

Steamboat Days at Conesus Lake New York

by Unknown Author - The Livingston Republican

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A steamboat at Long Point and the Livingston Inn at McPherson Point on other shore in 1905

The romantic associations and primitive glories of Conesus Lake, five and a half miles from Geneseo village, but forming a part of the eastern part of the boundary of the town are still held in memory of many of the living, and will long remain as tradition. And in this story of the past is included the story of steam boating on the lake.

Not a steamboat remains at the present day. They have fallen to decay, have been dismantled, or have been drawn overland to other waters. Of the present power boats, none are of the pattern of the former steamers, nor do any of them operate under steam power. All of that is in

the past now just as thoroughly as is Washington's army.

In a recent newspaper article touching on the early steam boating at Conesus lake it was stated that the first steamer was the "Jessie", launched in about 1880; but the files of the Livingston Republican show that the Jessie was launched on July 1, 1874. It was built by Samuel Hingston of Rochester. It was owned by Jerry Bolles, a hotel proprietor, whose place was on the east side of the lake between McPherson Point and Lakeville. It is said that the wheel of this old steamer is decorating the mantel of a Conesus lake cottage at the present time.

The Jessie was of twelve-foot beam and 45 feet long. Jerry Bolles friends offered to pay \$1,000 towards the expense of building her but he declined the offer, and then they sold 2,000 tickets at 50 cents each for round trip rides the first season and gave him the money, and he honored the tickets with rides. The Jessie could carry 100 passengers easily and once went as high as 225. An advertisement in the Republican that year said that when needed the boat would tow a covered gondola carrying 150 or more passengers. The boat ran on a regular schedule; Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and was chartered for picnics and excursions on Wednesdays and Fridays. Lakeville citizens held a public meeting and voted to build a dock 600 feet long for the use of this steamer.

The first sailboat on the lake was a Cape Cod catboat launched by Col. McPherson. The first cabin sailboat was brought to the lake in 1887 by Warren Brodie. It was 22 feet all over with an eight-foot beam. Col. McPherson built the first cottage on the lake. It was at Pebble Beach and was known as "Cluny" Cottage.

McPherson also built a three-decker known as the "McPherson". Its name was subsequently changed to the Starrucca and it was burned at the Lakeville dock in the winter of 1901. At the time of the burning a report was current that the anchor of that boat was the weight from the Livingston county jail that was formerly used in hangings, but of no further use as electrocution had succeeded hanging. That story was a wild dream and without any foundation, for the McPherson had a regulation anchor and never at any time used that weight. But such stories, once started, are hard to overtake.

Another large boat but of a different type was the "Conesus", launched July 30, 1904 and owned by Capt. Walter Strowger who operated McPherson Point for a season. It made daily trips for a season or two and then was

dismantled and some of its timbers were used for re-enforcing docks and piers at McPherson Point. The dismantling was done by the Conesus Lake Improvement Co. While it operated, it was the last word in lake transportation. It could carry 1,000 passengers in safety, was propelled by gasoline and lighted by electricity. In 1905 Capt. Walter Strowger of Rochester rented Mc Pherson Point, changed the name to "Point Strowger" moved an old hotel there from Avon and re-erected it, and it stands today. He built besides the Conesus some smaller steamers, and his activity was partially the cause that prompted the incorporation of the D. C. Walkley Transportation Co. in 1906. But Capt. Strowger's plans had been too ambitious and he was unable to swing them financially. When the Conesus was cut up the name, Point Strowger, was dropped and the original name of Mc Pherson Point was resumed.



The steamboat Conesus on Conesus Lake

In 1887, the Jessie ran into a sunken pile near the Bolles dock and sank because of a careless steersman. She was raised again and later she was drawn up and beached on the west side of the lake and slowly fell to pieces.

The "Gay '90s" saw the McPherson still active and with Henry Wemett of Hemlock as captain. Several smaller steamers were in service also. One of these smaller boats, the "Livingston", was burned July 28, 1891, just 24 days after she was launched. The burning took place at the Springs House dock near the head of the lake on the east side. The boat was 65 feet long, 11 feet beam and was capable of carrying 165 passengers, and was owned by Henry Wemett. Arson was strongly hinted, but there was no evidence on that point and those most directly in "on the know" ridiculed that idea; and even now, 46 years since that fire, the arson idea is still ridiculed.

Col. McPherson also had a small steamer named the "Musette", which later was called the "Nesbit". It was in operation until 1888.

The "White Swan" made its appearance in 1887 being brought here from Hemlock by Acker & Dewey. It caught fire the same summer but was put out.

In 1889, the "H. T. Jaeger" was built by C. D. Dewey, who sold out to Capt. Daniel Walkley in 1891. The Dewey Transportation Co. was formed and George Reynolds brought over the "Cyclone" from Hemlock lake.

All these boats and all yet to be named in this story were small steamers not double-deckers except the McPherson and the Conesus.

The Dewey Transportation Co., the Jaeger, White Swan, and McPherson.

Capt. Daniel Walkley built the "Alice M." in the year 1900. He originally intended to call his boat the "Livonia", but named her instead for his little daughter, then a child of seven.

The "Rochester", a gasoline boat, resembling the steamers in general outline, appeared on the lake in 1908 owned by a man named Salen (although that may not be the spelling) of Rochester, and built by Mel Durkee of Old Orchard Point.

Besides the large Conesus there was also a small Conesus, a gasoline boat.

Capt. Walkley's boats were the "J. A. Ritz", "H. T. Jaeger", "Alice M." and "Rochester". The keel for the Ritz was laid in March 1906. She was 70 feet long, 14 wide, 5-foot draft, twin screw propeller. She was built by A. W. Springstead of Geneva for D. C. Walkley Transportation Co. Her speed was twelve miles per hour.

And right here a word about the D. C. Walkley Transportation Co. is opportune. It had its inspiration from the fact that in 1898 a Conesus lake steamer ran into a rowboat with five passengers in it, upsetting them into the lake, but fortunately not drowning anyone. Six years later Capt. Walkley felt that this incident should teach him to be cautious and protect his interests, so he went to the late

Judge Carter who drew up articles of incorporation and in association with Frank Acker the concern was incorporated. The preceding paragraph says something more on this line. It is of interest to note that suit was started over that crash with the rowboat, but it was dropped as the pilot of the steamer was in no way to blame. It is also interesting to note that when steam boating came to a close in 1918 the D. C. Walkley Transportation Co. was still solvent.

"Captain Dan," as Mr. Walkley was familiarly called, ran steamers on the lake for 36 years and only twice in that time missed connections with the Lakeville train, and each time it was because his engine broke down.

With the progress of time and the building of more and more cottages at the lake electric and gasoline launches were brought, the first was an electric launch in 1894; now there are about a dozen of them, some public and commercial, others privately owned. But the steamers are gone.

The Alice M. was drawn over land to Silver Lake and put in use there, and the Jaeger was cut up for wood, and its engine and boiler were sold as junk. The Rochester was taken overland to Chautauqua Lake. The Ritz was cut up for timber and Rev. George K. Ward built his cottage at the head of the lake from the Ritz timbers, but the bow of that once popular steamer brought the whole story to a most unromantic and prosaic close, for (tell it now to former patrons of Conesus lake steamers) it was drawn up on the shore at Captain Dan's home near the head of the lake and that steamboat bow was made into a pig pen. Truly that was anything but a poetic close to the story. When the U. S. Frigate "Constitution" was threatened with an unromantic closing chapter Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote his poem of protest commencing;

"Aye! Tear her tattered ensign down,

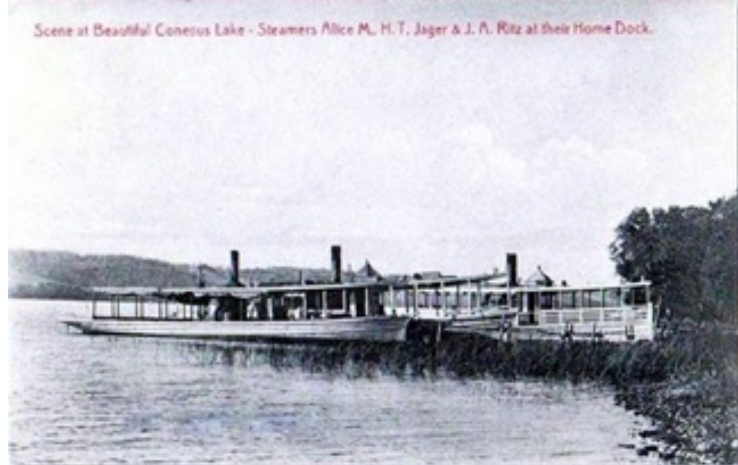
Long has it waved on high,

And many an eye has dared to see,

That banner in the sky."

Later in the poem he suggested that instead of desecrating the old vessel to an unromantic fate, it might be far better to;

"Give her over to the God of storms,



The steamboats Alice M., H. T. Jaeger and the J. A. Ritz at their home dock on Conesus Lake circa 1910

The lightning and the gale,”

But there was no Oliver Wendell Holmes to protect against that pig pen and so the last vestige of steam boating on Conesus lake, the final chapter of which story was written in 1918, may be found today at the Walkley place sheltering some unappreciative porkers, who never even heard of steamboats and would only grunt if they did. “How are the mighty fallen.”

It is mighty interesting to note that one cottager, Ned Allen, offered to give \$25 if 100 cottagers could be found who would contribute a like sum, to keep the steamers, or at least one or two of the small ones, for making trips around the lake. Even though they did no business and made no money, that contribution would be sufficient to pay the man running them, and he might pick up at least a little in passenger fees. Allen said that he wanted to see them going by his cottage for the sake of old associations. But his offer met with such slight response that nothing came of it.

This was the closing chapter of a story that will always be remembered while those remain alive who recall the moonlight excursions and the dances on the “big steamer”, as the McPherson was called. For fifteen dollars, it could be chartered for an afternoon, and many a Sunday School so chartered it, and took picnickers for an excursion trip around the lake. Too bad the story had to come to its conclusion in a pigpen; but Conesus lake steam boating is not the only romantic association of the past that has seen an inglorious finish. Perhaps it is just as well and couldn't be helped, but most of us would have preferred a more poetic final chapter to the story.



The steamboat McPherson on Conesus Lake

The Livingston Republican

Editor's note: A correction should be noted. The date on which the McPherson steamboat burned at the dock in Lakeville was December 6, 1902 not "winter of 1901" as originally printed in 1937.

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