

The Lap of Luxury

Historians call the 1890s the “Gilded Age,” and in many ways, the last decade of the 19th century was the first in which conspicuous consumption on a grand scale became an American trademark. There would be other decades in American history – the 1920s and the 1990s – in which conspicuous consumption on a similarly grand scale dominated the headlines, but the 1890s possessed a certain cachet that set them apart from the rest of American history.



Fancy Great Lakes yachts defined the style of the Gilded Age of the 1890s and the early 20th Century. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior, K. E. Thro collection)

Nowhere was that self-indulgence more elegantly displayed than in maritime passenger travel. The Cunard and White Star Lines whisked Americans to Europe in understated elegance, and the White Flyers of James J. Hill’s Northern Steamship Company offered Midwesterners the chance to partake in luxurious travel on the Great Lakes. But the truly rich at the turn of the 20th century didn’t necessarily travel on ocean liners or gleaming white Great Lakes passenger vessels. If the rich had to get to Duluth to inspect their iron mines or timber holdings, then they were more likely to venture there by private yacht than by more pedestrian methods.

James J. Hill perhaps best defined the image of a Gilded Age entrepreneur. Hill’s railroads and steamship lines created a seamless transportation network across the northern third of the United States that included the Great Lakes. In 1900, Hill went to the East Coast to purchase the largest steam yacht then available in Atlantic Ocean shipyards. The *Eleanor* had been built by Charles Hanscom of the Bath Iron Works in Maine during 1893 and 1894. With a triple expansion steam engine of 1,000-horsepower, the 240-foot steel yacht was capable of speeds of 14 knots. Even under sail, the *Eleanor’s* 11,000 square feet of sail could propel the vessel at six knots.¹

The *Eleanor* passed through several hands before Hill purchased it for \$150,000 in 1900. An avid angler, Hill had spent much of the 1890s traveling to New Brunswick to fish for Atlantic salmon. He reasoned that the yacht,

which he renamed *Wacouta*, would allow him to travel and entertain in style.² And what style. The *Wacouta* carried a crew of 45 and had accommodations for 16 passengers. There were 10 staterooms, a four-cabin suite on deck, a formal dining room, main saloon, a social hall, six bathrooms and eight water closets. Two fireplaces constructed of Venetian tile dominated the dining room and main saloon. A piano graced the social hall, and the staterooms boasted Tiffany lamps, oak parquet floors, oriental rugs and mahogany furniture.³

In early July 1900, Hill took the *Wacouta* to the St. John's River in Quebec where he leased a section of the shore from the Canadian government. Hill and his party boated 236 salmon averaging 13 pounds apiece. Leaving the *Wacouta* in Canada, Hill and his business associates returned to Buffalo, where they were joined by Hill's wife, Mary, and most of his children. When the *Wacouta* arrived from Quebec, Hill and his family immediately boarded the vessel for a cruise of the Great Lakes. Four days later, the *Wacouta* anchored at the foot of 5th Avenue West in Duluth. It was the first and only time Hill's palatial yacht would visit the Twin Ports. Hill's son, Louis, joined the party in Duluth, and for the next six weeks, the *Wacouta* toured Lake Superior. The trip was marred by a boiler accident off Isle Royale in late July in which two crewmembers were scalded to death, but Hill family members spent much of August and September fishing and exploring Isle Royale, the Apostle Islands and the Canadian North Shore.⁴

The *Wacouta* wasn't the only luxury yacht to call upon the Twin Ports. Thomas F. Cole, a Duluth-based mining entrepreneur, brought his 214-foot steel yacht *Alvina* to the Twin Ports in the summer of 1909.⁵ Built in Wilmington, Delaware in 1901, *Alvina* steamed across the Great Lakes at 16 knots. Like the *Wacouta*, *Alvina* included every creature comfort then known. The yacht had staterooms for the owner and up to 20 guests, as well as quarters for a crew of 30 to 35. The library, lounge, dining room and cabins were furnished in mahogany, and outfitted with exquisite damask sofas and chairs. *Alvina* had her own light plant for generating electricity, and an ice-maker provided ice cubes for guests' drinks.

Unlike *Wacouta*, *Alvina* spent most of 1909, 1910 and 1911 cruising Lake Superior. In 1911, the vessel joined the *USS Don Juan de Austria*, a Spanish-American War prize and flagship of the Michigan Militia, for ceremonies honoring the 25th anniversary of the Michigan College of Mines in Houghton.⁶ Despite rumors to the contrary, *Alvina* never again visited Duluth after the 1911 season. Cole moved to New York in 1917 to look after his extensive ownership interests in North American copper and silver mines, and he sold the yacht to the Russian government.⁷

Other Duluth entrepreneurs followed Cole's lead. In 1910, Russell Alger, the Michigan lumberman who controlled one of the largest sawmill enterprises at the Head of the Lakes, brought his steam yacht *Colonia* to Duluth. Marshall Alworth, the Duluth attorney who had been Wilhelm Boeing's attorney in the ill-fated attempt some years before to charge a toll at the Duluth Ship Canal, docked his gasoline-powered yacht *Oneida* in Duluth for a number of

summers in the 1910s. Chester Congdon, another Duluth attorney with extensive interests in the Lake Superior mining and timber industries, brought up his 50-foot yacht, *Hesperia*, for the 1911 cruising season.⁸ Ebenezer Hawkins, who had made his fortune in mining and banking in northern Minnesota, sailed the 98-foot *Itasca* across Lake Superior in the 1910s before turning the yacht over to the government for war service in 1918.⁹

The golden age of steam yachts on the Great Lakes disappeared after World War I, as rail, highway and air travel became more widespread. Uncounted thousands of immigrants had crossed Lake Superior in the holds of package freighters in the period between 1870 and 1900. Only a handful of Americans could afford the upkeep and maintenance of the steam yachts that defined style in the Gilded Age and early 20th century.

Exemplifying the utter demise of the Gilded Age was the dramatic transformation of the luxurious yacht *Winyah* in 1925 from one of the most lavish vessels of its class to a fish boat. *Winyah* had been constructed at Sparrows Point, Maryland, in 1894 as Andrew Carnegie's private yacht *Dungeness*, and her owner spared no expense to make her one of the showiest such vessels in North America. She cost Carnegie \$490,000, the equivalent of a software fortune in the 21st century. She was 115 feet long, with two tall schooner-rigged masts, a "rakish" oversized smokestack and a clipper bow.

Sail & Sweep yachting magazine described the ship in October 1902: "The cabin and all interior woodwork is finished in white enamel, striped and decorated artistically with gold. The upholstery is red plush throughout, offering a striking contrast to the enamel finish. A handsome mahogany sideboard forms part of the main cabin. Forward is a mahogany deckhouse beautifully fitted...as a dining room (with) a large double mahogany staircase leading to the main cabin below..."¹⁰

Dungeness was purchased from the Carnegies in 1898 by lumberman Frank W. Fletcher of Alpena, Michigan, and brought into the Great Lakes under her new name, *Winyah*. She became flagship of the fashionable Tawas Beach Yachting Association's Lake Huron fleet and took Fletcher's family, business associates and guests on tours of Georgian Bay's picturesque islands for the next 20 years, all the time serving as something of an icon for eastern Michigan's wealthy lumber barons. After World War I, however, the days of icons for America's rich had come to an end. Fletcher sold his beautiful *Winyah* to Martin, Alex and Otto Christiansen of Duluth in 1925.

The Christiansens removed the yacht's graceful spars and her saucy bowsprit, and they enclosed her main deck with a plain wooden cabin. They fitted her up as a coastal freighter to carry passengers and fishing supplies up the Minnesota North Shore and to bring back fresh fish to Duluth. She became a regular visitor to every dock and landing between the Duluth-Superior harbor and Port Arthur. After the loss of the Booth Line steamer *America* off Isle Royale's Washington Harbor in June 1928, *Winyah* also became the sole link to

the island's commercial fishing community.¹¹

When the Christiansens bought the diesel-powered *Detroit* in 1944, the steam-driven *Winyah* was relegated to the role of "relief boat," and she was idled for the next several years. Finally, in 1950, the 56-year old former yacht was sold and subsequently broken up for scrap in a slip on Duluth's Garfield Avenue in 1953. By that time she had become just a quaint reminder of the glory days that were so quickly fading from memory.¹²

¹ Thomas C. Buckley, "The Great Lakes Cruise of the Steam Yacht *Wacouta*," *Nor'Easter*, v.15, no.3, May-June 1990, Part I, p.1. The yacht had been built originally for the heir of a textile manufacturing fortune.

² *Ibid.*, p.3. *Wacouta* is a Lakota word that means "red wing."

³ *Ibid.*, p.2 The yacht had an isolated light plant which provided electricity for 150 incandescent bulbs, electric fans, and an electric ice-maker.

⁴ Buckley, "The Great Lakes Cruise of the Steam Yacht *Wacouta*," *Nor'Easter*, v.15, no.4, July-August 1990, Part II, pp.1-5. The *Wacouta* never came back to the Great Lakes. Hill used the yacht to transport himself and guests from New York to his favorite Quebec fishing rivers until he died. After his death, the *Wacouta* was sold, renamed the *USS Harvard* and became a patrol boat during World War I. She ended her days as the *Palermo*, an Italian vessel, when she hit a mine and sunk in the Adriatic Sea in 1944.

⁵ Buckley, "Affluence at the Arrowhead: Thomas F. Cole, the *Alvina*, and the Arrival of Power Yachts at Duluth," *Nor'Easter*, v.21, no.4, July-August 1996. Cole and Duluth investors Chester Congdon and Guilford G. Hartley were responsible for opening up the western end of the Mesabi Range in the early 1900s. The planned town of Coleraine was named in Cole's honor.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3. Although he never attended the prestigious Michigan College of Mines, Cole had been born and raised in the Copper Country.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6. See Also, Van Brunt, [Duluth and St. Louis County](#), p.526. The U.S. Navy's voracious need to ramp up the fleet in World War I claimed many of the yachts that plied the Lakes between 1900 and 1917.

¹⁰ [Sail & Sweep](#), October 1902, p. 185.

¹¹ Wolff, [Shipwrecks of Lake Superior](#), pp.130-132. By 1928, the completion of an all-weather road from Duluth to the Canadian border along the North Shore of Lake Superior spelled the beginning of the end for passenger and package freight service between the Twin Ports and the Canadian Lakehead.

¹² *Duluth News-Tribune*, Sept. 10, 1950.