

SODERBECK'S RIVERDALE FERRY IS FAMILY LEGEND

Robert Soderbeck could entertain his grandchildren for hours telling them stories about the old days.

But, the kids would probably beg, "Tell us the one about the ferryboat again Grandpa."

Soderbeck, an excellent story teller, would again repeat the tale of the Riverdale Ferry, each time including a new adventure just to keep them in suspense.

The story, a true tale of bygone days, begins in 1922 when Soderbeck's father, Mangus A., recognized the need for a ferryboat across the St. Croix River. Many people from Pine City did business in Grantsburg and vice versa.

"The first ferry was built wide enough to carry two Model T cars or a team and a wagon.

In 1927 a larger ferryboat was constructed to hold four vehicles and on two different occasions carried the Ringling Brothers circus across the river.

"Oh, the elephants were much too heavy to ride," Soderbeck would tell the children. "We had to find a shallow spot upstream and wade them across. The Riverdale Ferry looked a little like Noah's Ark as camels, giraffes and other animals were led up the ramp."

Building the ferry was a story in itself.

"We built it upside down," Soderbeck said. "A double layer of boards were nailed both lengthwise and crosswise on stringers. Then we flipped it over and laid the decking. The space between the three layers kept the ferry afloat."

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Hinged aprons on either end were controlled by a connecting cable. They became loading ramps on both sides of the river. Soderbeck also rigged up a device to keep the ferry from being carried downstream by the current.

A heavy cable crossed the river and was anchored on both sides. Located on the up current side, it was controlled by two pulleys.

When one chain was shortened, the ferry would angle and the current would push it across the river. A lighter cable on the downstream side held the ferry on course should there be a strong southwind.

However, operating a ferry service involved much more than mere mechanics.

Mangus Soderbeck had a large family, eight sons and six daughters. The older boys all helped their father in the business.

"Dad had to buy a bond and this obligated him to operate the ferry as a public service," Robert said. "It was also an insurance against accidents on the ferry."

The Riverdale Ferry cost 25 cents a crossing and was open 24 hours a day during the season from May through November.

"We built a cabin, or it was called a Ferry House, at the crossing and took turns operating the ferry Robert recalled.

"I hated to hear a car honk in the middle of the night, especially in late fall when I had to get out of a nice warm bed and go out into the cold to take someone across."

Nevertheless, it was good money in those times.

"One Fourth of July we took in \$40. That's a lot of crossings at 25¢ each," Soderbeck said.

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Spring created special problems for the ferryboat business. All winter loggers further north hauled their cutting to the river where the spring thaw carried the logs south to the lumber mills.

"If those logs hit the ferry from the side it was OK," Soderbeck said, "but if they hit her lengthwise it would cause a leak."

The Soderbeck boys would all be out there fighting the heavy logs with long poles and pushing them out of the path of the ferryboat.

The ferry was also inoperable during springs of extremely high water as the current would be too swift.

The Riverdale Ferry is remembered by many people in the area. Berny Haney said,

"When Ma packed a picnic basket and we spent the day at Soderbeck's Landing it was the highlight of the summer for us."

Soderbeck said, "On the Fourth of July the landing looked like the county fair. People came from everywhere to picnic, ride the ferry, pitch horseshoe and have some good old fashioned fun."

The St. Paul Fly Casting Club also held their annual tournament at the ferry landing and another annual event was a big dance. A large open platform was built of rough boards and a band, including a piano, was brought out from Pine City. The party went on for two days.

In 1942 the Soderbeck family gave up the ferry. It changed hands several times during the next ten years and was abandoned in 1952 when high water ripped out the cables.

The boat itself was floated downstream to operate as the Rush City Ferry for the rest of that summer.

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