



2 CENTURIES AFLOAT

For 200 years, the Millersburg Ferry has crisscrossed the Susquehanna.

BY DON HELIN

The sun peeked above the horizon, casting a long shadow across the river as the boatman put his long pole into the water and pushed off the eastern shore of the Susquehanna River, careful to check the current. He loved the dawn. Silent. Peaceful.

In 1817, there were no fancy wineries or restaurants along the great road (now Route 11/15), no trains, no bridges across the Susquehanna River, and believe it or not, no Red Rabbit Drive-In. There were only a few houses scattered in the areas where Liverpool, Newport, Duncannon and Marysville are now. None of these early log homes would have electricity or indoor plumbing for another 100 years.

“Ferries were critical to farmers and trappers working the fields and iron mines of the land,” said Dennis Hocker, a member of the Perry County Historical Society. “The founders of towns normally reserved ferry rights for their own early transportation and income.”

Nestled along the Susquehanna River at the mouth of the Wiconisco Creek, just north of Berry Mountain, lies the Victorian hamlet of Millersburg, founded by Daniel Miller in 1807. Ten years later, Michael Crow established what would become a permanent ferry crossing, said Melanie Morrison of the Millersburg Ferry Association.

“Even though Mr. Crow may have operated the ferry before 1817, it is a written lease that establishes the date of continuous operation at this location,” she said.

The Millersburg Ferry, first known as Crow’s Ferry, is the last ferry operating on the Susquehanna River. It runs from Millersburg in Dauphin County to Buffalo Township in Perry County.

TWO BOATS

Today, the Roaring Bull V and the Falcon III continue the 200-year-old tradition of the Millersburg Ferry.

The hulls of both boats are built of white pine, and the bows of each boat have a covered open deck and a pilothouse. They are powered by 57-horsepower diesel engines with hydraulic systems. Each ferry can accommodate as many as four vehicles or 20-plus motorcycles. Walk-on passengers are most welcome.

Much has changed over its 200-year history, other things not so much.

When the ferry is running, it’s still the quickest way to get from Millersburg to Liverpool, taking about 20 minutes for the one-way trip of nine-tenths of a mile. Otherwise, the nearest crossings are bridges 29 miles upriver at Sunbury or 15 miles downriver at Clark’s Ferry.

In an average season, assuming favorable river conditions, some 20,000 passengers buy a ticket for the ferry. Most are tourists, though the Amish have long depended on the ferry as a vital means of transport across the river.

YEAR AFTER YEAR

Over the two centuries, numerous families have owned the ferry. In recent times, Robert Wallis became the sole owner in 1972, and the Community

Bank of Millersburg purchased it in 1990, donating it to the Millersburg Chamber of Commerce. The chamber formed the association to oversee the ferry’s operations, run by a nine-member, working board of directors.

“Some do the actual repairs and maintenance on the boats, and others take care of fundraising and grant-writing,” Morrison said. “Each member of the board brings a unique talent and perspective to the board, which keeps the board successfully operating year after year.”

The Millersburg Ferry Boat Association currently employs four captains, six first mates and one operations manager. They are all part-time employees, passionate about their positions.

Without skilled captains and first mates, the association would not be able to remain in operation. The association works closely with the U.S. Coast Guard to ensure the program is run in compliance with all rules and regulations.

“We’re optimistic about the future,”

Morrison said. “Due to the recent retirement of Capt. Donald Lebo this year, who piloted the ferry for 27 years, we had to reduce the operating schedule from seven days per week to four days per week.”

This, he said, got the attention of the local community, and the board now has a number of people interested in becoming captains.

In August 2006, the Pennsylvania Historic Commission approved the nomination of the Millersburg Ferry to the National Registry of Historic Sites. This recognition celebrates the ferry’s significant historic impact to the state and nation. The boats themselves are not registered as historic landmarks as they are not stationary objects.

“I receive many positive reviews on our boats and crew,” Morrison said. “It’s a pleasure hearing how well they are all doing. Our crews make guests feel welcome and answer their questions regarding the history of the ferry and the general operations of the boats.” **B**

IF YOU GO

The Millersburg Ferry is located on River Street, Millersburg. It’s open Monday, Friday and on the weekends from May through October (closed Tuesday through Thursday). Before going, always check the website to ensure service has not been interrupted. The ferry also is available for private charters during off-hours in the regular season. For more information, call 717-692-2442 or visit www.millersburgferry.org.