

Brunette – Ruth – Sylph – Pathfinder

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Originally built as the Brunette in 1882 by Byerly, Hillman and Streaker of Camden, New Jersey, the wooden vessel was classified as a “Steam Yacht” and measured 82 feet in overall, from bowsprit to stern. She carried two masts in addition to her powerful marine engine. Her total cost of building and equipment was reportedly \$37,000.

Around 1885, the Brunette was purchased by former President Grover Cleveland as his personal pleasure yacht. She was named for his eldest daughter Ruth and was fitted out in a very luxurious manner. All of the woodwork was black walnut and mahogany. The stanchions and handrails were all brass. And she was fitted with Japanese silk tapestries.

The Ruth was able to make nearly 25 miles per hour and was by far the speediest yacht of her kind in the eastern waters. She traveled along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Florida.

Following the ownership by President Cleveland, the Ruth was sold to a navigation company which placed her on the Niagara River as a sightseeing steamer where she stayed for a few years. She was then sold and used as the flagship for the Chicago Yacht Club.

Leon G. Smith & Company of Muskegon purchased the craft from L. Cramer of Chicago and brought her to Muskegon. After a complete overhaul, the vessel was sold to the newly organized Whitehall Ferry and Transportation Company in 1903.

The new transportation company was made of up the following individuals: W. F. Nufer and Dr. Charles F. Smith of Whitehall; Dr. W. V. Chapman of Muskegon; William J. Baxter and Harry O'Connell of Montague. Harry O'Connell held 2 shares of the company and the other each held 4 ½ shares.

Mr. Baxter, who had 20 years of experience in marine affairs and navigation was the Captain of the vessel. Harry O'Connell was the Engineer. Joe O'Connell was hired as the Fireman.

The Steamer Ruth made her first appearance on White Lake on June 29, 1903.

In July 1903, the White Lake Yacht Club chartered the steamer Ruth for the day. Beerman's Band from Muskegon was also on board to provide music during the day.

In 1906, the owners, George and Frank Moon of Buffalo, New York, changed the name of the vessel from Ruth to Sylph.

In 1907, the yacht was taken to Mackinaw by a private party consisting of Dr. & Mrs. Vernon A. Chapman, Dr. & Mrs. Gayfree Ellison, and Mrs. Francis Smith. Dr. Chapman was part owner. It was expected the vessel would operate between Mackinaw and Toppin-a-bee for the summer. However, she ended up in Cheboygan, was used on Mullet Lake and later on the Cheboygan River where she was given her worst treatment – often times plowing through a heavy drive of logs coming down the river. Although badly battered from this experience, her seaworthiness was never in question.

Eventually, she made her way back to White Lake.

Captain Isaac L. Lanford purchased the Sylph in June 1908 and operated it in connection with the Steamer Cayuga. Len Robinson was Captain and George Reynolds was the Purser. By August 1908 she got a new crew after routine repairs were made. Hiram Hill became the Captain, W. F. Barley was Engineer, Bruce Baxter was Fireman and Tom Funnel was Purser.

Captain Louis Klett became the new Captain of the Sylph in July 1909.

There were rumors that began circulating that she was no longer seaworthy. This caused the more skeptical to avoid using her. The decline in her usage caused the company who owned her to go bankrupt. She was left at her dock where she eventually sank.

After 3 years, she was raised from the lake and brought to Muskegon in November 1914 where it was planned that she would become a Muskegon Lake fishing tug.

However, in April 1915, she was once again transformed to a passenger vessel. She was supplied with all the modern fixtures, including a smoking room, soda fountain, lady's cabin, and a huge promenade deck. The interior was finished in natural oak and all the stationary seats were upholstered.

Now owned by Captain Louis Larson and John A. Straub of Muskegon the name was changed to "Pathfinder". She made 2 regular trips daily between Muskegon and White Lake, leaving Muskegon at 7:00 A.M. and 1:30 P.M. and Whitehall at 10:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M. She carried both freight and passengers. Unfortunately, there was no further mention of the Pathfinder on White Lake after the 1915 season.