

Swans on the Don

By Steve Munro & Sarah Hinchcliffe © April 15, 2005

The Authors

Steve Munro is a renowned transit activist in Toronto who was recently awarded the 2005 Jane Jacobs Prize. He lives in an apartment overlooking the Prince Edward Viaduct, Castle Frank Station and the Don River.

Sarah Hinchcliffe, recently lured to the life of transit activism, provided the original concept and much encouragement for this proposal. Her training and experience as an engineer¹ bring a degree of sobriety and realism to a proposal that might otherwise have proven far too visionary.

The Problem

Toronto yearned for a new way of thinking about transportation – one to show the heart of a great city; one to charm locals and tourists alike. Something new and yet old, something functional and yet romantic, something elegant but not too expensive.

The Don Valley Corridor bedeviled planners almost as much as travelers. Roads were packed with cars. Buses and trains were packed with riders. Planning offices were packed with studies. Nothing moved.

Engineers looked at the Don and saw that the only way to achieve greater capacity was to exploit its one untouched avenue – the river.

Early Days

The Province of Ontario recognized the need for new forms of urban transit, for ways to exploit the latent capacity of busy corridors. This was no small undertaking. Transportation engineers the world over wrestled daily with technologies that could not be improved, with transit modes that were too costly, too outdated, too unlikely to attract research funds and economic development.

But Ontario was not deterred – find the right system and the world would beat a path to our door. Manufacturing and export markets would be boundless.

One summer afternoon, a young bureaucrat, freshly recruited from the advertising industry to the Ministry of Transportation, took refuge under a tree on Centre Island. His head rested on a large stack of unread² technology proposals. Carousel music played in the distance.

Startled by the excited shouts of young children, he raised tired eyes to behold the solution – through the trees, across the lawn, beyond the picnic tables, almost like toys in the water: Swan Boats.

Who among the youngsters, tourists and lovers happily paddling circles ‘round the lagoon could know that these simple craft would be the genesis of a new transit technology?

Development Begins

Travelers want personal service. Transit systems want marketability. Both want pizzazz, joy and whimsy – anything but the drudgery of commuting.

Swan boats are the natural marriage of fancy with function. Unlike most other transit vehicles, they float and are highly manoeuvrable making them ideal candidates for river-borne travel.

The OSBDC³ tested many designs, and trial runs on the Don were a common sight. Motorists crawling in traffic dreamt of the day when they could float freely down the river to work. Engineers dreamt of a city crisscrossed by canals.

¹ B.Sc. (Eng.) Queen’s

² Marketing people never actually read technology proposals.

³ Ontario Swan Boat Development Company

Winter proved no obstacle – ordinary swan boats might head south to warmer lands, but OSBDC swans converted to swan sleighs.

Community leaders complained of the new technology. “We won’t be able to cross the canals!” “The swandoliers will make too much noise singing for the tourists!”

The OSBDC rose to the challenge with designs for feather-light aqueducts where swan boats would glide overhead and with plans for a light opera school for *pianissimo* singers.⁴

One problem remained:

Access to Castle Frank Station

Castle Frank lies on the west bank of the Don high above the river. How to get swan boats and passengers up that formidable hill?

Downhill was simple: a second-hand flume from a defunct suburban theme park would provide a swift and thrilling start to the northbound journey. Uphill was a much harder problem.

Trebuchet⁵ levitation was a first attempt, and this required much additional down to cushion the swan boat landings. Test swan boats glided into a sling and sailed through the air. Alas, the complexity of adjusting for wind speed and passenger load overwhelmed available guidance technology.⁶ Many swan boats perished.⁷

Eventually, a simpler solution prevailed, and what an impressive sight it was: boats glided down the river, linked to a funicular⁸ and rose to the station above. A parallel stream of swans gently cascaded down the opposing track.

Private Sector Investment

Ontario, never shy to offload profits, encouraged the formation of Public-Private Partnerships. The Rosedale Heights Swan Boat and Inclined Plane Railway Company⁹ entered a 100-year agreement to purchase and operate the new line. The century of the swan boat had arrived!

RHSB&IPRC profits soared and share offerings for the Rouge Hill, Humber Downs and Credit Valley Swan Boat Companies quickly sold out.

A planned Taddle Creek Swan Boat Company failed when its promoters realized that they could not link the campuses of the University of Toronto and York University. The consultants had used maps from an era before the creek was underground.¹⁰

With so many swan boat routes in operation, a unified service was needed, and the challenge of co-ordination fell to the Greater Toronto Swan Boat Authority.¹¹

⁴ The mysterious impresario Baron Von Rothbart would be recruited as the school’s Artistic Director.

⁵ Trebuchets are large slingshots, but European and therefore inherently a superior transit technology.

⁶ This brings new meaning to the phrase “missing your stop”.

⁷ Only one legacy of the early trials remains: a down comforter store on Parliament Street that enjoyed an unexpected windfall of raw materials.

⁸ Yet another European innovation.

⁹ A wholly-owned subsidiary of 407407 Ontario Limited.

¹⁰ York University, undeterred, mounted a campaign for a Swan Subway.

¹¹ Strangely, the offices of the GTSBA were located far from any watercourses.

Swans Take Flight

Despite the popularity of swan boat services, the Castle Frank funicular, once quiet and elegant, became clanking and cantankerous. Riders complained of delays and Rosedale neighbours complained of noise. The engineers actually listened. Their answer: the Mark II.¹²

One morning, a new swan boat gleaming white and gold turned the last corner before the rise to Castle Frank. It paused briefly, spreads its wings, and flew gracefully up to the station. Local residents¹³ were astonished and thrilled to witness swan after swan circle through the air.¹⁴

This was the long-awaited breakthrough in swan boat technology. No longer a southern Ontario curiosity, swan boats were ready to circle the globe.

The Future of Swan Boats

The success of swan boats opens many opportunities for the City of Toronto. Waterfront transit will link the many river-based routes providing an alternative to expressway travel. The city will have a signature image – a flock of white swan boats – to draw tourists by the thousands.

Toronto, the site of a world-class transportation system, is ready for a crowning glory – a World's Fair presenting swan transportation in all its forms on land, sea and in the air. Fairground visitors will travel between sites on special, dedicated swan boats. Ardent historians will visit the spot on Centre Island where, so many years ago, the future of swan boat technology was revealed. A glorious cultural festival will culminate in a massed Swandolier Chorus with voices from around the world.¹⁵

One last shining moment will arrive. Dawn. A warm late-summer day. A light mist in the east. The golden rays of the rising sun caress the treetops. A giant, shimmering silver swan glides out in the harbour. Around its neck, a red and gold banner waves in the morning breeze. On it, the words:

“Toronto & Rochester Swan Ferry Company”.

Epilogue: Dark Secrets¹⁶

Winged transport was not the only goal of swan boat developers. Secretly, in a far-off city a new, sinister swan boat design emerged.

Late one night, a careful¹⁷ observer noticed a darker blackness against the sky as a ghostly swan boat soared high over the city. The crew, recent graduates of Von Rothbart's light¹⁸ opera school, sang with voices none but they could hear.

Soon flocks of Stealth Swans would rule the skies.

¹² The engineers never really liked the funicular, a railway technology, and the complaints were just the excuse they needed for further development.

¹³ Possibly excepting a certain renowned transit activist.

¹⁴ The renowned transit activist advocated emission controls, but was ignored.

¹⁵ York University will take particular interest in the Greater Cardiff Swan Boat System and its success in operating transit services in abandoned mines.

¹⁶ This material has only recently been declassified and appears here in public for the first time.

¹⁷ But not careful enough: like the black swans, he too has vanished.

¹⁸ Von Rothbart had a wicked sense of irony – the crew dressed all in black.