

Context:

Gabriola ferry history

Citations:

B. Parker Williams, Gabriola ferry *Eena*, 1955–64, *SHALE* 2, pp.15–20, March 2001.

Copyright restrictions:

Copyright © 2001: Gabriola Historical & Museum Society.

For reproduction permission e-mail: nickdoe@island.net

Errors and omissions:

Date posted:

August 21, 2017.

Gabriola ferry *Eena*, 1955–64

by B. Parker Williams



Frank A. Clapp, Ministry of Transportation & Highways

Background

Scheduled ferry service to Gabriola Island from Nanaimo began in July 1931. Tom and Bill Higgs won the government contract to supply the service, and the vessel they used was the *Atrevida*.¹

The *Atrevida* was 70-ft. long, and had a car-carrying capacity of six. Compare that with today's *Quinsam*, which at 285 ft. is four times longer and has a car-carrying capacity of seventy. The *Atrevida*, like all of the subsequent Gabriola ferries, was built here in BC. Initially, it travelled to Degnen Bay, but this was fairly quickly dropped to shorten the run.

¹ The early days of Gabriola's ferries are described in June Lewis-Harrison, *The People of Gabriola—A History of our Pioneers*, pp.196–218, Gabriola Island BC, 1982. The name *Atrevida* means “bold” or “audacious” and is the name of the corvette used by the Malaspina expedition to the Pacific, 1789–94. The *Atrevida* still runs; it is at Maple Bay.

The *Atrevida* gave sterling service for many years, but on January 15, 1955, its 100-hp engine failed. Two tugs came out from Nanaimo to take the ferry back. It is recorded that a northeast gale made it a rough time for the ten passengers, and one of the three cars almost went overboard when the chocks under its wheels slipped. A number of high-school students from Gabriola were stranded in Nanaimo and did not get home again until the following day. The 37-ft. *Vida II* was brought in as a temporary substitute, but it could carry no cars.²

The *Atrevida* was repaired, but its Gabriola days were over, and in May 1955, the Davis Shipping Co. (Captain Bert Davis), who had been running the service since 1947, introduced the *Eena* to the run. I do not know what “Eena” means; but the usual

² Its wooden hull is now rotting away on the Leeshore property on Protection Island.

explanation the captain gave to the curious was that it was “the name of a beautiful Indian princess of the Salish tribe”.³

The *Eena* had been originally built for the Provincial Government Department of Public Works in 1919 by Yarrows Shipyard in Victoria. For many years, it had been operated by the government on various runs across the Fraser River until a tunnel and bridge made it temporarily redundant and it was relegated to moorings at New Westminster.⁴

The *Eena* was originally powered by two gasoline engines giving it a service speed of 6 knots, but in 1934, it had been re-engined with two Ruston-Hornsby diesel engines of 106 hp each. The new power raised the service speed to 7½ knots. More importantly for the islanders, the *Eena* was 20 feet longer than the *Atrevida* and the car-carrying capacity of the route was bumped up from six to 10–12 cars. The *Eena* was to provide service to the island for the next nine years until it was scrapped in 1964.

Operating the *Eena*

I joined the *Eena* in March 1957 as one of the engineers. The salary was \$300 per month. The ferry was based on the Nanaimo side and the schedule was four returns a day, with an extra late-night trip on Fridays. In the summer, this was increased to five trips daily. In addition to cars and



Author's photograph

The *Eena* at the first Gabriola ferry terminal on the Nanaimo side. It was used from June 1960 until October 1965 when the present-day terminal went into operation.

passengers, we also carried freight on deck. Our main deck freight was groceries for the two stores, Halverson's [where the Boatel is now at Silva Bay] and Page's. This freight was all manhandled by the crew, which at that time consisted of three persons: captain, engineer, and deckhand.

Eena was a “double ender”, that is, it had two propellers at each end. The two at one end were engaged with a clutch while the two at the other end (the front end) were left in neutral and allowed to freewheel. The engines were operated from the engine room in response to telegraph signals from the wheelhouse.⁵

The ferry's rudders were located between the propellers, one at each end. This was NOT a good steering system and the *Eena* was hard to manoeuvre. Also, because of the shape of the underwater hull, which was nearly flat, it had a strong tendency to slide sideways.

³ “Eena” is actually a Chinook word meaning “beaver” EDITOR.

⁴ The Ladner–Woodwards Landing crossing (now the George Massey Tunnel); the Albion–Fort Langley crossing (still in operation); and the Agassiz–Rosedale crossing (now a bridge).

⁵ The *Eena*'s telegraph is on display at the Gabriola Museum. Visitors are allowed to ring the bell.

Trips in the fog were always a trying time. The only navigating equipment aboard was a magnetic compass and a wind-up alarm clock—there was no radio or radar. On the Nanaimo side, we used the CPR dock, which was located where the Beacon high-rise (Cameron Island) is now. The procedure in the fog was to leave the CPR dock and head toward the Gallows Point foghorn on Protection Island. The foghorn was operated by the lighthouse keeper at the point. Once abeam of Gallows Point, it was full speed for about 13 minutes until a whistle echo was picked up from the bluffs on Gabriola. This would get us close enough to pick up the shoreline and follow it into Descanso Bay. This would work fine just so long as there was no other traffic in the area, such as, for example, a tug with a tow headed for the MacMillan Bloedel pulp mill at Harmac, which had started operations in 1950.

The only communication with other vessels in the area when it was foggy was by blowing whistles. Although at full speed, the *Eena* would steer a course acceptably accurately, when it slowed down, as it had to when we met another vessel, it usually took a shear in one direction or the other. This made it difficult for us to determine exactly where we were in the Northumberland Channel. On the return trip to Nanaimo in the fog, the most difficult part was finding the CPR dock after passing Gallows Point. The CPR dock had no navigational aids.

One foggy morning, we departed the Nanaimo CPR dock. Captain John Ovans was skipper and Jim Corfield was on the wheel steering. Jim was having some difficulty getting the vessel settled on a steady course for

Gallows Point; consequently, we were out of position approaching the point. Suddenly, the bow rudder speared the stub of an old piling, a remnant from the old coal dock on Protection Island. The force of the rudder hitting the piling caused the steering wheel to take a spin. One of the spokes of the wheel caught the pocket of the floppy coat Jim was wearing and threw him through the open wheelhouse door where he landed in a heap on the outside deck. As we hurriedly backed clear of the shore, we could see that the bow rudder had been badly damaged. However, we still had the stern rudder in good order, so the bow rudder was disconnected and we then carried on to Gabriola.

For many years, all vehicles were loaded



Author's photograph

The *Eena* crews at the time of the changeover to the *Westwood* in June 1964. From left to right: Henry Spicer (mate), Herb Kittle (deckhand), Clarence Callow (captain), Dave Seefried (engineer), John Ovans (captain), and Al Springett (mate).

and discharged by the side of the vessel. This meant as one drove aboard it was necessary to make a sharp 90-degree turn to get into the fore and aft lanes of the ferry. The local residents became very proficient at this manoeuvre; however, for strangers it was a very intimidating experience. It also limited the size of trucks that could be carried.

In 1957, a new dock was constructed, so it was at least possible to end load on the Gabriola side. However, we still had to side load at the Nanaimo CPR dock. It wasn't until July 1960 that the Gabriola ferry had its own dock built on the Nanaimo side. By this time, the schedule had been increased to six trips daily with two night trips on Fridays.

One situation that gave the ferry crews a real work out was the raising and lowering of the ramps at the Gabriola Terminal. This was done by manually operated chain blocks. The most dreaded time was in the winter when the spring tide range is highest. The Friday night trip usually had to be made at low low-water which meant the ramp had to be laboriously hauled up 10–12 feet to be in position for the next morning's high high-water.

New engines

As mentioned previously, the engines of the *Eena* were a couple of old Ruston-Hornsby diesels. These were massive pieces of cast iron, fitted with huge clutches to engage and disengage the propellers depending on the direction required. The engines were well worn, and parts were no longer available. It became a challenge to keep them running. Finally one afternoon, one engine so badly worn, refused to start. We worked all night trying to nurse it back to life, but to no avail. In the morning, we rushed home for breakfast and right back to do our scheduled

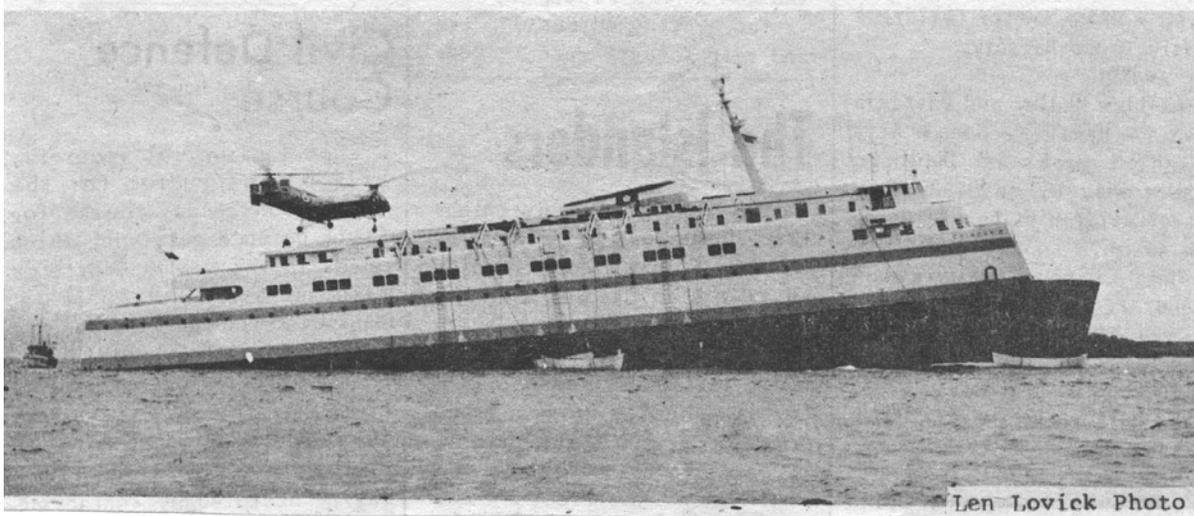
trips on one engine. As the schedule allowed for a break between trips, the extra time needed to make the crossing did not disrupt service too much. During the day, the owner, Captain Bert Davis recognized that new engines were needed. He had been aware that a re-engine job would be necessary one day, but had been putting it off until it was “absolutely necessary”. Now, there was no doubt, it was absolutely necessary. New G.M. 6-71 diesel engines were purchased for immediate delivery.

The first problem to solve was how to fit these new engines to operate both clutches. It was decided to eliminate the propellers on one end and drive the vessel from one end only through the reverse and reduction gear fitted to the new engines. Then the real work of re-engining began. The old engine had to be dismantled and removed in pieces as we were restricted to the size of the door opening into the engine room. Cowie Machine Shop⁶ fabricated a new engine bed. The new engine just barely made it through the engine room entrance with only a half-inch to spare. All this work was done between trips, during trips, and at nights, while maintaining the regular scheduled service. After three weeks of effort, the new engine was started up and put into service.

It was decided to operate the new engine for a month so that it could prove itself before we attempted to install the second new engine. A difficult-to-steer vessel suddenly became much harder to steer. On one side was the old slow-speed engine with its double-end propellers; while on the other side was the new high-speed engine with a single-end propeller.

During this period, all the preparation work was done for the installation of the second

⁶ Located on the waterfront off Wharf Street, about where The Coast Bastion Hotel is now.



The BC Toll Authority and Ferry System (BC Ferries) vessel *Chinook* attempting a short cut across Snake Island in April 1962. The Gabriola ferry *Eena* abandoned its scheduled service to take part in rescue operations. The *Chinook* was floated off on the late-afternoon tide and safely returned to Nanaimo for repairs.

Nanaimo Times, April 4, 1962

new engine. This took only five days from the time the old engine was shut down, dismantled, and removed, and the new engine installed and started up for service. It was a rare accomplishment to re-engine a vessel without cancelling any scheduled sailings even though in the days we did this, only four scheduled trips were made.⁷

Enter BC ferries

In June 1960, the Provincial Government, under the leadership of W.A.C. Bennett, entered the ferry business by establishing the BC Ferries Corporation, called then by the hefty moniker “the BC Toll Authority Ferry System”. Starting with two vessels, one route, and about 200 employees,⁸ it quickly

expanded by purchasing the Black Ball Line and the Gulf Island ferry service based on Saltspring Island. The absorption of the Gabriola–Nanaimo run was inevitable, and in February 1962, the Provincial Government purchased the Gabriola ferry. Once again, the *Eena* came under government ownership, though not as part of BC Ferries, but under the administration of the Department of Highways. It was some years later that the Nanaimo–Gabriola run became an integral part of BC Ferries’ operations.

An interesting episode occurred a few months after we came into government service. The former Black Ball Line ferry *Chinook* had run aground on Snake Island and could not get off. We were called to go to the site and help remove the stranded passengers. The *Eena* still had not been upgraded with navigating equipment, although we did now have a marine radio. Captain Clarence Callow was in command

⁷ ‘twas ever thus; the success of an engineer’s work being judged by how unaware the general public is that anything is happening at all.

EDITOR—an ex-engineer

⁸ BC Ferries currently has about 40 vessels, 46 routes, and 4500 employees.

of the *Eena*, and on the way to the rescue site, fog patches were encountered. Captain Callow radioed the *Chinook* and asked if they could guide us to their location with their radar. The rather testy reply came back that the only reason that they were perched up on Snake Island was that their radar was not working. In spite of this, we did safely locate the *Chinook*, and indeed its bow was firmly high aground. Sixty-eight passengers were taken aboard the *Eena* and other harbour craft and taken back to the Departure Bay Terminal. There, they had to wait eight hours before they got back their cars.⁹

The closing days

Now under government ownership, plans were made by the Superintendent of Ferries to do a major rebuild of the *Eena* to extend its service life. These were to entail a new steel deck—the old wooden deck used to leak quite badly—and a new superstructure. However, shortly after this decision was made, cracks started developing in the underwater part of the hull. A close examination of the hull showed that *Eena*'s condition was too bad to justify such a major rebuild.

The next plan was to start construction of a new vessel for the Nanaimo–Gabriola route. However, shortly after the start of construction, there was yet another change of plans. It was decided that the new ferry would instead be modified to carry more passengers and placed in service on the Britannia Beach–Woodfibre route in Howe Sound. The ferry currently used on that route, the *Garibaldi II* would service Gabriola Island. In early June, 1964, the

Garibaldi II arrived in Nanaimo, was put into the Nanaimo Shipyard, and made ready for service. Later that month, after being re-named *Westwood*, after Earle C. Westwood (a former Nanaimo mayor, MLA, and government minister), Gabriola Island now had a new and improved service.

The *Westwood* was a larger vessel and carried about 18 cars and 125 passengers, as compared to the *Eena*'s 10–12 cars and 60 passengers. The new ferry service was also improved by moving its base from Nanaimo to Gabriola, something that islanders had been requesting ever since the inauguration of ferry service back in 1931.

As for the *Eena*, having made its last run, and at 43 years of age, it was permanently retired. It is interesting to note that during its time it started out under government ownership, then passed to private owners, finally being re-purchased for government ownership. The *Eena* was dismantled. The engines were removed and fitted in the *Rolph Bruhn*, a small ferry that provided supplementary service to Gabriola in the busy summer months. *Eena*'s bare hull was purchased by a fisherman in Nanoose Bay for use as a barge.

The *Eena*'s work was done; it was now the *Westwood*'s turn. The *Westwood* was destined to remain in faithful service to the islanders for another eight years (almost as long as the *Eena*) until it was moved away in 1972 to make way for a succession of ever-bigger vessels—*Kulleet* (1972), *Klatawa* (1972–3), *Kahloke* (1973–7), *Quinitsa* (1977–82), and, for the foreseeable future, *Quinsam* (1982–).¹⁰ ◇

⁹ Not without complaint about the quality of the service since the government take-over I bet. The *Chinook* was eventually floated off on a high tide. EDITOR

¹⁰ Frank A. Clapp, *Inland and Coastal Ferries*, BC Ministry of Transportation and Highways, Victoria 1981 with Addendum April 1986.