

Riverdale ferry is Soderbeck legend

by Donna Heath

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 storyteller, 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 K. recognized the need for a ferry 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 wagon.

In 1927 a larger ferryboat was constructed to hold four vehicles and on two different occasions carried the Ringling Brothers 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 stagers. Then we flipped it over and laid the decking. The space between the three layers kept the ferry afloat."

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 in 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 cents each," Soderbeck said.

Spring created some problems for the ferry business too. All winter loggers up 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 could 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 spent the day at Landing, it was the summer for us.

Soderbeck added Fourth of July the like the county fair from everywhere to the ferry, pitch have fun."

The St. Paul Fly also held their annual at the ferry landing annual event was a large open platform rough boards, a bar piano brought out and the party lasted

In 1942 the Soderbeck gave up the ferry hands several times next ten years abandoned in 1950 water ripped out the

The boat itself downstream to open Rush City Ferry for the summer. When the bridge on Highway converted from a 50 fee it triggered the ferryboat era.



Riverdale ferry in early days.

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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 added, "On the Fourth of July the landing looked like the county fair. People came from everywhere to picnic, ride the ferry, pitch horseshoes, and have fun."

The St. Paul Fly Casting Club also held their annual W. W. W. W. W. W. at the ferry landing and another annual event was a big dance. A large open platform was built of rough boards, a band including a piano brought out from Pine City, and the party lasted 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. When the interstate bridge on Highway 70 was converted from a 50 cent toll to no fee it triggered the end of the ferryboat era.



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