

History vs. Hotdogs

Given our penchant for celebrating anniversaries that might better be forgotten, like the Vancouver Canucks' forty years of futility in pursuit of the Stanley Cup, it is surprising that more wasn't made this year of the diamond jubilee of the coastal ferry service.

Or maybe not.

The ferry corp is not exactly a popular topic these days. Sailings have never been more unpredictable, the fares have never been higher, the ridership is the lowest in years — and its American CEO can't stop counting up his giant bonus cheques long enough to connect up the dots between those things.

But despite its current funk, it's hard to think of one thing that transformed life on this coast as profoundly as the arrival of the car ferry, and it doesn't reflect well on our self-awareness that the 60th anniversary is passing almost without comment. I wouldn't have known myself but for a web posting by local realtor/historian Gary Little, and that's bad because I must be one of the few living coastians who actually partook in the event.

It's one of my first memories of life on the Sunshine Coast after my family moved to Nelson Island. I would have been six on August 11, 1951 and details are a little dim, but I recall the long, punishing ride down the rutted cat-road that passed for a highway in those days in the rattletrap six-door jitney that passed for a bus. My dad didn't own a car. There probably weren't two-dozen operational motor vehicles on the Sunshine Coast in those days, if you don't count the ones used for hauling logs. There wasn't much use for private vehicles because the few roads that existed were such that you risked taking out a crankcase or differential every 50 yards. At several points during our transit from Pender Harbour to Gibsons the able-bodied male passengers were called upon to get out and push the jitney up washboard hills and there were several level creek-crossings where the driver had to hit the water at top speed and kind of drift across. But mainly as a result of the event we were off to witness on that day, traffic would be streaming up a new highway to Powell River within three years and the automobile age would be transforming life throughout the Sunshine Coast.

Dad had enticed me along for the ride by saying there was going to be a big celebration in Gibsons to mark the startup of ferry service, including a boxing match, which excited me. Not that I cared about boxing, but I reckoned an outing like that would be sure to include popcorn and hotdogs and other fun things seldom encountered

on Nelson Island. When we got to Gibsons however, Dad presented me with a choice: we could stay there and take in the festivities around town or we could actually embark on the ferry on its first trip.

"It's a chance to be a part of history," he told me.

I didn't know what history was exactly, but the way Dad spoke of it, it sounded at least as exciting as boxing. Alas, the crossing on the antique Quillayute offered no more to relieve boredom than its modern counterpart and I remember thinking I'd been duped.

The new service was operated by the Black Ball Line, a private concern that specialized in starting new crossings — in 1816 it initiated the first scheduled passenger service across the Atlantic. Like its successor today, Black Ball was headed by an American emissary of free enterprise named, somewhat hilariously it seemed to my six-year-old mind, Captain Peabody. Peabody had been blackballed from operating ferries in Puget Sound after trying to ram through a 30 per cent fare hike, which led Washingtonians to conclude the profit motive didn't serve the needs of a coastal population dependent on marine links. They nationalized Peabody's operations in 1951, replacing it with the Washington state ferry system, which has provided reliable and affordable service there ever since.

Peabody managed to hang onto several old boats Washington didn't want and shifted to B.C. waters, where he hoped to build a new ferry empire free of state interference. At first it seemed a good move for him and B.C. both, but the B.C. government soon came to the same conclusion as its Washington counterpart, and in 1961 the redoubtable captain found himself nationalized a second time when B.C. premier W.A.C. Bennett merged Black Ball into the B.C. Ferry Authority. The rest, as my father would say, is history. Peabody's rag-tag fleet expanded to fulfil Bennett's vision of a reliable and affordable marine highway that enabled B.C.'s coastal economy to flourish, faltering only when lesser leaders forgot the lessons of the past and begin confusing the mandates of public utilities with those of private business.

Until I read Gary's article I thought the sailing my dad and I took that August day in 1951 was merely the B.C. ferry system's first crossing of Howe Sound. I assumed the Vancouver Island run had started earlier. Now I realize that the island crossings had not yet begun and that trip on the shimmying, shuddering old Quillayute was the Black Ball-cum-B.C. Ferries' first official trip in B.C. ever. It was more historic even than my father claimed. Not that I would have cared at the time. I just wanted a hotdog. **CL**



Howard White, a lifelong Sunshine Coaster, is publisher of Harbour Publishing in Madeira Park. His book, The Sunshine Coast, is essential reading for anyone hoping to fathom the mysteries of Coast life.