

# The *St. Roch* "Workhorse of the North"

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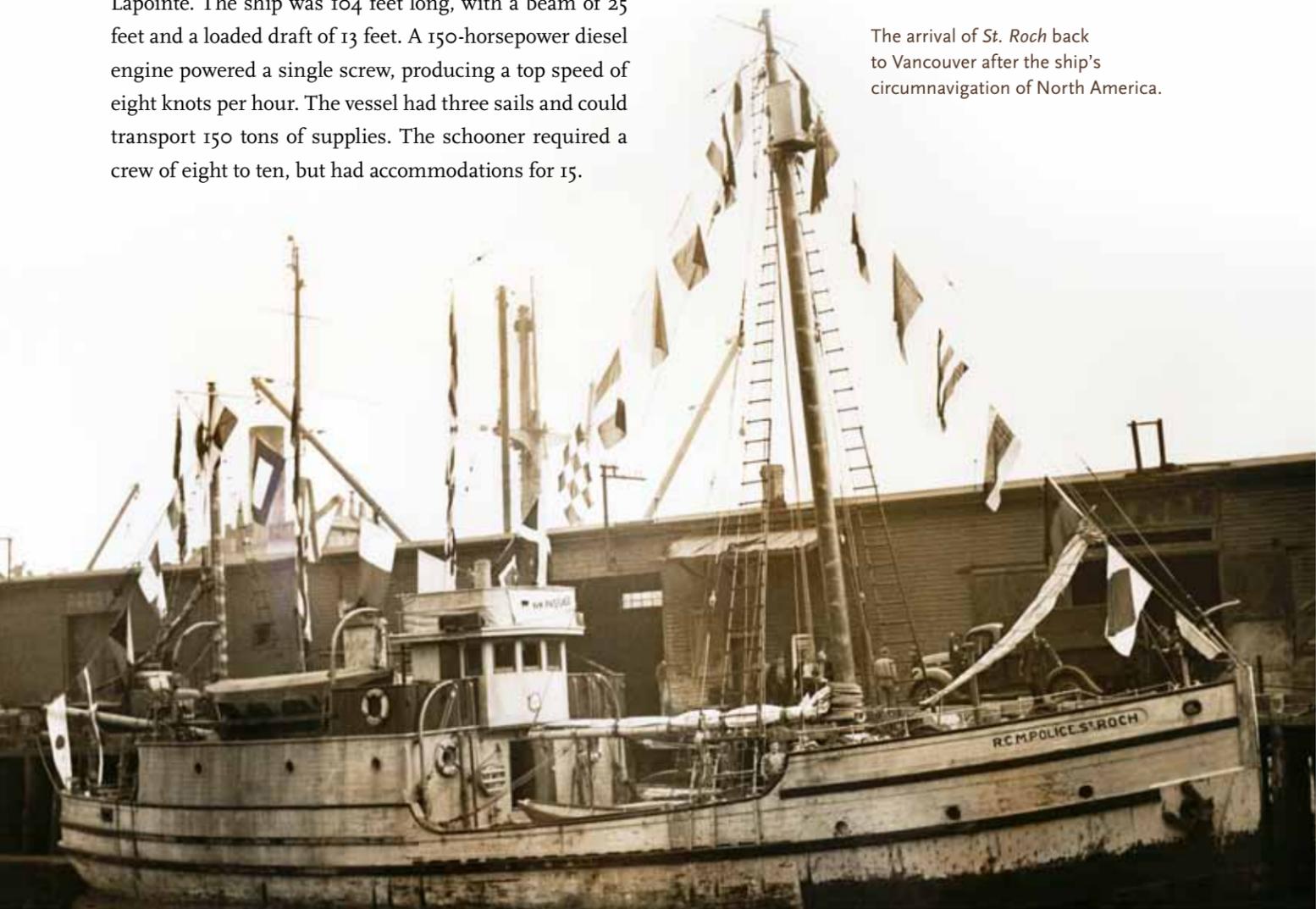
In 1903 the Royal North West Mounted Police established their first two-man detachment in the Arctic to assert Canadian sovereignty and respond to missionary complaints that whalers were debauching the Inuit. By the late 1920s there were seven northern detachments, four of which were in the Western Arctic. Private ships were used to supply these detachments during summer months. Assistant Commissioner Stuart Wood decided it would be more effective if the RCMP had its own supply vessel.

In 1928, at a cost of \$80,000, a specially designed wooden schooner was built in Burrard Ship Yards at the foot of Lonsdale in North Vancouver. It was named *St. Roch* after the Eastern Quebec Parish of Justice Minister Lapointe. The ship was 104 feet long, with a beam of 25 feet and a loaded draft of 13 feet. A 150-horsepower diesel engine powered a single screw, producing a top speed of eight knots per hour. The vessel had three sails and could transport 150 tons of supplies. The schooner required a crew of eight to ten, but had accommodations for 15.

The hull was egg-shaped and sheathed in Australian Iron Bark. It had three huge ice beams to prevent it from being crushed by ice during winter months. Cement was used to fill spaces between decks. This design was effective, but the ship was very unstable in rough seas.

The first Captain was Hugh Gillen, with Constable Henry Asbjorn Larsen as first mate. Larsen was Norwegian-born and had been at sea since he was 15 years of age. While sailing in the Arctic, he was impressed with RCMP members he met. On learning the force was building a vessel to serve in the north, he became a Canadian citizen and joined the RCMP. Because of his skill as a mariner and his knowledge of the Arctic, he was appointed skipper and remained Captain until the ship was taken out of service.

The arrival of *St. Roch* back to Vancouver after the ship's circumnavigation of North America.



The *St. Roch* proved very suitable for life in the Arctic. When frozen in ice during winter months, it became a working detachment. Police officers, using dog teams, conducted patrols, investigated crimes, and settled domestic disputes. They also took census, reported weather conditions, and provided medical treatment for the injured. They enjoyed an excellent relationship with the Inuit, employing many as guides.

In 1939 Sergeant Larsen was directed to sail from Vancouver to Halifax through the Northwest Passage. In 1903 Roald Amundsen sailed the *Gjoa*, a 30-year-old fishing sloop with a three-foot draft through the passage from east to west. The journey took three years. For 250 years prior to that, ships seeking a short route between Europe and Asia had attempted this feat but failed. Some ships were lost and their crews frozen or starved to death.

The *St. Roch* left Vancouver on 23 June 1940, but was only able to travel as far as the west coast of Cambridge Bay in the Arctic before being frozen in for the winter. On 31 July 1941 they finally broke out of the ice and continued eastward until again being ice-bound in Palsey Bay. On 3 August 1942 they managed to break free and arrived in Halifax on 11 October 1942. Although it took over two years, the *St. Roch* was the first vessel to successfully navigate the Northwest Passage from west to east. Members of the crew were awarded the Polar Medal. The *St. Roch* remained in Halifax and was transformed into a Ketch with a bigger and more powerful engine. A wheelhouse and more accommodations were added.

In 1944 the schooner returned to Vancouver in 80 days, using a more northerly route, and continued to supply Arctic detachments until 1948. In 1950 the ship returned to Halifax through the Panama Canal and was the first vessel to circumnavigate North America. The *St. Roch* was de-commissioned in 1954 and became the main feature of the Vancouver Maritime Museum at Kitsilano Point in 1958. The hearty vessel is truly a Canadian icon and Captain Henry Larsen, a Canadian hero.

Right

During 1957 and 1958 the RCMP *St. Roch* vessel came into Sterling Shipyards Ltd. in Vancouver for restoration and a refit to its original 1928 profile. In the course of restoration the crew of specialists removed some of the wood and it became waste material destined for the burner. Fred Bodnaruk, RCMP Staff Sergeant (retired) created several violins from the Burmese teak to commemorate the famous RCMP *St. Roch* and the memory of Henry Larsen, its famous captain. Several violinists played the instruments and were surprised at their tonal quality.



Royal Canadian Mounted Police Sergeant Henry Asbjorn Larsen commanded the *St. Roch* from Vancouver through the Northwest Passage to Halifax and returned to Vancouver between 1941 and 1944. He then circumnavigated from Vancouver south through the Panama Canal, to go for a third time through the Northwest Passage in 1954.

