

People have asked for copies of the text of our commentary. Here it is, with a few photos to refresh your memory!

Welcome onboard, ladies and gentlemen. Now that we have left the docks, we are sailing on the South Saskatchewan River and will spend the first half of our cruise moving upstream against the current.

Over on the right bank, during the summer you can see the tents of Saskatoon's popular *Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan* festival. Every year since 1985, professional actors have performed six weeks of Shakespearean theatre – two plays each season.

Across the river on the left bank is the University of Saskatchewan campus, which includes the massive buildings of the Royal University Hospital. The University traces its roots back to 1907, when an Act establishing the University was passed by the Legislative Assembly. The first classes in Arts and Science began in 1909 with a registration of 70 students; in 1912, the first building on campus, the College Building, was opened for student admissions. That attractive graystone building near the top end of the bridge was built to house University Presidents, which it has done to this day. And, in fact, whenever British royalty visits the City, they are accommodated in this grand old house – while the University President of the day is moved temporarily to the Bessborough Hotel across the river downtown.

The first bridge of the four which we will go underneath is the University Bridge. Often called the 25th Street Bridge, it was built between 1913 and 1918, to connect the new university with downtown Saskatoon and was the second bridge in the city built to carry vehicular traffic. Decades ago, the Canadian Navy Reserve used to have a boathouse and dock under the bridge on the right bank; HMCS Unicorn, the Navy Reserve's Saskatoon headquarters, is just a few blocks up from the river on 24th Street.



Saskatoon has been widely known as the *City of Bridges*. There are now eight bridges in the city, two of which carry trains, and six are for rubber-tire vehicles. The new “South” bridge is still under construction, and a little further upstream we will see that one of the bridges – the oldest one – is being re-built.

Now that we have passed under the University Bridge, we are headed up the longest open stretch of water on our tour. We are fortunate in Saskatoon that early municipal and

community leadership agreed that land along the river should be preserved for public access through the establishment of parks.

In several cases, community associations got behind this initiative and helped found - and fund - the development of these parks.

On the left bank, for example, is Cosmopolitan Park which has been deliberately left much as it was found by early settlers from Ontario in the 1880s. A favourite birding area in the city, Cosmopolitan Park includes a lookout point, paved trails at the top, slightly rugged hiking trails closer to the water, and benches and some interpretive signage located throughout.

Over on the right bank is Kiwanis Memorial Park, stretching between the University Bridge and the Broadway Bridge upstream. Much of it was first used as a coal dump and storage yard by the railways up until the early 1930s, Now, it is home to memorials commemorating military personnel who died in World Wars I and II, and a number of commemorative statues to local luminaries such as Governor General Ray Hnatyshyn and broadcaster Denny Carr (a tireless volunteer worker for charity).

Ahead of us in the middle of the park is Saskatoon's "castle on the river", the Delta Bessborough Hotel. Kiwanis park is bounded by Spadina Crescent inshore, and is



overlooked by three other downtown hotels (the Park Town near the University Bridge, the Sheraton Cavalier near "the castle", and the Radisson Hotel near the foot of the Broadway Bridge, as well as four of the community's early churches, beginning with Knox United Church, then St. John's Anglican Cathedral with its very tall brown steeple, then further along, with the black steeple, is St. Paul's Catholic Cathedral. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church is harder to see, hidden away near the foot of

the next bridge alongside the Radisson Hotel and Apartment tower.

The beautiful riverbanks through the city reflect the forethought of communities leaders in service clubs and city councils over the years, in particular the Meewasin Valley Authority. "Meewasin" is the word for "beautiful" in the Cree language (which is why we have named this little ship the *Meewasin Queen*). The Meewasin Valley Authority is an organization – proclaimed as an authority by the provincial government – dedicated to conserving the natural and cultural heritage resources of the South Saskatchewan River Valley in Saskatoon and area. With the support of the province, the City of Saskatoon and the University, Meewasin undertakes programs and projects in river valley education, development and conservation.

Meewasin's jurisdiction centres in Saskatoon and runs approximately 60 km along the river. It encompasses conservation areas, parks, museums, interpretive centres, the university lands, canoe launches, community links, and over 60 km of Meewasin Trail.

The Meewasin Valley Centre, at the end of the Traffic Bridge on the right bank, has many interpretive displays about the history of Saskatoon and the ecology of the river, as well as an attractive gift shop. The Centre is open to the public from nine to five weekdays and noon to five weekends and holidays.

We are often asked how deep the river is. In fact, it is very shallow in most places (only one or two metres deep). Shearwater's boats must carefully follow a channel which is between 2 and 3 metres deep). And, current velocity varies from 1.5 to 8 kilometres per hour. Normal river flow is between 90 and 350 cubic metres per second.

And yes, the river does freeze over every winter – normally. However, the Queen Elizabeth power generating plant south of the city uses river water in its boilers; this warm water is then discharged back into the river, creating a narrow band of warmer water flowing through the city. This keeps the river open under all but the most extreme winter conditions, at least as far as the weir. The warming effect soon dissipates after churning over the weir, and the water freezes from shore to shore. Downstream at the Clarksboro Ferry, the ice is sufficiently thick that a winter road is made across the river at the ferry landing, and even large trucks carrying grain are able to cross.

We are coming alongside the Bessborough Hotel, truly Saskatoon's "Castle on the River". This grand old lady was built by the railroad between 1928 and 1932, but was unable to open until 1935 because of financial woes caused by the Great Depression. The hotel boasts 225 rooms; its modern French Renaissance design is similar to the other famous railway hotels across Canada. The current owners have gone to great length and expense to restore this heritage property to its former grandeur. Design features include 32 unique gargoyle-like statues at front and sides. Of course, Grotosques and gargoyles are normally images of mythological creatures but the ones on the hotel are images of Saskatchewan creatures like buffalo, beaver, moose, and deer (and even a giant bumblebee overlooking 20th Street at the front of the building!)

A number of events take place near the Bessborough Hotel every summer, including the Saskatoon Children's' Festival, the Saskatchewan Jazz Festival, Ukrainian Day in the Park, and the Taste of Saskatchewan food festival.

We will soon be passing under the Broadway Bridge, which was built in 1932 as a "make-work" project during Great Depression. The design and construction of the bridge was overseen by the Dean of Engineering at the University of Saskatchewan.

Only men with families were allowed to get a job. They were paid 25 cents per hour and were laid off once they had earned about \$35. Only shovels and wheelbarrows were used



in the construction, with the goal of getting jobs for as many men as possible. Work proceeded 24 hours every day over 11 months through one of the coldest winters on record in Saskatoon; someone recently commented that building a bridge nowadays would require over eleven months of pre-feasibility studies before anyone even *picked up* a shovel!

The Broadway Bridge connects the Broadway district on the east (left) bank to the City's downtown. Under the west end of the bridge is the emergency boat launch; Saskatoon Fire and Protective Services operates its rescue boat from that location; on many tours we see the rescue crews with their divers practising on the river. The unit prides itself in being launched and ready to go within six minutes of a call-out, winter and summer.

After passing under the Broadway Bridge, we change parks on both sides of the river. On the left bank is the beginning of Rotary Park, which continues past the next bridge. On the right bank is a little area called Friendship Park, with two features: the Meewasin Valley Centre near the foot of the next bridge, and a statue of Gabriel Dumont. Dumont was the military leader of the Métis militia which fought against the Canadian army during the Northwest Resistance in 1885.

Dumont was a brilliant military strategist, and despite being seriously out-gunned and out-manned by the government forces, managed to stave off defeat for a considerable time. However, the Métis were eventually defeated at the Battle of Batoche (downriver north of the City), and their political leader Louis Riel was captured and taken to Regina, where he was later hanged for treason. Gabriel Dumont managed to escape to the USA where he worked for six years with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as sharp shooter, buffalo hunter and trick rider. Dumont was eventually pardoned by the Canadian government and came home to become a ferry operator downriver at Hague.

Ahead of us now is the Traffic Bridge. Built in 1907, and variously known as the Victoria Bridge or the Iron Bridge, this was, nevertheless, the first traffic bridge ever built in the community and it replaced a ferry operating at the same location. The bridge almost didn't make it to its own centennial birthday party; it was closed for evaluation and repair in the fall of 2005 and most of 2006, then re-opened until the late summer of 2010 when it was determined that the old bridge was beyond repair and needed to be replaced.

When it was built, the Traffic Bridge united the settlements of Nutana on the left bank and Riversdale on the west side, creating what is now the City of Saskatoon.



A year after being built, the bridge became the scene of Saskatoon's only maritime disaster when a 135 – foot stern-wheeler named the *City of Medicine Hat* came downriver from Alberta into Saskatoon, got caught in some telegraph wires and crashed into one of the bridge piers, where she capsized and sank. This, of course, spelled the end of the ship and, in fact, the end of commercial shipping on the South Saskatchewan

river... that was the bad news. The good news was that the passengers had already been put off upriver while the Captain and crew negotiated passage through the bridges. After the collision, the crew was able to clamber up onto the bridge with help of ropes and ladders while the wrecked ship lay on her side on the sandy river bottom, so no lives were lost.

One hundred years later, in September, 2008, this vessel – the *Meewasin Queen* – together with the Fire Department dive team and the engineering firm Stantec, spent a week searching for artefacts from the wreck. Earlier, the dive team had found the ship's anchor near the Broadway Bridge, and the volunteer archaeological expedition yielded what appear to be a number of other pieces from the ship. A full-length feature documentary about the wreck and the expedition was screened two years later at Saskatoon's Broadway Theatre. (www.laststeamship.com)

On the left bank past the Traffic Bridge is more of Rotary Park, lined as it is with apartments and condominiums. Over on the right bank opposite Rotary Park is the newest river-side park: River Landing. Up until a few years ago, it was home to the Gathercole Building, Saskatoon's first Technical High School, built in 1911. There has been a 20-year discussion - sometimes heated - about what should be done with this part of town, and finally, the first phase of a massive re-development project is well underway. New enhancements to the downtown include the new waterfront park system, water gardens, suspension bridges, boat docks and - back up from the shore, enhancements to the farmers' market, the Remai Arts Centre and Persephone Theatre, new shops and restaurants. Construction is expected to begin soon for a combined hotel, condominium and retail development, as well as a new building which will house the Art Gallery of Saskatchewan. It is a massive re-development project for a little city like Saskatoon.



River Landing follows the shore on the right bank, under the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge and around the corner to Victoria Park. This bridge was opened in 1968 at the location of the first train bridge built when railroad came to the city; it is often called the "freeway bridge" or the "Idylwyld bridge" because Idylwyld Drive, the city's principal north-south thoroughfare, passes over the top.

As we passed under the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge (named after a former Saskatoon mayor who also served in the Canadian Senate), passengers will have noticed a bird or two (or perhaps twelve hundred or so) up in the bridge "rafters". If the bridge engineers had harboured a secret yearning to build a birdhouse, they couldn't have done better! The pigeons who nest and roost up under the bridge, however, have a stronger motivation than a nice view: as long as they are up under the bridge, they are safely out of the way of the peregrine falcons which nest high above the city atop the Bessborough Hotel!

Past the bridge (and, incidentally, over the deepest part of the river along our journey - as deep as six metres) we are coming to the end of the riverfront park at River Landing. Part way up the hill you can see the old pump house that was associated with the coal-fired power generating station (the A.L. Cole power plant) which used to be on the top of the riverbank. The first part of the pump house - the water tower to the left of the structure - was built in 1911, and significant additions were made in 1929 and as recently as 1954. The Farmers' Market is up behind the pump house, where Avenue A crosses 19th Street.

Over on the left bank is Saskatchewan Crescent West, the only place in the city where

private property comes down to river's edge. Shortly after real estate promoter and temperance leader John Lake came out from Ontario to start a temperance colony (no alcohol) at what would become Saskatoon, his band of settlers surveyed some lots down to the river and divided them up amongst themselves. In the years since, community leaders decided no more private property should be surveyed to the river shore, and that everything along the river should remain public land. Here, a number of the old houses remain, but most have been replaced with new - and very expensive - houses, often on double-sized lots along the shore.

Along the riverbank on the starboard side of the boat you can see Victoria Park, one of the oldest parks in the city. It is home to a boathouse which houses the Saskatoon Rowing, Canoeing, and Kayaking clubs, as well as an extensive and well-used skateboard park and a large outdoor swimming pool. Past the boathouse is the city's water treatment plant with its settling dome and storage silos.

If you look away upstream you can see the last of Saskatoon's seven bridges - the Canadian National Railway bridge. It is often referred to as the Grand Trunk Railway bridge, after the early railway company that ultimately became the CNR.

Further along the left bank, near where our little ship comes about and heads back downstream, is Gabriel Dumont Park and - even further south near the CNR Bridge - lies Diefenbaker Park, named after a Saskatchewan-raised Canadian Prime Minister. There is a museum about the late John Diefenbaker in the University of Saskatchewan grounds, across the river from our docks where we boarded this tour.

The Saskatchewan River basin is the second largest river system in North America (only the Mississippi and Missouri river system is larger).

The South Saskatchewan is made up of four rivers, all with their beginnings on the east slope of the Rockies:

- The Red Deer River starts from the Saskatchewan Glacier west of Edmonton
- The Bow River runs through Calgary
- The Old Man River flows through Lethbridge
- The St. Mary's River starts in the foothills of Montana

These rivers all join in eastern Alberta, flow east as the South Saskatchewan through Lake Diefenbaker, over the Gardiner Dam and power generating station, through Saskatoon and heads north. About 100 miles downriver, the South Saskatchewan and the North

Saskatchewan River meet at The Forks, east of Prince Albert. Together they flow into the top end of Lake Winnipeg in northern Manitoba, which in turn empties into Hudson's Bay and the Arctic Ocean through the Nelson River.

In the early days of settlement on the Canadian prairies, the rivers – including the South Saskatchewan which we are on – served as major transportation links for furs, lumber, supplies, livestock and settlers. Well known – and huge – riverboats like the *Northcote*, the *Marquis*, the *North West*, the *Baroness*, the *Alberta*, the *Manitoba* and of course the ill-fated *City of Medicine Hat*, travelled the north and south branches of the rivers in the late 1800s. However, in the early 1900's, these ships and the unpredictable rivers lost out to the railway as the transportation system of choice.

While never established as a port city, Saskatoon is situated on a navigable river, where the federal Government of Canada has jurisdiction over navigation. The river in Saskatoon can get quite busy. There are canoe, kayak, and rowing clubs training daily throughout the summer, and - especially on hot summer afternoons and evenings - many boaters use the river with ski and wakeboard boats and personal watercraft ("sea-doo's") as well as small family runabouts and pontoon boats.

Saskatoon Fire and Protective Services operates a river rescue service with a well-outfitted jet boat and personnel drawn from the city's firefighting teams, who can often be seen practising their search and rescue techniques and diving skills.

Even the Canadian Navy has a footprint in Saskatoon. *HMCS Unicorn*, an important part of the city for over seventy years, was established in 1923 and commissioned as a land-based ship for the Navy Reserve in November 1941.



These days, Navy Reserve units are tasked with Coastal Defence, Port Security and Naval Control of Shipping. The Reserve operates Canada's Kingston Class Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels, one of which, #709, is the *HMCS Saskatoon*, (left)

stationed on Canada's west coast.

Shearwater River Cruises has been operating in Saskatoon since 1996. The motor vessel *Saskatoon Princess* was purchased and brought to Saskatoon in 2003; she was originally named the *Queen of Ottawa* and travelled the Rideau Canal in downtown Ottawa. The *Princess* usually serves as our dinner and charter boat. In the fall of 2007, Shearwater purchased the former *Lady Chesley*, which had operated on the Red River north of Selkirk, Manitoba. She has been fitted with a new Tier 3 diesel engine and duo-prop drive and re-named the *Meewasin Queen*.

If you have any questions about what you see along the river, our stewards will be happy to help you. In the meantime, please enjoy the rest of your cruise, and thank you for coming along with us onboard the *Meewasin Queen*.

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