

THE "ROYAL TRIO"

On the St. Lawrence River

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Three beautiful, white steamships, with their red smokestacks, belonged to the Ontario and Richelieu Navigation Company of Montreal, until taken over by the Canada Steamship Line (C.S.L.) in 1913.

Proudly flying the Union Jack, the Rapids Queen, Rapids King and Rapids Prince carried thousands of passengers from Prescott, Ontario to Montreal, Quebec for many decades, until passenger service ended seventy years ago, in September of 1949.

All three ships were designed to "run the rapids" of the St. Lawrence, in the years before the Seaway. Officially opened sixty years ago, on June 26, 1959, by Queen HRM Elizabeth, P.M. John Diefenbaker and President Dwight Eisenhower, the Seaway submerged the rapids and changed the river forever.

It was exciting. It was nerve-wracking. It was dangerous, as these large steamships ran through the rapids in currents ranging from 12 to 20 knots, guided by skilled pilots

and wheelmen. A new word was coined, as "day-trippers" came for the excitement. They left Prescott C. P. R. dock every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday at 9:30 am for the all-day adventure to Victoria Pier in Montreal, arriving about 7:30 p.m.

Beautifully appointed interiors of rich woods, large glassed-in saloons to sit and watch the scenery, classy dining rooms with white linens and silverware welcomed the travelers. Excellent lunch and dinner menus were prepared on board.

Other ships gave the "Royal Salute" of recognition, of 3 long and 2 short whistle blasts, as these ships passed by, carrying passengers, freight and a few cars, downriver only. They returned upriver empty, through the tedious system of canals and locks.

Nine sets of rapids had to be navigated on the trip from Prescott to Montreal. The small Galop Rapids at Cardinal, the Plat Rapids at Morrisburg, then the more treacherous

Long Sault Rapids to Cornwall. Next came a series of five rapids at Valleyfield Quebec, where the river drops 85 feet (25 metres) in 15 miles (24km) into Lake St. Louis. Twelve miles (19km) of calm water led into the fast rushing, most dangerous Lachine Rapids at Montreal. The river had dropped 246 feet (73m) at Montreal. Skilled pilots and crew were needed to navigate the rocks and shoals of the Lachine Rapids, with a current of 20 knots. Wild, white water engulfed the ship. As the bow plunged, speed picked up and the wheel had to be turned hard to port, then hard to starboard, where rocks were large, adding excitement and trepidation for the hundreds of passengers. At times, steering was more difficult, as many passengers rushed from one side to the other to catch sight of the cauldron, as the river continued to drop.

Three "royal" ships, designed to shoot the rapids belonged to Canada Steamship Line (C.S.L.) from 1914 to 1950.

1. Rapids Queen



STEAMER "RAPIDS QUEEN," IN LONG SAULT RAPIDS, ST. LAWRENCE RIVER.

Rapids Queen was built in 1892, in Chester Pennsylvania, by the Delaware River Company, for the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation Company. Her overall dimensions were 175 feet long, 34-foot beam, moulded depth of 9 feet, with a 5-foot draught. She had two boilers and two propellers. From 1892 –1905, she was known as the Columbian, from 1905 –1908 as the Brockville, then from 1909 to 1938 as the Rapids Queen. In 1901, at Sorel Quebec, she was rebuilt with more accommodation and in 1909 she was lengthened by 19 feet. The hull was sheathed in elm to protect the steel plating while running the rapids.

In 1936 and 1937, she became a floating hotel at Morrisburg, for the overflow of patients attracted to Dr. Locke's famous foot clinics at Williamsburg Ontario. The Canadian Dredge and Dock Company of Montreal cut her down to a barge in Kingston in 1939. The Queen ended her life in 1978, as a breakwater at Queen City Yacht Club, on Toronto Island.

2. Rapids King

Rapides de Lachine.
("Rapids King" shooting Lachine Rapids.)



Rapids King was built in 1907 in Toronto, by the Canadian Shipbuilding Company, for the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation Company. Overall dimensions were 245 feet long, 40-foot beam and a moulded depth of 10 feet. River pilots had not been consulted by the designers. They would not have approved a draught of 6 1/2 feet. Anything over 6 feet was dangerous in both Long Sault and Lachine Rapids. She struck every time she attempted a descent of the rapids. Pilots later refused to take her down anymore. She was laid up for a while, then tried as an excursion steamer at several lake ports.

Her 6 1/2-foot draught was too light for open water and she rolled badly.

There were two boilers, which developed 1800 horsepower and two, four-blade bronze propellers. It was not a popular ship and was laid up at Sorel Quebec in 1934. In 1950, the Rapids King was broken up in Kingston Ontario. This fine-looking ship proved to be a disappointing failure.

3. Rapids Prince

Rapids Prince was built in 1910, by Toronto Shipyards, for the Ontario and Richelieu Navigation Company Ltd. Overall dimensions were 210 feet long, 37-foot beam and a moulded depth of 9 feet 8 inches. Her single boiler, built by John Inglis Company in Toronto, produced 900 horsepower. This popular ship saw regular service, until her final trip on September 16, 1949.

She was part of Canada Steamship Line from 1914 until she was broken up in Hamilton Ontario, in December 1951.

Her two, four-bladed bronze propellers were sold for use on the S.S. Sagamo in Muskoka and her main engine was saved for use in the Quebec Government Marine Engineers' School in Rimouski. This ship was very successful in running the rapids. Only once, July 6, 1941, due to pilot error, she ran aground, just below Lachine Rapids. All 221 passengers and crew were rescued by motorboats, which were able to handle the fast current. In Montreal Dry Dock nothing was found wrong with the ship's hull. The steel hull was sheathed with elm planks to cushion the shocks in the rapids.



C.S.L. passenger service was discontinued after the terrible loss of 122 lives in the fire on board the Noronic, in Toronto Harbour, on the night of September 17, 1949. Canada Steamship Line assessed the damages of \$3 million.

An era of passenger service on the St. Lawrence River was over. The excitement and the romance of the white ships wrestling the rapids, taking on the turbulence, as the river dropped over the rocks to Montreal is now only a memory. **LH**