

What Happens to Men When Ferries Stop?

Will Ferry Workers Buy Chicken Farms When Dream of Bay Bridge Is Reality?

By Florence Clark

Twenty years ago it was just a whisper. Today it is a reality. The bridging of San Francisco is near completion. The huge webs stretch across the horizon, the tiny spiders of workmen bent against the blue-gray sky.

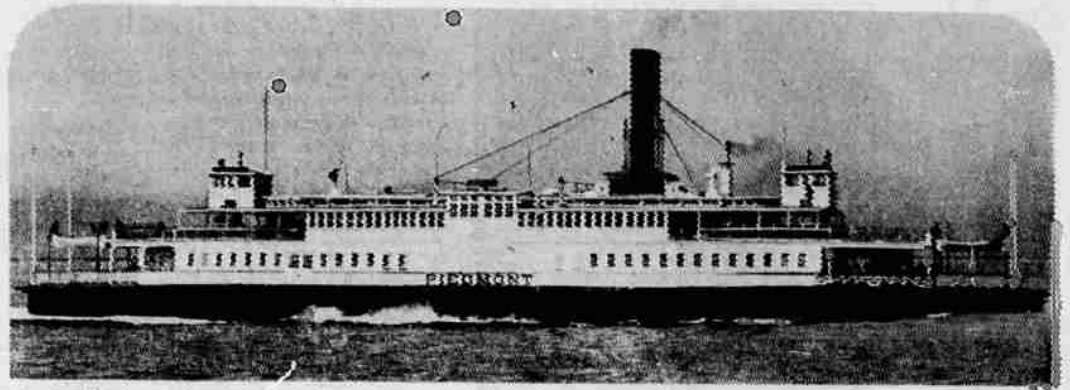
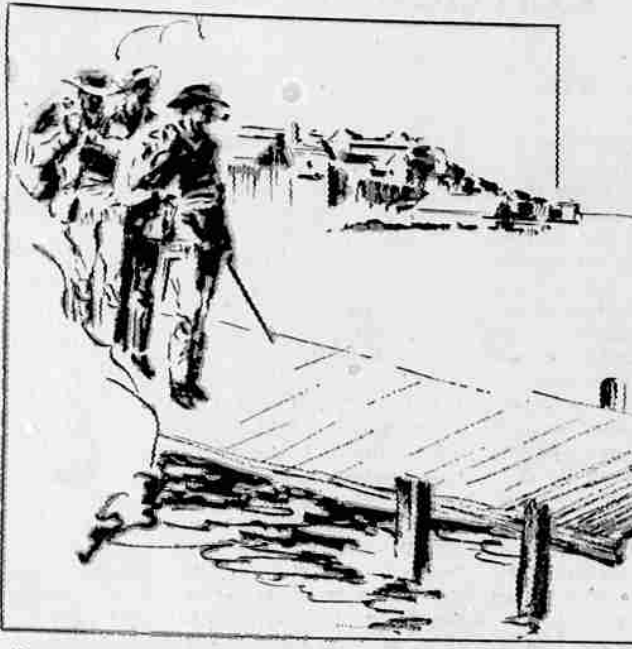
Then, water traffic goes on as before. Ships, which once appeared large on the water, now dwarfed to toy proportions, while the Ferry boats swing back and forth between the gigantic spans of the bridge with a certain defiant swirl. It is reminiscent of a faithful servant who does his final duties with an added independence, a flip of starched skirts in the face of a stern dismissal.

In the thoughts of many of the commuters who have ridden the Ferries each morning and during these many years, there is the natural question, "Is this the passing of the old romance of the Bay?" With this will come a little sigh of regret for that 20 minute respite as the boat's pulse and the seagulls cry above. Some men their heads as the boat passes close to the giant structure which soon will terminate the vibrant, colorful story of the Ferry boats. Others argue that the old must give way to the new, for progress moves in its appointed way, each over-lapping the other.

Yet, with the passing of each era, it is a human gesture to salute it with a generous and sincere appreciation, knowing that each period is a romance of its own. As someone said, "We live a romance every day, but don't recognize it."

We see not only the splendidly equipped, efficient Ferries of today, but in imagination, glimpse a hundred years or more, to the Indian clunky Tule boats across the Bay when the weather permitted. We catch a glimpse of those old, exciting days of the gold rush, when the boys boats received their first incentive. Fortune was made by those who carried men and women into the hill country, and up the rivers. Something of that thrilling time still hovers over the Bay, something more daring and colorful. The pageantry of a fearless, gold-mad people follows in the wake of the Ferry boats.

For a span of 50 years the river boats, too, flourished and prospered. These were river boats with stalls for cattle, space for horses and wagons, and accommodations for dining and sleeping. It was a slow trip to Sacramento, or better's Fort as it was called. In 1847 it took two to six weeks to make the round trip from San Francisco. Some of the passengers got



The modern "Piedmont" which plies regularly between San Francisco and Oakland. This sturdy vessel and many of its sister ferries will soon be relics of the past, made useless by the new Bay Bridge. Left: Hardy adventurers of the gold-rush days waited impatiently at the wharf for little ferries to take them north to Sacramento and sudden wealth.

off at one of the stops along the river, and walking the rest of the way to Sacramento, beat the boat by four days.

Captain Charles F. Heath of the Oakland Terminal said, "My father was a captain on the river boats, and before that he had sailed from England, around the Horn, and to East Indian ports. He was in Ceylon when the first cargo of tea was shipped out. Later he settled in San Francisco, joined the gold rush into the hills. Then he went on the boats. When I was a youngster of fifteen, he came home one noon, and said he didn't know what he was going to do for a porter the rest of the day. I said, 'Here's your porter.' The old man argued about school, but I finally went down to the boat with him, and... well... I've been with the boats ever since."

That was 45 years ago, and Captain Heath has seen the Ferry boats come into ascendancy, fulfill their destiny as a transportation of major importance, and now watches their gradual decline. He is in charge of all the Southern Pacific Passenger Ferries, and is proudest of the safety record they have made throughout many years of service.

There is rigid government inspection of all Ferry boats on the Bay, and it is rigid. Once a year the boats, one at a time, are taken over by the U. S. Inspection Board, and gone over completely. At frequent intervals, the sanitation, and fire equipment is also checked. In comparison with Ferry service in other parts of the country,

for safety, comfort, and cleanliness, the San Francisco Bay Ferries rank highest.

We caught R. D. Carter talking with one of the senior captains. He introduced us to this grand young man of 70 years, who this month completes 53 years of service on the Ferries. Tall, erect, dignified and gracious, this captain made us wonder if our more modern times will succeed in producing such types of men. We asked if he would permit us to take his picture, or mention his name, and very gently, but firmly we were refused that privilege. One doesn't argue with his kind. So we sat and talked.

WE ASKED, "What do you think of the bridges?"

"Well," he said slowly, "it's a little different with me than with some of the other men. I retire for good next month, anyway, so the bridges mean no loss of occupation. I've been hearing about those bridges ever since I began working on the boats 53 years ago. Every so often, someone would start a petition, then we'd hear no more about it. Now, here they are."

"Yes," he said, "we have every device on these Ferries which can possibly be of service, and they do help. Then, too, every obstruction has its own echo, so we know what's ahead of us. For example, when we blow our fog horn, the echo we get in return tells us the nature of the object we are nearing. If it is another boat, the sound is different from the sound we get from one of the piers, or the island. It takes long

experience to know your echoes. In fact, I've had new pilots come aboard who didn't know there was an echo, and they had to start listening for it!"

Riding over with Captain Hansen, from Oakland to San Francisco, he spoke of the safety drills the boats have as part of their regular program. "Now suppose someone goes overboard," he said, "I press this button, and you keep your eye on the right rear life boat, and figure the time it takes to set the boat on the water." We counted 50 seconds from the moment the signal was given, until the men had the boat lowered to water level. "Foolish," said Captain Hansen, "for anyone to think they can get away with suicides on these Ferries."

Then we saw the fire drill. One minute from the signal until four streams of water were being thrown from the top of the third deck. It is just such efficiency which has made the amazing safety record of the Ferry boats. It also is the result of the caliber of all the men on the boats. Any one of them would risk his life if necessary, just as part of the day's work. There was a real tribute in Captain Hansen's voice as he spoke of the men who work on the boats.

THE STORY of the San Francisco Bay Ferries would be incomplete without stopping for a few moments in the famous Ferry building. More people pass through this place during rush hours than through any traffic spot in the world, excepting the Grand Central Station in New York City, and Charing Cross of London. Down Market Street come the loaded cars, and swing into the circle of tracks in front of the Ferry Building. Like spilled beans, the home going commuters roll out, packages bobbing, coat tails flying, through the archways, past the ticket

windows, and with one second to spare, clump past down the sloping gangways to the boats. The great door clangs down with a finality which stops an onrushing group whose whole fate seems dependent on catching "that boat." Now, twenty long minutes they must wait and fume, be late for dinner, and miss that important evening date. What a study of that unpredictable thing-called human nature. What unlimited variations of expression and gesture. Temper, irritation, and on up to the smiling acceptance of disappointment. And fustiest of all, the self-important man of affairs left standing in the same futility beside the man in overalls.

Soon the crowds will be diminished to those who ferry across the Bay from train to train. The commuters will be streaming over the bridges.

What will become of the boats, and the men who have run them? So far no definite provision has been made for the future uses of the Ferry boats. Undoubtedly they will be bought and live out their days of service in other waters. Let us hope that wherever they go, there, too, will be the seagulls to companion them with the flash of white wings.

A picture persistently intrudes itself between the present and the future. There will be a last run for each boat, the final turn of the wheel, the long, lingering blast of the whistle nearing the pier, and with a rush of foaming water, the days of the Ferry boats on the Bay will come to an end. But in the following years, surely some days and nights will find an old boatman, and perhaps a captain, walking slowly along the wharf, looking out over the water, dreaming of a time when no bridges swung web-like above the Bay, and the lights of the cities and towns were answered by the moving, lighted windows of the Ferry boats.

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