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The POINT GREY QUEEN in Campbell's Bay, near Echo Bay, 1979. Len Thompson is on the dodger and Ed Francis is on the foredeck with Kila.

Booming up Bute

Life on the POINT GREY QUEEN

By Catherine J. Johnson

In 1980 I was running the POINT GREY QUEEN on the Homathko River at the head of Bute Inlet. I was a twenty-one year old woman, five-foot-one and a ninety-five pound weakling; the latter physical attribute being the main reason why I was the person running the tug and not pulling swifter wires or drilling boomsticks. Len Thompson and I

were the boom crew for JRG Logging and the POINT GREY QUEEN was our home, business and pleasure craft. Thompson taught me how to run the tug when we first arrived at the booming ground. He stuck the bow against the boom, left her in gear, then jumped down onto the logs to meet with the departing boom man.

"What am I supposed to do?" I hollered out the wheelhouse window as he headed across the bundles.

"Just keep the wheel straight!"

I had run skiffs with outboards, had a speedboat at one time instead of a car and had sailed, rowed and paddled various craft, but never had I been in control of 165 screaming horsepower. I was petrified; I didn't



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want to touch the wheel, terrified that the boat would slide off the logs and do God-knows-what! I couldn't even remember which control was the throttle and which was the gear.

After the initial panic I got the hang of it – it was an interesting job, it was a challenge and I was proud of myself. Our usual day, or night, depending on the tide, consisted of running upriver about a kilometre to camp and grabbing the bag of bundles at the log dump. I'd push the bow against the sticks to keep the bundles tight while Len Thompson threaded one-inch poly through them all. Then he'd whack open the bag with an axe, I'd spin the tug around down-river and off I'd go towing. Even though the bundles were tied together, the current still pushed them around and the Homathko is not very wide. I ran the POINT GREY QUEEN from the bridge so I could keep an eye on the sandbars behind me and steer accordingly. Sometimes a bundle would start to hang up but Thompson would be bringing up the rear in the boom boat by then and would give the offender a nudge.

During freshet the current was so strong that the bag wouldn't hold. We'd look up from towing and see bundles streaking past. From that point on they were dumped straight in the river and I'd run out from the booming ground and round them up while Thompson worked upriver ramming the stuck ones off the bars; sometimes a bundle or two would float free of a sandbar in the middle of the night and we'd have to motor down the inlet to find them.

I'd become fairly proficient at tying a bowline but, on one occa-

sion, had motored alongside a stray bundle off the mouth of the river during freshet, jumped from the POINT GREY QUEEN to tie the towline onto the swifter wire but started to fumble the knot as the line began to go tight a bit too quickly. The tug had already drifted a few feet away and was moving further out each second. I realized in a panic that I'd never be able pull the boat back in against the force of the current. Only the humiliating thought of being found floating down the inlet like a basking seal got me back onto that stern. After that I threw a wrap around the swifter wire before attempting the knot.

One morning I was about to set the bow against the boomsticks but went to throttle back and nothing happened. Wham! The boat crashed straight into the sticks and the engine screamed as the cast-iron frying pan flew out of the cupboard and smashed into the backs of my legs. I fooled with the throttle then jammed it in reverse before the entire bag of logs got shoved up onto the shore. Thankfully reverse engaged, but the engine was still revving out of sight. I was blaming myself because I'd gotten a little cocky, racing up to the boom for the power rush. The boat had become that familiar to me. And

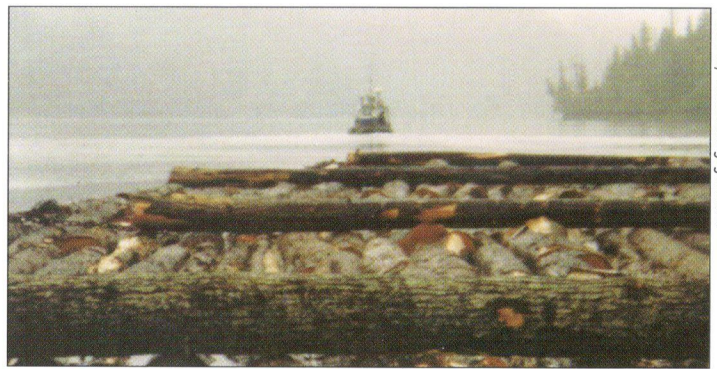


Photo by Catherine Johnson

The POINT GREY QUEEN towing hand-logged wood out of Sir Edmund Bay, 1979.

Thompson's words of advice came guiltily back to me: "Don't be afraid to go too slow."

The only thing I could think of was to crank the wheel hard and let the boat do donuts while I stood on the stern waving my arms at Thompson who was stowing on the boom boat. He was finally manoeuvring a bundle in my direction and looked up, astonishment on his face, and got to me as fast as he could -- which wasn't too fast considering he had to open the bag to get the boomboat out. Once onboard he just cut a fuel line. So then I knew what to do if an engine ran away on me again.

Now we needed to rebuild the engine -- the advent of spring-loaded control racks for injectors came a little too late for the POINT GREY QUEEN with its 1955 Jimmy. We took the boat upriver and tied her alongside the cribbing at the log dump one night on a high tide and cut a hole in the trunk cabin with a chainsaw. It was crude but it was a gyppo camp and there were no fancy power tools; no fancy anything. We hated to have to

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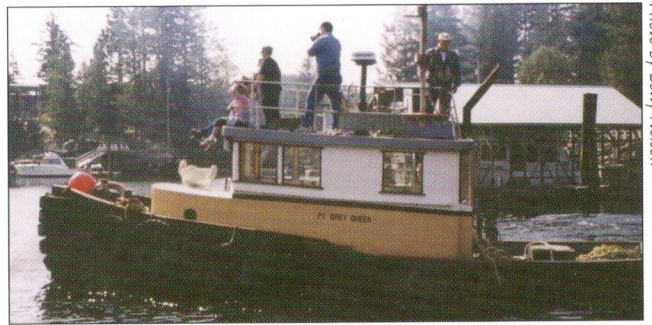
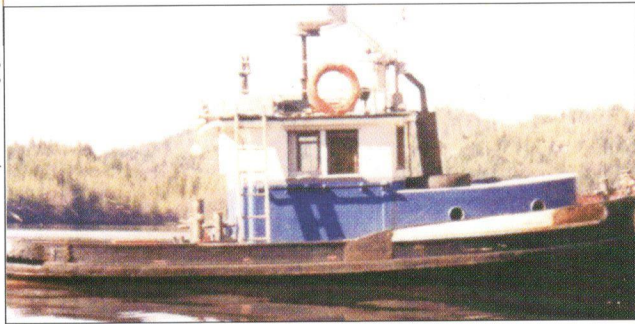
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These two photos (left: Sir Edmund Bay, 1979; right: Pender Harbour, 2001) show how the house-works changed on the POINT GREY QUEEN. The author lost track of the tug after Pender Harbour and couldn't find anyone who knows where it ended up. If readers know the recent history of POINT GREY QUEEN, where it is now, if still afloat, as well as the early history (when built and by whom; first owners, etc) please let us know at Western Mariner.

cut at all but that 6-71 was not coming up through the wheelhouse. We used a 980 loader to haul the engine out but the ground was uneven so, to avoid some hideous mishap like the loader pitching forward and landing on the boat or tipping the engine off the slings straight down through the hull, we attached a D9 Cat to the 980 with cable. I sat sweating in the cab of the Cat with both feet on the brake. I think my leg muscles bulked up that night – nothing could have pried my feet from that pedal.

An additional job for us was to

assist the Chevron barge whenever camp ordered in fuel. It was great financially and it felt good to help someone else navigate successfully.

We worked on the Homathko through all of the seasons -- spotted mountain goats on the steep slopes in spring and were chased by horseflies in summer (once for over ten minutes in a fast-moving skiff), heard wolves howl and watched the northern lights dance through fall and winter. And we listened to ice tinkle along the hull at night as we lay in our bunks before Christmas shutdown.

Life was good on the POINT GREY QUEEN, booming up Bute. ◀

Catherine J. Johnson has worked as a logging camp timekeeper and commissary operator, fire weather index calculator and towboat operator. She's lived aboard a 60-ft ketch, a converted fishboat, an old cruiser and a float-house, all with full bookshelves, at least in calm weather. She began her writing and editing career when she moved to town and now freelances to various magazines and publishing houses.

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Marine Link Transportation will continue to operate from its present base at Campbell River Marine Terminal, at Menzies Bay, just North of Campbell River.

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Guy and his staff at Marine Link look forward to continuing service to their many customers.

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