

# Excursion vessels offer peek at life's landscape

The writer, David Litogot, is a Trustee in the Historical Society of Michigan and a history teacher at Wooddale Elementary School in Farmington Hills.

By David Litogot  
special writer

The older I get, the more I realize that the trip is sometimes more enjoyable than the destination. Modern society has made it possible for us to be whisked off to far away destinations in just a few hours.

Our jets and interstate highways have replaced the boat, train and horse as means of "effective" transportation. But I still yearn for seeing the scenery — slowly. More specifically, I yearn for the days in Michigan when the steam excursion boat plied the waters of the Great Lakes.

Long before the Caribbean cruises and the "Love Boat," these excursion vessels sailed out of ports like Chicago, Buffalo, Cleveland and Detroit. Some made day trips to other ports or amusement parks; others provided weeklong vacations in luxury.

Few of us have seen Michigan from the water. Yes, we may have been on the Pictured Rocks boat tour at Munising, the Soo Locks Boat, or even the Ludington to Wisconsin ferry.

BUT THE only vessels we have today that would provide us with a faint idea of the adventure that existed just a few decades ago are the Bob-lo Boats: the Columbia and the Ste. Claire. These two historical ships do not, however, live up to the splendor and grace that existed on the water in the early 1900s. The years between 1850 and 1950 witnessed the popularity of the Great Lakes "trips." Picnickers, senior class graduates, convention dele-

## footprints in history

gates, honeymooners, vacationers and party-goers were able to sail up and down the waterways bordering our state on elegant, shiny, steam boats.

Even though the passenger trade on the lakes dates back to the opening of the Erie Canal in the 1820s, the first large passenger vessel on the lakes was the Western World.

Built in 1854, the 2,000-ton ship was about 350 feet long and had 200 staterooms. The salons, dining rooms, and cabins were all embellished with intricate hand-carved woodwork. This floating palace, like most of the excursion steamers of the next 50 years, was a side-wheeler.

Many people remember the Detroit and Cleveland (D & C) Company which began operating excursion steamers in the 1850s and eventually had six side-wheelers — the largest and fastest — on the lakes. Most memorable was the City of Detroit III. Built in 1912, the "DIII" was a picture of elegance, its three decks featured pillars, beamed ceilings, brass embellishments, and polished wood paneling.

The D & C Company disbanded in 1950 and the City of Detroit III was dismantled in 1956. Her famous Gothic Room, however, was saved and rebuilt at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle.

OTHER VESSELS worth remembering were the Frank Kirby, the Seacandee, the Keewatin, the

Aquarama, the Tashmo, the Put-in-Bay, the North America, and the South America. I could write a whole article on each one and still not do a thorough job.

Unfortunately other than the Bob-lo boats, there are few remains of those ships mentioned — just wonderful memories. Modern man wanted to control his own recreation so he purchased his own boats to captain. Many serious accidents (like the Eastland in Chicago tipping over and drowning 835 in 1915) plagued the ships. These accidents brought tougher regulations that made it too expensive for some companies to survive. By the 1960s, only a few excursion ships were around and their days were numbered. Most were scrapped; some were converted to troop ships and flat-tops during World War II.

One passenger ship still provided tourists with a glimpse of the past. The Keewatin, a 350-foot steamer, is docked near Saugatuck, Mich. She was built in 1907 and had room for 288 berthed passengers and a crew of 86.

The Keewatin was retired in 1965 and is open to the public as a museum. The red carpeting, mahogany paneling, stained-glass skylights, teak parquet floors, polished brass instruments, and plentiful memories are still there.

For further reading, I recommend Jim Cleary's book, "Ladies of the Lakes" and the "Telescope." The Dossin Museum magazine.



Japanese Society of Detroit president Tak-eshi Tanuma (left) presents a check to Farmington Public Schools acting superintendent Michael Flanagan.

## School district gets \$1,000 gift

Acting Superintendent Michael Flanagan of Farmington Public Schools met with the Japanese Society of Detroit Nov. 6 to accept a donation of \$1,000 for Farmington Public Schools.

President Takeshi Tanuma, joined by Kazuhiko Satoh, treasurer, and Keisaku Hosoi, school committee person, thanked Flanagan for the kindness and acceptance the Japanese school children have experienced while attending Farmington schools.

"It is indeed an honor to represent the members of the Japanese Society of Detroit in recognizing the schools of this community for the kindness and generosity exhibited toward our Japanese students," said Tanuma.

Founded in 1972, the JSD is made up of 1,120 members from 233 companies related to Detroit's automotive industry. The society surveys the distribution of Japanese students in the Detroit area

and selects the school districts where Japanese students attend.

JSD's annual donations to various Detroit-area school districts amount to more than \$20,000, and allows the schools to use the money for any purpose they deem appropriate.

This is the second year that JSD has made this donation to school districts in Oakland County. Other districts receiving this gift include: Walled Lake Consolidated Schools.

### CITY COUNCIL MEETING NOTICE CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS

The regular Farmington Hills City Council meeting scheduled for Monday, November 27, 1989 has been cancelled and rescheduled to Monday, December 4, 1989 at 7:40 p.m. Also, the City Council will meet in a special meeting with representatives from the Oakland County Road Commission on Tuesday, December 5, 1989 at 7:30 p.m. Meetings of the City Council are open to the public and any interested persons are invited to attend.

KATHRYN A. DORNAN,  
City Clerk

Enlight November 23 1989

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