THE railroad right-of-way surveyors and highway engineers hated lakes. Lakes meant rerouting off the direct line; they meant embankments, pilings, sometimes bridges; they were generally a confounded nuisance which could push the cost-per-mile construction figures up to most unpleasant heights.

Another group of New Hampshire men, however, loved lakes. They loved them not for their beauty or their fish but for their ability to move a great tonnage of passengers and freight with a minimum of man-, horse- or steam-power. To this latter group Lake Sunapee, with its nine miles of length and its comparative freedom from islands and reefs, was enormously appealing. After 1849, when the railroad reached Newbury at the southern tip of the lake and shore frontage became susceptible to resort development, there was a strong economic incentive for using the water to move passengers, baggage and supplies from railhead to resort.

Thus was the stage set for the Sunapee steamboat era, which lingered on until the mid-1920s - an era of color and excitement at a time when life's pace was slower and vacationists from New York and Boston came to stay the entire summer season. Today the steamers the old-time large soft coal burners - are alive only in picture albums and on the tongues of the natives, but in the years after the Civil War they were the essence of Lake Sunapee's summer life.

The earliest commercial lake boat on Sunapee, as on Lake Winnipesaukee, was propelled by horsepower - literally. In 1854 Timothy Hoskins and William Cutler launched a large horse-boat with 100-passenger capacity, and commercial water transportation made its bow on Sunapee. Five years later, with the American river boat boom at its height, Austin Going (or Goings), of New London, celebrated Independence Day with the launching of the 65-foot side-wheeler Surprise, a 300-passenger boat. At the outbreak of the Civil War, however, captain and crew enlisted and the Surprise was dismantled. For the next fifteen years the shriek of the steamboat whistle was unheard on the waters of Lake Sunapee: Then N.S. Gardner, one of the pioneers of the resort business on the lake, bought Little Island - for a silver dollar, the story goes - and built a bowling alley on it. In 1876 he launched the little steamer Penacook to transport his hoped-for customers. The fate of the venture was evidently unhappy, though, for within a short time the Penacook, remodeled, improved and renamed Mountain Maid, was operating under the ownership of Captain Na- than Young as a public steamer - "Sunapee Harbor to Georges Mills 10 passengers or more 25¢, Sunapee Harbor to Newbury 25¢, around the lake 50¢." Captain Young advertised in the Newport Argus in 1877. The Penacook-Mountain Maid marked the beginning of the great era of Sunapee steamboating, an era synonymous with the name of Woodsum.

Frank, Daniel and Elias Woodsum, brothers, moved to Sunapee from Harrison, Maine, (a lake town) in 1876 and promptly entered the boating business with their newly built Lady Woodsum, a 50 footer with a trailer barge for freight. Lady Woodsum was manned by a crew of three - captain, fireman and purser - and could handle 75 passengers comfortably.

The Lady's success and the growing summer population awakened interest in the minds of other men besides the Woodsum brothers. A Newport-Sunapee syndicate was formed and brought George A. Manson (or Monson) up from Massachusetts to Sunapee Harbor to build the 90-footer Edmund Burke in 1885. Named after a prominent Claremont lawyer who had developed the Burkehaven portion of the Sunapee shore (where, in 1875, Lafayette Colby had built the first true summer resort hotel in the

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area, the Lake View House), the Edmund Burke was the marvel of her time. With 600-passenger capacity and fine fittings she was pronounced one of the best passenger boats afloat by no less a judge than Captain E. P. Shaw, of Newburyport, Massachusetts, "the steamboat king."

The Woodsums were not to be outdone. An order promptly went down to an ironworks at Chester, Pennsylvania. In 1887, at what is now Lakewood Manor, the results of that order were riveted together to form the Armenia White, largest steamer ever to sail Sunapee. The Armenia White was 101 feet long and 23 feet in beam with 650-passenger capacity. She carried a crew of seven: captain, engineer, fireman, ticket seller, ticket taker, baggage man, and candy and paper boy. She cost $17,000 and was always the flagship of the Woodsum fleet.

Fleet it was, too. In 1897 the Lady Woodsum and the Armenia White were joined by the Kearsarge, a 250-passenger 70-footer whose plates were also fabricated at Chester. The year 1902 saw the launching of the 50-footer Weetamoo, and 1907 that of the 60-footer Ascutney, each of which carried a three-man crew and could handle 150-200 passengers. All were fitted with an invention of Captains Dan and Frank an engine control mechanism operated by a lever alongside the wheel, so that the pilot could start, stop or reverse his engines instantly. It was a safety feature and useful selling point.

Elias Woodsum had no connection with the device. Back in 1877, when the Lady Woodsum was only a year old, there had been an accident. George Woodward, of Sutton, was working on Little Island for N. S. Gardner then. The Lady pulled in one day to leave a can of milk and some freight, and shortly after her departure Woodward was dipping a pail of water from the well when he heard a boom. He looked up to see a great cloud of steam rising from the Lady and watched in horror as she settled onto Hay Reef until nothing was above water but the top of her pilot house.

Lafayette Colby, of the Lake View House, was an even closer witness to the accident. He was aboard that day, in the boiler room looking out of the window and kneeling on some cushions. when behind him the boiler exploded. Colby was lucky. The blast blew him through the window and into the water, leaving him uninjured. Elias Woodsum, also aboard, was unlucky. They managed to move him ashore, but within two hours he was dead of burns from the live steam.

The disaster was to prove that the Woodsums had not only enterprise and grit but considerable engineering ability. Anticipating a modern salvage technique, they sank lashed-together wooden barrels around the Lady Woodsum's hull and began pumping air into their jury-rigged caissons. When the compressed air forced out enough water to achieve positive buoyancy, the Lady came up off Hay Reef and was towed ashore. With the help of the Boston and Maine Railroad, to whose summer passenger business the Lady contributed, she was rebuilt, fitted with a new boiler and put back into service.

The steamboat season on Sunapee ran from late April to early October, although the first and last weeks were usually spent on such routine jobs as carrying men and materials for wharf repair. Each winter one boat was hauled out on the marine railway near Davis Cabins (still used by the MV Mount Sunapee).

Little Lady Woodsum's whistle usually greeted the first tourists of the season, with the larger boats coming into full service as traffic increased.

Daily schedule started before 6:30 in the morning, when one of the boats cast off and got under way, to be joined later by the other steamers as the press of business warranted. The complete trip around the lake took about three hours, with stops at the major landings of Sunapee Harbor, Georges Mills, Lakeside, Blodgett's, Brightwood, Pine Cliff, Lake Station, Soo-
behind and stern-first. It was a colorful scene: white steam and black smoke from the boat’s funnels, and blue air and pink cheeks ashore from the vociferous comments of the Lady’s crew. They even tell the story about a green fireman who informed his captain, one October, that he’d be darned if the lake hadn’t kept the same level all summer. He knew, because he’d been checking it every day against the side of the boat. Ozzie Woodward, of Sutton, tells this story on his uncle Ernest. The Ascutney was the paper boat. Every Sunday morning she’d make a special run to deliver the Sunday papers around the lake. Uncle Ernest Ayre, who lived in Sunapee Harbor, used to spell the regular fireman and heave coal for the paper run. The first part of the trip was from the Harbor down to the station to pick up the papers the train had brought. One particular Sunday either the Ascutney was early or the train was late. Anyway, they figured they might as well use the time to take on some coal. The Ascutney shovel went overboard into deep water during coaling. Uncle Ernest told the captain he didn’t know but what he could take care of things just as well with the boat’s dustpan. And he did, stoking the entire trip that way. Only one thing he hadn’t counted on, and that was being called the "dustpan fireman" for the rest of his days.

a coaling station and a special bucket tip-car for coal handling. In addition to the passengers and their baggage the trains and boats handled daily loads of mail, fresh meat and provisions for the resort establishments around the lake. James Shepard tells of meeting steamers at Lakeside and counting a hundred horses waiting patiently to carry the Armenia White pulling in so crowded with passengers (and she could handle 650 of them) that a second steamer had to follow behind with their baggage.

Ships and sailors are colorful subjects, and old-timers still tell a good many yarns about the Sunapee fleet -some of them fit to be put on paper. There was the time, for example, the Armenia White lost one of her twin propellers while entering Lakeside Cove. Her captain decided against running on one screw and whistled for help. Little Lady Woodsum steamed up at once to take her comparatively vast fleet-
fleets, ran faithfully till 1920. When business became too light to need her any longer, she was dismantled.

The Edmund Burke, second of the Sunapee steamers and the Woodsums' only important competition, was a hard luck boat from the start. The local syndicate that built her spared no effort to make her launching a memorable occasion. For the high point of the event they had had an old Civil War cannon hauled to the top of Sawyer Hill, ready to fire a grand salute when the chocks were knocked away. At the correct moment the temporary gunner yanked his lanyard, and the old gun blew its breech, wounding several of the crew.

The cannon mishap was a bad but true omen for the Burke's career. Once when she was being fitted with a new propeller the owners appeared at the waterfront one morning to find their pride resting on the bottom. This was no little Lady Woodsum to be floated with barrels (though one wonders if the ingenious brothers might not have figured a way to raise her), but the then queen of the lake. The syndicate bought a salvage firm up all the way from Boston and finally managed to float the Burke, only to find her once more on the bottom when they returned to work next day, and the whole job to do again.

In 1887, when the steel plates of the Armenia White were being assembled at what is now Lakewood Manor, the Burke used to have the effrontery to pull off her regular course and come close inshore, so that her crew could hoot and catcall across the water to the builders. "Old pile of junk iron'll never float," they'd shout, or words to that effect. Remarks from the Burke about buoyancy were ill-advised. Heading inshore on one of these jeering jaunts, while the crew were getting up a good lungsful of air and tuning up their voices, she ran squarely onto a submerged rock.

Putting the purpose of the visit out of their minds, the Burke's crew at once began to blow a distress signal to the shore-fu of sailors and boat-builders working on the Armenia White - who went quietly on with their business. The Burke's signals grew more and more frantic, and her crew's voices joined in. It took the builders quite a while, though, before they began asking each other whether they didn't hear something, blue jay maybe up in the pine tree, or was it more like a pig squealing. Not until the Burke's whistle stopped and a voice came across from her asking politely, and then actually begging, for help, did one of the workmen finally straighten up and say in a surprised voice he'd be danged if there didn't seem to be a boat out there in a mite of trouble.

The Burke's troubles kept piling up. In 1891 she went onto a reef off Lakeview, so firmly that it took her own crew, the Lake Sunapee Paper Company steamer, Captain Young and a gang of boys from Camp Sunapee to tow her off and beach her. After this experience she was repaired, enlarged, renamed Wenonah - and sold. The syndicate had had enough. Captain George Blodgett bought her and ran her for several seasons, but after the launching by the Woodsums of the Kearsarge even he surrendered. The Wenonah was tied up for the last time at Blodgett's Landing.

The old Burke bad luck found her there even in her new disguise, and she soon developed a leak. Captain George kept saying that "if he could just find five minutes of spare time he could fix that damn leak," but he was much too busy, thanks to the hour each morning and evening he had to put in at the Wenonah's pumps, lest she go down once and for all. Despite Captain George's pumping, that is what she eventually did, sinking at the landing and being burned to the water line. Her remains lie there today. About two years ago the LaPorte boys from Newbury put on their skin diving gear and brought up her anchor and propeller as souvenirs.

The Armenia White, finest of Sunapee's steamers, sailed the lake for a full thirty years. She and the Kearsarge always wintered at the mouth of a brook at Georges Mills where the outlet flow kept the ice thin enough to save the hulls from pressure damage (the rest of the Voodosat steam fleet wintered at Sunapee Harbor near the Woodsum home). Finally, in 1917, a survey showed the Armenia needed a new boiler. By this time the era of the great steamers was coming to a close, and her earnings did not warrant the expense of so big a refit. Tied up at a wharf at Georges Mills the lovely lady lay quietly for twenty-one years and then was cut up and sold for scrap. She brought $100.

The Kearsarge suffered a similar fate, although, as a ten-year younger boat, she was thought worthy of conversion to oil in the twilight of her active career. After sale to the Ben Mere Inn and then to Mr. Davis, of Davis Cabins, she was finally cut up for scrap in the mid-thirties.

The Weetamoo ran from 1902 to 1926, when she was purposely sunk in 60 feet of water off Pine Cliff. The Ascutney, when her profitable days were over, was cut down and converted to gasoline by Paul Gove and used for a while as a work boat, but she too was finally scrapped.

It was Captain Frank Woodsum who had first sensed the inevitable end of the fleet. One day just before the first World War he was in the pilot house of one of the boats entering Sunapee Harbor and saw something unfamiliar on shore. Picking up the long glasses for a closer look he discovered that the object was an automobile - the first he had ever actually seen. He handed the glasses to Bud Hobon beside him with a quiet comment.

"Better take a look at that thing, Bud - it means the end of steam-boating."

NOTE: The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Clayton B. Straw of Henniker, Orison H. Woodward of Sutton, and Charles A. Hill of Sunapee in authenticating data and obtaining photographs.
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.