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## VETERAN SHIPS OF THE TOBERMORY/MANITOULIN ISLAND RUN—WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

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*Part of this story originally appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on September 11, 2015 under the title CROSSING ON THE CHI-CHEEMAUN WAS SMOOTH AND PLEASANT. This is a much expanded and updated version of that story that focuses on the three ships used on the Tobermory to Manitoulin Island run from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century until September 1974 when the Chi-Cheemaun began operating, and on their present situation and where they are located in their retirement.*

With the Second World War production of corvettes and minesweepers (as well as tankers and coastal freighters that were also needed for the war effort) behind them, the Collingwood Shipyard entered the second half of the 1940's with orders for a variety of peacetime ships to carry cargo and

passengers on the Great Lakes as well as an order for three hopper barges for the Government of France.

The dual firm of Owen Sound Transportation Co. Ltd./Dominion Transportation Co. Ltd. had been operating passenger/freight vessels for many years. With the war over and a return to a peacetime economy, some older vessels could now be retired and replaced with brand new ships. This story focuses on the three ships operated by the firm in the late 1940's, 1950s and 1960's and into the early 1970's: M.S. *Normac*, S.S./M.S. *Norgoma* and S.S. *Norisle*, one elderly, the other two brand new.

After the war, two new ferries were ordered from the Collingwood Shipyard by the Owen Sound firm. The first new ship, launched July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1946 was the 215' 9" long *Norisle*. Less than a year after the end of the war, the ship was built using a surplus triple expansion steam engine that had been intended for a corvette that was not built due to the end of the war. This ship was followed three years later with the 188 ft. long *Norgoma* launched on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1949, built to replace the 60-year-old *Manitoulin*. Many years later these two new ships would be replaced by the well-known 365'5" *Chi-Cheemaun*—launched at Collingwood on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974— which still operates today between Tobermory at the top end of the Bruce Peninsula and South Baymouth on Manitoulin

Island. My father, during his 33-year career in the Shipyard, worked on the original construction of the *Norgoma* in 1949, her subsequent remodelling in the winter of 1963-64 and on the building of the *Chi-Cheemaun* in 1973-74.

## **NORMAC**

A third, much older vessel, was also operated by the company from 1931 to 1968. This was the 117'2" *Normac*, launched on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1902 at the Jenks Shipbuilding Company in Port Huron, Michigan as a fire tug for the Detroit Fire Department and originally named *James R. Elliot*. After being retired as a fire tug, this ship was purchased by the Owen Sound firm in 1930 and sent to the Midland Shipyard for conversion into a passenger/package freight/car ferry, and conversion from coal to diesel power with a Fairbanks-Morse engine. She was given the name *Normac* and entered service on the Manitoulin Island run in 1931. It was on this ship that my parents and I had a memorable trip one summer in the early 1960's when they decided that it would be a fun thing to drive up to Tobermory on a weekend and take the ferry to Manitoulin Island and back. While the idea seemed like fun, it turned out to be a very unpleasant experience.

We left Collingwood very early that Saturday morning and when we arrived at the Tobermory dock we had breakfast at "Harriet's Lunch". I had pancakes. Unlike today when the *Chi-*

*Cheemaun* operates alone, at that time the *Normac* and *Norisle* operated together with one ship leaving Tobermory and the other leaving South Baymouth, passing each other about half-way across, while the *Norgoma* was on the North Shore run from Owen Sound to isolated communities on the way to Sault Ste. Marie.

We were on the *Normac* and it turned out to be the roughest crossing they had so far that season. When we reached the windswept open water between the Bruce Peninsula and Manitoulin Island, the *Normac*, with a beam of only 25 ft., bobbed up and down like a cork. When we passed the much larger *Norisle* going in the opposite direction, she was rolling side to side in the heavy sea. Barf buckets were on duty that day when many people, myself included, were seasick and the fish of Georgian Bay had a good feed (including my pancakes). My father, a former Great Lakes sailor, took it all in stride as he went around tending to the “sick and dying”. Once on Manitoulin Island my mother and I didn’t feel like doing much and we were dreading the return voyage to Tobermory, so my father arranged for the two of us to be in a cabin on the *Normac* where we could at least lie down in our misery. Most of the way to Tobermory the little *Normac* rolled from side to side. From the bunk I was on, the view through the cabin window continuously alternated back and forth between all water and all sky. I have never since been so relieved to be

back on solid ground and it was many years before I could look at a pancake again after that trip, so lingering was the memory. In 1968 the *Normac* was retired and a year later it became a floating restaurant in Toronto's harbour. We will return to the *Normac* later in this story.

## **NORGOMA**

It may be difficult in 2019 to imagine Ontario without the Trans-Canada Highway linking the northern portion of the province with the south, but up until the highway was completed in northern Ontario in 1962, the *Norgoma* was a lifeline to the isolated communities on the north shore of Manitoulin Island, Georgian Bay and Lake Huron all the way to Sault Ste. Marie. The ship had been expressly built with sleeping accommodation—50 cabins—and a dining room and operated five-day round trips weekly between Owen Sound and Sault Ste. Marie. With completion of the Trans-Canada Highway and new competition from cars and trucks, the original purpose for the ship was now redundant, the last run to the “Soo” being in September 1963. Following this, the *Norgoma* returned to her birth place at the Collingwood Shipyard for a major conversion over the winter months to a car ferry and conversion from coal-fired steam to diesel-powered. The main deck sleeping cabins, no longer needed for passengers, were removed. In 1964 she joined her sister

*Norisle* on the Tobermory/South Baymouth run where there was an ever-increasing need to carry more automobiles. The two ships were filled to capacity with vehicles and it soon became obvious that a much larger ship would be needed for this route.

Many people had discovered that it was a pleasant shortcut to northern Ontario to take the ferry to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island then drive across the island on Highway 6 and across the former CPR swing bridge from Little Current to reach the mainland and the junction of Highway 6 and the Trans-Canada Highway. This saves a lot of time, miles and gas instead of driving all the way from southern Ontario up through Sudbury to reach Sault Ste. Marie. Pam and I took that shortcut in September 2009 when we went to the Soo from Collingwood to take the Agawa Canyon Fall Colours train trip.

While the two Collingwood-built sister ships operated together for ten years (1964-74) between Tobermory and Manitoulin Island until they were replaced with the new *Chi-Cheemaun* in September 1974, the *Normac* was reassigned to operate as a car ferry across the North Channel linking Meldrum Bay on Manitoulin Island, nearby Cockburn Island and Blind River on the mainland until 1968.

The City of Sault Ste. Marie purchased the *Norgoma* for one dollar in 1975 and opened her as a museum ship in 1977,

moored at the city-owned Roberta Bondar Marina for many years. In 1981 ownership of the vessel was transferred to the non-profit St. Mary's River Marine Heritage Centre. In 2011 the ship was designated an historical site. Funding has become a serious issue in recent years and there was a report in the Collingwood *Enterprise-Bulletin* on Friday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 indicating that city funding to operate the museum ship was coming to an end and options were being looked at to either scrap the ship or sell it to be sunk as a dive site in Michigan. The *Norgoma* has become a hot, polarizing topic in Sault Ste. Marie involving a lot of angry words—her historical significance to the marine history of the city now long in the past, some view her as an eyesore that costs too much to operate and maintain as a museum ship, while others see her as a proud reminder of the past which needs to be respected. On March 18, 2019 the City Council voted 7-3 to evict the ship from the marina and have her moved to docks behind the Algoma Steel Mill (where she will be inaccessible to the public) for one year. The estimated \$50,000.00 cost of moving the ship is to be paid by the St. Mary's River Marine Heritage Centre, as well as a \$40 per day moorage cost, neither of which expenses the non-profit society can afford. The city needs to replace the older wooden docks at the marina and build additional new docks in the space occupied by the ship and so the future for the *Norgoma* is, in the spring of 2019, undecided.

## NORISLE

The story of the *Norisle* in her retirement is very similar to that of her sister the *Norgoma*. After the *Norisle* was retired in 1974, the Township of Assiginack, on Manitoulin Island purchased the ship for one dollar in 1975 to use her as a museum ship at the Heritage Park And Marina in the Town of Manitowaning. The vessel served as a museum ship for about 33 years when a non-profit group, The S. S. Norisle Steamship Society began making plans to restore and return the ship to service as a historic Great Lakes steamship. They planned on having the ship drydocked in, ironically, Sault Ste. Marie to start the process of returning her to operating condition. On the other hand, there is the Tobermory Maritime Association that wants to sink the ship in water about 120 feet deep as a dive site. In 2016 the S.S. Norisle Steamship Society launched legal action against Assiginack Township to stop the ship from being donated to the Tobermory group for sinking, with the Society claiming to be the rightful owner of the ship. As is the case with the *Norgoma* in Sault Ste. Marie, the municipality wants to get rid of the deteriorated *Norisle* because they can't afford to keep and maintain her.

The lawsuit was settled in September 2018 in favour of the Township. The Society was suing the Township for ten million dollars for "breach of contract". Instead they received



\$45,000.00 from Assiginack in compensation for the removal of asbestos from the ship that had been undertaken by the Society. Asbestos removal was necessary regardless of the ship's future use which, at the time of writing, is still not finally determined. As of late December 2018, the society regained access to the ship to inspect her condition which they found to be "reasonably good" after several years of being locked out. It now appears to be up to the Assiginack Council to decide the ship's future.

There are some who can't wait to dive on the sunken *Norisle* near Tobermory where there are already a number of sunken vessels to dive on, while others relish the concept of cruising and dining on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay on a vintage steamship, re-creating a bygone era when travel and the time it took moved slower than it does today. On February 13, 2019, Rob Gowan stated in an article in the Owen Sound *Sun Times*, "There is perhaps a glimmer of hope on the horizon that the S.S. *Norisle* will sail again". The ship's next move may be west up to Sault Ste. Marie for drydocking or south to Tobermory and then down to the bottom of Georgian Bay. Like the *Norgoma*, the *Norisle's* future is undecided.

### **The NORMAC Today**

We now return to the later career and present circumstances of what is left of the old *Normac*. As mentioned earlier, when the

refurbished *Norgoma* joined her sister *Norisle* on the Tobermory/Manitoulin Island run in 1964, the *Normac* operated for four more years as a car ferry linking Meldrum Bay on the north shore of Manitoulin Island, nearby Cockburn Island and Blind River on the mainland of northern Ontario. The 66-year-old ship was retired at the end of the 1968 season and sold the following year to become “Captain John’s Harbour Boat Restaurant”, permanently moored at the foot of Yonge St. in Toronto. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1981 while 270 diners were aboard, the floating restaurant was rammed and holed below the water line by the Toronto Island Ferry *Trillium* when it suffered a mechanical issue and couldn’t reverse its engine. Dishes, cutlery, furniture and people became temporarily airborne from the impact. A temporary hull patch was installed and the ship pumped out, but two weeks later on June 16<sup>th</sup> the patch failed and the *Normac* sank to the bottom in twenty-four feet of water. When the ship settled on the harbour bottom, the superstructure was still above the water line and that was subsequently removed a year or so later whereas the hull remained on the bottom of Toronto harbour for five years while the lawyers argued over who was liable for the sinking. When the wreck was raised using air bags and massive cranes in June 1986 it was a rusted mess looking as though it had been bombed during a war. There is a series of photos of the wreck

being raised on the Facebook page “Tymeline Photography MS Normac 1902-2017”.

Later, the hull was cleaned up, repaired, received a new superstructure and all was painted white for the next destination as “Captain John’s Seafood Restaurant” in Cleveland in 1989. In 1995 the vessel was moved to Port Dalhousie, Ontario (annexed by St. Catharines in 1961) to become “Riverboat” Restaurant. The next name change in that location was to “Tokyo Joe’s” in 2008. Under this name the hull was gutted by fire in late December 2011. The superstructure was refurbished yet again and the vessel reopened under the name “Riverboat Mexican Grill” in 2013. At the time of this writing in February/March 2019, what remains of the *Normac* , now in her 117<sup>th</sup> year, was still moored at the Port Dalhousie Pier Marina, 80 Lighthouse Rd., but not in use (confirmed by my cousin’s husband who took photos of it). This vessel has come a long way from its days as a Detroit fire tug (28 years) and then a passenger/car/package freight ferry (37 years) followed by five different incarnations as a floating restaurant that included being rammed, sinking, salvage and fire. That makes seven “lives” so far for this ancient hull which now sits in peaceful waters, unlike that memorable windy day on Georgian Bay nearly sixty years ago when I travelled on her and lost my breakfast.

All three ships in this story had careers as passenger and car vessels, followed by subsequent repurposing as museum ships for the two larger of them, and, for the smaller one, as a series of disaster-prone floating restaurants. Now in 2019 the future is uncertain for all three of them. There are some individuals and/or groups who would like to restore and renovate *both* the *Norgoma* and the *Norisle* into Great Lakes cruise ships while others would like to sink both of them to start a new (and permanent) career as dive sites. Another alternative frequently mentioned is scrapping both of them. The old *Normac*, too, may not yet be finished if someone decides to repurpose the hull yet again. Home port for all three ships was Owen Sound, but two of them were built in the Collingwood Shipyard and all three came to Collingwood for drydocking and repairs when many Shipyard employees worked on them.

The *Chi-Cheemaun* (Ojibwa for “Big Canoe”) ferry, named by the late Donald Keeshig in a naming contest, replaced the three ships that are the subject of this story and is now 45 years old and continues to transport people and vehicles between Tobermory on the Bruce Peninsula and South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island.

***David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O’Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.***