



Table of Contents

| | | | | | | | |
|----|--|----|---|-----|--------------------------------------|-----|--|
| 9 | Foreword | 22 | Chapter Three Harnessing the Gasoline Engine | 88 | Chapter Six One Step Ahead | 138 | Chapter Nine A Heroic Contribution to Winning the War |
| 11 | Chapter One A New Frontier: A New Horizon | 46 | Chapter Four At the Helm of a Rainbow | 94 | Chapter Seven Boats with Stories | 152 | Chapter Ten Reflection |
| 16 | Chapter Two On the Muskoka Wharf | 76 | Chapter Five Transports of Delight | 102 | Chapter Eight Against the Current | 156 | Acknowledgments |



Foreword

Although sixty-four years have passed since the last Ditchburn boat left the Gravenhurst factory, their products continue to set the standard for the glory years of wooden pleasure-craft construction in Muskoka. Survivors are treasured reminders of a time when craftsmen built boats by hand, using the finest materials, creating a custom product uniquely suited to its purpose and its owner.

The final collapse of the company in 1938 was a calamity for many people—the workers, the community, the boating public, and especially Herbert Ditchburn, the genius who had guided the company to its domination of Canada's boating industry. Progressing from simple fisherman's rowing skiffs to luxury cruisers of 100 feet in length, Ditchburn products had penetrated unexpected markets in New York, Montréal, and Western Canada, far from their home waters.

Today, as we try to make sense of a world that is changing dramatically, these wonderful reminders of the past have assumed a

new importance—reminding us of the impact of beauty, function, design, integrity, and craftsmanship on our daily lives. Synthetic materials, mass production, and standardized design largely replaced traditional wooden-boat construction after the Second World War, but the desire to maintain the beloved products of the Ditchburn Boat Co. is increasing each year. Owning a vintage wooden boat has become a status symbol as well as a pleasure, and now also a responsibility.

To Canadians, the importance of preserving the remaining examples of Ditchburn production is clearly demonstrated by the zeal and dedication of Ditchburn owners. Fully aware of their special status, they have devoted time, money and skill to maintaining these important vessels, and they have been generous in sharing their good fortune by co-operating to the fullest extent in the production of this volume. Through their efforts, we may share the glory of Ditchburn excellence for many years to come.



Chapter One

A New Frontier: A New Horizon

The Canadian history of the Ditchburn family commences with the arrival in Toronto, in 1869, of four brothers—William, John, Henry and Arthur—who had been attracted by the government offer of Free Grant Land for settlers in the newly opened Muskoka area.

This forested wilderness, which begins about 100 miles north of the City of Muskoka, marked the southern boundary of the geographic region known as the Great Canadian Shield and was still sparsely populated. There was not a happy introduction to the frontier.

A fifth brother, Thomas, the eldest in the family, had also journeyed with them to Canada, but accompanied by his wife and six children, he left the group at Port Hope, where a more secure farming life was available. Boarding the ship *Dacia* at the Victoria Docks in London on June 17, 1869, the twelve family members endured a rolling passage to Quebec City. William wrote, "We are not very comfortable in our cabin but it is only for a short time so we have resigned ourselves to our fate."

Muskoka is a land of lakes—over 1,600 of them—mostly small, but all studded with islands, with rocky shores covered with pine trees. Today it has become a vacation paradise, but to the settlers of the late 1800s it presented an uncompromising battleground, requiring a constant struggle to survive. The dense

forest cover dictated that the first industry would be lumbering, however, used to the gentle, rolling farmland of England, most settlers despaired of taming this rocky wilderness.

William also wrote, "I have been to the Muskoka District where the Free Grant Lands are situated but it seems to be the opinion of everyone here that they are very dear as a gift as the land is very rocky and barren and the cost of clearing is very great. ... This life would only suit a hardy Canadian or one acquainted with the backwoods and invulnerable as to mosquito bites, and ready to do battle with the black bear."

Having grown up in the upper-middle-class surroundings of St. John's Wood, a comfortable part of London, the Ditchburn brothers were raised as English gentlemen. Thomas, their father, had been a lawyer; their grandfather, John, a manufacturer of ropes and cordage at Gravesend. Henry and Arthur, the two youngest, had sailed around the world as midshipmen. William had received some training in an architect's office, while John had been apprenticed to a marine designer in Brighton.

None had sufficient experience to be deemed qualified in these professions, but even their limited experience was to prove useful in the near future.

Their mother Emily, daughter of a wealthy family, had died at an early age. Then their father passed away in 1860. Each son inherited a modest fortune at age twenty-one, but a few years later this money was mostly spent, or lost in unwise investments. Poorly equipped to earn their living in England, the decision was made to emigrate to Canada together to seek their fortune in a young land.

Misfits in pioneer life, not completely trained for any profession, discouraged by black flies, mosquitoes, and the rocky, tree-covered land, they returned to Toronto, where they proceeded to exhaust all other career possibilities. However, in September of that same year they made a second attempt to embrace northern frontier life, traveling to their land grants at the village of Rosseau, then little more than a shoreline landing place. Three large and interconnected lakes—Muskoka,

[illegible]

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit, sed diam zu m nonnumy eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua erat volupat. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit, sed diam zu m nonnumy eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua erat volupat. I consectetur iscing elit, sed diam zu m nonnumy eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore . Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit, sed diam zu m nonnumy eiusmod.

Joseph, and Rosseau—form what has today become an expensive vacationland, with the village of Rosseau situated on the northern-most shore of the most easterly third lake.

Getting there from Toronto in 1869 presented a considerable challenge, as roads were merely bush trails, railroads mainly followed the shoreline of Lake Ontario, and wayside inns provided only the most rudimentary accommodation.

From Toronto, the brothers were able to take a train to Belle Ewart, on Lake Simcoe, then a steamboat to its northern terminus at Washago, and finally a horse-drawn stage to Gravenhurst at the southernmost point of Lake Muskoka.

In June 1866, Muskoka pioneer A. P. Cockburn had launched the *Wenonah*, an 80-foot side-wheel steamboat, at Gravenhurst, and she was soon sailing daily to several points on Lake Muskoka, including Bracebridge, Beaumaris, and the Indian River, below the rapids at Port Carling. While roughly built of whip-sawn planks, she certainly presented a

welcome sight to tired travelers such as the Ditchburn brothers, arriving on the first regular stage service from Washago to Gravenhurst (which Cockburn had also inaugurated). Cockburn was to devote the rest of his life to improving the economy of the district with his Muskoka Lakes Navigation Company.

Confined to Lake Muskoka by the rapids of the Indian River, the *Wenonah* transported the weary brothers to a landing near Port Carling. Now a 5-foot differential in water level and two major rapids separated them from Lake Rosseau, with the new locks not to be completed for two more years, in December 1871. There was, however, a rowing skiff that made thrice-weekly, 14-mile trips from Port Carling to Ashdowne Village, near Rosseau. The catch was that as well as paying the ferryman, passengers were expected to row part of the way! It was thus that the four brothers arrived to start their new life on the frontier.

A survey crew had established a wilderness camp in nearby Cameron's Bay, and here the travelers found help and advice in a friendly

back-woods setting. Exploration of their land grants, combined with their recognition of the hopelessness of clearing the bush to become farmers, left them overcome by despair. So a new plan surfaced: they would purchase the supply boat in which they had arrived and go into the transportation business.

With muscle power and an added sail, they brought in food, building supplies, passengers, and mail. For two summers they supplied the survey camp and other settlers. But their business was to be short-lived. Before the Port Carling Lock was completed and in operation, the *Wenonah* was warped up the rapids of the Indian River by building a series of temporary cofferdams, and once she was on Lake Rosseau, the steamship quickly captured the available transportation business. However, her owner, Mr. Cockburn, was already working toward providing additional business opportunities and employment.

Cockburn hosted an energetic and shrewd American, Mr. William H. Pratt, of New York City, on a tour of the lakes, and Pratt

MAP

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit, sed diam zu m nonnumy eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua erat volupat.

immediately recognized the tourism potential of this beautiful wilderness. If visitors could be assured of enjoying all the comforts of home, he thought, they would pay handsomely to vacation in this remote area. Part of the appeal would be the thrill of traveling to an unspoiled frontier location, and once there, the natural beauty of the location, plus the abundance of fishing and hunting, would ensure a memorable experience.

It was easy for the Ditchburn brothers to fit into Pratt's organization, with William becoming clerk and bookkeeper for the flourishing new hotel. This employment soon led to his becoming township clerk and postmaster of Rosseau. Meanwhile, the other brothers had begun building rowing boats in the upper story of the house that William had built for his family. It was apparent that these boats would be required in large numbers, as on-the-water recreation was the main interest of the vacationers. By 1875, the Ditchburn family was in the boating business, albeit with modest vessels of simple design.

Thomas Joseph Ditchburn



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, Mowitza II consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam zu mnonnumy eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua erat.ut labore et do

The family of brothers could boast a distinguished maritime heritage in the person of Thomas Joseph Ditchburn, a somewhat distant relative, who had been born in Chatham, England, in 1801. Educated locally, he was entered as an apprentice in the Royal Dockyard there, where he distinguished himself in his seven years of work and study. On leaving Chatham, he worked for a London firm that had achieved some fame in the construction of iron vessels powered by steam engines.

Entering into a partnership with Charles Mare, Thomas Ditchburn won a contract from the Russian government for the construction of a small iron ship, the *Inkerman*, which

was used with great success against pirates in the Crimea and the Black Sea. Relocating to Blackwall, the company, now known as Thames Iron Works, became famous as builders of both iron and wooden vessels. By 1844, due to refinements in his hull designs, T. J. Ditchburn had achieved a remarkable 18 mph in some of his iron-hulled, steam-powered vessels.

In all, over 500 vessels were constructed in his career, the two most famous being the *Fairy*, a royal steamship built for Her Majesty Queen Victoria in 1845 and propelled by an Archimedean screw, and the *Volna*, an 1848 iron schooner yacht for Grand Duke Constantine of Russia.

A. P. Cockburn continued his developmental efforts for the Muskoka Lakes District by encouraging another entrepreneur, Hamilton Fraser, to build a luxury hotel at the northern end of Lake Joseph, duplicating the success of Pratt's Rosseau House. The new Summit House offered splendid accommodations and a first-class dining room. Both hotels attracted a loyal clientele, with guests coming from the United States, Canada, even Europe. They were housed in opulence—crystal chandeliers, expensive wall hangings, luxurious rugs, and fine furniture. Fraser named his location Port Cockburn in honor of his friend, and the steamship *Wenonah* delivered guests to each hotel from the new rail point at Gravenhurst.

To capitalize on this expanding business opportunity, the Ditchburn brothers decided to divide their forces, with William and John operating in Lake Joseph serving the Summit House, while Henry and Arthur would continue at Rosseau. A boat-building shop was built on Rosseau Bay, where boats were both rented and sold. John continued to build boats in his

brother's Rosseau house, taking them to Port Cockburn for rental.

Both businesses flourished, and rental liveries were soon established at all the major resorts on the lakes: Rosseau, Port Cockburn, Port Sandfield, Port Carling, and Windermere. The rental fleet now numbered in the hundreds. Young workers were recruited and trained, and production increased to meet demand. One of these trainees was Herbert Ditchburn, Henry's nephew and second son of William. Energetic, organized, and quick to learn, he proved to be the successor that Henry was seeking, and the man who would build the company into a major Canadian boat-building enterprise.

Summer visitors were increasing each year and it became obvious to Henry that the Muskoka Wharf at Gravenhurst, where the Grand Trunk trains now arrived, would become the centre of future tourism and development activity. Here, by 1900, he had established the site of the new Ditchburn Boat Factory, where a much larger future awaited.



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit consectetur.



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur iscing elit, sed diam.