

# BY A NOT SO OLD HYDROGRAPHER

## “As it Was”™

At my interview for a job at Canadian Hydrographic Service, I had to answer all the usual sort of questions posed to me by two very formidable men. Finally, the time came to speak my own questions and thoughts! Considering a statement on family heritage might be an appropriate ice-breaker, I said: “I feel honoured to be interviewed for this job in that it carries on a family connection. I am related to a former Dominion Hydrographer.” With that, one interviewer looked at the other and said, “Not Norm Gray? [Dominion Hydrographer 1957-67]”, as much as an aside as anything else. To which, I responded, “Who? No, no, my grandmother's aunt married William J. Stewart.” The following is a tribute to the man and the ship named after him.

William James Stewart was born in Ottawa on 23 January, 1863 and died there from complications of surgery on 5 May, 1925. At the age of 17, he joined Royal Military College (RMC), having taken first place in the entrance examinations. Graduating in 1883 at the top of his class, he was presented with the Governor General's Gold Medal. RMC's records show that he was 5' 7" (170 cm) tall, with dark complexion, brown hair and hazel eyes.

Stewart joined the one-year old Georgian Bay Survey (later, the Canadian Hydrographic Service) in March 1884. He took over as Chief Hydrographer in 1893 and continued to survey in the Great Lakes until 1906. In 1891 he was sent to survey Vancouver harbour in British Columbia - the first Canadian government survey of that coast.

In ten years of surveying in Georgian Bay and the North Channel, Cdr. Boulton and Stewart, his assistant, were obliged to select thousands of geographical names in an area where all but major features remained unnamed on existing charts. So it is not surprising that they followed certain commemorative naming themes: family, crew, friends, and politicians. Sixty years earlier Admiral Bayfield had named the principal land and water features of this area in a similar way.

As a member of the International Waterways Commission in 1909, he helped determine the international boundary through the Great Lakes. When Chicago wanted to divert Great Lakes water into the Mississippi, he determined its effect on the lower St. Lawrence River. At the request of the British Government, he went to Europe to assist in laying out the new international boundaries as determined by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

Throughout his entire career he had a reputation of being tough, exacting, and most demanding. He would frequently criticize his own Service but he would not tolerate any outside interference. In the end, there were few who worked under, and with him, who did not admire his high sense of honour and judicial nature, and held him in high esteem.

### The Ship

Stewart's death while still in harness was keenly felt at CHS, and the next ship to be built, and first in almost twenty years, was named after him. Canadian Government Ship Wm. J. Stewart was built in Collingwood, Ontario at a cost of \$1 million. The Willie J. as she was more affectionately called, was 228 feet (69.5 m) long, 35 feet (10.6 m) beam and was 1295 tons gross. Her size was close to the maximum allowable to pass through the canals and locks along the St. Lawrence River. She was designed for oil-fired boilers which were changed to coal to satisfy local coal mining interests on the BC coast but the boilers were converted to oil firing in 1958 after the mines closed. The steam ran triple expansion engines connected to twin-screws. After commissioning, she travelled by way of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, and the Panama Canal to arrive at Victoria, British Columbia in July 1932. She proved not to be an outstanding sea-boat, and many a seaman travelled by the rail in a quartering sea.

Because she was specifically designed for hydrographic surveying, she carried a large crew (56) to man four launches and had a large chartroom - the seagoing office for the ten hydrographers - directly under the bridge. According to the standards of the 1930s, the hydrographers' cabins were spacious but crew's quarters were only adequate. In 1948, there was a 300 per cent crew turnover in six months, which may also have been affected by the availability of good paying jobs ashore. Quarters were improved but were never spacious.

She was not commandeered by the Navy during hostilities as were her Atlantic Coast sisters, but assisted the Navy by surveying small harbours, deploying nets and testing equipment. During 1938-40, CHS tested, using the Stewart, Radio Acoustic Ranging where the crew of the ship at sea would explode a bomb in the water at a location they wanted positioned. The acoustic signal was picked up by hydrophones on three separated buoys moored near shore and relayed back to the ship by radio. From the travel-times the position could be computed. The CHS tests were not successful, although the tests done by the Americans, apparently, were. The project got abandoned due to the war, the loss of the US-trained operator to the war effort, but the final death-knell was the post-war use of radio signals such as Decca and Loran-A for positioning.

The Stewart came close to an untimely end on 11 June, 1944 when she hit the notorious Ripple Rock in Seymour Narrows, at the narrowest constriction of the waters between Vancouver Island and the mainland [see Ritchie, 'As it Was', pp 113-114. GITC Publication, Lemmer, Netherlands (2003). While the stokers rushed to put out the boiler fires, the Captain and mates piloted the ship aground three miles away in Plumper Bay. She was salvaged and towed to Victoria for repairs. She was ready again for the 1945 field season. She

lasted through the 1975 field season then was mothballed for four years looking for a buyer. She is now the Canadian Princess, a floating hotel and fishing resort at Ucluelet, British Columbia - Canada's mini-version of the Queen Mary at Long Beach, California.

#### Further Reading

[www.canadianprincess.com/history.htm](http://www.canadianprincess.com/history.htm)

#### Rectification

Readers will be aware that the titles under the first two photos in this Column by Captain Barritt in Hydro INTERNATIONAL Vol. 8 No. 3 were inadvertently reversed. This error is regretted.

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<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/as-it-was-21>

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