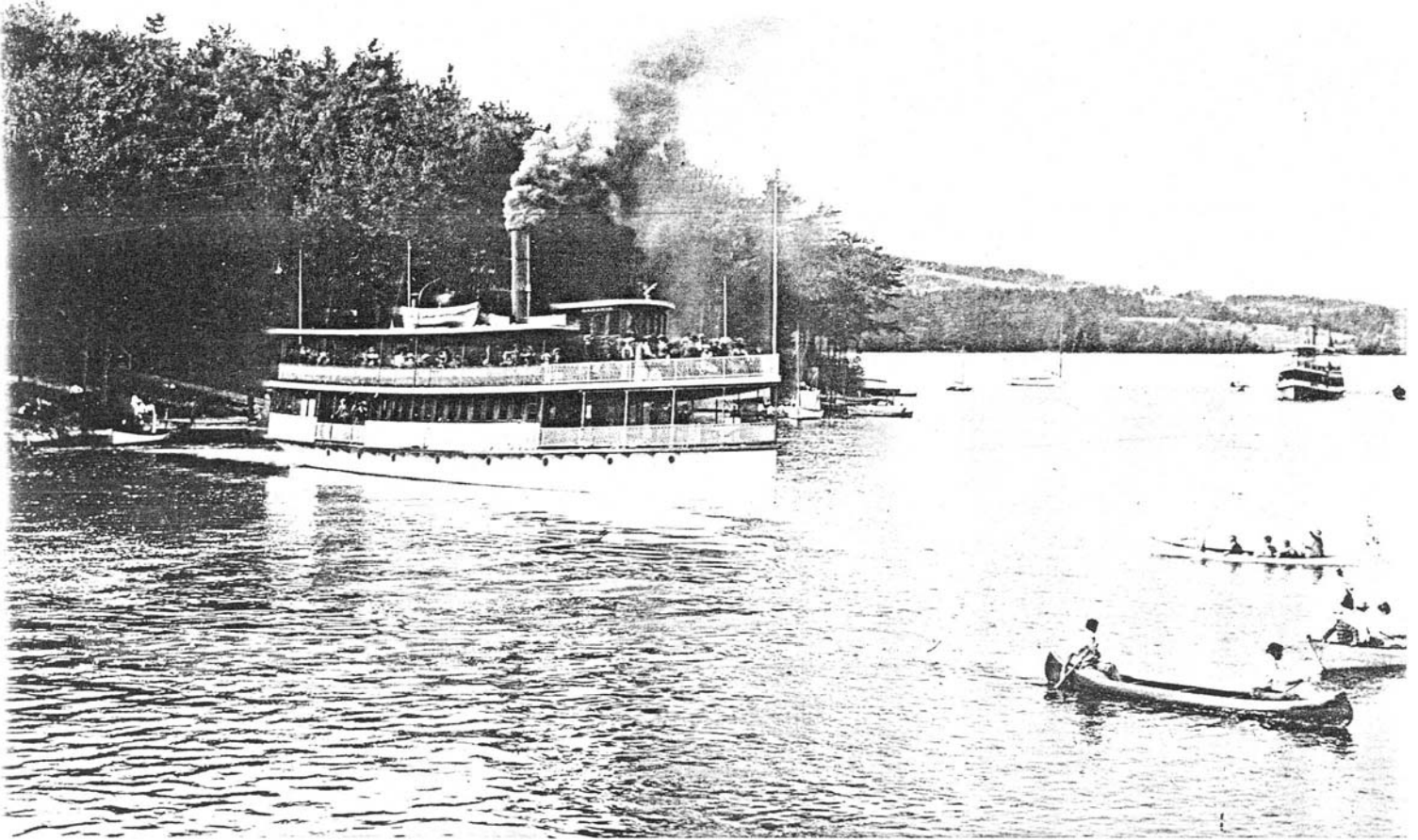


She was queen of the Sunapee Steamers, and when Richard Mitchell wrote about her in last August's Profiles, her purser's *memory* was jogged ...



# Remember the Armenia White

*My ship was the Armenia White, the queen of the fleet, captained by Frank Woodsum. She was a twin screw steamer, 101 feet long, 23 feet beam, with a capacity of 650 passengers. During the summer of 1909 my job was that of express agent. During the summers of 1910 and 1911, I was the purser, boss of the lower deck, second in command and official starter of all sailings. We were a crew of seven, sailed 119 miles each day, with special trips on Sundays and usually two moonlight excursions each summer.*

CAPTAIN Frank Woodsum was in his late 70's . when I first sailed on the *White*. He was a vigorous, stubborn mustached Yankee with a temper and vocabulary exceeding the imagination, yet with the sweetest smile and softest voice of any man I have known. Sweet and soft, that is, when all went well. When things went not to his liking, his voice rose an octave, his face became beet-like and his oaths were long and varied. He was completely unpredictable and would layout the whole crew with an impassioned bellowing, and not ten minutes later that smile would break out. He knew every shoal, every buoy, every rock and every current in Lake Sunapee, and he knew his ship as no other man ever did.

By B. A. Hoban

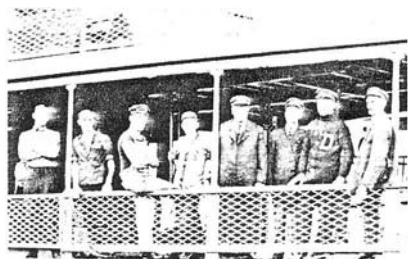
New Hampshire Profiles –  
April 1963

Among the crews of the other boats, the *Kearsage*, *Weetamo*, and *Ascutney*, were many friends and college mates of mine. My brother George, the Lewis brothers, Roy and Guy of Lebanon, Leon Tuck, Pete Winship, all Dartmouth football players working and enjoying the Lake Sunapee summer. With no autos, no motor-boats, and few roads, all travel was by train and steamship. People came for the summer with all their belongings in huge trunks. On one trip in mid-summer I counted over 500 passengers and 135 trunks. The entire crew helped with the baggage, express, and mail, so we all got plenty of exercise.



The 1910 crew of *Armenia White*. Author in back row at the right.

SOME vacationers arrived on Friday, but on Saturday morning the influx was tremendous. Oftentimes there would be eight or ten sleeping cars on the siding at Lake Station waiting for our first morning trip. The cars were overnight specials from New York and distant points. They had come to Claremont Junction during the night, to be picked up there by the Claremont to Concord local. I vividly recall this trip from Claremont to Lake Sunapee station. Two engines were necessary to pull the extra cars. Between Sunapee station and Lake Sunapee station there is a steep grade in the railroad bed. The engines would tackle it manfully, but they never quite made it. We slowed and finally stopped, usually a quarter-mile from the top. Brakemen and conductors would announce a fifteen minute stop, with three toots of the whistle to signal a re-start. So while the firemen shoveled and the engines made more steam, most of the passengers wandered into the fields to pick Rowers or berries, or just to sit. The whistle brought us flying back, then with a brief roll backward and a yank forward, we crawled over the top of the grade. This happened every Saturday morning all summer. And these were the people who were waiting for our boats to take them and their belongings to their cottages or hotels.



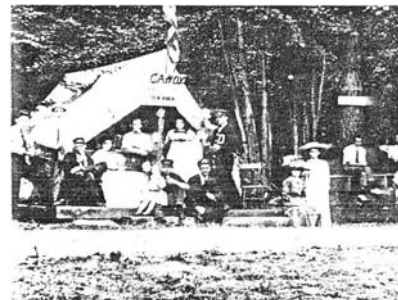
The same crew on bad day. Note the glowering captain (off-center).

COLLECTING tickets on busy trips was a real chore. That was my job as purser, though I could call on the express agent to guard the companionway while I collected first the upper deck and then the lower deck.

Children were always a problem. They scattered all over the ship. Large families would come aboard with dad holding all the tickets, and he would hand them over, usually with a remark like, "The four kids are running around here somewhere." With eight to twenty families like this on a single trip, the job was a bit frustrating. Then, too, the getting off and on at the various landings posed many a memory problem. I am certain that there were many free rides on the *Armenia White* in my day.

MOONLIGHT excursions were appreciated by the crew as much as one looks forward to a visit to the dentist. Three or four hundred young people, mostly in pairs, gave us an exciting and sometimes unpleasant couple of hours. Collecting tickets was the worst problem since the ship was dark and most couples resented being disturbed. We tried selling tickets on the wharf and collecting as the passengers came aboard, but many outsmarted us and jumped over the low rail and got lost at once in the crowd on the darkened ship. I have never been able to understand how Captain Frank piloted that big ship around the lake at night, especially when the moon didn't shine and we traveled in pitch darkness. There were no electricity and no spotlights, only an old kerosene reflector lamp to help at landings. But we never had an accident.

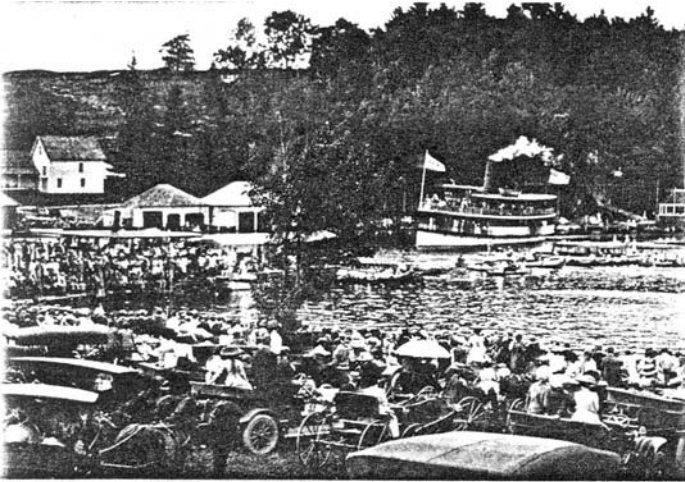
THERE was a fore-castle under the forward lower deck on the *White*. It had four comfortable bunks and was reached only by a trap - door in the deck floor. Although I slept there all one summer, Captain



Old-fashioned lunch counter for tourists at Lake Sunapee Station.

Frank warned us never to go down there during a run. One reason for this order was that if the trap door were dropped into place instead of gently lowered, the crash sounded in the pilot house as though we had struck a rock or log. During the summer of 1910 we suffered ten days of the hottest, muggiest weather ever to strike the Lake Sunapee area. After a couple of days of this, some of the crew got together and ordered a barrel of beer shipped up from Concord. There was only one place to hide it from Captain Frank, and that was in the forbidden fore-castle. We managed to smuggle the barrel aboard and lower it into the depths very carefully. The beer was in bottles, and the next step was to arrange to cool it. This was done by borrowing a wash tub and bringing aboard an extra cake of ice from the ice-house. We hid it in

(Please turn page)



*Regatta Day at Sunapee Harbor about 1915.*

#### Recollections (*Continued*)

the ticket office, where the ticket seller had to literally sit on ice until we were underway. Then we wrapped it in a raincoat and lowered it into the tub. Not one of us was a real beer drinker, but nothing ever refreshed us so thoroughly as one mid-morning and one mid-afternoon bottle of that cool liquid.

We made and followed strict rules of procedure, and I well remember that one of my tasks was to bail out the water from the tub each night after dark while we were tied up at George's Mills. This was done by hand with a small dipper which I could pass through a porthole and empty into the lake. All went well for four or five days. Then one of the men let the trap door slip and bang shut during a late afternoon run. Captain Frank whistled me up to the pilot house and wanted to know what had happened. Not being entirely satisfied with my answers, he told me to take the wheel, while he went down to investigate. Investigate he did, and shortly he was back at the wheel, exercising his vocabulary and laying me out as never before. The beer was nearly gone by then, but several of us nearly lost our jobs. One of the culprits was a fine young man studying for the ministry, who later became a rector in *New York*. I attended one of his Easter services there, and during a brief visit after the service, he recalled the incident. In all his experience, he said, he had never heard half the cusswords and language combinations that Captain Frank threw at us that day.



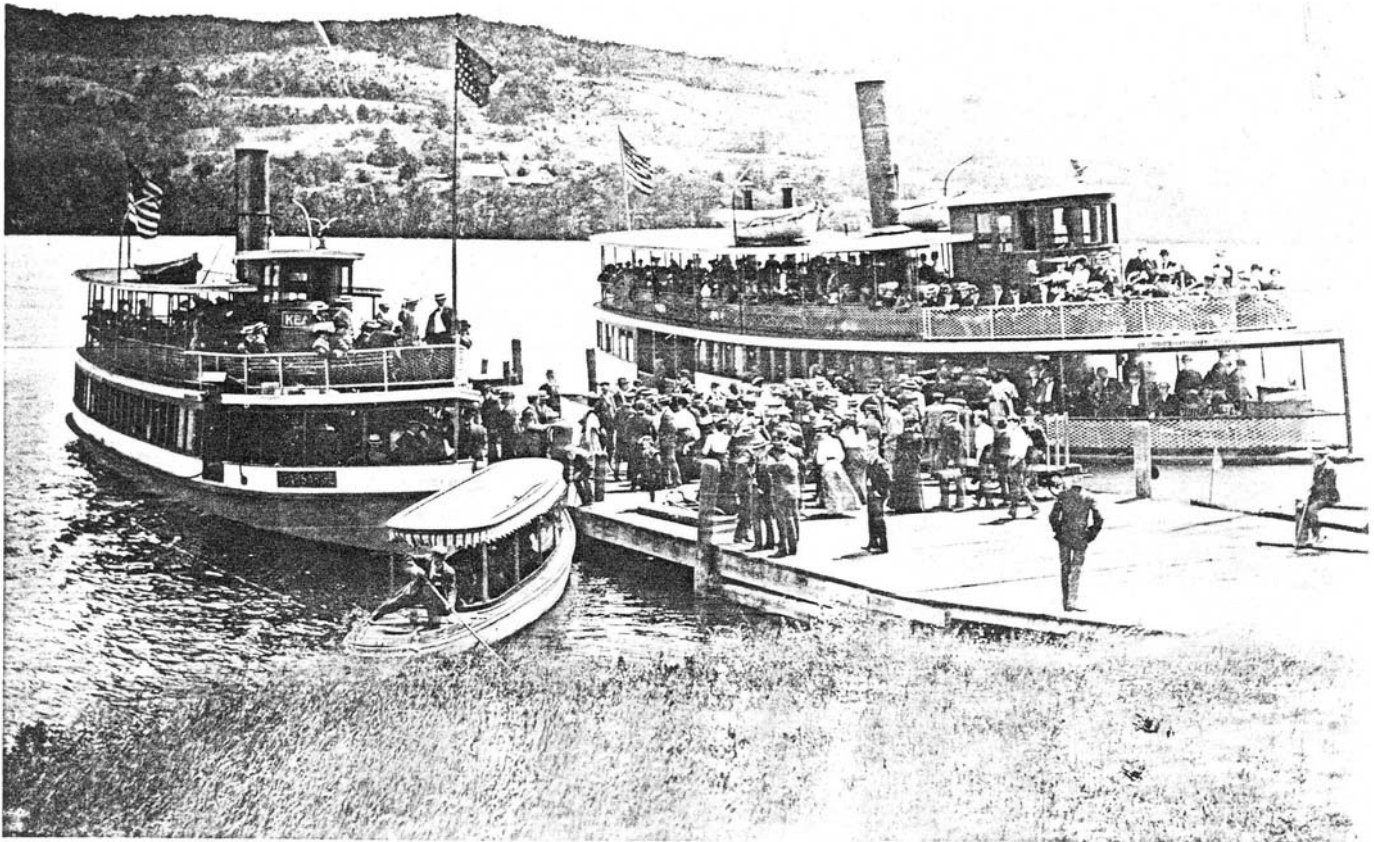
*Trunk-laden carts were pulled up long ramp by crew for each train.*

CAPTAIN FRANK would brook no interference with our scheduled trips, and any occurrence which aid, or just might, delay the *White* was anathema to him. On the day of the annual Lake Sunapee Regatta the dock area was always filled with boats whose occupants were watching the various events. Captain Frank drove our ship right in among the boats when we came into the harbor for our regular afternoon trip. With whistle and voice he gave vent to his disapproval of all that traffic in his steamer path. We never struck anything, but there was some swamping and much fast paddling by frightened boatmen.

On another occasion, Billy B. Van, a famous stage comedian who summered at George's Mills, decided to make a moving picture. He assembled his cast and, for an elopement scene, he consulted Captain Frank about a getaway by boat. It was arranged that the action would take place during our twenty-minute afternoon stop. We were to pull up the gangplank and start away from the wharf. The eloping couple would come running down the road and jump aboard just in time. We would then reverse ship back to the wharf, disembark the elopers and load our passengers for regular departure. Captain Frank warned Billy Van that his scene must take place promptly, minutes after we docked, in order to finish the action by sailing time. On the appointed day we docked as usual, but no movie company. One lone camera was set up, but the actors were late. I foresaw trouble and asked Captain Frank if he would wait for them. "We sail at 3:20" was all he would say. At 3:15 we loaded our passengers, and at precisely 3:20 the Captain gave one toot of the whistle, and we hauled in the gangplank. Just then the eloping couple hove in sight around a corner a hundred yards away. On they came, with cameras grinding away, as we were moving slowly off. We had left the gate open, and the lady leaped across three feet of open water. We dragged her aboard. Billy Van himself was the man in the case, but he was not so lucky. With top"hat and suitcase in hand, he grandly leaped into the air. One foot hit the deck rail, but that wasn't enough. Down went Billy to a watery ending to his elopement. I never saw the picture, but I was told they left that scene in.

I RECALL what was probably the saddest day in Captain Frank's life. He was rightly proud of the *Armenia White*; she was the fastest boat on the lake. One day late in August of 1911, a small two-cylinder motorboat, owned by George Taylor of Blodgetts Landing, took off after us on the straight run to Sunapee Harbor. Captain Frank opened both throttles slowly until we were making our top speed of 18 knots. Still the little boat gained, came abreast, and finally passed us going away. Captain Frank didn't say a word, but tears were near the surface. The little boat raced us several times thereafter, and after one such humiliation, he turned to me and said, "Hoban, I'm sorry I lived to see any boat out-speed the *White*."

*Reproduced from the  
NEW HAMPSHIRE PROFILES magazine,  
April 1963, Pages 20-24*



*Above - The Kearsarge and the Armenia White take on full passenger loads at Sunapee Station.*

*Below - At its peak Sunapee Station handled thousands of passengers, freight, mail and food for the resort area. The Ascutney is at right.*

