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News

WYANDOTTE: Former Boblo boat headed for the Hudson River

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By Jim Kasuba

WYANDOTTE — Since June of 2006 not much has happened with the old Boblo boat Columbia.

But appearances can be deceiving.

Three years ago a New York State-based nonprofit group purchased the steamer for service on the Hudson River.

Today, it still sits at its mooring place at the U.S. Steel dock in Ecorse, looking very much like a ghost ship — a shadow of its former self when it shuttled thousands of passengers back and forth each summer from Detroit to the popular island amusement park during its glory years.

Those who have had occasion to see the boat from the water probably could not perceive any improvements, but things are starting to move, according to Richard Anderson, president of the SS Columbia Project.

“Hull work has been done at Nicholson Terminal & Dock and asbestos abatement is done,” Anderson said. “The third stage is work on the superstructure and that will be done before the winter.”

When asked if he had a timetable for when the century-old boat would be ready for the long trip to New York, Anderson said funding is the key.

“I’ve learned not to predict timelines,” he said. “We want to make sure all the work is done so we are working hard at raising money. We are making progress. We thought it would be a much faster process, but we ran into an economic headwind.”

Sam Buchanan, a Brownstown Township resident who has been the shipkeeper since about 1995, when historian William Worden owned it, continues to keep an eye on the boat in Anderson’s absence.

Buchanan, who is captain of the J.W. Westcott II, has donated his services to the Columbia. He said he views himself as a liaison between the boat and the people in New York City.

The Columbia was built in 1902. Anderson said it combined a spectacular array of design, engineering and aesthetic innovations. At 207 feet long and 60 feet wide, it was designed to carry 3,200 passengers on five decks.

The Columbia and her sister ship, the Ste. Claire, were used for decades to transport visitors down the Detroit River to Boblo Island. The Ste. Claire currently is owned by Ron Kattoo, a Henry Ford Hospital physician, and his business partners. The Ste. Claire is further along in its restoration efforts than the Columbia. Plans call for it to reopen as a

Detroit area attraction within the next couple of years.

Boblo, first opened in 1910, closed permanently in 1993 because of dwindling business. However, the boats were last used as ferries to the island in 1991.

A partially restored Ste. Claire has been open to the public sporadically over the past few years for historical tours and as a Halloween fright attraction, but the Columbia has been pretty much untouched until the SS Columbia Project purchased it.

The Columbia has deteriorated due to exposure to the elements and neglect. One person knowledgeable about the boat said that if work isn't done right away, Columbia's decks risk collapsing upon themselves.

Although some nostalgic fans of the Boblo boats initially expressed disappointment that the Columbia is being taken away from its home in the Detroit area, Anderson believes that most are pleased it is being saved.

In fact, the SS Columbia Project is so confident that people wish the project well, the group is holding a fund-raiser Sept. 19 aboard the M.V. Friendship, docked behind Portofino, 3455 Biddle Ave., Wyandotte.

The restoration and operation of the Columbia is planned in four distinct phases. The first is stabilization of the ship to prevent further weather decay. That is under way now.

Phase II will involve transporting and permanently relocating the ship from Detroit to New York City.

The third phase will be full restoration of the ship's interior and exterior. In the final phase, it will enter into service and operate on the Hudson River and New York Harbor. Tentatively, that's planned for 2011.

According to the group's Web site, an operating Columbia will restore a historic transportation link between New York City and the Hudson River Valley by carrying students and tourists up the river on day trips.

The plan is for the vessel to serve as a floating mobile museum and cultural events venue.

Anderson said that although some people are skeptical about large-scale projects, he's confident that his dream will become a reality.

He's encouraged by a \$750,000 challenge grant that the project received from the state of New York and said enthusiasm for the project is growing.

Anderson finds it difficult to contain his own enthusiasm for a subject matter that has fascinated him since childhood.

"When I was 10 years old I called the maritime museum so much they told me to come in and they would put me to work," he said. "I would take a train or bus so I could volunteer. It's a long-term, passionate interest."

He said the SS Columbia is the oldest surviving passenger steamer in the country and is the best remaining work of one of America's greatest naval architects, Frank Kirby. The boat has recently been designated a Priority 1 Threatened National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.

"The ship's beautiful interiors were created in collaboration with the painter and designer Louis O. Keil, an artist of the Hudson River School," Anderson said. "The ship is adorned with mahogany paneling, etched and leaded glass, gilded moldings, a grand staircase, and an innovative open-air ballroom."

He said Columbia's massive antique 1,200-horsepower, triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine remains onboard in working condition.

The Hudson River Valley is a fitting place to take the Columbia because of its historical ties to steamships.

Anderson said more than 2 million passengers annually traveled the Hudson during the steamboat's heyday. As the automobile gained momentum, recreational travel on the river began to decline.

The last great steamboat, Alexander Hamilton, was retired in 1971, although Hudson River dayliners continued operations until 1987. However, none of the river icons survive.

As the oldest surviving passenger steamer, Anderson said a restored Columbia will carry on the grand tradition. He called the restoration of the Columbia "among the most ambitious maritime preservation projects yet undertaken in the United States."

He said he is grateful for the generosity the people of the Detroit area have shown his group since he purchased the boat. He said they always will be welcome to visit the boat in New York after it is restored.

"We are expecting a wonderful event with Boblo stalwarts," Anderson said about the Sept. 19 fund-raiser on the Detroit River. "This will be a crystallizing event and a great way to celebrate the end of summer."

Joel Stone of the Detroit Historical Society will serve as disc jockey. He has compiled music spanning the years Columbia was in service, from 1902 to 1991.

Anderson is interested in capturing memories Detroiters have of the Columbia. A videographer will be on board the Friendship to document recollections area residents have of the venerable boat.

He also is trying to locate photographs of the boat's interior taken prior to 1939, the year it underwent substantial remodeling.

"We want documentary evidence of her original splendor," Anderson said. "Anyone with photographs, we would love to have that."

For those interested in the Detroit River Cruise, it takes place from 2 to 5 p.m. Sept. 19 and departs from the dock behind Portofino. Be prepared to board by 1:30 p.m. The donation price per person is \$30. Complimentary pizza will be delivered by the J.W. Westcott II mail boat and a cash bar will be available. During the three-hour cruise, passengers will be able to view both the Columbia and the Ste. Claire.

Payment can be made via the Web site www.sscolumbia.org or by check payable to the SS Columbia Project and mailed to: SS Columbia Project, c/o Lori Feret, 1574 Westbrook Drive, Madison Heights, MI 48071-3045. The local contact phone number for tickets is 1-248-546-9712. Space is limited.

Columbia has strong local ties, including the fact that it was built by the Detroit Shipbuilding Co. at its Wyandotte Shipyard (formerly the Wyandotte Shipbuilding Co.).

The shipyard was at the foot of Pine Street. Portofino is on part of the property. Even more coincidental is the fact that the M.V. Friendship's slip at Portofino is the same slip where the Columbia was launched in 1902.

“The Columbia is an amazing relic that has to be saved,” Anderson said. “The fact she is still here at age 107, despite years of neglect, is testimony of her design and workmanship.”

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