

the ever so
unsinkable
and remarkably
unwavering

Captain Marsh

by Marijane Terry



photos from the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, The University of Toronto

When the settlers arrived at Lake of Bays, its beauty masked the many challenges that they would face. Free land grants had enticed them to the area, but the rocky, steep terrain, deep forests and isolation were daunting. When the Canadian Shield and a short growing season crushed most attempts at farming, many of the settlers drifted away within a decade. Against this slow exodus came a man by the name of George Francis Marsh, who saw opportunity where others saw defeat.



Marsh, from the southern part of the province, settled first in Baysville. He engaged in the timber trade, which had become the dominant economic driver in Muskoka. It wasn't long before Marsh recognized that Lake of Bays was particularly well situated for the industry. He moved to the north part of the lake and built a saw mill at the mouth of the Oxtongue River, an entrepreneurial venture which allowed him to capitalize on the business opportunity that the industry afforded him.

Like any lake resident, Marsh was well aware of the difficulty of getting around the area. The few roads that existed were barely passable, and transit by wagon did damage to both people and goods. Transport by water was a better answer, and Marsh saw another opportunity. While others on the lake had identified the same need and competition existed, he was unfazed, and built and launched a steamer, the *Mary Louise*, in 1884.

Within a few years, now known as Captain Marsh, he was able to buy his biggest competitor on the lake, and began to look for further growth for his enterprise. His best hope would be to capture business in Huntsville, which had the only railway terminal in the area, giving it ready access to southern markets hungry for logs and timber products. It was, however, already served by a steamship company, under the direction of Captain Denton, who worked the four lake chain around the town from *Mary to Peninsula Lake*.

For both captains, Peninsula Lake was tantalizingly close to Lake of Bays. Only a little over a mile separated the two and the land bridge between them had long been a natural point of portage. Captain

opposite page: Captain Marsh fishing with children at Marsh's Falls. **opposite page, inset:** The Portage Flyer, the world's shortest commercial railway, was launched in 1904.

above left: The *Mary Louise* transporting sportsmen to the Dwight warf. **above right:** Osborne's Stage Coach travelled between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays prior to the rail line.

Denton, just as eager as Captain Marsh to expand his company's prospects, made the first foray in what was to be a short business war. He put one of his steamers, the *Florence*, on Lake of Bays. Captain Marsh, not one to back down easily, countered by positioning the *Excelsior* on the Huntsville side of the divide, and then confidently added another steamer on Lake of Bays.

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Captain Marsh, by all accounts an affable man who understood people, was nevertheless persistent and determined in business. He was the ultimate victor in the contest with Captain Denton, which gave him a wider territory to serve, but challenges still remained. The unexpected was always a factor in operating a navigation company. The vessels were vulnerable to accidents—there were collisions with other boats or docks, perilous underwater hazards and sudden, fierce storms. Fire was a constant threat, and it destroyed several of the line's steamers.

The redoubtable Captain Marsh rebuilt or replaced damaged steamers, yet each serious loss placed his business in jeopardy. It was necessary to overhaul vessels periodically for safety reasons, or perhaps to compensate for original design flaws. For the company to prosper, new vessels had to be added. It all took capital and investment, and the constant pursuit of new business, which could be scarce in an area with one dominant industry and flat population growth.

Captain Marsh could see a possible opportunity that might change his company's prospects. In south Muskoka, a new kind of visitor had emerged. This wanted to enjoy the beauty of the wilderness and its

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wanted to enjoy the beauty of the wilderness and its apparent health benefits. Such visitors were providing a good stream of new revenue for the steamship companies in south Muskoka, and giving rise to a hotel industry there that was beginning to challenge the dominance of logging.

With the belief that a similar passenger business was critical to his company's future, Captain Marsh began to promote pleasure cruises and charters for special events to local residents. With an immediate focus on securing a livelihood, cruises were an indulgence for them, and the leisure passenger business was slow to build. Once the idea of lake tours did begin to take hold, he then directed his promotional efforts to a more distant audience: visitors, largely from the northeast part of the U.S., who had given rise to the tourism industry that was fuelling prosperity in south Muskoka.

Captain Marsh's belief about the economic benefits of tourism was vindicated when Deerhurst Resort opened on Peninsula Lake in 1896. It became an immediate attraction in the area, bringing visitors from afar, and it wasn't long before hotels were built around Lake of Bays to cater to summer guests. All of the new resorts ensured more fare paying visitors for the navigation company, and with some determined lobbying on Captain Marsh's part, a second daily train was added, which increased the passenger volume for his fleet.

The increased passenger load served to highlight a vulnerability of the navigation company. The divide between North and South Portage was served by a wagon service provided by the Osborne family, who owned the land. It was a slow, awkward method of transportation, and it limited how many passengers could be brought to Lake of Bays. Without the capacity to deliver a good number of visitors, both the navigation company and the lake's nascent tourism industry would suffer.

Captain Marsh had been aware of this problem for some time. Even before the new resorts in the area brought increased passenger traffic, he had sought permission to build an electric tramway across the land bridge. He did not proceed with this plan, but instead adopted an idea that had been floated about for some time, to build a railway.

Legislation had been enacted in the past to allow a railway to be built, but its cost would be high. The land had a steep grade, and with a total difference of approximately 170 feet in elevation between the two lakes, considerable engineering skill would be needed to design and construct the line. The cost versus

the return on investment had perhaps kept the idea at the dreaming stage, but increased passenger volumes, and the hope of greater tourism, gave Captain Marsh a compelling reason to act.

In 1900, Captain Marsh reincorporated the navigation company and received a separate railway charter, named the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway. The railway charter included a line from North to South Portage, and a second line between the east end of Lake of Bays and Hollow Lake. The charter allowed Captain Marsh to raise funds from investors, and plan for the first segment over the divide. He may also have been thinking ahead, as he sought another charter in 1902 to build and manage hotels, cottages and resorts, in addition to the navigation company and the railway. If his belief that Lake of Bays could become a popular destination for summer visitors came true, he would be well positioned for that future.

Captain Marsh leased the land from the Osborne family, but construction on the railway was slow to start, and it was not until 1903 that it began after the engineering issues had been solved. The delay meant that the costs mounted, and in the next year, Captain Marsh used his persuasive skills to gain a \$10,000 grant from the Province's perennially cash-starved government. With a tight budget, he shortened the route and bought used rail engines and cars. They ran on a narrow gauge, as opposed to the standard gauge mandated by the charter, but they suited the terrain.

By the fall of 1904, the world's shortest commercial railway was in operation. Initially, it was used to transport freight only, while the crews learned how to manage the line. The intention was to open the line for passengers the next summer. The planned schedule was for passengers to disembark from the Algonquin at North Portage, and be carried across the train line to a waiting Iroquois at South Portage. Freight would be hauled across in the hours between the first and second daily trains to Huntsville from Toronto.

Captain Marsh travelled across the line only once, shortly after it had been opened. He died in November of 1904, and never got to see how well the railway, dubbed the Portage Flyer, worked, or how it became a favourite of passengers. Nor did he live to see the grand hotels of Lake of Bays—Britannia, the Wawa and Bigwin Inn—which made his prediction that the lake would become a beacon for summer visitors come true. 