

# **SS Belcarra Shipwrecked 100 Years Ago**

Researched and written by Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, March 2010. (Revised: April 7, 2010)

One hundred years ago, a vessel that has historical significance to Indian Arm and Belcarra was shipwrecked. At 4:00 a.m. on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1910, the coastal steamer *SS Belcarra* ran onto the rocks in Jervis Inlet. At the time the *SS Belcarra* was owned by the *Sechelt Steamship Company* and was operating on the coastal run along the Sunshine Coast carrying passengers and cargo from Vancouver to Jervis Inlet with landings at Cowan's Point, Tunstall Bay, Grantham's Landing, Gibson's Landing, Sechelt, Secret Cove and Pender Harbour.

The *SS Belcarra* began its life in 1902 as the single-decked coastal freighter *SS Unican* — the vessel was 96 feet (29.3 meters) long, 20 feet (6.1 meters) wide, with a displacement of 89 tons. The steamer was built in Vancouver for *The United Canneries of British Columbia Ltd.*; hence the name *Unican*. The *Terminal Steamship Company* purchased the *SS Unican* in 1906, overhauled the original vessel, added a new passenger cabin, and re-launched the vessel on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1907, as the *SS Belcarra* with Captain Anderson of the steamer *Defiance* in command. Initially, the *SS Belcarra* ran from Vancouver five days a week in the summer and three times a week in the winter, supplying the lumber camps and summer cottages of Indian Arm.

## **Fine New Steamer for North Arm Run — "Belcarra" Successfully Launched and Christened Yesterday**

*Vancouver Daily World*, Tuesday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1907.

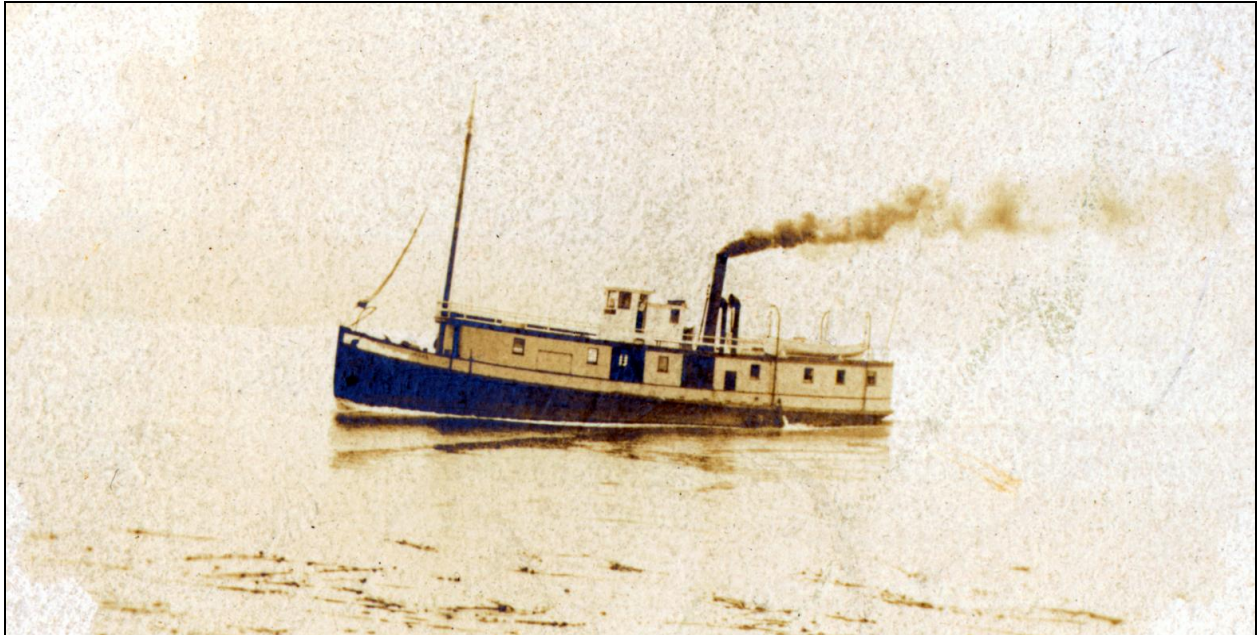
The *Terminal Steamship Company*, of Vancouver, now possesses a fleet of three trim steamers. The third addition to the local line was made last night when the steamer *Belcarra* was launched from the shipbuilding yard of *George Cates & Company* on False Creek. A large crowd watched the launching of the craft and everything passed off nicely...

The *Belcarra* is the offspring of the freighter *Unican*. [emphasis added] The old hull was thoroughly overhauled before the work of building a new cabin was begun, and the machinery had been left intact with the exception of being overhauled and thoroughly repaired.

Captain J.A. Cates, in having the cabin constructed, adopted the model of the *Britannia* as his pattern. Although much shorter she resembles the larger craft very much and in the dark one might easily be mistaken for the other. Mr. G. Sutherland, who superintended the building of the house on her, was most successful in his efforts.

On the top deck, well forward, is the pilot house and chartroom and behind this is appended four large lifeboats. The passengers' cabin, when finished, will be very cozy and comfortable. In the ladies' apartment there are fourteen comfortable cane-upholstered seats large enough for two, and a high back leather chair at the rear. The floor is covered with a deep red carpet and a small piano has been stationed near the staircase leading to the dining-room below. The men's cabin is further forward and is furnished with twelve double seats something like the kind used in the street cars. The ceilings and walls in both cabins are panelled in white with gold trimmings, and red curtains will be hung on all the windows. The smoking-room, saloon and pursers' office are located further forward, and each will be quite comfortable and attractive when completed. The dining-room, when finished, will also be attractive and a first-class cuisine will be furnished. The steamer throughout will be electric-lighted and steam heated.

The *Terminal Steamship Company* intends to have her ready in a few days. She will be put on the North Arm [Indian Arm] route and will make daily trips from Vancouver. Captain Anderson of the steamer *Defiance* will command the new steamer and Mr. C. Mowat will be chief engineer.



Vancouver Public Library (VPL 71592)

**SS Unican circa 1902 — Predecessor of the SS Belcarra**

— Advertisement —

**Terminal Steamship Company Limited**

Vancouver Province, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1907

*S.S. Belcarra* — The cheapest and coolest trip out of Vancouver on the *S.S. Belcarra* up the North Arm [Indian Arm]; 50 cents round trip. Boat leaves *Evans, Coleman & Evans'* wharf every morning at 9:15 a.m., returning about 6:30 p.m. Sunday boat leaves at 2 p.m.

In January 1908 the *SS Belcarra* began to serve Indian Arm as a *Travelling Post Office* (TPO). Although a general belief has existed that this TPO was the first in the British Empire, in fact it was not even the first in British Columbia. Several steamers acting as post offices, with their own postmarks, travelled BC waters from the 1880s on. Captain John A. Cates was the official postmaster from January 1908 until February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1910. The *Terminal Steamship Company* sold the *SS Belcarra* to the *Sechelt Steamship Company* in January 1910.

**Floating Post Office for the North Arm**

*Vancouver Daily World*, Wednesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1907, page 11.

After the first of the New Year the North Arm [Indian Arm] of Burrard Inlet will have a mail service all by its lonesome and this will be the first mail service of its kind in Canada. Commencing with January 1<sup>st</sup>, the steamer *Belcarra*, which now operates to points on the Arm, will be commissioned as a mail boat, giving a full post office service, and will make the trip three times a week.

The *Belcarra* gives a passenger and freight service daily, but on days to be appointed will have the post office in working order, with the captain as postmaster and the purser as assistant postmaster.

Twenty-two points including *Barnet* will be accommodated. At some of the points the boat will only call when flagged, or at any unnamed point where it is possible to effect a landing. Post office orders will be issued, registered letters delivered, stamps sold, letters received and delivered, and the boat will be a regular floating post office.

## Terminal Steamship Company

It was the colourful Captain John Andrew (Jack) Cates (1866–1942) who first opened-up Bowen Island as a resort for the day excursionist. He started by purchasing the 320 acre Mannion estate, also known as the *Mannion Ranch*, on Bowen Island's Deep Bay in 1900. Next, he launched the *Terminal Steamship* ferry fleet in 1902, the new name for his Howe Sound ferry service, and brought new partners into the company and began to enlarge and improve his fleet.

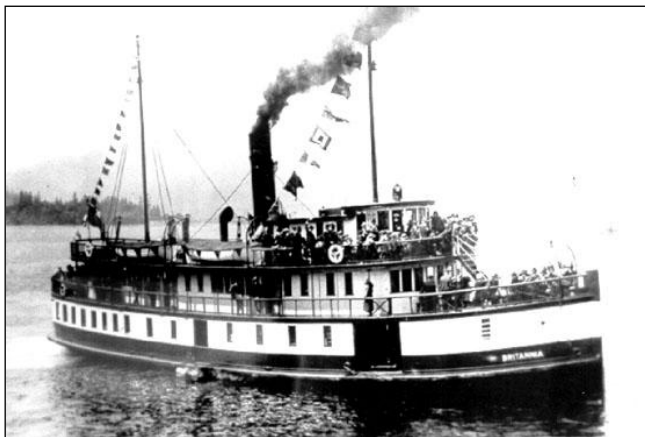
Terminal's flagship was the new 300 passenger *SS Britannia* built in 1902 at the False Creek shipyard of Jack's brother George Cates (*George Cates & Company*). The ship was christened by Jack's sister, Lillian Cates, who was to become manager of the *Terminal Hotel*. Step-by-step the *Terminal Steamship Company* fleet grew to include the *SS Belcarra*, the *SS Baramba*, the *SS Bowena* and the *SS Ballena*. As time went on, Cates bought 520 additional acres on Bowen Island, opened a new *Terminal Hotel*, added a farm and general store, picnic grounds and a dance pavilion.



**Captain J.A. Cates**  
(CVA Port P978)

In 1904 the *Terminal Steamship Company Limited* purchased the 160-acre *Bole Ranch* at *Belcarra* as one of their excursion destinations for the *SS Britannia* and *SS Defiance*. In 1906 the *Bole Ranch* was sold to the *Bidwell Bay and Belcarra Company Limited*, however, the *Terminal Steamship Company* retained the right to use the *Belcarra* wharf and picnic grounds.

In 1908 the *Terminal Steamship Navigation Company Limited* was incorporated with a capital of \$200,000 to take over the business of the *Terminal Steamship Company Limited*. Captain Jack Cates said that the company was reorganized to facilitate potential business growth and the building of new boats.



**SS Britannia – circa 1902**  
(CVA Bo P374)

business. The *SS Defiance* was one of the best known local excursion boats, having been on the North Arm run for the previous seven years. The *SS Defiance* was 90 gross tons, was 62 feet in length with 16 feet beam and 5.4 feet depth. In November 1913 the *North Arm Steamship Company* filed an application for the company's operations to be wound-up.

After some twenty years, Captain Cates sold his thriving resort and company in 1920 to the long established *Union Steamship Company* which ran a "cruise ship" style of ferry service that offered dancing and midnight cruises. The *Union Steamship Company* started making runs with *SS Lady Alexandra*, *SS Lady Cecilia* and *SS Lady Cynthia*.

In 1910 Captain Cates sold his entire interest in the North Arm (Indian Arm) trade, including the *SS Defiance*, to a company known as the *North Arm Steamship Company* in order to focus on his Howe Sound business. In June 1910 the *North Arm Steamship Company* and assets, including the *SS Defiance*, were sold for \$24,500 to the *North Arm Steamship Company* whose principals were Captain Frederick W. Foster (1877–1965), Ronald M. Maitland and Thomas S. Somers. The intention of the new company was to operate the *SS Defiance* along the North Arm (Indian Arm) route in the general freight and excursion



**Captain F.W. Foster**  
(CVA Port P1293.1)



City of Vancouver Archives (CVA Bo P65)

### **SS *Belcarra* in Vancouver Harbour circa 1908**

An inquiry into the loss of the *SS Belcarra* was held in Vancouver on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1910, before Captain C. Eddie, Examiner of Masters and Mates, Port of Vancouver. Captain John Edgar Fulton, Master of the *SS Belcarra*, gave the following testimony:

"I possess a Passenger Master's Certificate, Coasting, No. 33710. I was Master of the *SS Belcarra* on her last trip. We left Vancouver about 3:50 p.m. on the 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1910, bound for Bona Mine, Jervis Inlet, calling at way ports. The ship's draft was 10'3" aft; forward 6'0". I navigated the ship through the narrows, then gave over charge to the Mate [John Robertson]. The Mate made the landings at Cowan's Point, Tunstall Bay, Grantham's and Gibson's. I was asleep while those landings were being made."

"The next landing was at Sechelt but the Mate called me, according to orders, before getting there. It was then foggy and rather smokey. [There were forest fires burning in the vicinity.]"

"I, myself, made the landing at Sechelt, and afterwards retained charge until the vessel struck. I always retain charge when the weather is thick. I told the Mate to go and turn-in and go to sleep."

"I called into Secret Cove and Pender Harbour, the fog then being only slight. It was not necessary to blow the whistle."

"We left Pender Harbour at 2:15 a.m. on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> September. About 10 minutes after leaving Pender Harbour it came on very thick. I had, however, a good departure from Norman Point. I could not take a bearing of it even if I wished to because the compass was in the Pilot House and the line of vision obstructed, the Point being abaft the beam when I saw it."

"I navigated by the echo from the whistle which I keep going all the time. I kept nearer to the eastern side of the channel than the western. I had a man on the lookout, named McDonald. I could not see the land at all, only went by the echo and time; engines going full speed. The tide was against me."

"I ran my time for Dempsey's Camp [on Jervis Inlet], having taken my bearing from Norman Point. From Norman Point to Dempsey's I allowed 50 minutes. ['Full Speed' for the SS *Belcarra* was 7 knots, therefore a '50-minute run' was about 6.7 miles (10.7 km) heading north from Norman Point into Jervis Inlet.] I then stopped the engines and kept blowing long blasts on the whistle to wake them up in the camp. In about 3 to 5 minutes after stopping a light was shown on the starboard beam. I then ran full speed ahead and put my helm hard aport to turn the ship round. While on the spring to starboard the first I saw of the land was made visible by the light showing through the cargo door on the rocks and bushes. I sprang to the telegraph and stopped her just as she struck [it was about 4:00 a.m.]. The impact was severe, so much so, the ship made much water, then the Engineer said that he could not keep her free and the water was gaining. I kept the engines going slow ahead and got the boats out in order to land the passengers. [Testimony stated that 18 to 20 passengers were onboard.] I then ran the following lines out — forward 5½" manilla, also ½" wire rope, and hove them tight; aft, leading forward, a new 4½" manilla line; all these were made fast to separate trees. I could not put out my chain cable owing to conditions at the time. I then proceeded to save my cargo and ships fittings. At 9:00 a.m., or thereabouts, the lines parted and the ship slipped into deep water and disappeared. I endeavoured to locate the vessel but failed to do so with the means at my disposal. The water at the time of the accident was smooth."

"When I saw the light at Dempsey's I thought it was on the float, instead of which it was about 200 ft. inland in their cabin. This misled me and was the cause of the accident. I do not drink to excess and was not under the influence of drink when the accident occurred. I had complete confidence in all of my officers."



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**SS *Belcarra* (right) in Vancouver Harbour circa 1907**



Map of the Sunshine Coast showing the location of the SS *Belcarra* shipwreck