

1955 March

STEAMBOAT BILL

THE ALASKA STEAMSHIP COMPANY

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In September, 1954, passenger steamship service under the American flag between Seattle and the Territory of Alaska ended. Thus closed a type of connection which stretched back to the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, and over half a century of passenger transportation by the Alaska Steamship Company.

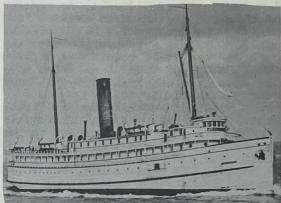
It is the aim of this article to present the principal characteristics of the service rendered by the Alaska Steamship Company since its formation in 1895, and to point out some of the stages in the development of its fleet. In this connection, Mr. Lloyd Stadum's admirable list of the fleet of the company (p. 96 of the December issue and p. 7, below) provides so many of the basic facts that there will be no need here to mention all the ships of the company, or to repeat their main characteristics. There will be only the most casual mention of the freighters.

The passenger ships have been a most interesting lot. Only two of them were built by the company for its own service. One came originally from the Cunard Line, another from the Castle Line, two from the American Line, two from the Oceanic Steamship Company, one from the Savannah Line, and six from the Ward Line. The fitting together of these and other steamers into a remarkably homogeneous and satisfactory steamship service in a region which offered a multitude of challenges to mariner and operator alike is a tribute to the men who served the company from its inception.

Steamship service from the United States to Alaska began in regular fashion in 1867 with monthly sailings between Portland and Sitka, via way ports, by the North Pacific Transportation Company. In 1875 the Oregon Steamship Company assumed the service, which had been supported by a mail contract since 1870. The Pacific Coast Steamship Company entered the Alaskan trade in 1880, and, in addition to monthly vessels to care for the limited needs of the settlements in southeast Alaska, a brisk summer tourist trade came into being about 1885.

The Alaska Steamship Company was organized in 1895, and inaugurated service on March 3 that year with the single freighter WILLAPA. The gold excitement of 1897-1898 brought less expansion to the company than to others. While the Pacific Coast Steamship Company had 12 steamers on the Alaska run by March, 1898, and a host of new operators had entered the business, the Alaska Steamship Company chartered only ALLIANCE in 1897. It purchased ROSALIE the same year to replace WILLAPA, which was wrecked. In 1899 DIRIGO and FARALLON were added, and these typical steam schooners with limited passenger accommodations formed the backbone of the service to southeastern Alaska for more than a decade.

The company's first bid for a part in the passenger trade was made when DOLPHIN entered service between Seattle and



JEFFERSON

--Marine Salon

Skagway in 1900. HUMBOLDT was chartered to operate with her in the summer of 1903, and the next year JEFFERSON, first ship constructed for the company, entered the "express" service. She was a wooden steamer built by E. W. Heath of Tacoma, and was the first vessel of the fleet to exceed 1000 tons.

It was this very modest fleet of 4 ships which in 1908 was consolidated with that of the Northwestern Steamship Company, Ltd., under the name of the Alaska Steamship Company, under control of the Guggenheim-Morgan copper interests. In 1915 the company came under the ownership of the Kennecott Copper Company, which retained it until May, 1937. The Northwestern Steamship Company had been formed in 1904 by John Rosene and associates as a subsidiary of their Northwestern Commercial Company. Specializing in the trade to southwestern Alaska and the Nome district, the company had assembled a large and varied fleet. When the fleets were combined in 1908, they totaled 15 steamers of 28,160 tons in all, and formed the largest steamship fleet operating exclusively to Alaska.

The basic service pattern of 1908 remained comparatively little changed until 1941. DOLPHIN and JEFFERSON maintained the southeastern Alaska passenger

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LOCATION OF SAN DIEGO