

The Union Steamship Era: Opening Up the Sunshine Coast

In 1889, the Union Steamship Company of British Columbia (USSCo) was formed to provide maritime transportation services for the benefit of the two or three thousand loggers, fisherman, farmers, and other hardy residents of the Sunshine Coast and dozens of small communities scattered along the British Columbia north coast. Its ships carried passengers, freight, and mail to and from the Union Dock located at the foot of Carrall Street in the Gastown area of the newly incorporated city of Vancouver.

USSCo was the catalyst for the growth and development of the Sunshine Coast in the first half of the 20th century, allowing rural families to survive and even flourish despite the isolation and the lack of modern conveniences found only in the big city. USSCo also promoted our area as an idyllic tourist destination: it was referred to as the “Gulf Coast Riviera” in colourful travel brochures and thousands of people visited over the years to enjoy a wide range of outdoor recreational activities.

The Comox was the first USSCo vessel to regularly serve the Sunshine Coast. From 1890 to near the end of World War I she sailed here from Vancouver twice a week carrying passengers as well as provisions for the residents.

Over the years, many wharves were built along the coast so that the USSCo ships could load and unload passengers and cargo more easily. The three wharves in the Sechelt area were at Davis Bay, Selma Park, and near the present pier at Trail Bay. Others were located at Hopkins Landing, Granthams Landing, Gibsons Landing, and Roberts Creek to the south, and Halfmoon Bay and Irvines Landing to the north.

In 1917 the Comox was replaced by the Chilco (renamed Lady Pam in 1935) and Chasina which had been acquired that year from the rival All-Red Line. The Capilano II also began serving the Sunshine Coast in 1920.

In the 1920s and 1930s, USSCo was able to grow its business considerably by embracing the tourist trade and promoting the natural attractions of The Path of Sunshine and Sea Charm along the Gulf Coast Riviera, the exotic description of the route used in USSCo travel brochures.

One popular tourist destination was a 7-acre parcel of land at Selma Park (across Trail Bay) — only a 3-hour steamer trip from Vancouver — which



The S.S. Comox regularly served the Sunshine Coast from 1891 to 1917. (Courtesy of the Vancouver Maritime Museum)

USSCo had purchased when it acquired the All-Red Line business in 1917. People flocked to this resort for swimming, sunbathing, hiking, fishing, picnicking, and tennis. A large dance pavilion with a magnificent view was also built on the heights across the road from the wharf and visitors could stay in cottage bungalows, camp cottages, or tents.

The price for a return trip to Selma Park in the early 1920s: \$1.50 plus an extra 50 cents for lunch at the nearby Sechelt Hotel run by local mogul Bert Whitaker. In 1926, USSCo acquired Whitaker's businesses and land holdings in the village of Sechelt, including the hotel, general store, and wharf at Trail Bay. See the heritage sign on the Trail Bay wharf to learn more about Whitaker and his Sechelt empire.

USSCo launched several of its “Lady” ships in the mid 1920s to accommodate its booming excursion and day-boat business: Lady Evelyn (1923), Lady Alexandra (1924), Lady Cynthia (1925), and Lady Cecilia (1925). They were nicknamed the “Daddy Boats” because every Friday in the summer they were loaded with working men from Vancouver coming to visit their vacationing families.

By the late 1940s, USSCo's tourism and commercial operations began to suffer. On the tourism side, the popularity of the automobile and a better road network meant that more and more people headed to highways rather than ships when they went on vacation. On the commercial side, remote communities and camps came to favour private boats or the convenience and speed of float planes for transportation.

The Sunshine Coast's reliance on USSCo Steamship disappeared virtually overnight with the arrival of Black Ball Ferries' drive-on drive-off car ferry service between Horseshoe Bay and Gibsons in 1951 combined with the paving of the road to Sechelt in 1952. In early 1959, after 70 years of continuous service, USSCo ceased steamship operations completely: the Union Steamship era was over.



A USSCo map from a mid-1920s tourism brochure showing the Sunshine Coast route. (Courtesy of the Sechelt Community Archives)