

WHY I PAINTED THE STERNWHEELERS

by Alec Garner, 1954

In all this vast and rugged Interior of British Columbia, the scenery is varied and significant, so much so that one finds himself wondering how it must have appeared to the pioneers and prospectors who blazed the hazardous trails across its forbidden passes. This brings us to the old Sternwheelers, far back to 1865 when the brave little *Fortynine* powered by the old *Jenny Clark* engines, (the *Jenny Clark* was the first sternwheeler of the Pacific Northwest) left Fort Colville, Washington to grope her way slowly up the Columbia River through the ice of the Arrow Lakes, to arrive four months later at the foot of Death Rapids with her cargo of tools, food and passengers for the gold rush to Revelstoke.

While this effort was short lived and her second return trip consisted of a load of disillusioned prospectors, the gold rush was again revived in 1885. This called into service the sternwheeler *Lytton*, a much sturdier craft than her predecessor. But the little *Fortynine* was the beginning of what developed in the latter part of the century into a mighty fleet of sternwheelers, plying the Arrow, Slocan and Kootenay lakes, even as far north as the Upper Duncan.

With Great Northern from the United States and our own Canadian Pacific vying tooth and nail for supremacy, the two great companies opened up by means of the sternwheeler this greatest and most bounteous land. The Interior of British Columbia with its vast acres of timber, its wealth of minerals and metals and its green fertile valleys, to the people of the region the boats meant life itself. One seldom meets a man who has lived here more than twenty years who has not at one time or another worked on one or many of the boats. They were a means of livelihood for the settlements, bringing food, supplies, doctors, entertainment and mail from home. Everything came by boat, even the time of day was measured by the deep throated whistle of the sternwheeler, which consequently became the symbol of well being to all who awaited the smoke of her funnels and the swish of her great wheel.

Then after the turn of the century, the railroads wound their tortuous way through the hills and over the great summits. One by one the old boats were discarded for the faster, more economical method of carrying passengers and freight in and out of the rugged mountains. I remember so well when in 1948 the old *S.S. Nasookin* was finally brought to rest in Nelson. Since 1931 she had served on the Kootenay Lake as the government ferry from Fraser's Landing to Gray Creek. She was replaced by the new diesel ferry *MV Anscomb*. By some

blunder, the old queen of the lakes was tied up at a point where she was left to the mercy of wind and waves. Within a year after she had been docked the brave old boat lay broken and beaten, a great hump in her proud back. I was with the captain the first time I saw her in this condition and the old man, a hard bristling old Scot, turned his head away and cursed softly. He loved his boat and he could not look upon her in her misery and neglect.

In April of this year we saw the retirement of the *S.S. Minto* at Nakusp. Her end of service was much more publicized than that of the *Nasookin* but here again strong people swallowed hard and wiped the odd tear for a passing friend. There now remains but one of the old veterans, the *S.S. Moyie*, who plies the Kootenay waters from Procter to Lardeau. Soon too she will go, her days are numbered and with her exit will pass a grand and romantic era filled with rugged paths, hope and progress, the building of a mighty portion of Canada via her great natural waterways.

There are twenty-four complete pictures done to date with seven more underway. So many people have given generously of their help in an exhaustive research, in an effort to prevent the old boats from slipping out of sight completely and being forgotten. Already a ways and means committee has been organized to purchase the series when completed as a foundation for a museum in the Interior. Washington too, is interested and is working to secure them on loan for a historical convention to take place in the spring of 1955.

I can truthfully say that nothing I have ever done, has given the complete satisfaction that these boat pictures have given, when I had the conversations among the people of days recalled with the slowing of the old sternwheelers. The "Echoes of the Paddle Wheel," this is to me, reason enough for painting the boats.