

A little ferry fleet and how it grew

The son of a veteran B.C. Ferries skipper recounts how the corporation, now celebrating its 40th anniversary became a huge enterprise

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by Ken Donohue

Hailed as a great gamble and bold experiment in 1960, BC ferries is now celebrating its 40th anniversary. Its birthday was in fact on June 15, a date that largely went unnoticed. There were a smattering of news stories that day about the beleaguered Pacificats, but B.C. Ferries is more than just about political decisions to build three fast ferries, it is about the communities it serves and the people that make it run.

One of those people is Captain Alan Donohue, who is also celebrating a milestone: 35 years at B.C. Ferries. His deck crew affectionately refer to him as the “old man”—but to me he’s just my father. At age three, I used to walk around the house saying, “Daddy at work”, having little idea *where* my father worked.

As I grew older I came to appreciate what he did and would look forward to those summer days when I could tag along to work with him. Whether helping steer the ferry to a small gulf island port, or blowing the whistle on the big ferry through Active Pass, I never tired of those days. Each trip was its own little adventure.

Standing on the bridge of the Spirit of Vancouver Island, the largest ship in the B.C. Ferries’ fleet, my father prepares the ship for yet another sailing from Tsawwassen. Ensuring all the vehicle and passenger ramps are up and with three short blasts of the ship’s whistle, he puts the engines in reverse. The ship gently slips away from the berth. With ease, he manoeuvres the ferry so it turns into the strait.

It’s so effortless, so rehearsed; yet he has the concentration of a chess player contemplating his next move. An unsuspecting gust of wind or a misread tide could put the ship in a precarious position.

With the ferry pointed towards the Gulf Islands, the captain sets a course for Active Pass and another officer puts the ferry on autopilot. Looking around at the massive bridge and state-of-the-art navigation equipment, it’s hard to imagine what it was like 40 years ago when the fledgling ferry company had two ships, two terminals and one route.

The government got into the ferry business quite by accident. In the spring of 1958, the coastal ferry services were put in jeopardy when labour disputes threatened to isolate Vancouver Island.

At the time, Black Ball ran passenger and vehicle service between Vancouver and Nanaimo, while the CPR offered sailings between Vancouver and Victoria. There had been labour dissatisfaction among employees of both CPR and Black Ball, but it culminated when Black Ball employees gave strike notice on June 23, 1958.

Then Premier W.A.C. Bennett, as he was known to do, acted swiftly by invoking the Civil Defence Act, which ultimately gave the government control of the Black Ball's routes.

Concerned about the inadequacy and vulnerability of ferry service between the Mainland and Vancouver Island, the government approached Black Ball and CPR about expanding their service. Neither was interested.

And so it was on July 18, 1958, that Bennett announced the government would establish its own ferry service between Vancouver and Vancouver Island. Construction of two vessels, each capable of carrying 100 cars and 500 passengers, was begun immediately.

Reaction to the news of government involvement in the ferry business was mixed. Many argued that expansion of the coastal ferry service would not be successful due to a lack of demand. Bennett, however, was intent on proving his critics wrong.

On June 9, 1960, less than two years after the government's intervention, the ferries and terminals were ready. Originally estimated at \$8 million, the final cost was \$12 million and no one seemed too concerned. It was an era of unprecedented growth and this investment reflected prosperous times.

On that first day, June 15, 1960, the M.V. Sidney built in a record 12 months—made its maiden voyage from Swartz Bay to Tsawwassen with just 26 vehicles and 10 foot passengers. But within its first year, B.C. Ferries carried 350,000 and 120,000 vehicles. And unheard of today, the company even turned a profit in its first few years of operation.

While its beginnings may have been modest, its ambitions were lofty. Within six years, 14 ships had been built and more routes were being added. Success for B.C. Ferries has come by meeting the demands of increased passenger and vehicle traffic.

In the early 1970s seven vessels were "stretched" as an 84-foot mid-section was added. In 1985, four of those ships were "lifted" to allow an extra vehicle deck. This concluded one of the boldest projects in the history of marine engineering.

When launched in 1962, the M.V. City of Vancouver, later renamed Queen of Vancouver, had a capacity of 109 vehicles and 1,000 passengers. Today, nearly 40 years later, the Queen of Vancouver still makes regular runs between Swartz Bay and Tsawwassen carrying 340 vehicles and 1,380 passengers.

As the Spirit of Vancouver Island nears Active Pass, the captain is back on the bridge, autopilot has been disengaged, and the quartermaster stands with his hands on the modern looking “wheel”. Noting our position, the second officer radios Vancouver Traffic, a control centre that monitors shipping in the region.

We make a sweeping right turn around a point on Galiano Island, and Vancouver Island’s sister ship, the Spirit of British Columbia comes into sight.

The “spirits” are the largest ships in the fleet. They have a capacity for 2,100 passengers, 470 vehicles, and carry a crew of 53. At 560 feet, and if standing on end, the spirits would be nearly as tall as Vancouver’s Harbour Centre Tower.

B.C. Ferries has come a long way over the past four decades. From two ships, the fleet now boasts 40. One route has expanded to 26. The staff of 200 employees has mushroomed to more than 4,500. From 350,000 passengers in its first year, B.C. Ferries now carries some 21.5 million passengers and 7.8 million vehicles annually.

What was once thought of as a great gamble has grown into one of the largest ferry systems in the world. But the job of piloting a ferry has changed more in scale than in kind. The basic facts of the job—like the enormous responsibility for the welfare of passengers, and like the fickle West Coast weather—remain unchanged.

Responsible for the safe passage of up to 2,000 passengers and crew, along with a ship worth millions of dollars, the captain’s job can often be emotionally demanding.

There are days when everything is quiet and routine, and then there are nights like one in April 1993. At 11:30 p.m., soon after leaving Departure Bay in Nanaimo, a person was reported overboard. Finding someone in the water in daylight is difficult enough let alone the black of night. My father turned the ship around, summoned the emergency boat crew, and began a search of the area.

At 12:30am, with the search still on, a call came to the bridge from one of the engineers reporting that a small fire had broken out in the engine room. Not only did he have to deal with a passenger overboard, but now a potentially dangerous fire had to be extinguished.

Within minutes the fire was put out and the search for the passenger resumed.

Six other vessels had joined the search and at 1:30 a.m. the body of a 15-year old girl was located by an auxiliary rescue boat. She and some friends had been drinking on the upper vehicle deck and on a dare she jumped into the frigid water.

That night took its toll on my father , as did another the following year. A southerly storm kicked up as he was steering his ship toward the terminal at Tsawwassen with winds between 40 and 50 knots.

He made several attempts to get the ship into the berth, but after the third try, and fearing the ferry would be blown aground in the shallow waters around the terminal, he gave up and sat a mile offshore.

Aiming the ferry into the wind, and leaving the engines on dead slow, he waited for the storm to subside. After an hour and a half, he finally made it into the berth and off-loaded some relieved and weary passengers.

On those days, he'll tell you, you have to know your ship, have faith in it, and summon everything you have learned.

Today—just as captains have been doing for the past 40 years—my father guides the Spirit of Vancouver Island into Swartz Bay. With ease, he pulls the ship up to the side of the berth and gracefully backs into the dock.

The sound of buzzers alert him that it is safe to unload, and as the passengers and vehicles stream off like hurried ants, most are unaware of what it took to get them here.

For my father, it is just another successful sailing—one of over 30,000 he's made in the past 35 years. He will retire one day, but for now he has work to do as he readies the ship for another sailing.

For the past 40 years, BC Ferries has been good to British Columbia. For 35 of those years, B.C. Ferries has been good to my father.

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