

HERITAGE CORNER

History of the Bluewater Ferry Company reaches back into the early days of St. Clair Township

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Sombra ferry going strong after 118 years of continuous operation

By Bonnie Stevenson

The Sombra ferry has been a thriving operation since 1880. That's when Samuel Whitely began taking passengers across the St. Clair River in a sailboat called *The Silent*.

Of course, when there was no wind, the boat had to be rowed across, an arduous task for the crew. And then, there was the problem of winter ice. Iron runners on the bottom of the boat provided a way to shove the vessel over the top of the ice.

The fare in those early days was ten cents for a round trip.

In 1888, Whitely's son, Tom, took over and eventually brought the small steam ferry, *Comfort*, to Sombra. Since then, a steady progression of powered vessels with names like the Whitely, the Marian, the Ariel, and the Lowell D. have plied the waters between Sombra and Marine City, Michigan, carrying passengers, automobiles and trucks safely to the other side.

The Dalgety family, present owners of the Sombra ferry, didn't get involved in the ferry business until 1948, although they were residents of Sombra before that time. The family originally owned a rubber stamp works, which can still be seen in the heart of Sombra on the east side of the St. Clair Parkway.

The ferry was bought by Morgan Dalgety and George Dean, and it has been operated by the Dalgety family ever since. It's present owner is Morgan's son, Lowell. "I started on the ferry in the summer of 1948 as a deckhand," said Mr. Dalgety. "I bought the ferry around 1970 from the family."

Mr. Dalgety's business, the Bluewater Ferry Company, presently has seven full-time employees, as well as one of his grandsons, who works aboard the ferry. "We're on the fourth generation," said Mr. Dalgety. "My 16-year-old grandson is working as a deckhand, but he goes to school at SCITS in Sarnia." His two sons, Morgan and Robie, also work for the company.

Although he doesn't know the exact number of vehicles the ferry carries each year, Mr. Dalgety offered a rough estimate of the traffic his company services. "In the summertime, it's very busy—about 16,000 to 20,000 per month," he said. "In the winter, there are usually ice problems when we can't make frequent trips, so it's less." He added this past winter offered no ice problems at all because of the mild temperatures.

During the busy season,

the ferry Daldean makes about 50 trips per day, and with the help of the second ferry, Ontimich, as many as 100 trips can be made.

The Dalgetys originally owned two ferry lines. In addition to the one in Sombra, they also ran the ferry from Walpole Island to Alganac, Michigan. Mr. Dalgety says that was his father's first ferry business. "Dad bought that in 1939, the same year the war started," he said. "Then he bought this one so he was running two at one time."

When Morgan Dalgety sold the Walpole Island operation in 1951, he looked at upgrading Sombra. He had the Daldean built in Eriau, Ontario in 1952 to replace the Lowell D. The Daldean can carry 12 cars and 100 people. In 1983, the Ontimich, which originally ran from the Port Lambton docks, was purchased to augment the Sombra service.

The present ferry service has come a long way from the days of sails and paddles. Mr. Dalgety says today's crew is required to be trained in safety measures, making a trip aboard the Sombra ferries safe and enjoyable. "All of the boat crew has safety training," he said. "It's sponsored by the Coast Guard. They instruct on things like lifesaving and firefighting."

The name Dalgety has been synonymous with the Sombra ferry operation and it seems the thriving operation will carry on well into the new millennium. For Lowell Dalgety, it's a life he wouldn't trade and he smiles when he talks about the changing nature of his duties. "I don't know anything else," he said. "I don't work on the boats any more, but I take care of the business and pay the bills."



Aboard the *Daldean of Eriau*, from left: Lowell Dalgety, Morgan Dalgety, Harold Stover, William Laing, and Stuart Clark.

Photo from Sombra Museum archives