



Passage to Paradise, Bridge to America; Steamship Sails On

Ivy Ashe *Thursday, July 11, 2013 - 9:15pm*

When Allie Joseph was a little girl, she would spot mermaids while on the ferry to Martha's Vineyard, insisting to her mother that they were there, in the depths of Vineyard Sound.

On a recent Tuesday Allie, now in college, stood with parents David and Chris and sister Nikki at the Steamship Authority terminal in Woods Hole, waiting to board the Island Home. The ferry, the largest in the fleet, loomed overhead, its wake still turbulent from its arrival. The Island Home's entrance into Woods Hole Harbor is dramatic: the water churns and roils and turns white with foam as the ferry draws closer and its captain and pilot guide its 64-foot beam into the slip. It's enough to draw even the attention of those who have no plans to board the ferry. Cyclists from Falmouth stopped at the docks to pull out their cell phones and snap photos.

The Joseph family has been coming to Martha's Vineyard for 20 years, escaping the heat and humidity of their Florida home for an Island summer. Once, and only once, they took a plane over, much to Allie's consternation.

"I was so mad at my parents," she said, laughing. "It saves time, but it's not the same."

Daytripper, commuter, weekender, summer kid, year-rounder, washashore, Islander: the moniker doesn't

matter. It doesn't matter if you take a plane to the Vineyard, or if you come via your own boat or one of the other passenger ferries that makes the trip. The Steamship Authority ferries are the keystone in the metaphorical bridge to America.

More than one million passengers embarked from Woods Hole in 2012, bound for ports in either Oak Bluffs or Vineyard Haven. This past Fourth of July holiday, on July 4 alone, 8,485 passengers traveled on the Island Home, the Martha's Vineyard, the Sankaty and the Governor. Hundreds more cars made the trip that weekend. Dozens of trucks brought food, propane, furniture, fertilizer, lumber — everything that keeps the Island afloat, including the mail. The first reservations processed by the SSA are for the postal service trucks that bring the mail ashore.

"It's such a huge part of your everyday thinking," said Marc Hanover, the Vineyard representative on the Steamship Authority board of governors. "I can't imagine anyone on the Island who doesn't think about the boats at least twice a week."

As part of the legislative act that created the agency, the boat line is the lone organization that transports passengers, cars and trucks. It regulates licensing of nearly all of the other passenger ferries that traverse the Sound. Monopoly power was granted for the benefit of the people coming to the Islands, former Vineyard governor Ronald H. Rappaport said, to ensure that there was a viable, year-round government entity.

"The Authority, in terms of law, is a corporation without stockholders, and therefore it must belong to nobody," one Gazette editorial noted. "But actually it is so closely identified with the two Islands and with the men who operate the line that is now their common interest." The year was 1961, one year after Chapter 701 of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Acts of 1960 established the Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority.

-

As stated by the Acts, the boat line mission is to "provide adequate transportation of persons and necessities of life for the Islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard."

For Wayne Lamson, general manager of the Steamship Authority since 2004, adequate wasn't enough.

Mr. Lamson, who grew up in North Falmouth, has worked for the SSA for 41 years, starting as a summer ticket-taker to bring in extra income alongside his job at the local hardware store. He studied accounting at Bentley University in the off-season and on graduation in 1972, was offered a job as an auditor for the Steamship Authority. From there, he became chief auditor, then assistant treasurer, then treasurer proper in 1982. He served as interim general manager on occasion during his time as treasurer, and was chosen by the board of governors in 2004 to succeed Armand Tiberio.

Mr. Lamson made changes almost immediately, relying on his years of attending meetings to establish priorities and business protocol. At the time, the SSA had been using an automated switchboard to handle calls. Mr. Lamson brought back the operator, so customers could talk to a real person. He removed the tariff on truck height for vehicles traveling on the open-air freight boats, where height made no difference. If a policy couldn't be easily explained, he tweaked it until it could be, or removed it entirely.

When Mr. Lamson considers organizations to compare the Steamship Authority to, he doesn't think of other transportation groups, but rather utilities like NStar, or companies like FedEx. The Steamship Authority, he said, is ultimately a service industry.

He's at work in the management offices at the Woods Hole terminal at 8 a.m. each day, handling customer feedback from a newly-designed website and sorting through "piles of different things" that have appeared overnight, before starting the basic task of juggling the several dozen balls thrown into play each morning

once the boats start to run (he takes a break at lunch to go home and read the Wall Street Journal). There are the daily details — weather troubles, delays, managing the bus companies that pick up at the Woods Hole terminal. There are eight different bargaining contracts Mr. Lamson negotiates for the 450 year-round employees (the number jumps to 650 in the summer); the Steamship Authority has always been heavily unionized. There are daily meetings with senior staff, and monthly meetings with the board of governors.

The board consists of five members representing each of the ports: Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Falmouth, Barnstable and New Bedford. The two Islands have a weighted vote that gives them a power of majority in decision-making. The board sets the rates and the schedules and attempts to see the future, determining when is the best time to commission a new boat, or when to remodel the Woods Hole terminal (soon, as it turns out, for both of these goals).

The board provides the framework the boat line is built around, but the builders are those on the “front lines,” as Mr. Lamson says — the ticket-takers, dockworkers, parking attendants, reservations agents, engineers, boat captains and crews — the employees who work to keep the business going seven days a week, every day of the year.

“It becomes like second nature to these employees,” Mr. Lamson said. “That’s something that I don’t think the public really sees — people working holidays, crews staying on the boat overnight.”

A poll commissioned by the Vineyard Gazette this spring found high public confidence in boat line leadership (<http://mvgazette.com/news/2013/07/11/confidence-steamship-authority-significantly>), in marked contrast to a similar poll conducted in 1987. The Gazette Harris-Interactive Poll found 38 per cent of respondents in 2013 said they had a great deal of confidence in the SSA compared to 12 per cent in 1987.

•

“Never buy a black bag,” Bridget Tobin said as she picked up the phone in her Oak Bluffs office to call the Woods Hole terminal. Just the day before, she said, three people had picked up the wrong bag off the baggage cart. Today she was trying to return a laptop computer and bag to its rightful owner.

You can see everything from Mrs. Tobin’s corner office at the back of the Oak Bluffs terminal, where she is the manager. The windows overlook the long pier down to where the Martha’s Vineyard and the freight boats tie up. A blue tray hangs on one wall, painted with the words “Bridget Tobin: Ferry Fairy.” A poster-sized printout declaring in large letters “Ferry Godmother” is behind the computer screen showing 12 different security camera feeds.

Most people call her the Gatekeeper, but her favorite name was a pun bestowed on her by an Islander who traveled to the mainland frequently for trips to the hospital. He has since died, but the nickname stuck: The Tobin Bridge.

500 ambulance transfers took place last year, with the Authority standing at the ready to make space for an ambulance that needs to go to the mainland.

“We do our very best to juggle and, by God, mostly it works out,” Mrs. Tobin said. “The hospital always works with us.”

Customer service isn’t second nature to Bridget Tobin, it’s first nature, front and center, so much a part of her being that she once created her own job on the boat to help senior citizens and sell tickets. It was in the days before cell phones, she said, and it was important for people to know somebody was taking care of them once they had left the landlines behind.

Mrs. Tobin started working in reservations in 1974, taking people’s information over the phone and handwriting every name and every car in the file.

“You knew people by their names, there weren’t many [then],” she said. “And you knew their cars.” There were only eight boat trips a day then, all displayed on a large board in the ticket office. The reservations system was computerized in 1979, and Mrs. Tobin has since moved through the ranks at the Steamship Authority, right up to her current position, but she still brings personalization and warmth to every encounter.

“I like to be the first person people see,” she said. “I want them to feel comfortable and appreciate this beautiful Island we live on.”

The boat trips can help facilitate that, which Mrs. Tobin knows firsthand. She used to commute to work in Woods Hole, using the 45-minute ride over from the Vineyard to eat breakfast while sitting outside and watching the sunrise.

Once, she saw a pod of dolphins on her trip across the Sound. It was years ago, but she still remembers the sheer joy of watching the dolphins leap alongside the now-retired Uncatena. It was the middle of May, she said, and “we all just went crazy. Everyone was out there on the deck.”

•

On the Sunday after the Fourth of July, it certainly seems as if everybody is out on the deck. The Martha’s Vineyard is carrying more than 700 passengers, which isn’t even its full capacity of 1,090, but it has been a busy holiday weekend and the boat is crowded. Passengers lean against the life jacket lockers on the outside decks and sit inside the windowsills below. The Smith family, starting the first leg of their trip back to New York city, scored a bench to themselves. Charles 4th, eight months old, was the fifth generation of Smiths to visit the Island. His great-grandmother Harriette Evans lives in Oak Bluffs; his father, Charles 3rd, has been coming since he was his son’s age. Mr. Smith recalls playing cards outside and having half the deck blow away in the wind, but what stood out most vividly to him were his college days.

“I just remember always rushing and trying to catch the last boat,” Mr. Smith said. Sometimes he’d miss it and sleep in his car in the Woods Hole parking lot.

This past winter, when buses packed with 400 Vineyard high school basketball fans traveled to Boston and got stuck in rush hour traffic on the way back, missing the regularly scheduled last trip, the SSA called in the reserves and ran one final boat to bring them all home. But that’s not the norm. The schedule is set and the boats stick to it.

“It’s a real adjustment to live your life around a boat schedule, and people that don’t live here don’t understand it,” Mr. Hanover said. “It just doesn’t resonate with them.”

“It’s like speaking another language to most people,” said Julie Olson, farm manager at the Farm Institute. The farm produces locally-grown meat but there is no slaughterhouse on-Island, so Ms. Olson must take livestock off-Island. She also brings new herd members back to keep the flocks growing. Explaining to a prospective seller why she can’t change a date to pick up some sheep is often a task.

“You don’t understand, it’s August, it’s a tractor-trailer — that’s three car lengths,” she said of a typical conversation.

Ms. Olson grew up in Dennis, and her school’s sports teams often played the Vineyard and Nantucket. In the summer, she would come to the Vineyard to study dance.

“You’d get a half-day of school [to come over,]” Ms. Olson said. “The boat was everyone’s highlight growing up.”

From the bridge of the Island Home, every wave motion below is amplified, but pilot Bill Frosthalm and

able-bodied seaman Mike Couto don't seem to feel the shifts. Every Steamship Authority boat is staffed by a minimum of 11 crew members: captain, pilot, engineer, oiler, boatswains, able-bodied seamen, and ordinary seamen.

The Island Home doesn't require as much maneuvering as the other boats because it is double-ended, with a bridge on either end, so it doesn't need to turn around in the harbor. But it is, admittedly, "a big boat," Mr. Frostholm said. "It's a little tough when it's windy."

The Island Home is the newest boat in the fleet, put into service in 2007, after a delay due to Hurricane Katrina flooding the shipyard in Mississippi where it was built. But the Steamship Authority is working to add another new boat, to replace the 60-year-old freighter Governor. Most ferries, Mr. Lamson said, have a useful life of about 50 years if properly maintained.

"You kind of put together a dream vessel, and give that to the engineers," former financial advisory board member Bob Murphy said of the building process. "It may take a couple of years just to come up with a design."

The Island Home's design costs were recovered a year later, after the Washington State ferry system built three exact replicas of the boat. The Steamship Authority earned a royalty from the design fees.

"Every vessel seems to get a little bit better," said Mr. Murphy, acknowledging that no member of the fleet is flawless.

•

Sankaty Capt. David Dandridge had no hesitation indicating his favorite thing about the job, pointing to the tall ship Shenandoah as she cruised by in the distance.

"That about sums it up," he said, taking up a pair of binoculars to look at the schooner. And then, to pilot Paul Menton, "Looks like he's going to tack."

The ferries are large enough that any boat would want to avoid their path, but they don't have priority in the water just by virtue of being a ferry. Just like on the road, Captain Dandridge said, there are rules and right of way.

This summer is his 25th as an officer — he started as a deckhand in the summer, working for a research vessel out of Columbia University for the rest of the year and earning the sea expertise needed for his pilot and captain's license. By the 1980s, the Authority had grown enough that there was enough work for him to leave the New York job and be closer to his Vineyard Haven home.

The Sankaty rode an ebb tide toward Woods Hole, moving at 13.9 knots. The freighter, which earlier in the day had carried trash trucks and a trailer of Julie Olson's cows over to the mainland, was now mostly carrying passenger cars.

As the Sankaty neared Woods Hole, Captain Dandridge moved the clutch, which hissed as the pneumatic air system pushed the mechanical parts below decks and the speed dropped to nine knots.

"Sometimes there's boils and currents coming through; you can see it in the water," Mr. Menton said.

"We kind of like this way," Captain Dandridge said of the calm entrance. Mr. Menton left the wheelhouse for the deck, watching from above as the Sankaty eased into its slip.

The GPS reading showed 0.0 knots. Captain Dandridge pulled a brown baseball cap on, and took his sandwich plate with him as he left the Sankaty to go back home. It was a short walk from the Sankaty's slip over to the Island Home docked next door, but the boat ride awaited.

On Martha's Vineyard, everybody is a passenger.

To read more about the Steamship Authority over the years, see the article [A History Shaped by State Politics](http://mvgazette.com/news/2013/07/11/history-shaped-state-politics) (<http://mvgazette.com/news/2013/07/11/history-shaped-state-politics>).

For more photos, view the galleries: [Steamship Authority Faces Behind the Scenes](http://mvgazette.com/multimedia/steamship-authority-faces-behind-scenes) (<http://mvgazette.com/multimedia/steamship-authority-faces-behind-scenes>) and [Passengers Aboard the Ferries to and from the Island](http://mvgazette.com/multimedia/passengers-aboard-ferries-and-island) (<http://mvgazette.com/multimedia/passengers-aboard-ferries-and-island>)

For more on changing perceptions and opinions of the Steamship Authority, see the results of our Island-specific Harris Interactive Poll. (<http://mvgazette.com/news/2013/06/27/gazette-poll-island-residents-coastal-erosion-tops-list-concerns>)