

I slowly pulled away from the dock at Napinka, the steam engines chugging happily as the paddle wheels cut effortlessly through the waters of the Souris River. We were heading for Scotia, North Dakota, on this beautiful Sunday afternoon aboard the Empress of Ireland, my pride and joy!

My name is Hunt Large, but to the folks along the Souris River route, I'm known as Captain Large.



The "Captain"

Many folks enjoy these day trips on the river. I play my banjo, and of course sing a few Irish tunes that my dad taught me. My dad could tell the most amazing stories of growing up in Ireland - and then crossing the big waters to Canada on the great ship. Maybe that's what inspired me to build this paddlewheel. All my life I wanted to build a boat and I finally set to doing it.

I used plank flooring from an old CPR boxcar to build the bottom of the boat. Next, I salvaged material from an old dismantled house, and two Sawyer-Massey engines from two old steamers. I built the two large metal paddle wheels myself, from tractor traction wheels – it was perfect!

Folks would ask 'what is a blacksmith doing building a riverboat in the middle of the prairies?!' (laugh) I've been a blacksmith for years. Opened up my shop in Coulter around

1902. Folks knew I could fix most any piece of machinery – even made a few of them too. I was even able to help a fella with his new-fangled horseless carriage that wouldn't run. There's a future there, but they need to work out the kinks!

I snatched every chance to work on my boat - even on Sundays – well, until the pastor next door paid me a visit – said I was disrupting his church service with my hammering – maybe my singing as well! So, out of respect for the pastor, and the Good Lord, I kept the Sabbath for a day of rest – I think my family liked that too!

Ah, the Empress ... it was just this spring when we launched her on the Souris. I say 'we' because the whole community came out – some to cheer me on and some to watch me fail. Some said she'd never float but float she did!



Launching the Empress in 1909.

It's been a dandy summer riverboating down the Souris, but I have my eye on bigger waters. I'd like to paddle the Assiniboine next year. They say the Brandon Fair of 1910 will be a big one and I can make some good money there!

I'd have to figure out how to get her there – probably by train I always love a good challenge!

Betty Sawatzky adapted 'The Empress of Ireland' from a story written for Vantage Point 4