

The Magnificent T.J. POTTER

Jerry Canavit

When the splendid sternwheel steam packet WIDE WEST was retired in 1887, the talented and versatile Captain James W. Troup of the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company began work on a boat which would prove to be the finest and fastest sidewheel steamer in the Northwest. Construction on the new boat, named for the late Thomas J. Potter, first vice-president in charge of the Union Pacific's railway operations in the West, began based on designs drawn up by Captain Troup that were greatly influenced by the Hudson River steamer DANIEL DREW. The new design had none of the massive hog braces or stolid boilers on the guards found on the Hudson River boats. The POTTER would be a picture

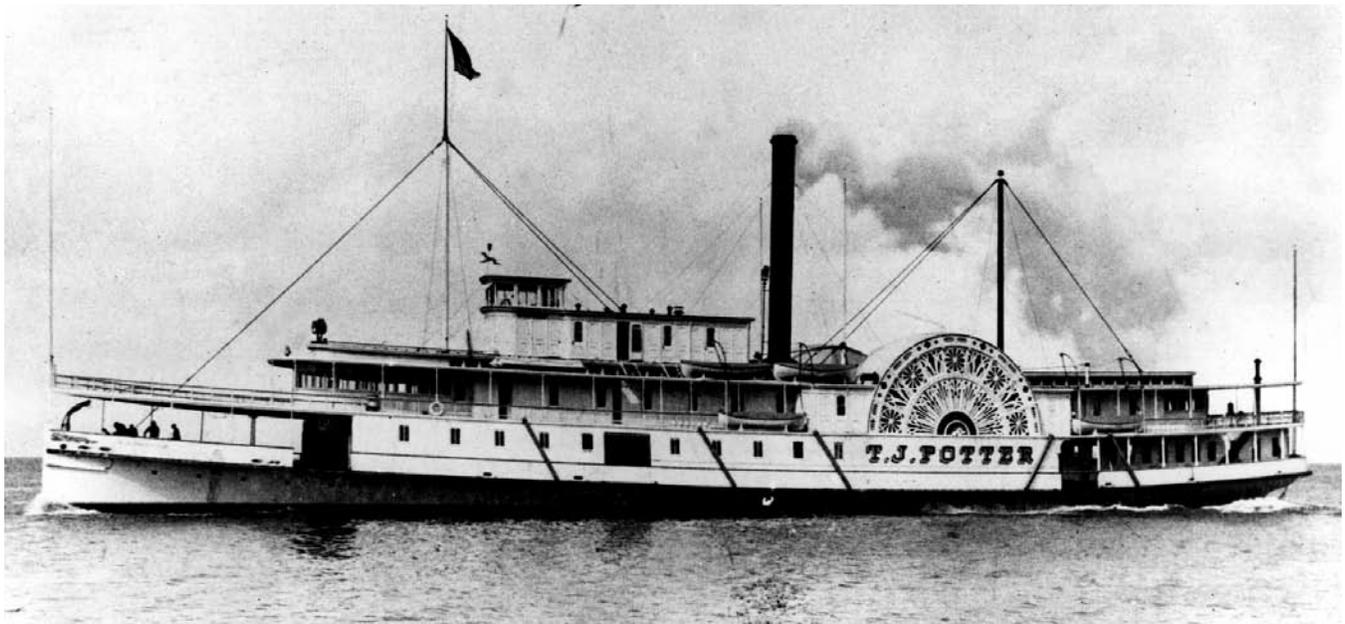
of beauty with clean, unbroken lines; graceful and elegant from her stempost to her rudder.

The house and upperworks were transferred from the WIDE WEST practically intact and placed on a new, slim racing hull designed by Captain Troup and built by John B. Steffen in Portland. Only slight modifications were necessary to accommodate the large, ornate paddleboxes that would enclose her big thirty-foot paddlewheels. Her simple high-pressure engines, with twenty-eight-inch cylinders and eight-foot stroke, also from the WIDE WEST, were built at Wilmington, Delaware and were rated at 1200 horsepower. New cylinders were required and were cast at the Willamette Iron Works. Her large locomotive-type boiler (84" x 32'), built by the Pusey & Jones Co., Wilmington, Delaware, provided steam at 150 pounds of pressure and was fueled by a huge wood-burning firebox; the largest on any river steamer in the Northwest. When she was

launched at the North Yard in Portland on May 29, 1888, she was complete to the last detail. Her hull measured 230' x 35.1' x 10.6' and she was rated at 659 gross tons.(589.60 net tons).

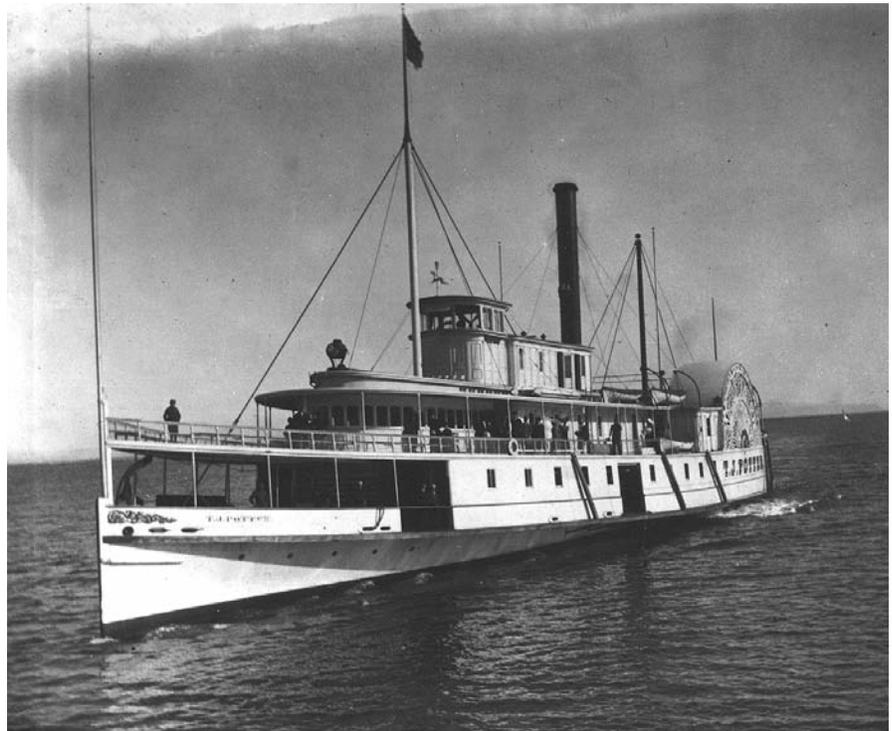
She was a gaudy boat, from her fine Wilton carpets to her ornate fretwork paddleboxes that resembled giant doilies. From her lower deck to the grand saloon rose a magnificent curved divided staircase. At the head of the stairs hung the largest mirror in the whole North-west. In the saloon was a grand piano, ornately carved in a case of birds-eye maple. In the dining room smaller tables seating families took the place of the long common table of earlier boats. Dark wood paneling and beams accented the large room and set off her exquisite settings of silver. Her cooks were excellent and her fine meals were reported to be a culinary delight. There were thirty elegantly furnished staterooms on the salon deck and at the rear of the main deck was the spacious

The beautiful sidewheel T.J. POTTER was designed by Capt. James W. Troup and launched on May 9, 1888 in Portland. Her machinery and upper-works came from the famous Columbia River sternwheeler WIDE WEST. She was considered to be the finest and fastest sidewheel packet in the Northwest. Her dining room and bar were as legendary as her speed and she set the standard for all vessels in the West and rivaled the finest boats in the East



dining room seating one-hundred persons. Broad decks extended fore and aft for casual promenades and comfortable watch of the passing river. Her wonderful bar, with its fine glass and skilled and tactful bartenders, was said to have outshone any other bar in the whole country. The best brandy, whiskey, wines, the best cigars, the best mixed drinks and cocktails came across the towel-wiped mahogany of the T.J. POTTER.

After her launching, she spent her first season on the seaside route, running Portland to Ilwaco, in charge of Captain Archie L. Pease, with Edward Sullivan as pilot; Thomas Smith, chief engineer; Phil Carnes, assistant and Daniel O'Neil, purser. In August, 1888 she made the run from Portland to Astoria, 106 miles, in 5 hours and 31 minutes. In September of 1888 she was taken to Puget Sound for service between Seattle and Olympia; Captain Pease, Engineer Smith and Steward Charles Petrie going with her. In 1889 she returned again to the Columbia River when the seaside

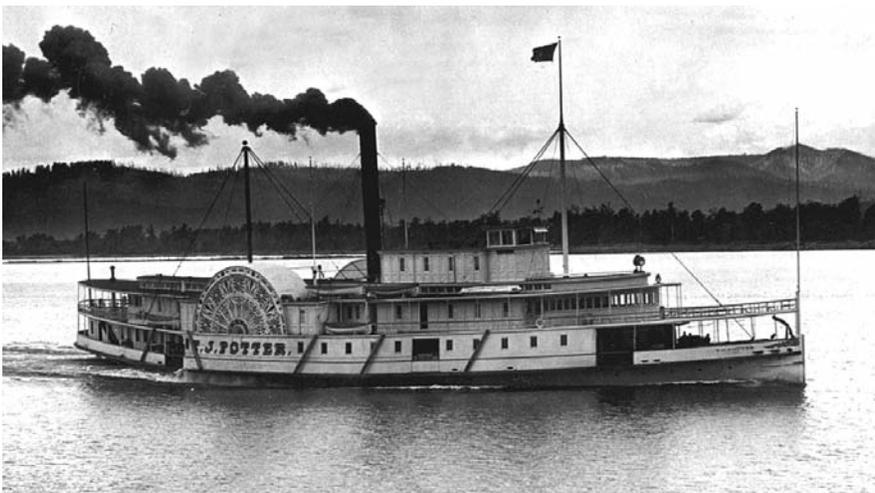


The T.J. POTTER as she appeared right after her victory over the BAILEY GATZERT. The argument over which vessel was faster was settled on June 14, 1891 when the POTTER beat the GATZERT in a 28-mile sprint from Tacoma to Seattle. The POTTER'S time for the race was one-hour; 22 1/2 minutes; a record time. Note the "Dog & Broom" atop her pilot house, signifying she was the fastest vessel on Puget Sound.

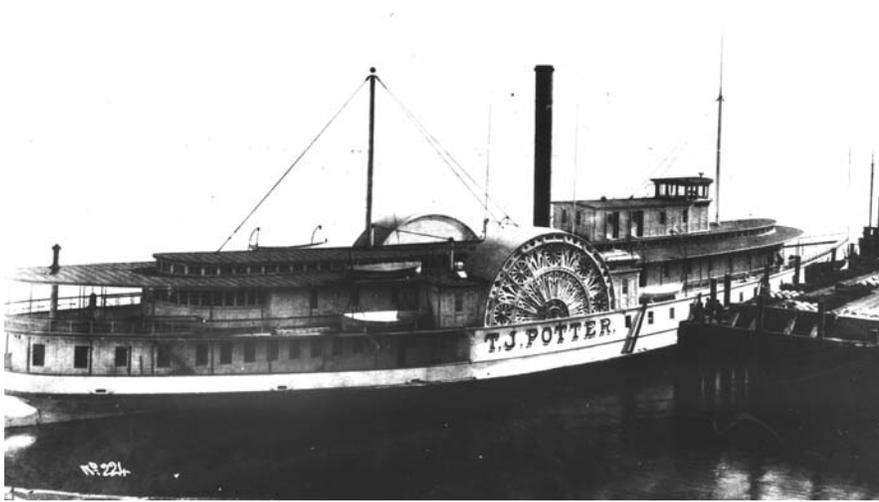
business opened again, only to return to the Sound again in September of 1890 to try and establish a foot-hold for the OR & N in the Seattle-Tacoma-Olympia trade.

While running on the Sound she engaged in some lively steamboat

races, as competition for business was keen. There she had numerous encounters with the Seattle Steam and Navigation Company's sternwheeler BAILEY GATZERT that old-timers still talk about. For a period of time, between December, 1890 and June, 1891, these two boats, along with another small, fast sternwheeler, the GREYHOUND, were literally at each others throats almost daily trying to keep or take speed trophies (in the form of a gilded dog and broom) from one another. The competition between these boats, their owners and their builders is the subject of a story unto itself. Suffice it to say, it was a most interesting and intense rivalry. To this day there is still debate as to which boat was the fastest. In their three recorded encounters between Tacoma and Seattle, the POTTER won twice, the GATZERT, once.



In 1892, the POTTER returned to the Columbia River where she ran Portland to Astoria for the OR & N on an alternating schedule with the big sternwheeler R.R. THOMPSON. Her luxury accommodations and speed made her a popular vessel with people of means. She continued service between these two cities until 1900, when she was given a new and larger hull, expanded accommodations and larger engines.



The T.J. POTTER in her 1888 configuration just before her 1901 rebuilding. Her sleek lines and slim racing hull made her one of the fastest boats in the Northwest. The ornate latticework detail on the paddleboxes rivaled even those on the Hudson River steamers and gave her a unique appearance.

The POTTER won the “big race” on June 14, 1891 when the GATZERT blew her nozzle out her stack while running about neck and neck with the big sidewheeler. The POTTER went on win the trophy and the speed title, setting a new record time for the 28-mile trip of one hour and 22 1/2 minutes.

In other contests, the POTTER bested the sternwheeler MULT-NOMAH and the large screw steamer CITY OF SEATTLE. While on the Sound she was only beaten twice; once by the BAILEY GATZERT and once by the GREY-HOUND.

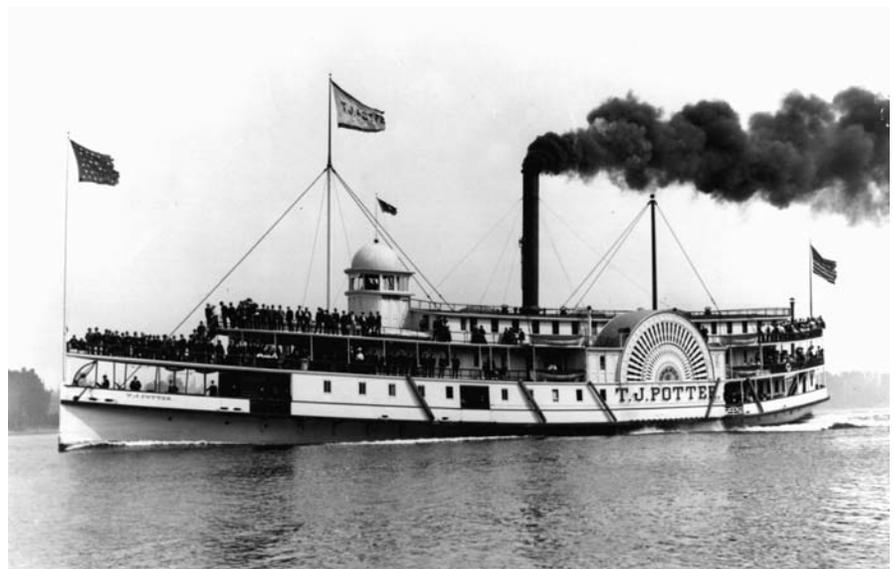
Because she was a riverboat she never ran well on the Sound. Her thirty-foot side-wheels gave her mighty traction on the smooth Columbia River, but when the Sound kicked up, the huge wheels worked against each other, with her slim racing hull rolling helplessly between them. First one wheel would dig deeper into the water while the other whirled in thin air and salt spray. Back and forth she would roll. It wasn't unusual when the passengers became unanimously seasick, but on a brisk day, the captain and crew were likely to join

them. Realizing she belonged on the river, her owners took her back to the Columbia late in June of 1891, still sporting the speed trophies she had earned on the inland sea.

She ran on the Columbia until late in 1900, making a round trip a day on the Astoria route alternating with the R.R. THOMPSON. Her masters during this time were Captains Edward Sullivan, M. Martineau and E.J. Rathborne. After thirteen hard years of service, her owners decided to replace her

old hull and rebuild her completely. She was rebuilt on May 7, 1901, slightly enlarged and converted to coal-burning. Her new hull measured 233.7' x 35.6' x 11.4' and her displacement was increased to 1,017 gross tons. She was also given new engines; increasing her cylinder size to thirty-two inches and her indicated horsepower to 2,100. An upper deck of staterooms was added behind the pilot house, giving her a total of 69 staterooms and numerous other sleeping accommodations; all with electric lights. Atop her pilot house was placed a large light blue-colored dome. Her rebuild made her more luxurious than ever, but her larger and heavier hull reduced her once legendary speed despite her more powerful engines.

She was launched with a new number at 9 a.m. on May 7, 1901 in the North Yard of the OR & N in Portland. On June 10, she made her trial trip with Captain Willis Snow in charge, Henry Pape as chief engineer assisted by Jake Multhauf and Phil Cairns.



The new T.J. POTTER was launched from the North Yard in Portland on May 7, 1901. The rebuild made her larger and more luxurious than ever, but the wonderful lines of her original racing hull were lost with the new, heavier hull and even more powerful engines could not restore her once-legendary speed.

She was registered with customs on June 18, 1901, and took her place on the ocean beach run with Captain J.L. Turner in command.

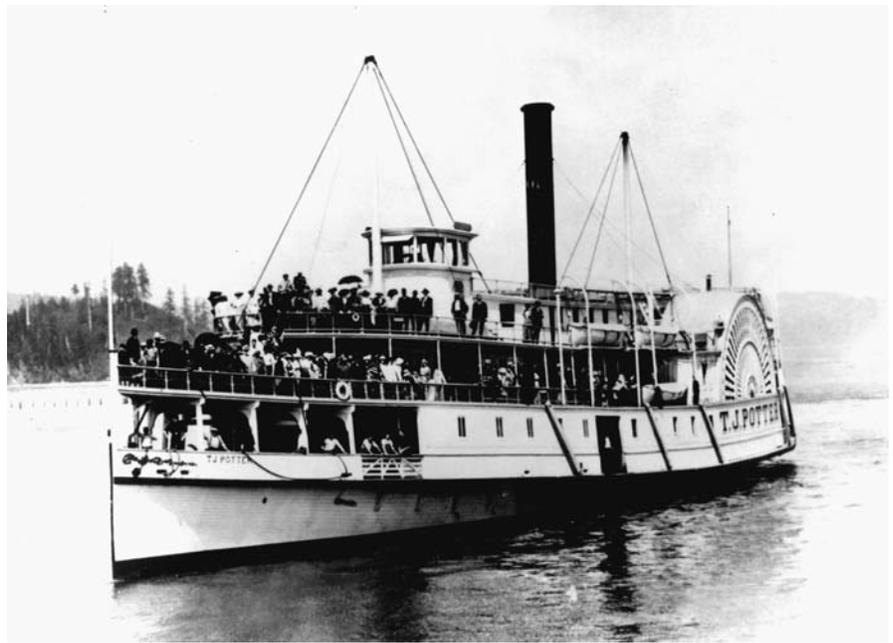
The ocean shore resorts that had developed along the northern Oregon beaches and later on the Long Beach peninsula, just north of the mouth of the Columbia River, became the watering places for Portland's fashionable people whose handsome homes were occupied during the summer season by wives and families. Soon, the popularity of the resorts drew crowds of weekend picnickers until a whole new fleet of fast steamboats was needed to accommodate the traffic. The most smartly appointed and the boat that soon became the accepted way to travel was the T.J. POTTER.

In 1906 she was again rebuilt and reduced to 826 gross tons.

She ran the rest of her days on the Columbia River as the "crack" boat; the boat for the well-heeled and well-to-do to take and be seen on, operating as a night boat on the Astoria run for several years in Command of Captain Edward Sullivan. There were other fine boats on the Columbia, but none had the class and sophistication of the T.J. POTTER.

In early 1911 she was sold to the Washington-Portland Navigation Co. of Portland and Captains George Conway and, later, W.E. Inman were her masters.

When age and the railroads began to take their toll on the old sidewheeler, she was gracefully relegated to lesser rolls. She was retired from regular service in 1912 and during World War I was used as a house boat to take care of the carpenters engaged in the



The T. J. POTTER as she appeared after her 1906 rebuilding. She continued running passenger service to the Long Beach Peninsula as the preferred way of travel until she was retired from active service in 1912. Note the absence of the gaudy blue dome atop the pilot house and the shortened smoke chimney.

McEachern Ship Yards at Astoria, and was finally condemned for passenger service in 1918. For a number of years after this, she continued serving as a barracks boat for construction workers. She was eventually abandoned and surrendered her license on November 10, 1920 at Young's Bay near Astoria.

In 1925 she was dragged from the boneyard, the roosting pigeons in her cabins were shoed - off, and a towboat came alongside to take her down to a mud flat on Young's Bay, where she was burned for her metal. She was finally broken up in 1930.

Her boiler was removed and installed in the boiler room of the Astoria Box Company saw-mill and her whistle was installed as the main mill whistle. Both boiler and whistle saw service for many decades.

It is said that a few of her timbers can still be seen there as small

pieces of her remains are in their final stages of deterioration. One can only try to imagine how she once looked as she gracefully swept back and forth from Portland to Astoria, or from Tacoma to Seattle, with white foam rolling from under her big sidewheels and clouds of black smoke billowing from her tall slender stack. A once truly magnificent vessel representing a different time and a different way of life - of the halcyon days when a trip on the T.J. POTTER was an occasion to remember.

