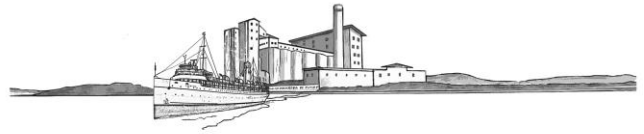


S.S. Keewatin 1907

Port McNicoll, Ontario



The S.S. Keewatin Project

Backgrounder - March 1, 2021

S.S. Keewatin was built in Glasgow, Scotland in 1907, in the same Edwardian culture and tradition that would build RMS Titanic in Belfast, Northern Ireland five years later. Keewatin, and her twin S.S. Assiniboia, joined three older passenger steamships in the Canadian Pacific Railroad Upper Lakes Service, in Owen Sound, Ontario. In 1912 the fleet moved to a newly created purpose-built terminus in Port McNicoll, Ontario and continued operation from that location for more than half a century, growing a town referred-to as the “Chicago of the North”.

Keewatin was designed with comfort, class and beauty in mind. She transported passengers and freight on a luxurious two-and-a-half-day journey across the Great Lakes between Port McNicoll and Fort William and Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) Ontario. Shipping technology and transportation standards changed over time and by 1950 the three older ships had been retired, and Keewatin and Assiniboia were focused on the tourist trade, connecting passengers on the Toronto “boat train” with western Canada excursion trains like The Canadian at The Lakehead.

However, in 1949, strict regulations were imposed on wooden cabin steamships on the Great Lakes following the SS Noronic fire disaster in Toronto, which took the lives of over a hundred tourists. That same year legislation enable work to start on the Trans Canada Highway, which opened in 1962. Doomed by her wooden cabins and superstructure and with passengers opting for more convenient and faster modes of travel, Keewatin was laid up and retired on November 28, 1965 at Port McNicoll, finished forever and waiting to be scrapped: Assiniboia followed suit.

In 1967 Keewatin was saved from an ignoble end when RJ Peterson of Douglas, Michigan, purchased her. A marina owner and Great Lakes historian, Peterson borrowed the funds, bought the ship and towed her by tug to his marina on the Kalamazoo River. There she was established as a maritime museum and lovingly cared-for by the Petersons for the next 45 years. Eric Conroy, a teenaged waiter on Keewatin in the '60s, started visiting in 1995, and was given the honorary persona of “Captain Rick” during Keewatin’s centenary celebration in 2007.

Meanwhile, Assiniboia was sold, towed away, and lost in a fire in 1968. The CPR operations in Port McNicoll concluded, and over time the track was removed, buildings were demolished, and the extensive property at the centre of town was put up for sale and became derelict. In 2005 Skyline purchased the property with plan to create an upscale period-themed waterfront village. Skyline’s President, Gil Blutrigh, learned of the existence of Keewatin, and in 2007 offered to purchase her from Peterson to make her the centrepiece of his development: Peterson refused.

In 2011 an aging Peterson offered Keewatin to Blutrigh on condition he donate the ship to a charity in his name in Port McNicoll. Blutrigh agreed, the contract was signed, and Conroy was engaged as Project Manager to extricate the ship from the river, return her to Port McNicoll, and manage the charity. Keewatin was returned to Port McNicoll in 2012, Skyline formed the RJ and Diane Peterson Great Lakes Foundation and Keewatin Museum charity in 2013, and in 2015 obtained a Canada 150 grant to restore the dock, pledging to donate it to the municipality.

On the strength of contractual commitments and public pronouncements made by Skyline that would see Keewatin donated to the charity, popularly known as Friends of Keewatin, in Port McNicoll, hundreds of volunteers donated tens of thousands of hours in expertise and effort to restoring the ship and operating her as an historical attraction. However, rather than fulfill its obligations, Skyline inexplicably chose to abandon them and is now bent on donating Keewatin to a different organization in a location with no historical connection to the ship or the fleet.

Keewatin now stands not only as the last remaining Great Lakes passenger liner, but also as the last Edwardian-era passenger steamship in the world. Representative of a bygone age and an attention to craftsmanship and opulence we won’t soon see again, Keewatin is a true symbol of growth and development in North America and a treasured piece of Canadian history. Most of all, Keewatin is representative of the Canadian Pacific Railways Upper Lakes Service and the community that grew around it and worked on it for more than half a century: Port McNicoll.