

The SS Norisle

For almost 50 years the SS Norisle has been part of the Manitowaning waterfront. Since its arrival on July 20, 1975, it has invoked a love/hate relationship with local residents. Having a length of 214 feet or 65 meters, with its imposing black and white exterior and towering smokestack it presents an imposing sight in this area.

The ship, commissioned by the Owen Sound Transportation Company was built at the Collingwood Shipyards. When put into service for its maiden voyage in October 1946 it made its first and only stop in Manitowaning while in service. Tons of coal were needed to drive its triple expansion engines. These engines, built for a naval corvette, were not needed by the Canadian Navy due to the ending of World War 11. Destined to be the ferry between Manitoulin Island and Tobermory it was the first passenger ship built on the Great Lakes since 1913. It could carry 50 vehicles and had berths for 100 passengers. However, in many respects it was already out of date.

The Norisle served on the ferry run from 1947 until 1974 when it was replaced by the MS Chi-Cheemaun. It was still a young ship and had not really been in service that long. One of the major drawbacks was the fact that it burnt coal and belched black smoke into the atmosphere.



At that time, it was also realized that a much larger ship was needed on this route. However, many passengers did enjoy being able to rent a cabin and spend the night on the ship ready for the morning's voyage. It was like a floating motel. Each cabin had a set of bunk beds and a sink. Washrooms and showers were shared. Passengers could then enjoy their breakfast in the "formal" dining room while enjoying the crossing to South Bay Mouth.



The Norisle was a side loader and cars would drive on or be driven on and parked on the upper car deck or taken down to the lower car deck by an elevator. This picture is c1973.

When the ship was decommissioned, it was first offered to Owen Sound but turned down as the city felt it would be too costly to maintain. Assignack resident Dave Ham happened to be listening to the radio and heard about their decision. "I thought to myself that Manitowaning should have that boat," said Mr. Ham who then called John Lane, area MPP at that time. This started the ball rolling as it seemed to be something that could be a major attraction to the area. Unfortunately, the deal was completed without much planning for the future. The Manitowaning Board of Trade, the Municipality of Assignack and the Assignack Historical Society supported the move and the Municipality of Assignack became the proud owners of the SS Norisle for the price of one dollar.



Norisle arrives in Manitowaning pulled by the tug Ivan Purvis.

I hereby certify that the contents contained in this Bill of Sale have been entered in the Ships Register held at this Port on the 23rd day of September 1975 at 1405 hours.

Registrar of Shipping
Port of Owen Sound,
Ontario. W.K. 5M9

BILL OF SALE (Body Corporate)

ISSUED BY THE
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT

Official No.	Name of Ship	No., Date and Port of Registry	Whether a Sailing, Steam or Motor Ship	Horse Power of Engines, if any
176,112	"NORISLE"	5/1948 OWEN SOUND, Ontario	Steam Ship	N.H.P. 92 I.H.P. 800
Length from forepart of stem to the st side of the head of the stern post			FEET	TENTHS
Main breadth to outside of plank			203	3
Depth from top of deck at side amidships to bottom of keel			36	1
			14	9
			Number of Tons	Gross 1668.33 Registered 1359.62

and as described in more detail in the Certificate of the Surveyor and the Register Book.

We, (a) THE OWEN SOUND TRANSPORTATION COMPANY LIMITED having our principal place of business at North Bay in the Province of Ontario in consideration of the sum of One Dollar (\$1.00) paid to us by The Corporation of the Township of Assignack of (b) Manitowaning, Ontario the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, transfer sixty-four (64) shares in the ship above particularly described, and in her boats, guns, ammunition, small arms, and appurtenances, to the said Township of Assignack.

Further, we, the said THE OWEN SOUND TRANSPORTATION COMPANY LIMITED for ourselves and our successors covenant with the said CORPORATION OF THE TOWNSHIP OF ASSIGNACK and (c) its assigns, that we have power to transfer in manner aforesaid the premises hereinbefore expressed to be transferred, and that the same are free from incumbrances (d).

In witness whereof we have hereto affixed our common seal this 10th day of September one thousand nine hundred and seventy-five.

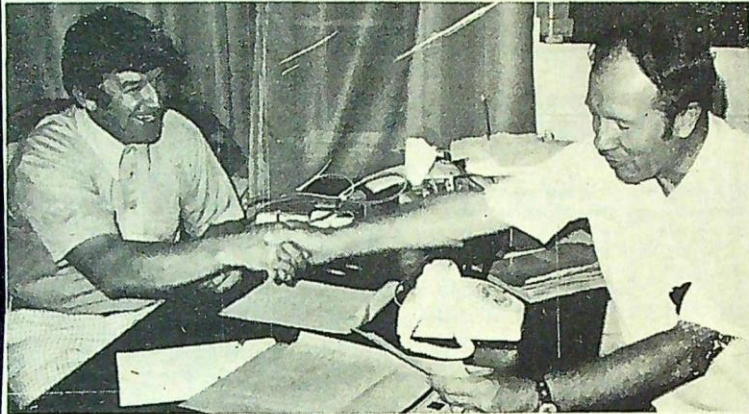
The Common Seal of the THE OWEN SOUND TRANSPORTATION COMPANY LIMITED was affixed hereunto in the presence of (e).

J.A. Williams
Vice-President / Manager
John Lane
Secretary

(e) Here insert title in full of the Body Corporate. (b) Here insert address in full and description of transferee or transferees. (c) "His," "her" or "their" as appears by the Registry of the said Ship." (d) Description of Witnesses, Directors, Secretary, etc. (as the case may be), "Signes for signature and seal."

Notes: (1) A Purchaser of a Registered British Vessel does not obtain a complete title until the Bill of Sale has been recorded at the Port of Registry of the ship; and neglect of this precaution may entail serious consequences. (2) Registered Owners or Mortgagees are reminded of the importance of keeping the Registrar of Shipping informed of any change of residence on their part.

84-0017 (1462)



Assiginack Reeve Hugh Moggy and MPP John Lane exchange one dollar and congratulations.

John Lane, Hugh Moggy ink Norisle agreement

By SALLY HARASYM 1975

The council members of Manitowaning met with M.P.P., John Lane, in the Assiginack Council Chambers, last Friday, July 18, for the official signing over of the S.S. Norisle.

The signing of the agreement which transfers the S.S. Norisle to the Corporation of the Township of Assiginack had to precede the release of the Norisle at Owen Sound. The agreement was presented to the council by Reeve Hugh Moggy, moved by [Name] Reed, and seconded by [Name] McCulligh.

M.P.P., John Lane received the one dollar cheque from Mr. Hugh Moggy, and summed up the ceremony with saying, "Never has so much been bought for so little."

Congratulations and thanks were extended, and Mr. Lane and Reeve Hugh Moggy both acknowledged the fact that the preparation for the purchasing of the Norisle had been a great community effort, and the actual purchasing had made unmatched history for Manitowaning and the entire Manitoulin Island.

On a beautiful summer's day Sunday, July 20, 1975 excitement was in the air as a crowd gathered to watch the Norisle being towed by Purvis Marine of Sault Ste. Marie into Manitowaning's harbour. Local resident Jack McKay captained the ship assisted by Ivan Clarke as first mate, Bill Sloan as second mate and Murray Little as deckhand. This capable crew assisted the tug Ivan Purvis which towed the ship from Owen Sound to its new berth where it would remain for the next 48 years. Captain McKay noted it was smooth sailing after leaving Owen Sound where a large crowd had turned out to give the Norisle a fitting farewell at 5:05 pm on Saturday. On Sunday a community picnic was held for those awaiting its arrival. A large cheer went up as the ship came past the Roller Mills at 1:30 pm to the organ strains of Auld Lang Syne played by Herman Peltier.



HERE COMES THE SS NORISLE

Now the real work would begin. Few actual plans as what to do with this ship had been thought through. For the next 28 years it would be an uphill battle to maintain this large vessel and keep it operating as a tourist attraction and then 20 more years deciding how to best get rid of it. However, for the first 28 years it did attract a lot of people to the community and many events were held on board. Approximately 2000 people would visit each year but this was not enough to cover the costs of running this ship.

With the acquisition of the Roller Mills and Wharf, it was decided that the Assiginack Historical Society, who were responsible for the Museum should take over this area as part of their mandate. This was definitely a major undertaking for a small community group. The area along with the Assiginack Museum, Lighthouse and St. Paul's Church became part of a historical tour. Steps were added on Wellington Street to help tie the area together for a walking tour. Picnic area, theatre, restaurant, etc. would add to this area's draw.



The Wheel House

Unfortunately, it was soon discovered that little maintenance such as painting, deck work, etc. had been kept up. At 30 the ship was just at the point when some major work needed doing and of course the Owen Sound Transportation Company had done as little as possible since they were planning on decommissioning this vessel.

Therefore, one of the first jobs carried out was to repaint parts of the exterior and interior. Fortunately for the Municipality, this was a time when upper levels of government were encouraging the expansion of tourism in northern Ontario and many grants were available. Right from the start Assiginack for many years did not have to use local tax dollars to support the Norisle. The Historical Society was able to obtain a number of grants. The Municipality's major contributions consisted of in-kind labour for which there were broad interpretations.

In 1976 tours were started and immediately brought many people to the community proving this could be a valuable addition to the community. Local teens helped to guide people through the ship. Stairs were built where an elevator had taken cars to the lower deck.

1977 saw the graduation ceremonies for the Assiginack School Kindergarten take place on board. Kids, parents and teachers were thrilled with this unique place for this ceremony.



Beginning in the summer of 1978, the lower car deck was transformed by a group of local teens into the Disc-A-Drift Disco. An article's headline in a June edition of The Manitoulin Expositor reads, "**Norisle rocks to sound waves, now**". The article states that the five teens, Dianne Moggy, Tammy Maguire, Brenda Hembruff, Rob Maguire, Alton Hobbs and Leo Moggy, are all set to reopen on Friday, June 29 from 9pm till 1am. As well kids under 12 can enjoy the space every second Thursday.

One of the first major jobs completed in 1979 was the installation of a converter to change the ship's direct current electrical system to alternating current. This work was completed by Henderson Electric of Mindemoya as part of a major electrical upgrade to also serve the mill and wharf. Another necessity was to bring town water onto the ship and to be able to utilize the sewage holding tank. When Burns Wharf was converted into the theatre in the early 80's a double sewage pumping system was installed under the theatre which allowed having a pipe hooked up to the Norisle's holding tank.

When the theatre began the ship's cabins were used to house some cast and crew members of the Sudbury Theatre group. The costume designer just loved being berthed in the captain's cabin. Those not staying on the Norisle were billeted with local residents.

St. Paul's Church held one of their first summer dessert and auction parties on the ship in July 1981.



The community was pleased when the Norisle was featured on the 1982 Haw Dollar.



One of the main problems encountered over these years was the deterioration of the decking which resulted in leaking and the resulting damage to the interior. It was also discovered that many of the window drains had rusted out. Instead of rain water coming out on the deck it ran into the interior. This problem would continue throughout the life of the ship. Water also came in through the top of the smokestack and this would not be rectified until 2007.

Parts of the ship that were considered too dangerous were closed off for touring. However, it seemed that no matter how heavy a lock and/or chain were used people managed to get into these areas. Some really nose person even brought his own chain cutter. Another problem, when people were allowed to tour on their own, were people who came with screwdrivers and removed the brass name plates from various pieces of equipment.

The Assiginack Historical Society hosted a buffet dinner in the dining room on July 29, 1984. This was to raise funds to assist in carrying out needed repairs. A highlight was a canoe filled with ice to show off the salads that were available along with all types of other great things to eat.



In 1986 the Historical Society received a grant to redeck the ship and carry out interior repairs. The painting of the exterior of the ship was also carried out. The Norisle was sandblasted before being repainted. The new decking turned out to be a real fiasco. One of the Federal Government employees insisted that the ship's decks should be planked and the spaces between filled with oakum. He must have thought he was working with a sailing vessel. The Society was notified in no uncertain terms that despite warning the government that this would not work there would be no grant unless it was done that way. Within a very short period of time the planks twisted and the rain once more came inside destroying many of the other interior repairs.

At this same time a dry sprinkler system was installed throughout the vessel. It was connected to a pump that would pull water from the lake when needed. Thankfully the system was never needed but certainly added another headache as it required a great deal of yearly maintenance. Exterior stairs and gang way were constructed to the first deck in order to give a second exit from the ship. These also created a problem as it enabled many a brave heart to reach the upper deck more easily where they could launch themselves into the cold waters of Manitowaning Bay. This was considered an illegal and dangerous practice but it became more of a game to avoid being caught. The same was true of night time visits to the ship.



It wasn't until 1994 that another grant was received and the decks once again replaced using a low roofing technique. This work was carried out by Espanola Roof Maintenance. In the meantime, a tremendous amount of damage had occurred. Again, much of the interior wood was replaced. As well at this time the forward lounge and cabins on the boat deck were renovated into a dining room and kitchen. The next year saw the opening of the Norisle Bistro.

This new dining room and kitchen on the upper deck were initiated for a buffet dinner on Tall Ship Day, Tuesday, July 26 when the Madelaine came into the harbour.

NORISLE BISTRO OFFERS FINE CUISINE AMIDST NAUTICAL AMBIENCE

The Manitoulin Expositor July 1995



What an exciting time that was to be able to offer fine dining in a beautiful space. In order that patrons could attend the theatre dinner time and show times were coordinated. Dessert was served after the shows. The Bistro continued operations in 1996 but the owners decided after that season they had to break their 5-year lease due to financial problems.

THE SS NORISLE TURNED 50 ON MONDAY JULY 15,1996.

This all came together at the perfect time. The Municipality of Assiginack had a year long celebration to mark its 125th Anniversary. The Norisle also turned 50 that year and was there a party. Arthur Street from Queen to Nelson was closed off in order that various activities could take place there. There were games, a silent auction, face painting, special tours of the Norisle and dinner of course. The day ended with a bang when a wonderful display of fireworks was set off from Fanny Island. One of the best places to see this display was from the decks of the Norisle.

The S.S. Norisle ^{June 21/46} is 49 this year

Make this ship a part of your summer plans

Norisle Bistro Restaurant

Opening July 1st
in the fully refurbished
forward lounge
a unique experience
in fine dining
in a spectacular location...



New decks, new paint & new displays make for an interesting and enjoyable tour of this historic vessel.

Stop at the new gift shop located in the mill
"Yuletide Gifts & Collectables"

While in Manitowaning visit our other fine shops and step back in time with a visit to 150 year old St. Paul's Church and the Assiginack Museum also featuring many new displays.

For more information call (705) 859-3905

Plan to attend
Summer Theatre
at its best
Two great musicals to
enjoy at Burn's Wharf.
Combine this with
a great meal for a great
night's entertainment!

Nunsense II - July 26 to 29

Closer Than Ever
- August 9 to 12 & 15 to 19 -

Curtain 8:00 p.m.
Tickets \$10.00

As previously mentioned, and despite all the problems associated with maintaining this vessel it did accomplish the goal of attracting visitors to the community. Over the years numerous displays were set up in various parts of the ship. The major focus was on encouraging people to visit and tour the ship. Students were employed each summer and sometimes it was possible to run guided tours but in later years most tours were self directed. Many of these students will remember polishing brass and washing the many windows on the ship.

To add insult to injury in the 90's a flock of pigeons decided to make the ship their home port. What a mess they created. With a great deal of perseverance and the use of live traps they were finally gotten rid of. It was necessary to hire a company to clean up the mess. This same company also removed some of the asbestos that was on the vessel.

As a way to better use the Norisle the 134 RCSCC Admiral Mountbatten Sea Cadets from Sudbury spent some time living aboard the ship. This was an experiment to see if it would be feasible to use the ship as an actual naval training centre for cadets. Unfortunately, due to associated costs, insurance, etc. this did not work out to the disappointment of both sides.

As the years went on managing the Norisle became very frustrating. Councils did not want to spend money on the ship and no one was stepping forward to help the few volunteers who cleaned, painted and tried to keep tours running. The Historical Society also tired of spending money on minor repairs, exterior painting, etc. The Society and Museum Board decided in the

early 2000's that they would no longer be willing to look after the Norisle. This resulted in the ship and the Roller Mills being closed to the public. Now would begin an era of figuring out how to best dispose of the ship. Council looked at various plans which included selling the ship for scrap, sinking it in Manitowaning Bay as a dive centre, etc.

Once again in 2001 the ship was used for a special event. The South East Lions Club turned it into a haunted ship during October. This use continued for the next 2 years and was well received and attended.



HAUNTED NORISLE
in Manitowaning

- Friday, October 17 • Saturday, October 18
- Friday, October 24 • Saturday, October 25

7:00 pm - 9:00 pm (or when line-up ends)

Sheltered Waiting Area and Canteen
Admission: \$5.00
12 and under: \$3.00

(Not recommended for young children)
Supervised Play Area Available
Over 7500 square feet of bone chilling excitement!

SEE YOU THERE, IF YOU DARE!

Sadly, in 2006 the Norisle sprung a leak in the hull and began to list as water poured in. Fortunately, the dock manager at the time, Joe O' Brien, noticed that something didn't look right and notified the Municipal Crew who along with the Assiginack Fire Department went into action with large pumps. Historical items on board were removed in case the ship did sink. However, the hole was plugged, the water stopped and the ship saved.

In 2007 a new group, The Friends of the Norisle/SS Norisle Steamship Society, stepped forward with plans to save this great piece of Canadian history. It was their hope to have the ship retrofitted into a cruise ship that would tour the Great Lakes. This group would spend the next 16 years trying to bring their dreams into reality. However, this did not happen despite all their hard work.

A plan was presented to Council by the Tobermory Marine Association in 2016 to have the ship towed to Tobermory. Here it would be sunk and become part of their dive location. However, the SS Norisle Steamship Society was able to have these plans scuttled. They filed a lawsuit against the Municipality seeking millions in damages. This cost the Municipality over \$200 000.

Then in 2023 the ship was declared a problem vessel by the Canadian Coast Guard. This hastened the Municipality's decision to have the ship towed out of the harbour and scrapped.

In October 1946 the SS Norisle made its maiden voyage with great fanfare and anticipation for the future. In 1975 it was towed to Manitowaning again with great fanfare and anticipation for its future there. On October 11, 2023 it was towed, watched by a silent crowd, to the Marine Recycling Corporation in Port Colborne where it will be scrapped.

This history has been compiled by David Smith, past chair of the Assiginack Historical Society and Assiginack Museum Board with the assistance of Kelsey Maguire, Assiginack Museum Curator.