

The Ramon had a tendency to roam

By Jerry Bowen

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Ferryboats have long been a part of the transportation network for Solano County, including the largest train ferries in the world.

The county also can boast of having one of the most long-lived, cantankerous, wandering train ferries ever. Of course it was only meant to be a temporary train transporter, but somewhere along the way it managed to last for more than 40 years.

In 1912 the Oakland Antioch & Eastern (OAA&E) railroad company (later the Sacramento Northern, then Western Pacific) submitted an application to build a railroad drawbridge from Chipps Island (south of Birds Landing) to Mallard Island (west of Pittsburg in Contra Costa County). This was to have provided a fast direct rail route from Sacramento to Oakland. The plans finally were approved after much finagling, and construction began with an estimated completion time of two and one-half years.

At the same time (1912) OAA&E, in a hurry to begin service, decided to build a ferryboat and provide service while the bridge was being built. The ferry named Bridget (a pun on the words "Bridge It") was completed in July 1913 and put into service.

Construction of the bridge stopped in May 1913 after building one pier on the Contra Costa side after the company ran out of money. Then the Bridget was destroyed by fire on May 17, 1914. It sure wasn't a very propitious beginning.

As an interim measure, OAA&E rented tugs and railcar-floats from the Santa Fe and Western Pacific railroads to continue service while another ferry was built.

The Lanteri Shipyard in Pittsburg built the replacement ferry, Ramon, in a hurry. In order to speed up production, it was built completely with flat- plate steel.

The Ramon was basically a rectangular barge with no keel and with propulsion at both ends. A distillate engine (for light diesel fuel oil) that was rated at an optimistic 600 horsepower, but in actuality only managed to grind out about 535 horsepower, powered the vessel.

Ramon also had a very small restaurant below decks when it was built. One has to wonder why you needed a restaurant that seated about 25 people on a vessel whose runs were only supposed to last an average of nine minutes each. Well, it was only

supposed to be a temporary ferry anyway, so why not?

Ramon was launched about six months after the Bridgit was destroyed, and of course even that had its problems. A tugboat was hired to pull it off the building ways into the river. Because of a heavy river crosscurrent the tug couldn't hold the proper position for the operation. When the signal came to pull, the tug's skipper did just that, even though he was out of position and the Ramon was pulled off the building blocks onto its side. Several days later, after righting the vessel and a few repairs, the launch was successful.

William Stritsky was assigned to the Ramon as a deck officer in 1916 and later became her skipper, serving until the ship was taken out of service. During an interview in 1966, the then 75-year-old Captain Stritzky related many interesting stories about the ship that seemed to have a knack for getting into trouble.

With a boxy hull, no keel, a very shallow draft, and with not enough power, it had a tendency to go where the wind and river currents wanted it to go instead of heeding to the captain's desires.

With trains on its deck, the ship was equipped with a very efficient sail. Many times the engine would fail and the Ramon would be blown ashore or drift with the winds and current. Heavy winds made landing the ship at the ferry slips a tricky and very often repeated maneuver.

Over the years of the ferry's temporary service, train cars began to be built longer. When loaded to capacity with the longer cars, the wheels would extend right up to the edge of the ship at both ends. To carry the load, they were forced to remove the timber blocks and use drawbars that stuck out about three and a half feet over the ends of the ship to hold the trains in place.

On warm summer nights, passengers on the train would open the windows for relief from the stifling heat. Then swarms of mosquitoes from the surrounding swamp (that's wetlands for you politically correct folks) would make life thoroughly miserable.

One night, one of the trainmen just couldn't stand the swarms of attacking insects any longer and threw a lighted flare into the caboose of a train being loaded, hoping the fumes would drive the nasty little critters out. The caboose burst into flames and an emergency unload was made. After the fire was extinguished the train was reloaded and sent on its way with the virtually destroyed caboose still attached.

Getting out of the landing slip with the underpowered ferry resulted in an interesting solution to getting under way. The captain would tell the train engineer to come on

board fast, slam on the brakes and the hooks holding the Ramon in place were released at the same time. This gave the ferry enough momentum to leave the slip with little trouble. The California Occupational Safety and Health Agency would have had a fit if it had been in operation in those days.

In spite of it all, the temporary career of the Ramon lasted 41 years without losing a single life or injuring anyone. She was retired in 1954 after a Coast Guard inspection determined the hull was no longer safe. The vessel was built with hull plates that were only three-sixteenths of an inch thick and constant erosion had taken a toll of the already too-thin metal. Thus ended the rather spectacular career of the ferry Ramon and ferry service from Chipps Island to Pittsburg.

In spite of all the problems with the Ramon, Capt. Stritzky was proud that he was able to operate the roamin' Ramon all those years with no damage of any consequence to the ship, freight or passengers. I'd have to agree, it takes a man of courage and steely nerve to survive the shortcomings of design in a temporary vessel that continued in operation for 41 years. The Ramon was scrapped near to the place it was built and apparently no artifacts from it have survived.

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