



*On July 10, 1910, the Polson Iron Works launched a new steam ship. There was little fanfare as the ship slipped into the water—only the satisfaction of a job well done. The ship's name was the S.S. Ella Mary. Her intended role was to be one of two private yachts available to the Kuhn family at their cottage on Belle Isle in Lake Muskoka. At 66 feet in length and a beam of 11 feet and eight inches, the steam ship had a triple expansion engine and was capable of a speed of ten knots. Made with a steel frame, she was a sturdy vessel, yet appointed comfortably for passengers.*

## A Link to the Past

**LOOKING AS FRESH AS A CENTURY BEFORE, PEOPLE CHEERED ON THE S.S. BIGWIN AS SHE SLIPPED INTO THE SPARKING WATERS OF LAKE OF BAYS**

by Marijane Terry

For the next decade, the S.S. Ella Mary was used for pleasure cruises, water adventures from the swim deck, and social calls to friends on other islands. Then fate, as fate has a habit of doing, intervened. J. S. Kuhn, a Pittsburgh magnate, lost control of his business holdings in a banking scandal. The Belle Isle property was seized, and the S.S. Ella Mary was sold to an architect in Toronto and disappeared from Muskoka.

Meanwhile, Bigwin Inn, a new resort on Lake of Bays, had opened to great acclaim. The last and the most distinct of the grand Muskoka hotels of its era to be built, it became an instant draw for guests seeking luxury and diversion. The Inn was a new business venture of C.O. Shaw, who ran the Anglo-Canadian Leather Company in Huntsville. Shaw owned the Huntsville Navigation Company, and it was a combination of its ships; the S.S. Algonquin, S.S. Iroquois, and the Portage Flyer train, that delivered guests to the Inn from the Huntsville train depot.

**opposite page:** S.S. Bigwin tied to the dock at Bigwin Inn. One of the photos used to ensure we restored the trim to its original look. **left top:** The S.S. Bigwin floating in LOB on her 100th Birthday; **left middle:** In 2007 the last of the douglas fir planks were attached to the steel frame; **left bottom:** Roy Davies found the steam engine near Camp Borden where it had been maintained by a steam enthusiast who very reluctantly sold it to the Museum.

A few years after opening Bigwin Inn, Shaw noticed that not all guests arrived by train. The automobile had become popular, and while the journey to Muskoka was difficult given the state of the roads, some guests liked the independence of a car. In 1923, after the famed Wawa Hotel was destroyed by fire, Shaw bought the property on Norway Point, and constructed a new steamer dock and garages on it. His search for a suitable vessel to convey guests to the Inn was successful when the S.S. Ella Mary was discovered in Toronto, and Shaw purchased it in December 1924.

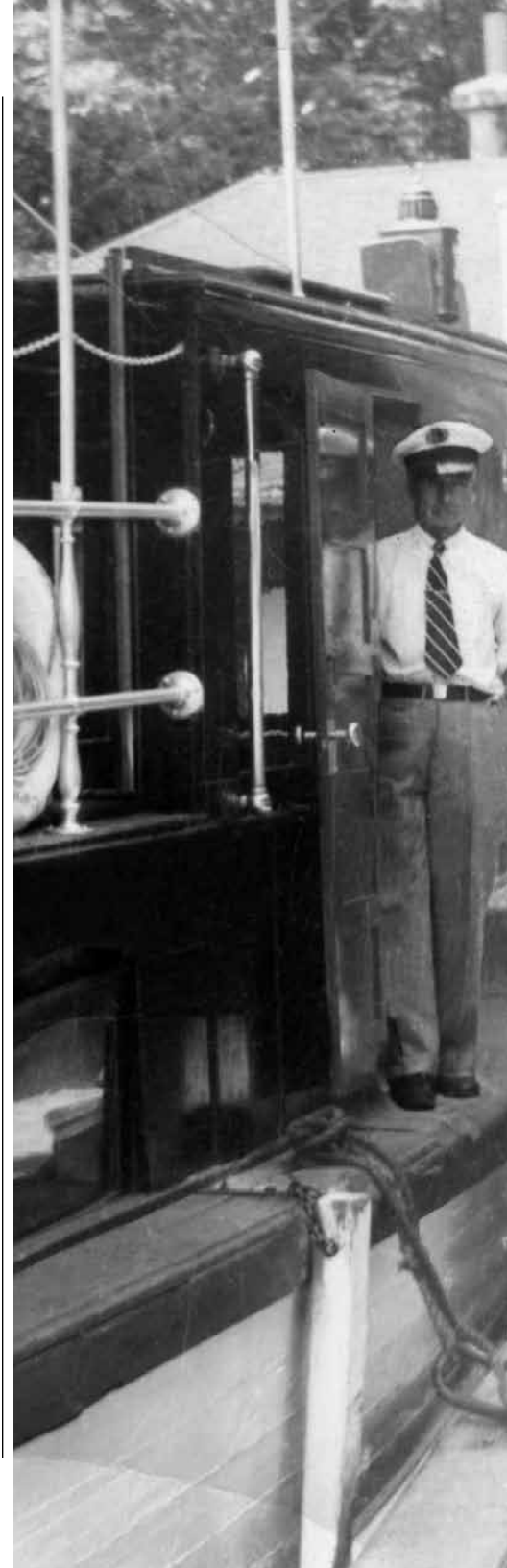
Rechristened the S.S. Bigwin, the steam ship was launched into service on July 4, 1925. The vessel had been repainted in the signature colours of the Navigation Company of red, black, and green accents with a white hull. It had been reconfigured to hold 44 passengers, many of whom liked to sit on the top deck and enjoy the leisurely approach to the Inn's steamer dock. Those few minutes were a serene respite from both the journey completed and the anticipated whirl of sporting and social activities that guests would engage in during their stay.

Reservations were difficult to obtain during the 20s as the Inn was full. The S.S. Bigwin travelled frequently to the island, conveying guests, staff, and supplies. There were regular Sunday morning trips to Glenmount for church services and occasionally a pleasure cruise when the S.S. Bigwin could be spared from her regular ferry duties. The hard times of the 30s brought fewer guests for shorter visits, but the Inn still drew the famous, the rich, and the merely well-to-do. The S.S. Bigwin carried them to the island and then back to their waiting chauffeurs and cars when their summer sojourns on the waters of Lake of Bays were finished.

Guest visits to the Inn increased during the Second World War years, but when C.O. Shaw died in 1943, the glory years of Bigwin Inn died with him. After the war, and for the next thirty years, a succession of owners would try to recreate the Inn's magic, but the times had changed and continued to change. Expanded highway systems and then newly affordable airlines lured people to new and distant destinations. Muskoka remained a favourite place for many people, but post-war prosperity allowed them to buy cottages, rather than stay at a resort.

As these changes unfolded, and with all of the Inn's guests now arriving by car, the S.S. Bigwin continued her ferry duties. In the 50s, she was converted

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from steam to diesel power, and was indispensable to the Inn. Despite this vital importance, with less cash for maintenance and repairs, the scars of her hard working life began to show. As usual, she was stowed in the autumn of 1968 in the metal boathouse for her winter rest, but the fabled Inn never reopened. Some two years later, when the S.S. Bigwin fell through her supports and sank in the boathouse, it appeared to be the end for her, too.

The last owners of the Inn had intended to convert the resort into condominiums, and the East Lodge became Muskoka Condominium Number One. It was a project ahead of its time, and when the units didn't sell quickly and the cash ran out, work stopped. The remainder of the property became entangled in the Seaway Trust Scandal, and it was not until the late 80s that it was returned to private ownership after being under the control of Ontario's Public Trustee.

The S.S. Bigwin, largely forgotten, remained in the boathouse for over 20 years. By chance, in 1991, Mark McLean, now President of Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation, happened to see the vessel. He thought she should be saved, and he mentioned this idea to Ross Boothby, who agreed and passed on the good word. The community voiced its support, and the Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation undertook the project with the help of many volunteers.

### **While the cold water and the shelter of the boathouse had helped to preserve her to some degree, her age was very apparent.**

The S.S. Bigwin was purchased for one dollar from the MCCI, who owned the boathouse, and the recovery was underway. First, tons of oily rock, which had served as ballast when the vessel was converted to diesel power, had to be removed. Then, one sunny Sunday, a group of volunteers pumped the water from the hull, wrapped her in a tarpaulin, and the Boothby brothers towed her slowly from the boathouse and up the lake to South Portage. There, she was hoisted from the water by cranes and set on a wooden support structure.

The S.S. Bigwin had been saved, but there was no clear plan for her future. After a year, the vessel was taken to a field in Dwight, and there she sat for another decade. Then Jeff Gabura, a cottager on Lake of Bays,

heard about her, and the moment he laid eyes on the S.S. Bigwin, committed to restoring the steam ship. Jeff thought it would take a couple of years to get her back in the water, but it turned out to be a bit more complicated. While the cold water and the shelter of the boathouse had helped to preserve her to some degree, her age was very apparent. She looked like the ghost of a steam ship, and it would be a monumental job to restore her. Jeff would invest the next decade in his efforts to bring back to life this piece of the lake's heritage.

It took several years just to find her a home in Dorset where the restoration could begin. Jeff spent thousands of hours in detective work—understanding the intricacies of her design, tracing her ownership history to get a clear title, identifying authentic materials to use, and locating original equipment such as the engine. Skilled craftsmen had to be found, and funds had to be raised to support the project. The Lake of Bays Navigation and Marine Museum was created to give the vessel a permanent home. It was all made possible by the generosity of the community, who responded with financial donations, volunteer help and encouragement, and by a grant from FedNor.

The work on the S.S. Bigwin was undertaken with painstaking care. The goal was to return her as closely as possible to the state she was in when she served as the Inn's ferry although after almost a century, some of the decisions had to be informed guesswork. Earlier pictures of her gave clues, as did the memories of people who had worked or voyaged on her. A great deal of the work was done by hand to get it right, and efforts would stall when the money ran out or a piece of equipment was elusive. Every time Jeff thought the project might have to be abandoned, a donation arrived or material was located and work resumed.

On July 10, 2010, the S.S. Bigwin returned to Lake of Bays. Under the summer sun, her white hull and polished mahogany looked as fresh as when she had been launched a century before, and her reflection danced on the water. The bridge and docks in Dorset were lined with people who cheered her return, and a klaxon of horns from boats filled with spectators celebrating her. She is the community's link to the past, when steam ships made first settlement and then travel on Lakes of Bays possible, and she is a visible symbol of a legendary resort. In the summers to come, she will once more cross the lake, holding the memories of the past and creating new ones. 