

HERITAGE CORNER

Majestic passenger ship *S. S. Noronic* ended in tragedy

By Ian Mason and Bonnie Stevenson

If you have lived along the St. Clair River for any length of time, you will have heard of the noble beginning and the tragic end of the majestic *S. S. Noronic*.

She was the flagship of the Canada Steamship Lines, Northern Navigation Division, launched from the Western Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company in Port Arthur, Ontario. But her exquisitely crafted interiors were made with care and pride in Sarnia. From the time she left Point Edward on her maiden voyage in May, 1914, to the horrifying day 35 years later when she was destroyed by fire, she plied the waters of the Great Lakes offering passengers the finest in luxurious surroundings.

This month marks the 65th anniversary of the violent passing of the *S.S. Noronic*. In the early morning of Saturday, Sept. 17, 1949, while docked at Pier 9 in Toronto Harbour, the stately ship caught fire and burned, killing 119 of the 524 passengers on board. The tragedy took the life of Miss Louisa Dusten of Sarnia, who had strong family ties in Sombra where she is buried in the Riverside Cemetery. It also ruined a life.

Capt. William Taylor, commander of the *S.S. Noronic* at the time of its destruction, was a Mooretown resident who began his 47-year sailing career on the St. Clair River. Eleven days after the fire, a Court of Investigation was convened. It lasted five weeks and its findings indicated Capt. Taylor and the company had not taken proper precautions for the safety of



The *S. S. Noronic* steams down the St. Clair River carrying passengers on a thrilling cruise through the Great Lakes.

anticipated the potential for disaster. Capt. Taylor's certificate was ordered to be suspended for a year, but he never asked to be reinstated even though the Canada Steamship Line scoffed at the findings and offered to retain him on the payroll. He resigned from the company and never sailed again.

Capt. Taylor returned to the area to live, although not in the historic home he owned in Mooretown. His wife, Harriett, continued to live in the house with her sister-in-law, Grace Taylor. He eventually moved into Sarnia where he worked as a desk clerk at McFee's Hotel. He is buried in Bear Creek Cemetery on Moore Line.

The *Noronic* disaster prompted a drastic change in guidelines regarding Canadian passenger ships. Only a few of those ships met with the requirements at that time and instead of retrofitting the ones that didn't comply, they were simply laid up and eventually scrapped. The last surviving Canadian Great Lakes passenger steamship, the *Keewatin*, was retired from passenger service in 1965. American passenger ships didn't last much longer due to equivalent restrictive requirements. The *S.S. South America* was retired from service in 1967.

The *Noronic* was known by her nickname, *Queen of the Lakes*, which demonstrates the affection she inspired in those who saw her go by and who sailed aboard her. But since Sarnia and Point Edward were the home ports of the Northern Navigation Division of the Canada Steamship Line and many local people worked on the ships, it held a special place in the hearts of the people of Lambton County.

A plaque commemorating the *Noronic* disaster can be seen today located near the site of the tragedy just west of the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel on the Toronto waterfront.



The once-noble *S. S. Noronic* sits in smouldering ruins at Toronto Harbour's Pier 9 on Saturday, Sept. 17, 1949.

the passengers in the event of tragedy. Only 15 of the 171 crew members were on duty when the fire broke out. Fire drill procedures were practiced only by the crew, but the company held that vacationing passengers should not be bothered by the annoying interruption of emergency drills. The Court's report was damning of Capt. Taylor's lack of emergency preparedness and berated his judgement. Further, it determined he should have an-

Sombra Museum seeks WWI items

World War I items, memorabilia or stories are being sought for the Sombra Museum's new exhibit to commemorate the 100th anniversary of "the war to end all wars". Call 519-892-3982 for more information.

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For information and/or assistance, call Coruna at 519-862-1240 or Brigden at 519-864-1395.

Legion membership is NOT required.