



*Let's go to*  
**BOB-LO**  
*The Isle of Recreation*  
**5 SAILINGS DAILY**  
 FOOT OF WOODWARD  
 DETROIT

# Long Live Bob-Lo!

by David L. Newman, Issue #21, February 2002

A hot summer day, a few dollars in your pocket and the urge for fun was once a recipe for a trip to Bob-Lo Island, a Canadian island with a strong American accent. Who could forget the Wild Mouse roller coaster, the Dodge-em cars — or Captain Bob-Lo putting his hat on some lucky kid?

Situated eighteen miles southwest of Windsor, Bob-Lo was named Bois Blanc by the French, due to the birch and beech trees that once covered the approximately half-mile wide by three-mile long island.

The area's non-French residents called the island Bob-Lo, since they couldn't pronounce Bois Blanc properly. The name stuck for years and was officially accepted by the owners and area residents in 1949.

The island's written history dates to the 1700's when French Catholic priests set up a mission for the Huron Indians residing in the area. During the War of 1812, the great Shawnee Indian Chief, Tecumseh, set up his headquarters there. Three block houses were constructed on the island in the 1830's and Bois Blanc was a stepping stone for runaway slaves during the American Civil War.

A lighthouse was built in 1839 on the southern side of the island to guide ships into the narrow straights behind Bois Blanc. In the 1850's, Colonel Arthur Rankin purchased the island from the government for \$40 including 225 acres, but could not buy the remaining 14, as they were leased for life to the lighthouse keeper, Captain James Hackett.

In 1869 the island was sold to Rankin's son, Arthur McKee Rankin, a well-known stage actor in New York. He built an elaborate home and held grand parties there.

Rankin also stocked the island with deer, elk and wild turkey.

The island was later sold to Colonel John Atkinson and James A. Randall, who built a home on the site of one of the block houses. The island's next owner was the Detroit, Belle Isle and Windsor Ferry Company. In 1898 the Bob-Lo Excursion Company was born.

## The Bob-Lo Steamers

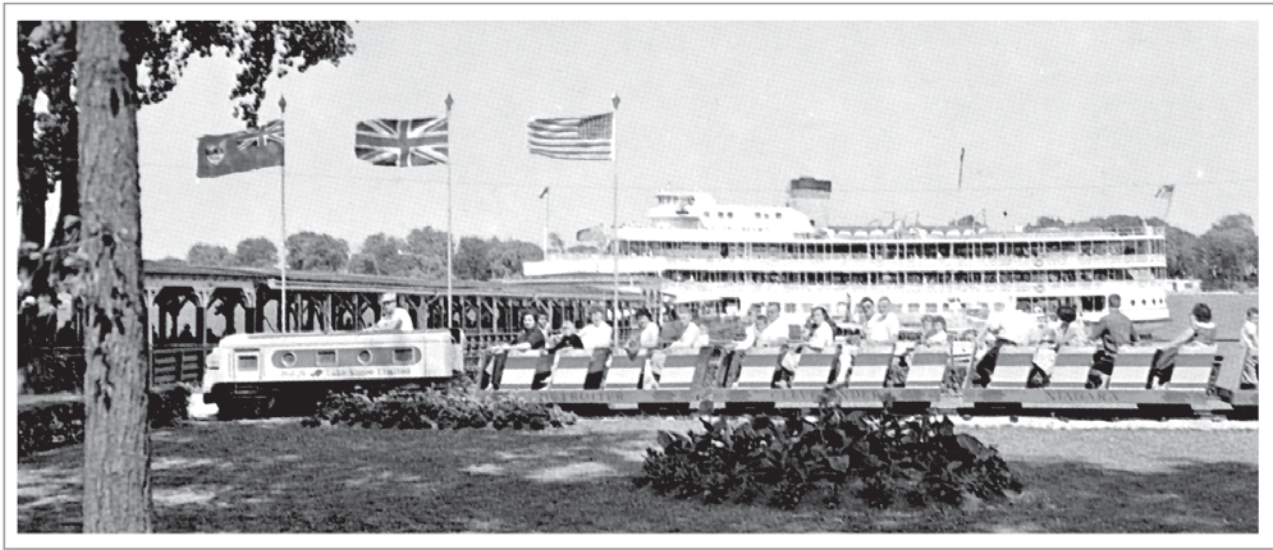
The first steamer to carry passengers to Bob-Lo was the ferry Promise. Frank E. Kirby designed the next two steamers: the Columbia, built in 1902, and the Ste. Claire, built in 1910. The Columbia's first trip was July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1902; the Ste. Claire's launching was May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1910 and her first trip was later that year. The Ste. Claire was named after Lake St. Clair and St. Clair River, which in turn reflects the fact that the explorer Robert de La Salle paddled through the two waterways during the feast of Ste. Claire. The Columbia, named after Christopher Columbus, celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2002. She is the oldest steamer in the USA, with the exception of vessels classed as ferries.

*Top: The Ste. Claire, built in 1910, carried passengers for over 70 years.*

*Right: The Bob-Lo dock in Detroit, early 1900's — price of steamer ride to "Bois Blanc" was 25¢.*

*Photos: Dave L. Newman Collection*





*In 1958, Bob-Lo added trains rides that circled the park. Above is the S.S. Ste. Claire (a Browning Line) at Bob-Lo dock and one of two scenic railway trains making a two mile trip around the island. Photo David L. Newman Collection*

Both steamers are propeller driven, as were all North American steamers. The Ste. Claire is 197 feet long, 65 feet wide and 14 feet deep. Her tonnage is 870 grt and 507 nrt. The engine is a triple expansion steam with 1083 horsepower; she can carry 2,500 people.

The Ste. Clair and the Columbia, which served 81 years on a single run – a record unequalled in U.S. Maritime history – are the last of the classic excursion steamers in the U.S.

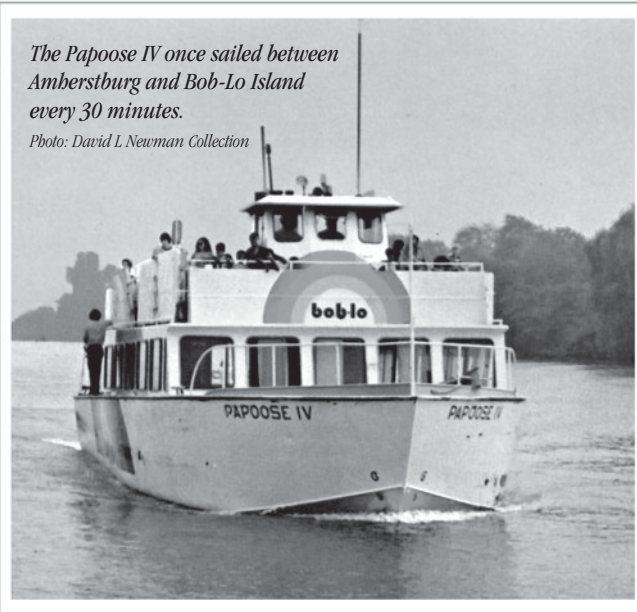
### U.S. Military Invade Bob-Lo

The first attractions to the island were quite simple. There was the trip to the island, picnicking and a carousel. Henry Ford had famous Detroit architect Albert Kahn design and build the stone pavilion.

During World War I, U.S. military personnel were not to leave the country when on leave in Michigan. The military officials, however, made an exception for Bob-Lo, deeming it a hardship not to let military men relax there with their ladies.

*The Papoose IV once sailed between Amherstburg and Bob-Lo Island every 30 minutes.*

*Photo: David L. Newman Collection*



### An Amusement Park is Born

In 1949, bankruptcy threatened the island park. Windsor Mayor Art Reaume wanted the island to be designated a National Park but the Brownings family stepped in and bought the property and the steamships.

The Brownings transformed the island into an amusement park. They built roller coasters, rides, a ferris wheel, a fun house, a dance hall and an antique car exhibit. The zoo held 300 exotic animals – in 1972, seven baboons escaped their pens and roamed free; the last one was finally captured after being coaxed out of the fun house. The miniature railroad that went around the island was built in the 1960's.

In 1961 the dock area was upgraded. The freighter Queenston was stripped and sunk in place as a dock.

In 1972, three people were arrested for causing a disturbance on one of the ships. They ran around yelling, "the ship is sinking!" Twenty-three people were injured in the melee.

In 1973 the Thunder Bolt roller coaster was constructed. Built of steel, it thrilled the crowds that lined up to ride it. The next addition was a log flume. In 1978, the 100-year-old carousel was restored and returned to active service.

### Captain Bob-Lo

Getting to the island from the Canadian side was easy. A small ferry called the Papoose carried passengers to Bois Blanc from Amherstburg. From the American side you boarded at the foot of Woodward Avenue, later the Cobo Hall area, then lastly the Gibraltar area.

Once on the Columbia or Ste. Claire, you could take in the beautiful view of the shorelines on both sides for the trip, which lasted over an hour.

For the children there was Captain Bob-Lo! He was a small man appropriately named Joe Short, who amused the children as a clown for the Ringling Brothers Circus. In this 1960 photo (at right), he has a good grip on the arm of a little girl who happens to be my girlfriend, Joan. Her brother, Robert is to his right. Captain Bob-Lo would hand out colouring books and





*The Bob-Lo steamer Columbia, seen next to one of the two miniature trains, was built in 1902, and named after Christopher Columbus, celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2002. photos David L. Newman Collection*

small items to amuse the kids on the trips. He always wore an oversized hat, binoculars and carried a sceptre. Joe worked on the ships until he retired, at 90 years of age. He passed away the following year.

### Island for Sale

The Brownings sold the island in 1979. Several owners followed, including IBC (owners of the Harlem Globetrotters) and AAA Michigan.

In 1987, U.S. Immigration people and Ontario officials spent all day on the island, rounding up members of the Outlaws, a motorcycle club.

### End of an Era

In 1990 the old carousel, whose figures were made by famous carousel maker Marcus Illions, was auctioned off. The top price paid was for a deer – \$34,000 U.S. Next was a horse that went for \$21,500 U.S.

Labour Day 1991 – the last ferry ride, the final bag of cotton candy – Bob-Lo Island closes. In 1992 the two steamships were named as national monuments. So ended a long and illustrious era for Windsor and Detroit residents. All that remains are snapshots, souvenirs and memories.

LONG LIVE BOB-LO!



*Adults and kiddies' fire engine, Bob-Lo Island Park.*

### R.J. Cyr & Bob-Lo Connection

I read David Newman's article with great interest, as I have many fond memories of the island.

By way of correction, however, the Log Flume was installed in 1972, followed by the Thunder Bolt roller coaster in 1974. The roller coaster was an innovative design for the time and one of the first all-steel rides in North America. It was designed and fabricated in Japan, and when the amusement park closed, it was unbolted and shipped to Mexico.

Both rides were installed by R. J. Cyr Co. of Windsor. The rides were initially tested using sand bags, but when it came time to be the first human riders, Lorenzo (Red) Browning, owner of the island and my dad, Ray (R.J.) Cyr took the front seats. After they had deemed it "safe," they consented to give my sister and I the second seats.

**Randy Cyr, Windsor, Issue #22, March 2002**

### Bob-Lo Perks

My younger brother and I were still in school during WWII and one of our summer jobs was on Bob-Lo Island. It was probably 1943 or '44, and it was as much fun as it was work. I don't recall the pay, but it included room and board. We stayed on the island for the summer in a 'men-only' dormitory. The female summer help had to leave on the Papoose before it quit running each night. My brother and I worked at the coffee/hamburger stand, which was at a corner of the cafeteria building. Getting to know the operators got us some free amusement rides – just one of the perks. I think Matti Holli led the dance band at the big pavilion that summer. It had a very impressive wooden floor as I remember.

The souvenir shot-glass [right] was picked up at a yard sale in 2001 in Charing Cross, just south of Chatham. I was going to send one to my brother but never got around to it.

**Ron Lemon, Blenheim, Issue #27, September 2002**

