

History of the Ferry “Wahkiakum”

Wahkiakum County, Washington

Prior to 1925 the only safe way between Portland, Oregon and Astoria, Oregon was by steamboat. There was a small barge that ran between Cathlamet, Washington and Westport, Oregon that could accommodate only one car. The only roads leading west over KM Mountain were treacherous logging roads through the woods.

In June 25, 1925 Walter Coates brought the first ferry to Puget Island. It was a wooden ferryboat he named the *Cathlamet*. Walter Coates ran the ferry with his sons Melvin and Ellis. The ferry carried 8 vehicles. For the first 4 or 5 months the *Cathlamet* ran from Cathlamet, Washington to Puget Island, Washington, around the Island and across the main channel to Westport, Oregon. The fare was \$1.25 for automobiles, 15 cents for foot passengers.

The second ferry, the *Westport*, also owned by Walter Coates, arrived later in 1925. The *Westport* made the run between Puget Island, Washington and Westport, Oregon and carried 8 vehicles. Foot passengers and the crew were transported by automobile on the 3½ mile trip between the two ferries. The crew consisted of the pilot, the engineer, and two deckhands. During the week the ferry made six runs a day, seven on Saturday and Sunday.

Cathlamet was a booming place in the late twenties. There were 5 gas stations, three garages, four grocery stores, two meat markets, a theater, and a skating rink, among other enterprises. This brought many salesmen by way of the ferry to Cathlamet. The *Cathlamet* also transported the Puget Island high school students to Cathlamet.

The Coates family ran the ferry for seven years. A bus eventually replaced the old automobile used for transporting passengers between the ferries.

In 1929 the river froze over closing the ferry down for five to six weeks. No supplies arrived in Cathlamet, nor did any mail.

In 1932 when the highway was extended west Walter Coates thinking the road would connect to the Astoria ferry, thus eliminating much of his business, sold both ferries. The *Cathlamet* was purchased by the Umpqua Navigation Company and moved to Reedsport, Oregon. The *Westport* went to Waldport, Oregon. The ferry run was taken over by Arthur Houchen who operated it with a barge maneuvered by a tug. In 1934 Mr. Houchen purchased the *Everyday* for the run from Cathlamet to Puget Island. In 1936 Arthur Houchen sold the business to Elmer Danielson. In 1938 Wahkiakum County Officials decided to construct a bridge one-quarter mile downstream from the ferry landing between Cathlamet and Puget Island when Mr. Danielson refused to improve the north ferry landing. The ferry from Puget Island, WA to Westport, OR continued as normal. The *Tourist No. 1* took over for the

Everyday in the early 1940's and in 1948 Mr. Danielson replaced the *Tourist No. 1* when he had the 65-foot metal ferry, the *Almar*, built. He ran the ferry until he and his wife divorced and Jessie Danielson received the ferry in the divorce settlement. In 1959 it was sold and moved to Anacortes, Washington. There was no ferry service for the next four months.

In April 1960 Darrell Boylan took over the ferry service. Since the ferry had been sold and moved, he utilized the tug *Sylvia B.* and the barge *Pendleton*. By September 1960 Mr. Boylan made the decision to cease operation.

The Wahkiakum County taxpayers voted to take over the ferry, and the county operated Mr. Boylan's tug and barge, with Oscar Bergseng as Captain. In 1962 Nichols Boat Works of Hood River, Oregon finished construction of the Ferry *Wahkiakum*, as commissioned by the county. The *Wahkiakum* is still in operation today. It is the last ferry operating on the Columbia River west of Grand Coulee Dam, 485 miles upstream. The 12-car ferry runs 365 days a year, 18 runs a day.

In 1969 the State of Washington was persuaded to accept the ferry as an extension of State Route 409 and share some of the operation costs. Today, the State covers 80% of the deficit costs of operating the ferry.

Of all those who have been connected with the ferry system over the years Oscar Bergseng's name is most prominent. He worked 26 years on the ferry, seven of those years part time. At one time four full time employees were Bergsengs, Oscar, his wife Adine, and sons George and Gary. When Oscar retired in 1966 Gary took over as skipper.