

The Role of the Steamboats on the Stewart River 1883-1960

Gold was discovered along the bars of the Stewart River in late 1883. By 1885 news of this had reached the outside world and more than 75 miners came in over the Dyea pass that year to work the bars. Steamboats were used to get as far as the McQuesten River. In 1886 McQuesten, Harper and Mayo established a post at the mouth of the Stewart River (confluence with the Yukon) to supply the miners gathering on the river. It was estimated that over \$300,000 worth of gold was taken from the bars in 1885-86. The streams coming into the Stewart were prospected as well which led to the Duncan Creek stampede in 1901. Placer gold mining still continues on the bars and the creeks today.

Steamboating of supplies came early to the area with McQuesten and Mayo (partner of the Alaska Commercial Company) bringing the *Yukon* on line in 1883. The *Yukon* was sunk by an ice jam in 1883 but was soon replaced by the *New Racket*. By 1901 and the Duncan Creek stampede there were over 60 boats and barges servicing the Yukon River some of which then began to service the Stewart River as well. The *Lightening*, the *Prospector* and the *Vidette* (the latter two belonging to the Side Stream Navigation Company) brought miners and supplies up the Stewart River to Gordon Landing in 1901-02 for the overland trip to Duncan Creek. By 1903 the townsite of Mayo was established at the confluence of the Mayo and Stewart Rivers and a landing established.

The development of the Silver King mine and the discovery of silver ore at Keno in 1919 greatly added to the steamboat revenue. At high water, ore was taken from Mayo to the Yukon River on barges pushed by the shallow draft sternwheelers *Vidette* and *Pauline*. The barges were then left at Stewart City to be pushed up river by the larger boats.

The *Keno* was built at Whitehorse and completed in August 1922 as a side stream freight hauler. In 1937 she was made ten feet longer to accommodate more freight. She worked mainly on the Stewart River hauling silver lead concentrate from Mayo to Stewart City, a distance of 180 miles. The *Keno's* draft was less than two feet, making it easy to navigate the river at low water. When there was a large ore load to transport the boat pushed a barge. The *Keno* could haul 120 tons and the barge an additional 225 tons (each sack of silver lead ore weighed about 125 pounds). The *Keno* had a crew of 21 men plus a captain and a pilot. The *Keno* was also occasionally used for early and late season trips to Dawson City because its shallow draft made grounding less likely during low water.

On the trips into Mayo the *Keno* and other boats would haul freight, Henry Breaden who worked the boats in the 1940s and 50s, notes that they would put kerosene lanterns under the tarps containing produce on the trips in, so that the produce would not freeze. Breaden also recalls that the freight was most likely to be on the boats while the fuel, dredge parts, vehicles or dynamite were loaded on the barges. When dynamite was hauled there would be no passengers allowed. Usually the *Aksala* hauled the dynamite from Whitehorse to Stewart City where it was transferred to the *Keno*. They would put the detonators in the stateroom bunks for the trip. On these trips they flew a red flag

from the forward jackstaff to warn other boats. Brearden jokes that when they passed other boats on the river, somehow they found a reason to sit near the beach until the *Keno* had gone by "perhaps they were thinking of the Str. Columbian in 1906, and that was only 4 tons of black powder on the bow."

The *Keno* continued to service the Stewart river until 1955 when trucking ore proved more economical than barging it. Other boats operating on the Stewart at the same time as the *Keno* included the *Aksala*, *Nasutlin*, *Yukon Rose* (belonging to Taylor and Drury) and the tunnel boats *Nazel B* and the *Neecheah*. The *Keno* was the last sternwheeler to travel a river in the Yukon when it steamed into Dawson City on August 23, 1960, under the command of Cpt. Blacky and Frank Slim.

Prepared by Dr. Anne Leckie, Mayo Historical Society for site visit in Mayo of Parks Canada personnel from Dawson City, May 22, 2002.