

Armenia White under way.

Sunapee Steamers

By Richard M. Mitchell

THE railroad right-of-way surveyors and highway engineers hated lakes. Lakes meant re-routing 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 1920's - 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 Winnepesaukee, 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-

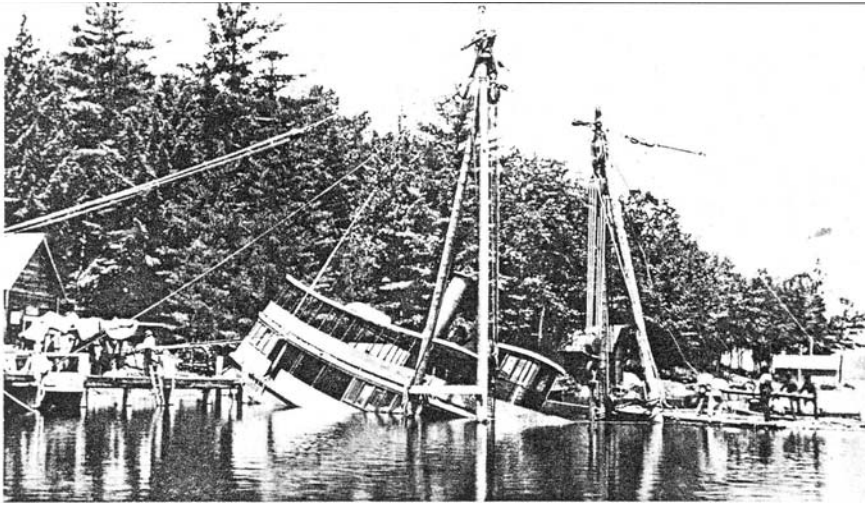
than Young as a public steamer - "Sunapee Harbor to Georges Mills 10 passengers or more 25¢, Sunapee Harbor to Newbury 25¢, around the lake 50¢," Captain Young advertised in the Newport *Argus* in 1877. The *Penacook-Mountain Maid* marked the beginning of the great era of Sunapee steamboating, an era 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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A fitting photographic memorial of the hard luck ship Edmund Burke.

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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



The Mountain Maid, first of them all .

selling point.

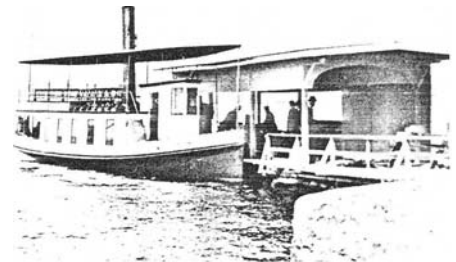
Elias Woodsum had no connection with the device. Back in 1877, when the *Lady Woodsum* was only a year old, there had been an accident. George Woodward, of Sutton, was working on Little Island for N. S. Gardner then. The *Lady* pulled in one day to leave a can of milk and some freight, and shortly after 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*).



The Lady Woodsum after explosion.

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-

Nipi Park, Burkehavn and Granliden. Special trips were made for many occasions, of course, with church service and moonlight excursions to the music of Booth's Orchestra occurring regularly. How heavy traffic was is indicated by one figure during the 1888 season *Edmund Burke*, *Armenia White* and *Lady Woodsum*, the only boats then in service, sold a total of 15,000 tickets.

At first rail-boat trans-shipment took place at Newbury, where the public dock is now located, but after 1891, when the Lake Sunapee station was built (present site of the Davis Cabins), trains pulled in there. New York summer people usually arrived via Claremont Junction; Boston visitors via Concord. And they arrived with vast mounds of trunks and suitcases, preparing to spend the entire summer at a favorite hotel or cottage. It was not unusual for the train to stand at the station a full half-hour, while the perspiring baggage - men wrestled with wardrobe trunks. At the height of the period the station was equipped with a ten-car siding, a turn-table, a large steamboat wharf,



The Lady Woodsum before explosion.

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-



Dan and Frank Woodrum aboard *Ascutney*

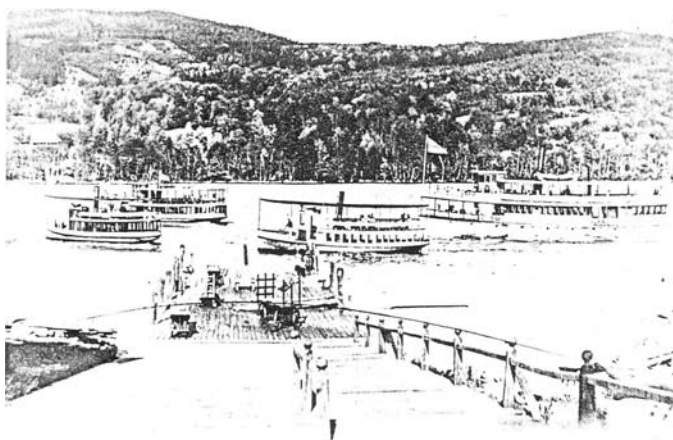
mate in tow for Sunapee Harbor. The *Armenia White* followed obediently until the harbor entrance was reached and a goodly crowd had gathered to see what was amiss. Then she suddenly opened the steam valve to her good shaft and, on one screw, foamed up alongside and beyond the *Lady* without casting off the towline. So it was the *Armenia* who pulled gaily into the harbor, with the *Lady* on the tow

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.



Ascutney, *Kearsarge*, *Weetamoe* and *Armenia White* of the Woodrum fleet.

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fleet, 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 brought 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 cat-call 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 lungful 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-ful 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 Woodsum 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.

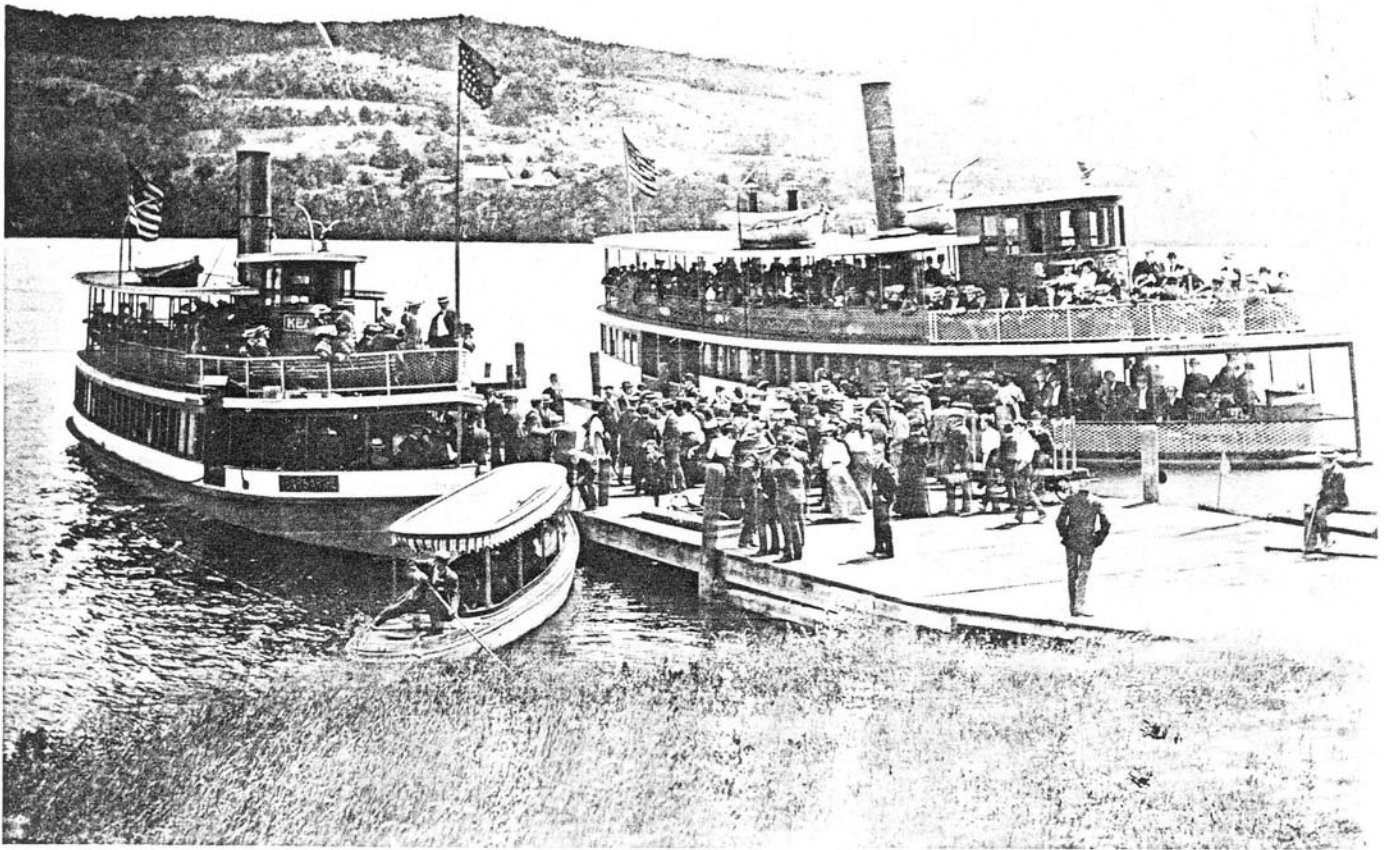
The *Weetamoe* ran from 1902 to 1926, when she was purposely sunk in 60 feet of water off Pine Cliff. The *Ascutney*, when her profitable days were over, was cut down and converted to gasoline by Paul Gove and used for a while as a work boat, but she too was finally scrapped.

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.

NOTE: This article was reproduced from the NEW HAMPSHIRE PROFILES magazine, August 1962 issue, Pages 20,22,23 & 45



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.

