

The Empress Line

STRANGELY, THE ORIGINS of the CPR's Empress fleet came about as a result of gold miner Henry Beatty's Tinker Claim at Camerontown in the fabulously rich Cariboo country. After making a small fortune digging gold from the claim, Beatty returned home to Ontario and in 1870 became a partner in his uncle's steamship firm. In 1882 William C. Van Horne purchased controlling interests in the Beatty family's steamships and appointed Beatty manager of Great Lake transportation for the newly formed Canadian Pacific Steamship Company.

In 1887 the CPR began an ocean-going steamship service called the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company by buying a small fleet of three ex-Cunard liners to trade in commodities between Vancouver and Hong Kong. These ships were the *Abyssinia*, *Parthia* and *Batavia*. This new enterprise opened up all kinds of opportunities for trade with the newly created railway company. Later, when the railway company had their own line of ships built in Barrow, England, Beatty supervised their construction and soon the brightly painted "White Empresses" inaugurated a new era for the company.

In 1889 the Canadian Pacific Railway directors signed a ten-year trans-Pacific mail contract with the British government to deliver mail from Halifax to Vancouver by rail and then to Japan and China by ship. This Royal Mail agreement included a clause that the British and

Canadian admiralty had the right to hire the ships at any time to transport military troops at cost. This government contract greatly subsidized the fleet and increased the company's profits.

The *Empress of India* was the first "Empress" to arrive in Vancouver having steamed around the world by way of the Suez Canal, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Nagasaki and Kobe. She arrived in Vancouver on 28 April 1891 with 1,810 tons of tea, silk, rice and opium and 486 passengers. By the end of the year the three Empresses—*India*, *China* and *Japan*—commenced regular, clockwork sailings in and out of Vancouver that opened up new opportunities for the city and the port as the CPR's trade expanded.

The trade in products from the Orient was very profitable for the CPR's Empress fleet. Raw silk from China was landed in Vancouver and then quickly loaded into waiting railway boxcars for transportation on special "silk trains" to textile mills in the Eastern United States. These trains had the right-of-way over any other trains as they sped east across the prairies with the valuable and perishable raw silk destined for Eastern United States textile mills. Armed guards accompanied each train to keep the precious cargo out of the hands of would-be hijackers.

In 1897 the CPR purchased the *Athenian* and *Tartar* ships to capitalize on the Yukon Gold Rush.

At the outbreak of the First World War the CPR's Empresses were requisitioned by the Canadian government for war service to transport troops.

At the end of the war the Empresses were called into service to secretly transport thousands of Chinese "coolies" from Hong Kong to Vancouver to Europe's western front to free up soldiers for front line duty. These men, recruited for the Chinese Labour Corps, upon arrival in the "Saltwater City" were quickly loaded into train cars for transportation across Canada to Halifax.

The ornate sea dragon figurehead of the *Empress of Japan*.



The arrival of the *Empress of India* at the CPR Docks at the foot of Granville Street on 1 September 1891.

Malcolm J. R. Reid, the Vancouver-posted Dominion immigration officer, requested newspapers not report their arrival, and as a result the men marched down the ship's gangplanks, through the immigration building, and immediately boarded locked train cars under armed guard. The twelve cars, called "colonists," on each train had berths for 50 men. A special military unit with Ross rifles guarded the cars to prevent anyone from escaping. Local politicians were fearful that the city's resident Chinese might be upset upon learning of a large movement of their countrymen to assist in the war effort. In total 84,000 Chinese labourers passed through Vancouver to work in Belgium and France

unloading trains, building docks, roads, railways and airfields, and when the war wrapped up, they remained behind to clear the battlefields of unexploded artillery shells and barbed wire. About 1,600 died.

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the CPR placed their ships at the disposal of the navy, and several were used as troop carriers. The fleet broke up in the 1960s with the advent of air travel.

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John M. Horton's painting of the *Empress of Japan* berthed at the CPR docks at the foot of Granville Street. The scene in the northeast show tall-masted lumber ships at Hastings Mill.

