbitt Pioneer in BC Shipping, Dead,” *CP*, 1 December 1937, 1; “Local and Personal,” *CP*, 20 December 1905, 5; “Purely Personal,” *CP*, 14 February 1906, 1; “Purely Personal,” *CP*, 28 February 1906, 1; “Faithful Service,” *CP*, 24 September 1913, 4.

SS *Ramona* for landing fees on these chiefs' behalf. One feature of Skwah reserve that made it an agreeable location to host the community riverboat landing was the basic stability offered by the established hereditary chiefs who governed the landing facility. As such, a patina of riverboat culture will always overlay the Stó:lō people living at Skwah First Nation.<sup>19</sup>

According to Captain Joseph Herrling, while other Fraser River communities enjoyed permanent dock facilities, Chilliwack residents tolerated a "mud landing" due to the low grades of their flood-prone riverside location. The Fraser River redrew the riverbank annually and commonly damaged all the local riverboat-related infrastructure. Shortly after first being built, the Chilliwack Landing facility was engulfed by river sedimentation that formed sandbars. Because the new landing could not be reached by steamboat, in November 1906 the SS *Beaver* and the SS *Ramona* charged a seventy-five-cent-per-ton penalty to Chilliwack farmers for having to load or unload goods in the mud of lower Chilliwack Landing. To help relieve the situation, between 1907 and 1909 the federal government supplied these boats with a landing scow to ferry goods between the steamers and the warehouses located onshore. The shortcomings of this scow were held up for public ridicule on the various occasions when it either flipped or sank, and it became part of the larger criticism of the inadequacy of Chilliwack Landing – criticism that persisted until the BCER began service in Chilliwack in 1910.<sup>20</sup>

#### CAPTAIN GARDNER OFFERS HIS SERVICE

Captain Charles Gardner, fresh from piloting the SS *Bonanza King* on the Yukon River, stepped forward to replace Frank Reid in December 1906. Gardner began life as a Stó:lō boy living at Matsqui First Nation, later attending St. Mary's Indian Residential School across the Fraser River in Mission, British Columbia. As a teenager, he appeared to have been anointed for life aboard the SS *Beaver* when he first met Captain George Odin in the 1870s. At this time, Odin was new to British Columbia and was piloting the SS *Gem*. He was seeking a river route into Sumas Lake and "asked for someone to guide him up the river and into the lake." Young Charlie, who was tending the cattle of the Oblate

<sup>19</sup> Merlin Bunt and Trevor Williams, "The Last Steamboat Whistle: The Rise and Demise of Chilliwack Landing at Skwah First Nations, 1863–1928," *Northern Mariner*, XXVII, no. 3 (2017): 267–288; LAC, RG 10, vol. 1462, letter 582; LAC, RG 10, vol. 1464, letter 121; LAC, RG 10, vol. 1462, letter 70. Note: Neither the author nor this article represent the views of the Stó:lō Tribal Council or Skwah First Nation.

<sup>20</sup> Bunt and Williams, "Last Steamboat Whistle," 284; BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Capt. Joseph Herrling, tape T1225-18c2.

brothers, volunteered and piloted this small steamer through the deepest part of the river to Sumas Lake, for which Odin was so impressed he paid young Charlie for his efforts. As an adult, Gardner became the captain of the SS *Beaver*, his appointment being similar to that of George Odin years earlier.<sup>21</sup>

Of the six SS *Beaver* captains, three of whom were Métis, Charlie Gardner was the one most closely connected to the Salish people living in the Fraser Valley. In 1941, Gardner, or *Quotaseltill* as he was named by the Stó:lō, told the *Vancouver Sun* of his youth in the 1860s, of how “he rode down the great river with his grandfather in his long high-powered war canoe,” and of being taught by Matsqui reserve Elders how to “read water.” As an adult, he had spent many years connected to the steamboats at Chilliwack Landing, where he operated a livery business at Skwah First Nation until 1886, with his mother living among relatives on the nearby reserves. Gardner also groomed Métis men from Chilliwack to make their livelihoods on steamers, his protegee including Skeena River steamer captain Samuel Cromarty.<sup>22</sup>

#### CAPTAIN SEYMOUR AND THE HIGH POINT FOR FRASER RIVER STEAMERS

Fresh from being fired from the SS *Ramona*, Captain Charles Seymour replaced Gardner as the master of the SS *Beaver* after Gardner's resignation in 1908. Seymour was born in 1862 in Montreal and arrived in the Fraser Valley in 1889, where he began to work on steamer crews travelling between Chilliwack Landing and New Westminster. He avoided dying in the famous explosion of the SS *Ramona* at Fort Langley in 1901, which eviscerated the boat owner and injured much of its crew. The replacement boat, SS *Royal City*, was burnt at Mission, British Columbia, a week later, again with Seymour at the helm. This captain, who had escaped death on the Fraser River several times, took charge of his long-time competitor, the SS *Beaver*. Seymour was captain at the sunset of the SS *Beaver*'s career, which was also the apex of the steamboat river trade on the lower Fraser River route.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> “Local News Briefly Told,” *NWDN*, 4 April 1906, 5; Edna Brandon Hanson, “The Strange Life Story of Captain Charlie Gardner,” *Vancouver Sun*, 29 November and 6, 13, 20, 27 December 1941.

<sup>22</sup> *Vancouver Sun*, 29 November and 6, 13, 20, 27 December 1941. Bunt and Williams, “Last Steamboat Whistle,” 285; “Off To The North,” *CP*, 9 April 1913, 5; personal communication between Mrs. J. Cromarty and author, Fall 2015

<sup>23</sup> F. Howay and E.O.S. Scholefield, *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present*, vol. 3 (Vancouver: SJ Clarke, 1914), 833–34; Bunt and Williams, “Last Steamboat Whistle,”

Part of the lore of this steel steamer concerns how it competed head to head with a train for the final three years of her service. Before the BCER began operating, the SS *Beaver* had absorbed all the freight from the New Westminster to the Chilliwack Landing run by default, through the poor performance of the SS *Ramona*, which had sunk for the last time in 1909. When the BCER commenced service from Chilliwack in 1910, its travelling time to New Westminster was faster than that of river steamers, and this made it instantly popular. Historian Andrea Lister believes that the long river journey to New Westminster, to which Fraser Valley residents had become accustomed, helped to compel the establishment of the first emergency health services in Chilliwack after a young man died on the SS *Beaver* while travelling to seek medical attention.<sup>24</sup>

From the start of its service, the BCER matched the shipping rates that steamers charged Fraser Valley farmers, thus competing directly with the SS *Beaver* and another steel-plate hull steamer, the SS *Paystreak*. Historian Patricia Roy informs us that the arrival of trains in Chilliwack brought only “gradual change” and that it took one full year for the BCER to bankrupt the less established of the pair of steamers, the *Paystreak*. By October 1913, the mounting losses that had accumulated through the previous years led the cost-averse, rail-oriented CPR managers to finally order the SS *Beaver* off the lower Fraser route after fifteen years of service. The introduction of overnight rail service and the arrival of a second railway in Chilliwack also contributed to this decision. However, according to historian Norman Hacking, based on what they had experienced in the years prior, Seymour and Nesbitt “were convinced there was still enough business to maintain a steamboat on the river.” The pair knew first-hand how busy one steamer with a monopoly on river traffic could be on the Fraser River. The pair were greater believers in Fraser River shipping than the CPR was, and after the SS *Beaver* left, Captain Seymour and Nesbitt reinvested in the SS *Skeena* and continued operating on the lower Fraser route between Chilliwack Landing and New Westminster until 1928.<sup>25</sup>

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278, 279. Hacking, “Later Days of the Fraser River Sternwheelers,” 126; “The Farmer’s and Trader’s Boat,” *CP*, 18 August 2002, 8; “Local,” *CP*, 4 March 1908, 5; “Local,” *CP*, 22 July 1908, 5; “News and Other Items,” *CP*, 17 April 1901, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Lister, *Committed to Caring: Chilliwack Hospital Auxiliary’s 100 years, 1911 to 2011* (Chilliwack: Fraser Valley Custom Printers, 2011), 1; Patricia Roy, “The Changing Roles of Railways in the Lower Fraser Valley,” in *Lower Fraser Valley: Evolution of a Cultural Landscape*, ed. A.H. Siemens (Vancouver: Tantalus, 1968), 55.

<sup>25</sup> Hacking, “Later Days of the Fraser River Sternwheelers,” 129. Bunt and Williams, “Last Steamboat Whistle,” 288; Roy, “Changing Roles,” 51, 55, 60, and 61.

From 1914 onward, the SS *Beaver* remained in dry dock, while its owners rejected different offers for its purchase. Captain Troup appears to have written the steamer off, describing the SS *Beaver*:

She is a very old boat, and has seen a good deal of service; her plates are very thin and her boiler is very old, being the same one which was originally in her. It is impossible to say whether it would pass inspection or not. In any case, her steam pressure is only fit for the bone yard.

Later, on the initiative of an outsider, Skeena riverboat operator Captain Thomas (TJ) Jackman, the SS *Beaver* was promoted for sale to the BC government for use as a vehicle ferry. Jackman worked for months to overcome the suspicions of Troup and other CPR managers so he could arrange the purchase. He claimed to be operating on the request of then BC Premier Harlan Brewster, shortly before he unexpectedly died while in office in March 1918. A month later, Jackman insisted the former premier “had the *Beaver* in mind,” and the BC government purchased it later that spring. The provincial government invested twenty-five thousand dollars to have the steel-hulled steamer extensively repaired at Star Shipyards in New Westminster during the autumn of 1918. The SS *Beaver* came out of her five-year retirement in July 1919, at the dawn of the automobile era in the BC Lower Mainland, transformed into the Ladner–Woodwards Landing vehicle ferry.<sup>26</sup>

#### CAPTAIN HERRLING STEERS THE FERRY

The next master of the revamped SS *Beaver*, now a vehicle ferry operating on a route between Richmond and Ladner on the lower Fraser River, was Joseph Herrling from Herrling Island, near Chilliwack. He watched the SS *Beaver* on the Fraser River from a distance for many years while working as a crew member on several competing steamboats. Herrling joined the ferry service before the SS *Beaver* arrived, and he steered the

<sup>26</sup> BCA, MS-3254, Earl Marsh Collection, box 22, file 10, Troup to Black, 31 May 1918, and Capt. Jackman to Grant Hall, 4 April 1918; BCA, MS-3254, box 7, file 15, 20 July 1914, Troup to Bury and 6 December 1913, Troup to Manson; “Province Purchases River Boat Beaver,” *VC*, 8 March 1918, 13; “Government Fits Vessel as Ferry,” *VC*, 30 July 1919, 8; BCA, MS-3268, interview: Wiggs O’Neill, tape T0315; *Journals, Legislative Assembly of British Columbia*, vol. 48, 27 February 1919, McKenzie to Minister of Public Works, 110; BCA, MS-3232, box 2, file 6, “Monthly Time Book, 1918”; Patricia Roy, “Brewster, Harlan Carey,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brewster\\_harlan\\_carey\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brewster_harlan_carey_14E.html).



Figure 4. Sternwheeler *Beaver*. Photo by Philip Timms, courtesy of Vancouver Public Library Special Collections, accession 8138.

ferry in “between his seasonal command of Sternwheelers in the north,” on the Peace River and the Yukon River. Under Captain Herrling, the SS *Beaver* took ten to fifteen minutes to cross the Fraser River from downtown Ladner to Woodward’s Landing, the long-forgotten boat landing located at the end of Number 5 Road in Richmond. In those days, the SS *Beaver* would unload cars in Ladner at the foot of Elliott Street.<sup>27</sup>

The SS *Beaver* “had a greater carrying capacity for cars and passengers” than did the ferry she replaced. This was due to the lack of hog posts, which would normally bisect the cargo deck. This meant she could ferry more “Tin Lizzies” across the river during the Roaring Twenties. As with other riverside landings, Ladner and Woodward’s Landing had problems with sandbars forming across the vessel paths. Edgar Dunning recalls how, occasionally, the *Beaver* ran “aground on the sandbar at the entrance to Ladner harbour on her way to the dock at the north end of Delta street. We would have to wait for the tide to lift her so she could back into the deeper water.” The SS *Beaver* regularly crossed these

<sup>27</sup> Heritage Preservers of Rosedale and District, *In the Shadow of Mt. Cheam: A History of Rosedale, Popcum and Camp River British Columbia* (Winnipeg: Inter-collegiate Press, 1988), 319–20; City of Richmond Archives, Richmond Oral History Project Fonds, interview: Capt. J. Herrling, 18 January 1973, and Mr. and Mrs. Ruben Hall, tape 15; Mary Keen, *Time and Tide: The Settlement of Lulu Island South Arm Shore* (Richmond, BC: City of Richmond Archives, 2005), 28; CP, 24 June 1908; BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, interview: Capt. Joseph Herrling, tape T1225:1&2

sandbars over the course of her lifetime, but it had also crossed another bar as one of the few riverboats to cruise from the age of steam into the age of the automobile.<sup>28</sup>

Acting as the Ladner ferry was the final bow for the SS *Beaver*, and this closed out her twenty-eight years of service on the Fraser River before she retired to Porcher Island. Captain Herrling remembers most of these years, and he told Imbert Orchard, based on his lifetime on the Fraser River steamers, that “the *Beaver* was always the best boat” of those working the lower Fraser River route. During the *Beaver*’s working life, some British Columbians were drawn to her because of the musky halo of the fur trade that lingered around this boat, thanks to being a namesake ship. Others saw the *Beaver* as Captain Irving’s boat, that special new boat among the classic roster of Canadian Pacific Navigation steamers. For First Nations people, the SS *Beaver* was a colonizing boat, one that compelled young Stó:lō men to leave their reserves, adapt to speaking English and working for wages, while also offering them a new way of expressing their traditional connection to the Fraser River. Celebrated name aside, it was the *Beaver*’s innovative steel skeleton that first drew the attention of the hundreds of Victorians who gathered to see the newborn steel steamer in 1898 and who collectively predicted for her a productive and consequential life. The SS *Beaver* did not disappoint them.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> “Tunnel Sends River Ferry to Drydock,” *Delta Optimist*, 23 May 2009, n.p.; “Rambling,” *Delta Today*, 3 April 1994, n.p.; Hacking, “Later Days of the Fraser River Sternwheelers,” 131.

<sup>29</sup> BCA, MS-3268, Imbert Orchard Fonds, Capt. Joseph Herrling, tape T1225-1&2; “The Latest Launch,” *VC*, 24 April 1898, 7.