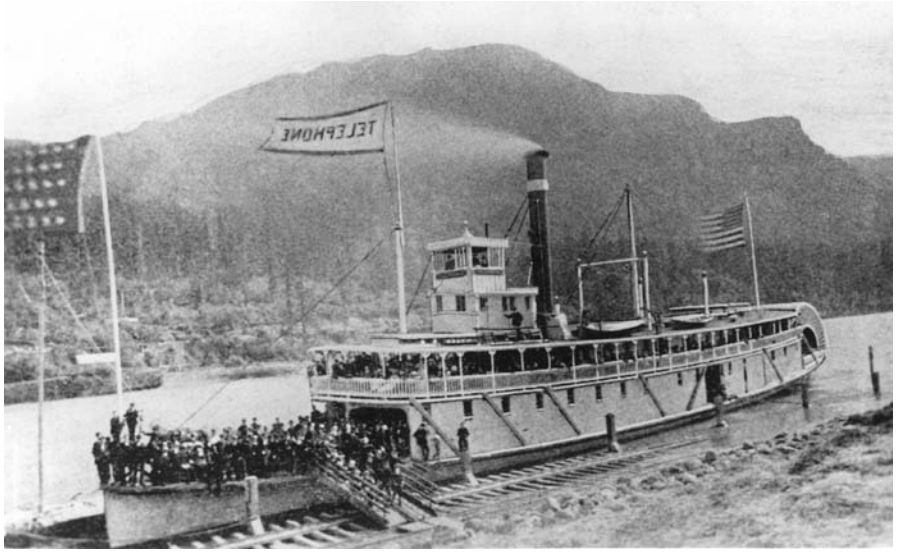
THE FABULOUS TELEPHONE

Jerry Canavit



The steamer TELEPHONE on the Columbia RIver shortly after she was launched in early 1885. Her speed was legendary and she was advertised by her owners as "The World's Fastest Riverboat."

Long ago, when steamboats were plentiful on the waters of this country, and old rivermen gathered for conversation, they often told stories about the legendary fast boats. Many such stories are, today, well documented; the most famous probably being the contest of speed on the Mississippi River in 1870 between the steamers NATCHEZ and ROBT. E. LEE. Each area of the country had its champions. Some were side-wheelers, some were sternwheelers, some were made of wood, others of steel. Some were large, others were relatively small. They all, however, had one thing in common - they were uncommonly fast.

As to which boat was actually the fastest would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Many were capable of making great speed, with or against the current or tidal influences. A good number of them would certainly be candidates for the honor of being "fastest" and each would certainly have their supporters.

One contender for the title of "fastest" would have to be a vessel that ran most of her career on the Columbia River. Accounts of her activity are not plentiful, but more than 75 years after her retirement, local river men still talk about the legendary speed runs of the boat many consider to be the fastest river steamer to ever turn a paddle wheel; that boat was the fabulous TELEPHONE.

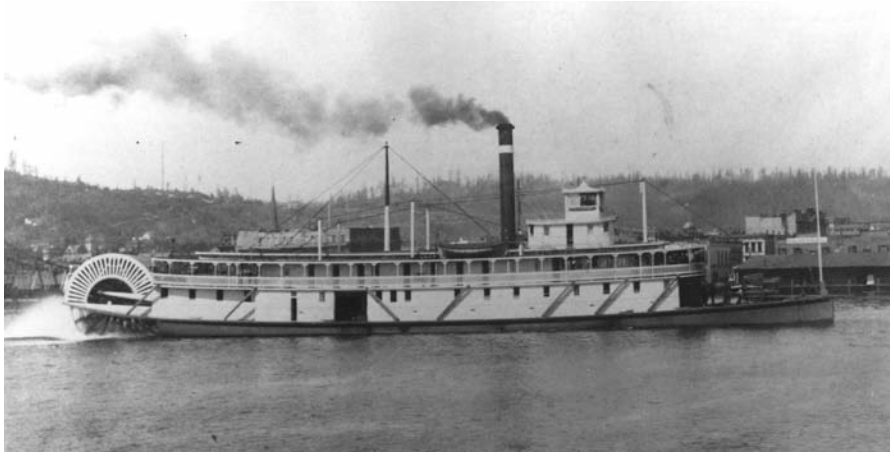
The design of Columbia River steamboats like the TELEPHONE, evolved from traditional hull designs and propulsion systems that had proved their worth on the waterways of the East and of the Mississippi River System. The limitations of these designs metamorphosed into a style of river craft peculiar to the Northwest United States. The majority of these boats were sternwheelers. Some were among the most beautiful craft to grace the waters of any river. Their hull lines were graceful, clean and shallow, and about five times longer than the beam. Aft of the pilot house rose a single stack; a characteristic of this design. A kingpost soared amidships, flanked by at least four hog posts, secured by "hog chains" to keep the supple wooden hull aligned. After 1870, the stern-wheel was often enclosed in a box on which appeared the craft's name and port of registry and also served to keep the water-spray off of the passengers. The main deck foreward was usually open for winches, capstans and cargo. Wood construction was favored, even after steel became available, for wood was cheaper, provided easier upkeep and damage repair was easier. For propulsion, early engineers preferred a high-pressure, non-condensing engine. Cylinder bores varied between ten and twenty-eight inches and the piston stroke was between six and eight feet, rarely more. Locomotive-type boilers were usually used and carried a working pressure of about one-hundred twenty pounds per square-inch.

The TELEPHONE was the creation of Captain Uriah B. Scott, who operated steamboats on the Ohio River from 1859 until 1873, when he came to Oregon. When he arrived in Oregon, he tried to find employment on some of the steamers of the People's Transportation Company and the Oregon Steam Navigation Company. The managers of these companies were skeptical of his abilities and did not employ him. They would soon regret their decision, for Captain Scott, with the aid of a couple of financial backers, went into business for himself. He proceeded to build the steamer OHIO, the first light-

draft steamer in the Northwest. With the OHIO, Captain Scott was able to open up trade on the Willamette River as far south as Eugene, Oregon. Within three months, Captain Scott had cleared over ten thousand dollars and his critics soon became check-waiving backers, fighting for the opportunity to finance his next vessel.

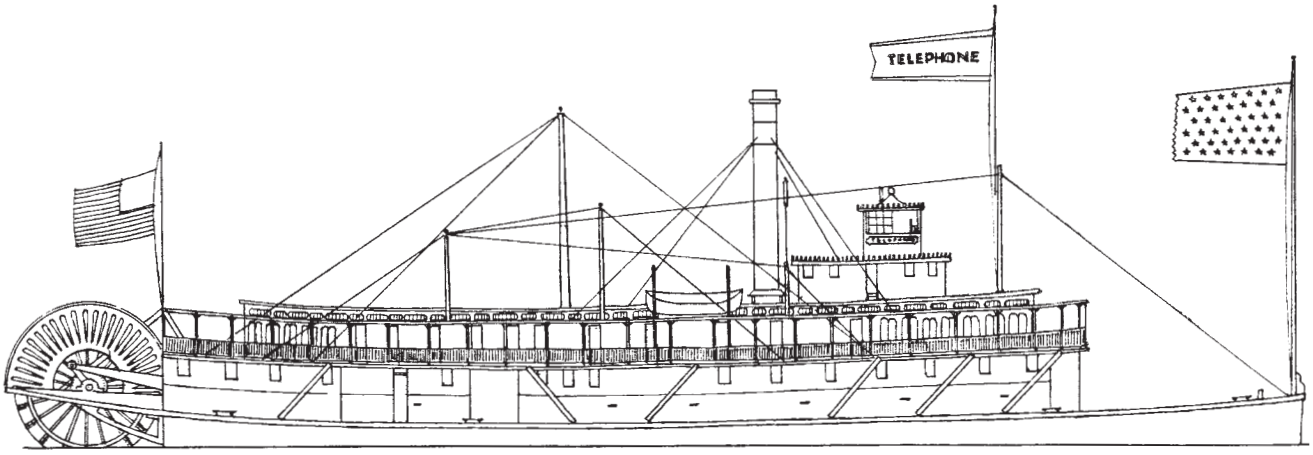
With almost unlimited financial resources available to him, Captain Scott could then afford to build the best steamboats money could buy. He next launched the sternwheel CITY OF SALEM, followed by the FLEETWOOD, a small, fast screw-propeller steamer that cost the local competition more, in terms of lost business than any other boat ever pitted against them. With the great success of the speedy FLEETWOOD, Captain Scott decided he needed a larger and even faster boat; a boat faster than anything on the river. He would personally design the hull, and carefully supervise the construction of this new boat. She would be named the TELEPHONE.

Much was expected of the TELEPHONE, and she certainly was not a disappointment to Captain Scott. The gaudy sternwheeler was built at South Portland at the Smith & Paquet yard by Joseph Paquet, M.C., for Scott's Columbia Transportation Company. She was launched October 30, 1884, however, her trial trip was not run until February 24th of the following year due to Captain Scott's insistence that she be finished out to his complete satisfaction. Her hull measured 172' x 28' x 7.2' with an overall length from her stempost to the end of her paddle box of 198.6'. Her engines were non-condensing, high-pressure steam reciprocating, rated 500 indicated horse-power with 22" cylinders and an eight-foot stroke driving a 25' diameter paddle wheel. Her boiler was a locomotive-type measuring 78" x 25' with a 6-foot smoke box. She was rated at 386 gross tons and cost her owners $45,000 when completed.



The TELEPHONE as she appeared in 1887 after her record breaking dash from Portland to Astoria. She made the 105-mile trip in 4 hours, 34 3/4 minutes, breaking the record of the sidewheeler OLYMPIAN, which had set the pegs at 4 hours, 47 minutes in 1886. The TELEPHONE'S average speed was 22.93 mph.

Indeed the TELEPHONE was a floating palace in the tradition of the steam packets of the 1880's. With her fancy gilding, ornate lattice-work, fine carpets, hand-rubbed wood and twenty elegantly furnished staterooms, she was complete to the last detail. Her reputation, however, came from her speed. In an era of fast riverboats, she had no equal. She was advertised as the "Fastest Riverboat in the World," and her normal running speed was a phenomenal 21 miles-per-hour. When pushed she could exceed 25 miles-per-hour. Whenever she ran she rewrote the record books.



When the TELEPHONE went loping down the river with black smoke streaking from her tall, white-banded smoke stack and her wheel making a thunderous waterfall astern, it was said there was no boat afloat that could catch her.

The TELEPHONE was in her prime when the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company brought the big Eastern-built, walking-beam side-wheeler ALASKAN, and her sister ship, the OLYMPIAN, to the Columbia to run on the Ilwaco route. The ALASKAN ran in opposition to the TELEPHONE, with James Troup, captain, Archie Pease, pilot, and Thomas Smith, engineer. Captain Scott's speedy sternwheeler had attracted a lot of business; some at the expense of the OR & N, and the competition was keen. Whenever the TELEPHONE encountered the big side-wheeler, passengers were treated to some of the finest steamboat races ever witnessed on the Columbia River. Opposition between the two boats became so heated that speed contests between the two boats were of daily occurrence. The TELEPHONE was the faster boat but made many landings which gave her the opportunity to beat the ALASKAN two or three times in the course of the run between Astoria and Portland. The TELEPHONE, with W.H. Whitcomb as master and Newton Scott, chief engineer, was too fast for the big Eastern side-wheeler under most conditions, but Troup and Pease used considerable ingenuity in keeping the TELEPHONE in shallow water, which retarded her movements and provided some close running and exciting

The TELEPHONE leaving Astoria during the fireman's Tournament in June 1885 with about 250 firemen on board. Because of her great speed she was a popular vessel and was booked for many events.

moments. Although both of the big side-wheelers were fast, they were never able to beat the TELEPHONE on the river or to the bank, as they proved to be enormously expensive to operate.

Eventually, the TELEPHONE and Captain Scott proved to be too much for the big O R & N twins, and sent them both seeking business in other waters. Again, Captain Scott had proved his business acumen and shipbuilding skills more than a match for the competition.

In less than two years after she had been launched, her speed had become the talk of the Columbia. Even at her normal running speed, no boat could pace her. In one of her first attempts at speed on the Astoria route, she made the round trip between Portland and Astoria in eleven hours and four minutes. Captain Scott finally decided to see what she would do if pushed and on July 2, 1887, he set out to lower the existing record time between the two cities set back in 1886 by Captain L.A. Bailey on the OLYMPIAN. The OLYMPIAN had made the 105 mile run in four hours and forty seven minutes at an average speed of 21.96 miles-per-hour; a very fast time.

Captain Scott swung the TELEPHONE gracefully out into the stream from the Alder street wharf at exactly 10 a.m. and headed for Astoria on her scheduled run. At exactly 10:05 1/2 she passed F street and a warning toot from her whistle announced that the race against time had begun. She passed St. John's at 10:23 1/2 and at 10:43 she left the sluggish waters of the Willamette and headed out into the lordly Columbia, encountering at once a very strong headwind that increased in power all the way to Astoria. It became quickly evident that Captain Scott could not have picked a day for his speed run when conditions could have been worse. In spite of heading into winds gusting to 40 miles-per-hour and fighting a strong cross-chop, she made St. Helen's at 11:24 1/2, Kalama at 11:54 and Rainier at 12:14. She passed Mt. Coffin at 12:24 1/2, Oak Point at 12:52 1/2 and Cathlamet at 1:27. As she passed Cathlamet, the winds increased to nearly gale-force and negated the effect of the ebb-tide into Astoria that would have certainly increased her speed. She passed Brookfield at 1:57 and as she entered the bay at Astoria, the winds were so strong

and the seas so rough that she snapped one of her hog-chains. She continued across the bay with her huge paddle wheel cascading mountains of water behind her and her sharp bow knifing into rough seas, sending spray as high as her hurricane deck. The excitement among the passengers was intense and everyone's eye was on his watch when the boat flashed past Clatsop Mill at 2:40 1/4, completing the 105 mile trip in 4 hours and 34 3/4 minutes. Before landing she steamed past the city front and rounded to, and came to her dock amidst the blowing of boat and cannery whistles, and the cheers of the crowds who lined the docks. Her average running speed for the entire trip was 22.93 miles-per-hour. Captain Scott was heard to say "They will hammer away at that record for a long time before they will beat it." Her time would never be equaled or bettered by any rival in regular service.

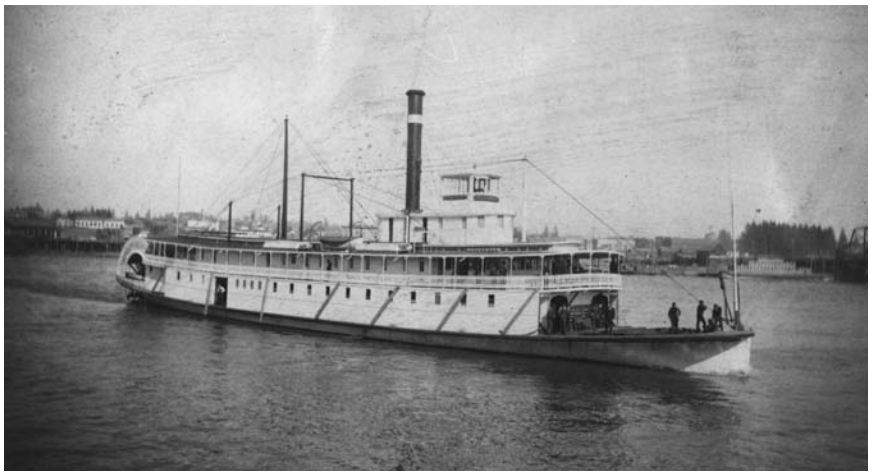
When you search the records of all the rivers in the U.S., the number of vessels that were able to attain this kind of speed can almost be counted on one hand. Along with the ALBANY and MARY POWELL on the Hudson, the PRISCILLA on Long Island Sound, the CHRYSOPOLIS on the Sacramento and the J.M. WHITE III on the Mississippi, the TELEPHONE, indeed, belonged to a very select group. She was the only vessel in this group to be propelled by a stern-wheel; making her, without question, the fastest of her build. The original TELEPHONE was handled by Captains Scott and Whitcomb, with Newton Scott, Perry Scott and Joseph Hayes, chief engineers, and C.R. Barnard, purser.

The launching of the second TELEPHONE at the Johnston & Olson boatyard in Portland on October 30, 1888. The new vessel was almost 30 feet longer than the original vessel and had more powerful engines.

While the TELEPHONE earned a reputation for speed, she also seemed bent on destroying herself, first by fire, then by collision.

On November 20, 1887, she caught fire at the end of her usual speed run to Astoria. She was abreast of the Scandinavian Packing Company when the shout "boat afire" came through the speaking tube. Captain Scott immediately assessed the situation and, understanding the seriousness of the situation, he swung the big boat, quartering when abreast of George & Barkers Cannery, finding a clearing between there and Badolett's and, under a full head of steam, beached the boat well up on the clay bank, just avoiding a large group of logs and piling. Fortunately, the boat ran so far up on the bank that the passengers were all easily able to get ashore. One hundred thirty-nine passengers and a crew of thirty-two escaped the inferno by leaping over the guards to dry land. Captain Scott barely managed to escape by diving through the pilot house window after flames had consumed his escape route. Despite their valiant efforts, the Astoria fire department managed to save only the hull.

Captain Scott then made immediate plans to rebuild the TELEPHONE. Upon hearing of this, the competing Oregon Railway & Navigation Company sent for him and told him not to put his money on a new boat, and if he did, they would "run him off the river." They then offered to make good his loss by the fire, hire him to rebuild the sternwheeler WIDE WEST (to be launched in 1888 as the T.J. POTTER), and then give him command of her. Captain



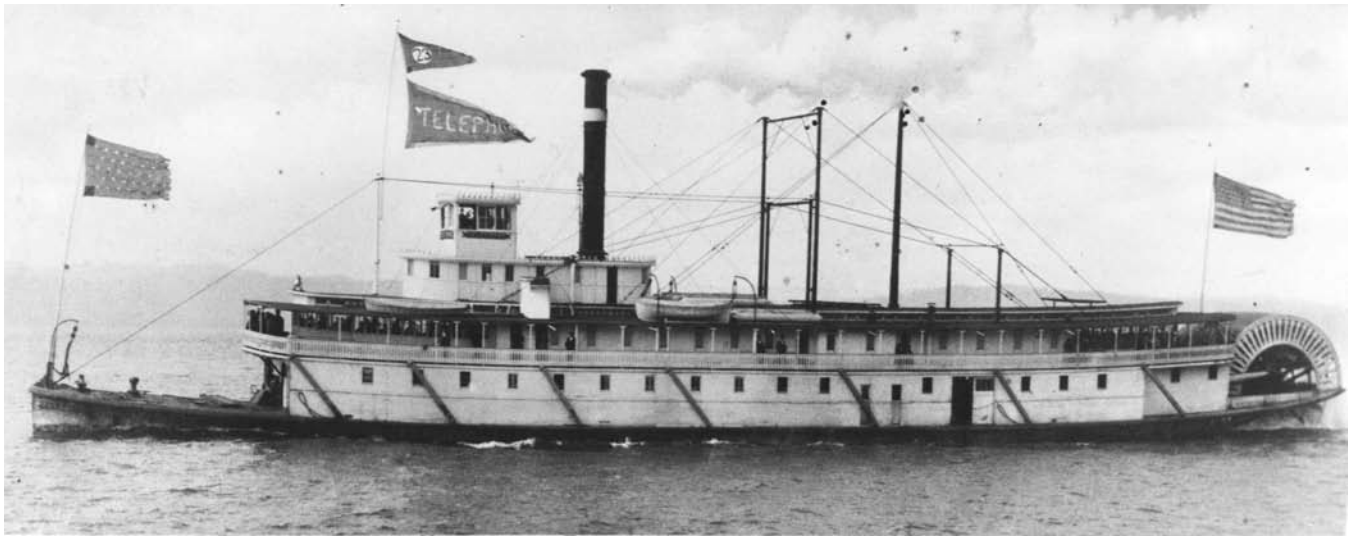
The TELEPHONE shortly after her launching in 1888 from the Johnston & Olson boatyard in Portland.

Scott was interested but could not come to financial terms with the OR & N and, on April 28, 1888, a new TELEPHONE returned to the river, larger, more luxurious and, apparently as fast as ever.

The new TELEPHONE, rebuilt by John H. Johnston at Portland, was practically a new craft. A splice in her old hull lengthened her about thirty feet. Her new dimensions were 200' x 28.3' x 6.8' and she was rated at 500 gross tons. New high-pressure, non-condensing engines with 25-inch cylinders and an 8-foot stroke increased her horse-power to 1500. Steam was supplied by a larger locomotive-type boiler measuring 78-inches in diameter and 32.5 feet in length. On her trial trip to Astoria on May 19, 1888, Captain Thomas H. Crang showed that the new TELEPHONE was very nearly the equal of the old as the original running time was easily maintained.

On January 5, 1892, while heading out from Astoria to Portland, she struck the old Government revetment while running in the fog on the Columbia River. Veteran pilot William Larkins was unable to see the Government light on the revetment and, while looking for it, drifted too close in, so that when she started ahead she piled up on the obstruction and began to fill. The collision tore a large hole in the starboard bow and she sank until only her bow remained out of the water. Life boats were lowered in the early a.m. fog and all passengers were safely taken off the TELEPHONE to Coon Island. While the boat was almost totally submerged for about a week, she hung to the breakwater and was pumped-out, raised and patched, suffering very little damage.

Although it is generally agreed that the TELEPHONE was the fastest boat to run the Columbia, there were a few other boats in the same class for speed. The steamer HASSALO (the third to bear this name) was one of these boats. The HASSALO was slightly larger than the original TELEPHONE, measuring 181.3' x 36.8' x 8.4' and rated 679 gross tons. She was built at Portland in 1899 by Peter Carstens at the direction of A.L. Mohler of the Union Pacific Railroad. Mohler was fond of steamboats and one of his first innovations after coming to



The TELEPHONE in 1894 running at high-speed on her daily run to Astoria. Her average running speed was 21 miles-per-hour and she was capable of exceeding 25 miles-per-hour when pushed. She never turned down the opportunity to race and in over 33 years of running, she was never passed by another boat.

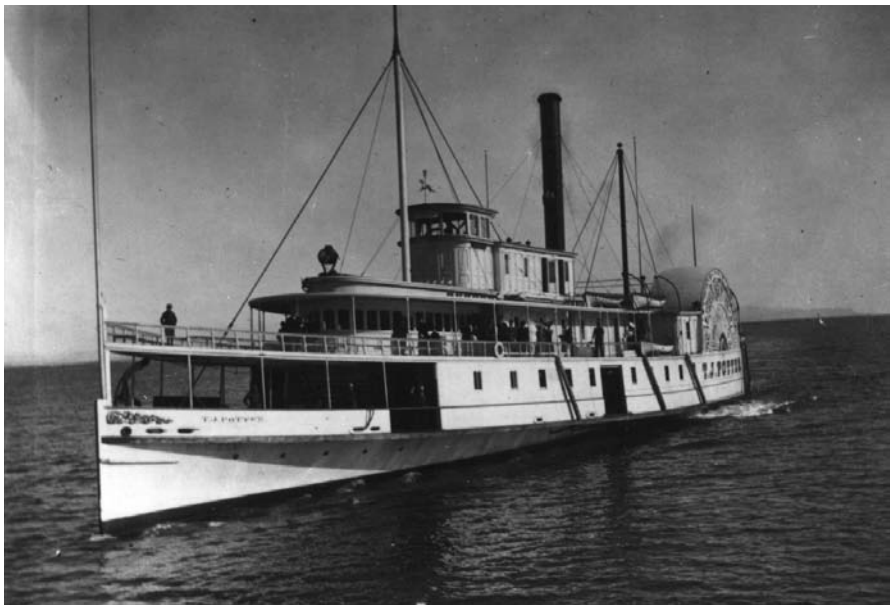
Portland was to order the construction of a stern-wheeler which he intended should be the fastest of her type afloat. The HASSALO was equipped with immense tandem-compound engines with high-pressure cylinders of 22.5" and low-pressure cylinders of 38.75", generating 1,600 horsepower with a 98" stroke. These were the first engines of this type to be installed in a Columbia River stern-wheeler. When launched, on April 20, 1899, she was said to have made over 21 miles-per-hour on her test run on the quiet water of the Willamette Slough. After carefully being groomed for a speed test the HASSALO actually succeeded in lowering the time made by the original TELEPHONE on her record breaking trip. She negotiated the distance between the two cities in four hours and twenty-two and 3/4 minutes, bettering the TELEPHONE'S time by 12 minutes. The conditions under which the two records were made were so different however, that the TELEPHONE was still considered by many rivermen to be the faster boat. A comparison of the two trips tends to support this view.

On June 18, 1899, the HASSALO with picked fuel and her hull reportedly stripped of all superfluous weight, left Portland in an attempt to better the TELEPHONE'S twelve-year-old record. In addition to her early departure she carried no freight or commercial passengers - only the normal crew and a few OR & N dignitaries were along for the record attempt. The HASSALO'S early start arguably gave her an advantage with the morning headwinds - although she, like the TELEPHONE, encountered a lot of wind. The TELEPHONE'S run was made on her regular schedule with a load of freight and two-hundred passengers on board. Captain Scott stated that no special preparations were made and that only regular fuel was used. The weather conditions for the TELEPHONE'S trip were described as poor - starting out with moderate to strong headwinds and increasing in power all the way into Astoria. The wind became so strong that the TELEPHONE actually snapped one of her hog-chains as she was crossing the bay into Astoria. The HASSALO'S time from Portland to Brookfield was faster than the TELEPHONE'S, but from Brookfield to Astoria, where the TELEPHONE encountered near gale-force winds, the TELEPHONE'S time was slightly faster than the HASSALO'S. On the 13-mile stretch between Kalama and Mt. Coffin, where weather was less of a factor, the TELEPHONE averaged over 25 miles-per-hour.

The OR & N steamer HASSALO was the first boat on the Columbia to have tandem-compound engines. In 1899 she ran the 105 miles from Portland to Astoria in 4 hours, 22 3/4 minutes, averaging 23.80 mph.

Another formidable challenger was the T.J. POTTER. The POTTER was a side-wheeler, 230 feet in length, 35 feet of beam and rated at 659 gross tons. She was built using the engine and upper works from the stern-wheel steamer WIDE WEST. Captain James W. Troup designed her based roughly on the design of the Hudson River steamer DANIEL DREW, but she showed her own individuality of design. There were no heavy hog trusses arching over her hurricane deck and no bulky boilers on the guards. She was built by John F. Steffen at Portland for the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company and was launched on May 22, 1888. There was no denying that the POTTER was a beautiful boat. Her ornate lattice-work paddle boxes and slim racing hull made her something to behold as she gracefully swept down the Columbia. With her 1200 horse-power engines, she was fast, too. She had returned from Puget Sound in 1891 with speed trophies on her pilot house after having bested the fastest boats there. She was touted as the fastest side-wheeler in the Northwest, but she had not yet had the opportunity to test the TELEPHONE.

An old account exists of the two boats "almost" racing on a hot, sultry Saturday in August of 1895. The T.J. POTTER was wait-



The beautiful sidewheel steamer T.J. POTTER ran on the Columbia River and on Puget Sound. She sported speed trophies on the roof of her pilot house in the form of a gilded Dog and Broom. Launched in 1888 at Portland, she was one of the fastest and most luxurious vessels in the Pacific Northwest.

ing at her dock, her wheels idling, her stack showing a streamer of smoke; passengers came aboard early and clustered along the rail watching the TELEPHONE, docked, on a rare occasion, next to her. The TELEPHONE was scheduled to pull out at one o'clock - the same time the POTTER was scheduled to leave. On the deck firemen stacked bolts of wood, carefully selected and set aside for just such an occasion. The engineer on the POTTER waited eagerly for the whistle to come through the speaking tube and for the pilot to give the order to pull out. On the TELEPHONE the same things were happening, and her passengers crowded the rail to watch the T.J. POTTER. In the pilot house the minute hand of the clock moved closer and closer to the hour; imperceptibly the paddle wheels began to turn to get the engine rhythm established for a quick start. At a few seconds before the hour, both the POTTER and the TELEPHONE whistled the bridge for an open draw. Everyone anticipated a race all the way down the river. Downstream, the tender on the Burnside Bridge dropped his barrier and swung his span open, ready for the race. Almost at once the TELEPHONE's 25-foot paddle wheel churned into the water and the boat shot into the stream. As the story goes, the possibility of a race was halted by the appearance of a Major O'Neill on board the POTTER, who had decided, at the last minute, to take the POTTER down river. Not only was Major O'Neill the receiver for the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company (the owners of the POTTER), but, it was known that he strictly forbade any kind of racing activity on his boats. With studied calm the Major came aboard, just late enough to see the stern of the TELEPHONE disappear beyond the draw, much to the chagrin of everyone aboard. The T.J. POTTER went down the river that day in sober dignity with her reputation for speed still intact. The appearance of Major O'Neill that day was probably the POTTER's good fortune, as she would eventually lose her speed trophies to the phenomenal sternwheeler.

The TELEPHONE continued regular service on this run, year after year, racing every challenger that questioned her speed, showing her heels to everything on the river; defeating the likes of such greyhounds as the T.J. POTTER, HASSALO and CHAS. R. SPENCER. During this time she was captained by Thomas Crang and W.H. Larkins, with C.W. Evans and Joe Hayes in the engine room.

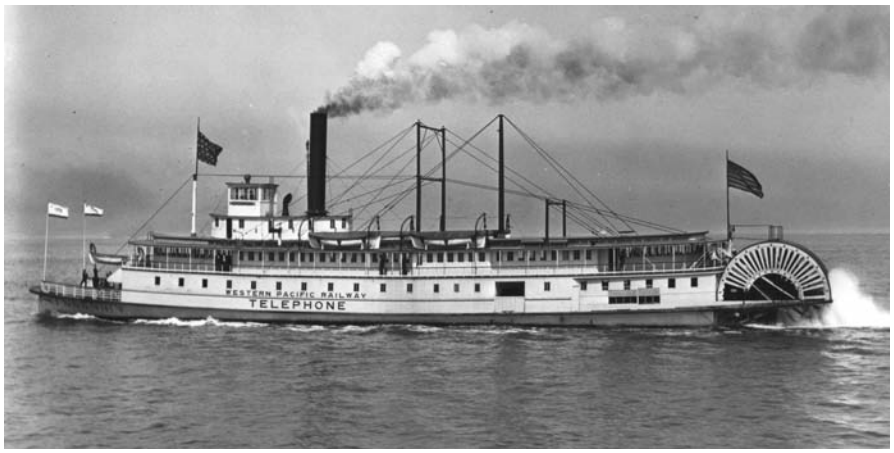
The TELEPHONE after her 1903 rebuilding by James Cochrane. She ran Portland to Astoria and Portland to the Dalles until 1908 when she was purchased again by Captain Uriah B. Scott.

By 1903, she was practically worn out and was retired by Captain Scott badly in need of repair. She was sold late in 1903 to Captain James Cochrane of the Arrow Navigation Company where she was rebuilt again by Joseph Paquet - given new engines: 26" x 96", a new hull and boiler, while retaining some of her old superstructure, pilot house, and paddle wheel. Her new dimensions were 201.5' x 31.5' x 8' and she was rated at 794 gross tons.

Arrow Navigation eventually went broke and the boat reverted to Captain Scott. On September 18, 1905, Captain Scott sold the TELEPHONE to Mr. J. H. Middleton in Portland and was chartered to the Regulator Line for service from Portland to The Dalles with E.W. Baughman serving as master. During the period from 1904 to 1908, her home port was listed as Seattle, Washington (she probably ran the Portland to The Dalles run from 1905 to 1907 and then, sometime in 1907, reportedly received new engines [size and make unknown] , giving her original ones, along with her melodious "chime" whistle, to the BAILEY GATZERT when the Seattle-built sternwheeler received her new, longer hull.) Her activity after being re-engined is not well documented, but it is noted that during 1908-09, her home port was listed in SR & E, Portland as Portland instead of Seattle. Sometime during this period (probably in 1908), Captain Scott again became her owner.

When the Western Pacific Railway needed a fast passenger ferry to run between Oakland and San Francisco, they went looking for a fast riverboat to purchase and convert to that use. After combing the waters of the Northwest, their selection was narrowed to two Columbia River boats, both built for and owned by Captain U.B. Scott; the TELEGRAPH and the TELEPHONE. After considerable negotiations, a satisfactory agreement for the purchase of the TELEPHONE was arranged, together with the risky delivery of the vessel. The Western Pacific agents were eventually able to get together a crew that was willing to bring the vessel from Portland to San Francisco. She was sold to Western Pacific on July 15, 1909 for $24,500, was boarded-up, and taken under her own steam to Astoria, then towed down the coast to San Francisco by the steam schooner YOSEMITE with the TELEPHONE helping with her own engines. She survived the rugged trip down the coast and, on September 9, 1909, steamed in through the Golden Gate intact, much to the joy of Western Pacific. WP spent $42,200 to remodel her for ferry service on San Francisco Bay, removing all her staterooms and converting her to oil burning. The rebuild reduced her measurement to 632 gross tons. With Capt. M.A. Graham in command, she arrived on the Bay like a conquering hero looking for all comers in speed runs. Decked out in orange paint, she carried her first load of 600 passengers on August 22, 1910, averaging just over 19 miles-per-hour on her trial run across the Bay. This was nearly two miles-per-hour faster than any other commercial vessel operating on the Bay at that time.

As on the Columbia, no San Francisco Bay rival could touch the TELEPHONE for speed. Although at a distinct disadvantage because of her single-ended-ness, forcing her to back out of her Oakland dock and swing her long slender length around before heading for her San Francisco berth, she'd often be quite a distance behind the Southern Pacific double-end ferry who had a quicker get away. However, once her big orange paddle wheel began churning-up the Bay waters and she hit her full racing stride, she'd close on her rival like a thoroughbred overtaking a nag and would be tied up and discharging her passengers well before her



The TELEPHONE was purchased by the Western Pacific Railroad in 1909 and ran as a passenger ferry between San Francisco and Oakland. She could carry 600 passengers and was the fastest commercial vessel on the bay until her retirement in 1918.

The hulk of the TELEPHONE at the Oakland Estuary boneyard in 1919.

opponent would be approaching the San Francisco slip.

Despite her speed, her limitations as a ferry soon became obvious. She was the last of the riverboats in San Francisco Bay ferry service, but what she had in speed was not sufficient to overcome the disadvantages of a riverboat on a bay, and with the amount of traffic on the Bay increasing, her backing out was becoming a hazard to navigation. Finally, Western Pacific committed to building a more "appropriate" vessel and, in 1913, she was replaced with a new, larger double-ended ferry, the EDWARD T. JEFFERY. The JEFFERY slid down the ways at the Moore & Scott Iron Works on July 19, painted Tuscan red and sporting the "Feather River Route" emblem on her stack. A relatively small craft for a double-ender, she was 218 feet long, had a 42 foot beam and was rated 1,578 gross tons.

The JEFFERY, with her new 2500 horsepower, four-cylinder, double-compound engines, was almost as fast as the TELEPHONE and sort of assumed the Bay speed title, as the TELEPHONE was retired to relative inactivity until June 30, 1917, when she surrendered her license.

She was officially retired on December 31, 1917 and dismantled in early 1918 and her boilers were hauled to Portola, CA and set up as stationery power at the WP Roundhouse. When the roundhouse was torn down, the boilers were used in the diesel house to supply steam to the WP Hospital. The wheel from the pilothouse is currently on display at the Sacramento City-County Museum.

Although the junkyard got the TELEPHONE in 1918, no competitor ever got her speed trophy as, in her 33 years, she was never beaten in a race and maintained her high-speed running and her reputation as the World's Fastest Riverboat (and ferry) until the very end.

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