

HISTORIC ROOTS

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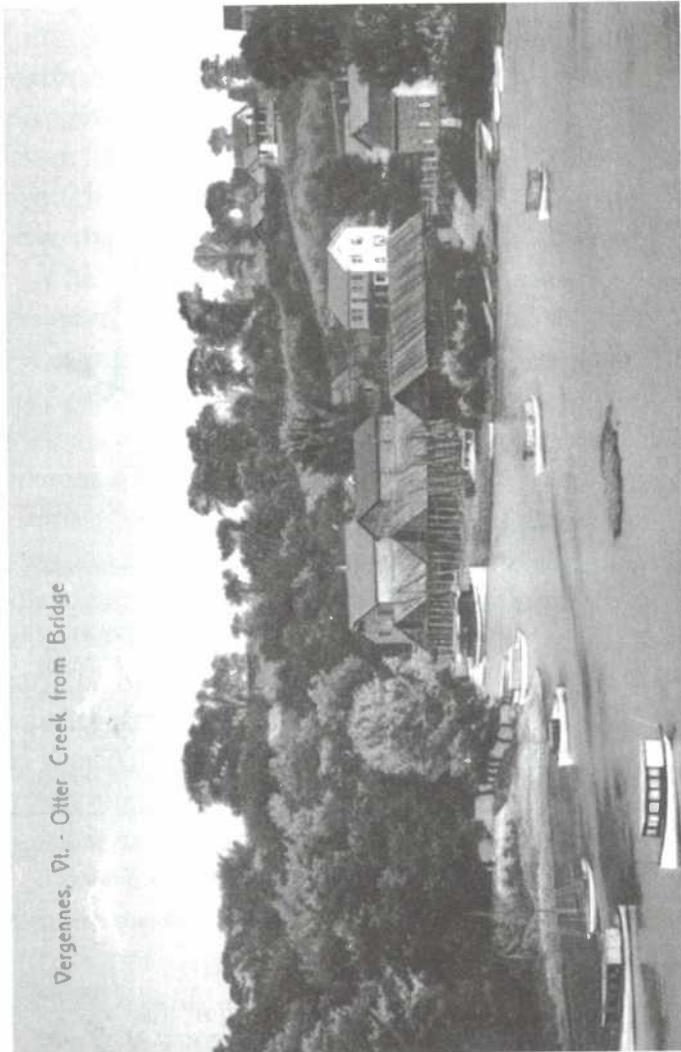
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A postcard showing either the Victor or the Alexander in front of the Daniels Boat Line dock. The buildings on the water are coal sheds the family owned. The first brick house you can see above the sheds belonged to Louis and Philomene. It is now owned by their great-grandson.

THE CAPTAIN WORE PETTICOATS

By JANE VINCENT

Philomene Ostiguy dit Domingue was, according to one historian, “the most colorful and picturesque figure in the history of steamboating on the Otter Creek.” She was born in Quebec Province in 1843. When she moved with her family to Vergennes, Vermont, there was no hint of what was to come. Nor did she know it when she married Louis Daniels in 1862.

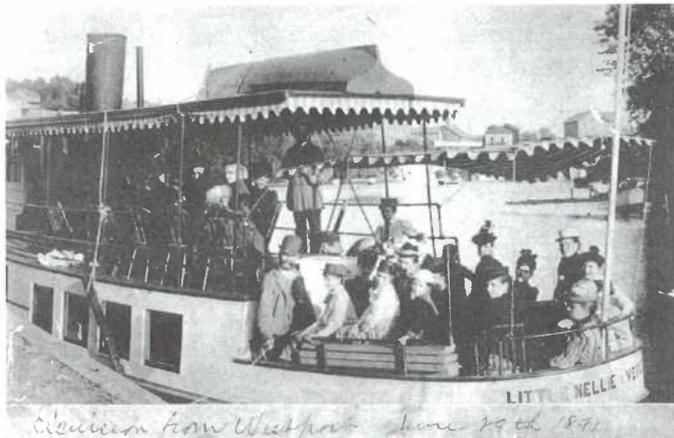
At first, Louis worked in the factories by the Vergennes falls. Later he held jobs on some of the steamboats on Lake Champlain. He and Philomene had two sons, Fred and Mitchell.

Their life began to change in 1877, when Louis and another man bought a small steamboat called the *Water Lily*. Louis bought his partner out in 1880 and started the Daniels Boat Line. He later added three more boats. The Daniels Boat Line operated out of the basin at the foot of the Vergennes falls, where the city dock is now.

In those days, boats carried freight and people on Otter Creek and around and across Lake Champlain. The Daniels Line ran daily

trips from Vergennes to Westport, New York, stopping along the way to pick up or drop off passengers. The trips could be timed to let passengers meet the north-south trains that ran on the west side of the lake. Daniels boats towed canal boats on Otter Creek, carrying freight between the lake and the factories at the falls, seven miles away. They also took passengers on day trips up and down the lake.

When Louis started the boat line, his two sons were old enough to help out on board. Rather than sit home by herself, Philomene decided to go with them. After a few months on the water, she felt she knew the bends and turns of Otter Creek. She asked her husband if she could have a turn at the wheel. Happy to have some help, he gave her a turn. She did



An 1891 excursion setting out from Vergennes on the Little Nellie.

...to their own country. At the conclusion of Prof. Turrel's most interesting address, the thanks of the audience were tendered him, Dr. Howe at the same time thanking him on behalf of the Ladies' benevolent society of the church, under whose auspices the lecture was given.

THE WOMAN PILOT.

Mrs. Daniels of the Water Lily the first woman pilot in the country.

Mrs. Daniels, wife of Capt. Louis Daniels, of the Water Lily which plys between Vergennes and Westport, this spring appeared before the inspecting and applied for a license as a pilot of steamcraft on Lake Champlain. After successfully passing a very rigid test, before them, she was sent to Dr. Cornell of this city to be examined for color blindness or any other defect of the vision. She passed a very successful examination, and has received her license as a pilot on the waters of Lake Champlain. Mrs. Daniels is undoubtedly the first woman to receive a pilot's license in this country, if not in the world, in other cases long known by the authorities. There was, and may be still, a woman on the Mississippi river who, upon the death of her husband, succeeded him as the captain of a steamer, but this woman was not licensed as a pilot.

Mrs. Daniels is a prepossessing woman of 43 years and for the past 20 years has lived upon the water during the boating season. For the past 10 years she has been at the helm of the Water Lily nearly all the time, both in calm and stormy weather and has never met with an mishap. During this time she has received many encomiums from many passengers for the skill which she has frequently displayed. The Water Lily canis down the Otter creek to the Lake Monday when the flats were covered with water, but without the slightest hesitation she kept to the narrow channel, although there were seemingly no marks to show where the course should be laid. As the captain himself expressed it, he couldn't stay forward, expecting every minute the boat would be aground.

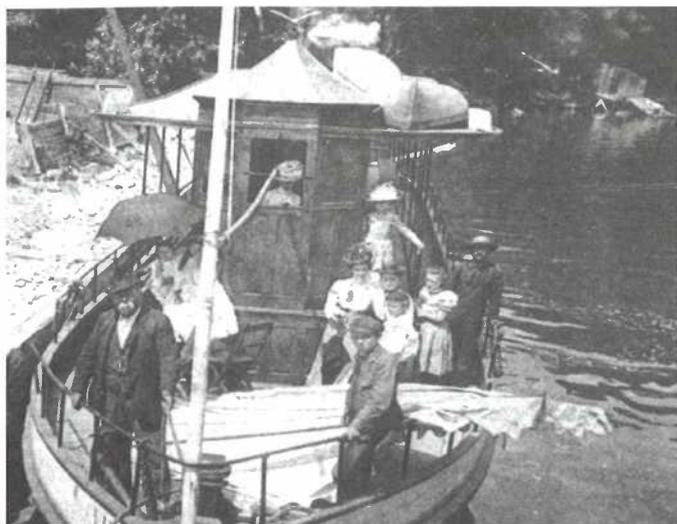
A Bridge Falls with a Loaded Team.
The bridge across the New Haven river near Gore & Green's store in Lincoln gave way Tuesday while Ellen M. Leah was crossing on a load of wood.

The headline of the article in The Burlington Free Press and Times telling of Philomene's "successfully passing a very rigid test" to become the first woman to be licensed as a pilot.

well and knew at once that she wanted to be a pilot.

From that day on, Louis and she worked together. After they bought a second boat, Louis persuaded her to get a pilot's license, so she could take boats out by herself on the river and the lake. When she passed the test for her license, it was a big story. *The Burlington Free Press and Times* of May 5, 1887 reported that she was "undoubtedly the first woman to receive a pilot's license in this country, if not in the world...."

Captain Phil's life as a pilot was full of adventure. She captained boats through storms and shifting winds on the lake. She navigated

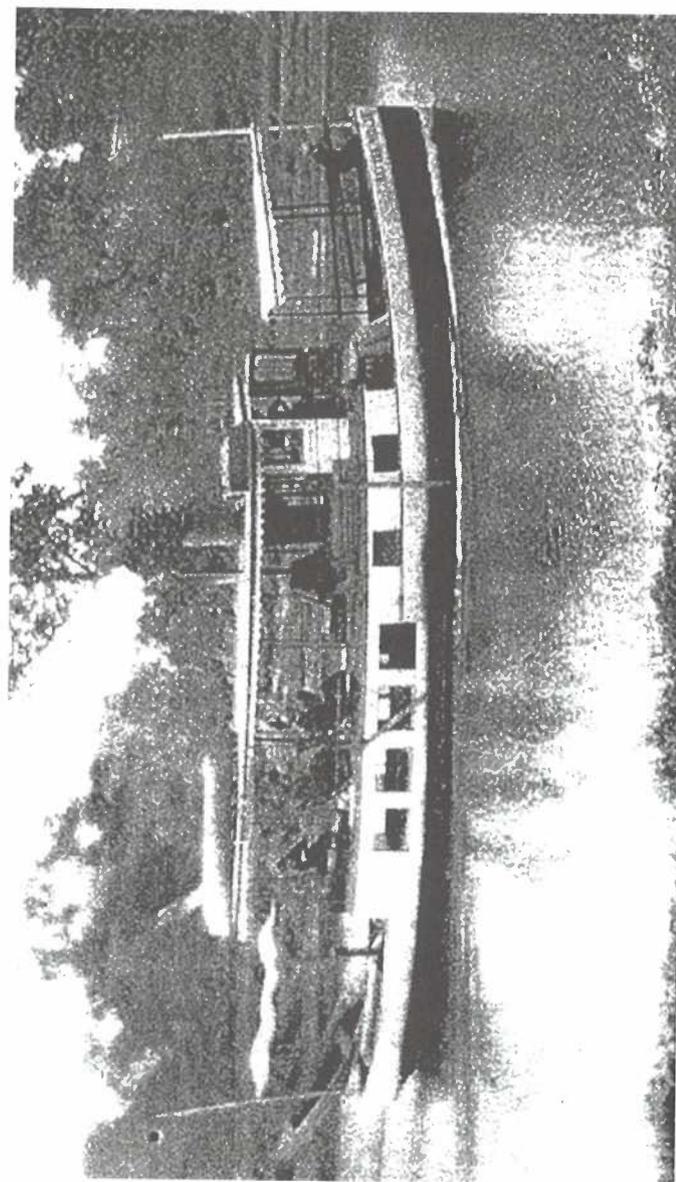


Captain Phil, in a fancy hat, in the pilot house of the Victor. Louis is at the bow, with a derby hat and mustache. Fred is near the pilot house, with his hand on the rail.

the tricky channel of Otter Creek. She took passengers on sightseeing trips on the lake. One of those sights, in September 1887, was said to have been Champ, Lake Champlain's elusive¹ monster.

In her long skirts, gold jewelry, and fancy hats, Captain Phil was quite a sight at the wheel. But if anyone thought they could take advantage of her because she was a woman, they were wrong. Once, when a young man's behavior began to annoy her and the other passengers, she simply pushed him overboard. When he came back on board, dripping wet in

¹Elusive means hard to catch or catch sight of.



The Little Nellie on Otter Creek. You can barely see Philomene in the pilot house.

his good clothes, he and the other passengers had a lot more respect for their captain.

When Louis died, in 1903, Philomene worked hard to keep the line running. Mitchell's wife, Helen, helped run the business. She later became the second woman to be licensed as a pilot.

A few years later, in 1908, Philomene married Charles Caisse. It is probably around then that she turned the line over to Mitchell and Helen. They continued the Daniels Boat Line until 1916, when competition from railroads and automobiles made it unprofitable.

The whistles of the steamers are no longer heard on Otter Creek. No ferry line is based at



The city dock in Vergennes as it looks today. The house behind the trees, on the far right, is Philomene and Louis' homestead. It is hoped that some day there will be a historic marker there.

Vergennes now. There are no markers to remind tourists or residents of this remarkable woman. But Philomene Daniels has left many descendants — in Vergennes, in Vermont, and out of state. They help keep alive the story of this strong, determined woman and of life in the not too distant past.

Rooting Around

What members of your family, or people in your town, do people tell stories about? What are the stories? What do they tell you about how life was lived in the past?

How did such people, even if they were not famous, affect the life of a family or town in their own time? How do they affect it today?