Alligator in the Ottawa River

To participate in the Ontario County of Renfrew’s 150th anniversary celebrations, the Canadian Forestry Association undertook to transport the W.D. Stalker Alligator Steam Tug Boat up to the Ottawa Valley from its berth in the Lynn River in Simcoe, Norfolk County, Ontario.

The Alligator was initially set up as a static component of the extensive forestry exhibit at EXPO 150, attracting many hundreds of curious or nostalgic visitors. Attendants on hand heard wonderful stories, often from old lads, telling of summers of their youth when they might paddle out from shore to a steaming, smoking Alligator with a boom in tow, often on the Ottawa River near Pembroke or Deep River or Arnprior, to be treated by the cook on board to a piece of buttered bread or raisin pie. An account from the summer of 1943 by a Renfrew lady tells how she and other teenage girls would swim out to the Alligator from their cottage near Castleford to be helped on board to repeatedly dive off the bow. Running the boom logs in the old days was a recurring theme as men chatted, peering into the hold of the Alligator, to view the boiler, upright steam engine, and mile of steel warping cable on the large horizontal drum. Younger visitors often needed to be reminded that forestry opened up this country and before railway access, roads or trucks, the river was the highway upon which the vast timber harvests were transported each summer to mill or market. The river drive is legendary in the Ottawa Valley and featured in story and song, once again now with the visit of the Alligator Tug Boat in the summer of 2011.

The Alligator was a significant forestry workhorse invented in 1889 and manufactured through to the 1930s by the West and Peachey Company of Simcoe, producing almost three hundred craft. It revolutionized river drive operations across the near-north by combining the technology of the steam engine and the warping (winding) drum to the process of kedging of huge log booms across large expanses of water in the watershed. Kedging was the tedious, backbreaking system of winding the hawser rope around a capstan to haul the boom of logs forward where there was little or no current. Early on, this was done with horses or men plodding around endlessly to turn the vertical pulley mechanism on a raft anchored downstream to a rock-filled crib or to a land base.

A precursor to the plan to bring the steam boat to the Valley was the publishing of the book “Alligators of the North” in 2010 that combined the early work of the late Clarence Coons of Kemptville and John Corby, now Curator Emeritus at the Museum of Science and Technology with the writing skills of Port Dover historian Harry Barrett. This book is the definitive text now on Alligator Tug Boats and its success provided some of the funds needed to bring the 50 foot, 25-ton W.D. Stalker Alligator steam boat north. The town of Simcoe and Norfolk County proudly celebrate their West and Peachey Alligator manufacturing heritage with the Lynn River display of the W.D. Stalker. However, through all the years, the Alligators were shipped by railway out of Simcoe to destinations from Maine and Newfoundland across the Canadian Shield through to Minnesota. The Trent System, Georgian Bay, Ottawa River, and the St. Lawrence River watersheds were where most of them were put to work, some operating even up to the 1950s and ’60s. This is where most of them died, drawn up on shore or left in the water to rot away.

Following the County of Renfrew’s EXPO 150, the W.D. Stalker was hoisted back on the trailer and transported to the Arnprior Marina courtesy of Shaw Lumber of Pembroke. It was launched there by backing the tractor trailer into the Madawaska River but it still needed the persuasion of a crane to complete the process. It was one of three steam boats, voyageur canoes, dragon boats and a camboose scow and many other conventional water craft that formed...
The Norway Bay to Braeside Flotilla on June 25th. The event was a wonderful example of the longstanding friendship across the Ottawa River, where we in Renfrew County and our friends in Pontiac County Quebec proudly say that river doesn’t separate us, it joins us.

The W.D. Stalker is the only operating West and Peachey alligator boat in existence today. The boat and the perseverance of the Simcoe steam enthusiasts who maintain and run it are a testament to our forebears in the legendary forestry river drive operations of yore.

**Dave Lemkay**
Executive Director
Renfrew Industrial Commission
[former General Manager, Canadian Forestry Association]

The Alligator steam boat crew from Norfolk County and Ottawa Vallee. Participants from Pontiac County and Renfrew County assembled prior to the launch of the flotilla from Norway Bay, Quebec to Braeside, Ontario, June 25, 2011.

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