Guide to the Records of
Washington State Ferries

Office of the Secretary of State
Division of Archives and Records Management
Olympia, Washington
April 2004
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Washington State Ferries

Compiled by
Kathleen Waugh

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Many small steamers (the so-called “Mosquito Fleet”) carried passengers on Puget Sound, on Lake Washington, and on various rivers, beginning in the 1850’s, but they were all privately owned until the state legislature in 1895 authorized counties to build and operate ferries. The side-wheeler King County of Kent began carrying people from the east shore of Lake Washington to Seattle. The first ferry built on Puget Sound specifically for cars was the Leschi, which began service on Lake Washington in 1914, joined a few months later by the Lincoln. This county ferry system was never profitable and was soon privatized. Some Lake Washington ferries continued to run even after the Lake Washington Floating Bridge was opened in 1940, and ferry service on the lake ended only with the last run of the Leschi in 1950.

The two principal ferry companies on Puget Sound were the Kitsap Transportation Company, or “White Collar Line,” and the Puget Sound Navigation Company (PSNC), or “Black Ball Line.” Due to the growth of the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard at Bremerton and to an increase in tourism, more and more people needed transportation across the Sound to Kitsap County and the Olympic Peninsula. Although all of the early ferries were originally for foot traffic, the growth of private automobile ownership caused the remodeling of many ferries, such as the PSNC’s Chippewa, in the 1920’s to enable them to carry cars. When the Golden Gate Bridge opened in San Francisco, the PSNC bought seventeen of the ferries which had been put out of business in the bay area, and rechristened them with northwest names, including Elwha, Enetai, Illahee, Kehloken, Klahanie, Klickitat, Malahat, Quinault, and Willapa.

The Puget Sound Navigation Company bought the Kitsap Transportation Company, which was plagued by labor strife, in 1935, and became the largest inland fleet in the world. In 1935 it purchased the burned-out Peralta from California, gave it a new, silver, streamlined, art deco superstructure, and renamed it the Kalakala (“flying bird”). The Kalakala served the , mostly on the Seattle to Bremerton run, for thirty-two years before being bought by a seafood processing company, towed to Alaska and used as a factory. In 1998, after twenty-eight years high and dry, she was purchased by a private foundation and towed back to Seattle to await restoration.

When the four-month-old Tacoma Narrows Bridge collapsed in 1940, the Highways Department began to run the ferries Crosline and Skansonia in its place. World War II greatly increased the traffic on Puget Sound, and the Puget Sound Navigation Company was able to buy six more ferries from California (including the City of Sacramento, the San Mateo, and the Shasta), make twenty-eight round trips per day between Seattle and Bremerton, and still lower fares by twenty-five per cent.

After the war there was great controversy when the PSNC tried to raise rates again, and the idea of state ownership was raised. Governor Langlie pushed legislation that would allow the state to sell bonds to buy the ferry system. Under pressure from his bankers, the owner reluctantly agreed to sell for $4,944,499 after the state threatened to have the fleet condemned. Many people believed that the ferry system was a temporary form of
transportation which would soon be retired after the building of five bridges across Puget Sound.

In August of 1950, at Seattle’s Seafair celebration, the Willapa, by then named the Bellingham, was set on fire by the Seafair Pirates as part of the festivities and described as the sacrificial burning of Neptune’s barge. Four months later, the PSNC’s shareholders agreed to sell all the routes except the one to Victoria, B.C., and the state took control on June 1, 1951. At sundown the ferries paused for one minute and lowered their Black Ball flags for the last time. The state now owned eighteen ferries, twenty terminals, and the destroyer escort Mitchell. The state expected to keep rates down and minimize labor problems, but was disappointed on both issues, due in part to a strong ferryworkers’ union. Governor Langlie had hoped that ferries eventually would not have to charge fares at all, but the cost of running the system was higher than expected. Both maintenance of the ferries and the service provided by them improved, but they were not self-supporting as the legislation had originally stipulated. Starting in 1959, a fraction of the state’s gasoline taxes was used to help support the ferry system, which is required to generate at least 60% of its operating expenses from fares.

There was also an obvious need for more and bigger ferries to serve the rapidly growing population of Puget Sound. The state bought two used ferries from Maryland, towed them 6,000 miles and rechristened them the Rhododendron and the Olympic. In 1954 the first ferry was built specifically for the Washington State Ferry System: the 310-foot Evergreen State. Built by the Puget Sound Bridge and Dredging Company, she carried 100 cars and 1,000 passengers. She was followed a few years later by the “Evergreen-State-class” Klahowya and Tillicum.

A 1962 report stated that most of the ferries in the fleet were too old and small to be useful and that new ferries were needed. The aging Leschi, like the Kalakala, was sold to Alaska to process seafood. In 1967, the state launched the Elwha, the Hyak, the Kaleetan, and the Yakima, big ferries for the time at 382 feet long, carrying 160 cars and 2,000 passengers. Funds were appropriated to complete the 40-car Hiyu.

In 1972, Todd Pacific Shipyards of Seattle built the Spokane and the Walla Walla; these “jumbo ferries” were the biggest ferries in the world. They carried 206 cars and 2,000 passengers.

In 1974, in response to the energy crisis, some ferries were ordered to run at reduced speed and power during off-peak midday periods, to save fuel. The Department also encouraged people to take the ferries as foot passengers, and use busses, vanpools or bicycles. 1974 also saw state ferry service instituted on the Port Townsend-Keystone (Whidbey Island) route, previously privately operated. In 1979 ferry service had to be reinstituted over northern Hood Canal when the Hood Canal Bridge broke apart and sank in a storm.

In 1977, the state authorized the building of six more 100-car “Evergreen-State-class” ferries by the Marine Power and Equipment Company of Seattle. The first two, the
Issaquah and the Kittitas, began service in late 1980. The Kitsap, the Cathlamet, the Chelan, and the Sealth followed. They had the latest computer technology, but experienced various problems. “Disputes over contract administration and unusual public scrutiny of technical problems encountered during the vessel break-in periods, particularly with the Issaquah, led to adverse publicity and repeated investigations into all aspects of the $106 million contract,” according to the Department of Transportation Biennial Report.

In the 1990’s, the Jumbo Mark II ferries Tacoma, Puyallup and Wenatchee were built by Todd Shipyards. They carried 218 cars and 2,500 passengers, but there was still a need for more ferries. It had been decades since the last cross-Sound bridge proposal had been abandoned, and the ferries were more popular than ever. Passenger-only ferries were reinstituted on Puget Sound in 1990, with the Kalama, the Skagit, and the Tyee, and later the Chinook and the Snohomish.

The Washington State Ferry System is the largest in the United States, with twenty-nine vessels on ten routes serving twenty terminals in eight counties. It carries more than 11 million vehicles and 26 million passengers a year.

Responsibility for the Washington State Ferries was originally shared by the Washington State Toll Bridge Authority and the Department of Highways. The new Department of Transportation took over responsibility in 1977.

Ferry name changes:
- Chetzemoka – formerly Golden Poppy
- Enetai – formerly Santa Rosa
- Illahee – formerly Lake Tahoe
- Kalakala – formerly Peralta
- Kehloken – formerly Golden State
- Klahanie – formerly Golden Age
- Klickitat – formerly Stockton
- Nisqually – formerly Mendecino
- Olympic – formerly Governor Nice
- Quinault – formerly Redwood Empire
- Rhododendron – formerly Governor O’Connor
- Willapa – formerly Fresno

Sources: Building Washington by Paul Dorpat and Genevieve McCoy
Department of Highways Biennial Reports
Department of Transportation Biennial Reports
Pacific Work Boat, May 1959
www.wsdot.wa.gov/ferries
SCOPE AND CONTENT

The records in this collection document the operations of the Washington State Ferries. They consist mostly of correspondence and also include advertising, agreements, financial documents, legal documents, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, reports, statistics, and studies. Of particular interest are the files on particular ferries, which in some cases include blueprints, inspection and drydock records, or log books.

NOTE ON THE ARRANGEMENT

These records were transferred to the State Archives from the Toll Bridge Authority, the Department of Highways, and the Department of Transportation, on many occasions over the past thirty-five years. They were in no particular order.

The records have been separated into two sections, subject files and files on individual ferries. They have been put into alphabetical order and placed in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes.
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Traffic Statistics, Easter 1952-58
Traffic Statistics, Fourth of July 1952-59
Traffic Statistics, Memorial Day 1952-59
Traffic Statistics, Mother’s Day 1953-59
Traffic Statistics, Thanksgiving 1952-57
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  Tudor Engineering Co. 1969-76
  Tudor Engineering Co. 1973-76
  United States Army 1952-72
  United States Bureau of Outdoor Recreation 1963
  United States Coast Guard 1952-54
  United States Coast Guard 1952-65
  United States Coast Guard 1957
  United States Navy 1952-64
  United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1955
  United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1955-57
  United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1957
  United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1957-60

Box 22: United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1957-62
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  United States v. Toll Bridge Authority 1960-64
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  Vashon Terminal 1952-63
  Vessel Allocations 1955-74
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  Wastewater 1975
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  Winslow Auto Transfer Span 1951-53
  Winslow-Seattle Route 1951-64
  Winslow Terminal 1951-53
  Winslow Terminal 1951-61
  Winslow Terminal 1954-66
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Box 22
Chetzemoka 1953-54
Chetzemoka 1972
Chinook 1951-54
Chippewa 1953-54
Chippewa 1953-54
Chippewa 1957
City of Seattle 1970
City of Tacoma – see Washington State Toll Bridge Authority collection,
   “Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Ferry”
Crosline – see Washington State Toll Bridge Authority collection,
   “Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Ferry”
Defiance – see Washington State Toll Bridge Authority collection,
   “Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Ferry”
Elwha 1967
Elwha 1972
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1963-65
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1965
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1965
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1965-69
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1965-69
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966-67
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1967
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1968
Enetai 1957
Evergreen State 1952-54
Evergreen State 1952-60
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Box 23
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1966-67
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1967
Elwha, Hyak, Kaleetan, Yakima 1968
Enetai 1957
Evergreen State 1952-54
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### FERRY FILES

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  Olympic 1990

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  “Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Ferry”

  Spokane, Walla Walla 1970-71
  Spokane, Walla Walla 1970-71
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Box 31
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Rhododendron
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