

M.V. Rhododendron – The “Rhody”

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

As a youngster growing up in Washington DC, going each summer to visit my grandparents in New Jersey or to stay at the beach at Ocean City, I looked forward with great anticipation to the ferry ride across the Chesapeake Bay. The ferry crossed the 4 miles from Sandy Point (Claiborne), on the western shore, to Kent Island (Romancoke), on the eastern shore, at the narrowest point in the Bay. Little did I know that 60 years later I would ride the same ferry every day across the 1.4 miles from Tahlequah to Point Defiance.

Ferries began running on the Chesapeake Bay very early in our country's history, and with the advent of the automobile, car ferries became a necessity for crossing the 200-mile long Bay. Plans to bridge the Bay began in the early 1900s, but it was not until the late 1930s that the State of Maryland began to plan in earnest and purchased the ferry system that ran where the bridge would be built, since the bridge would put the ferries out of business. The state owned Chesapeake Bay Ferry System built two new 48-car ferries in 1947, the Gov. Harry W. Nice and the Gov. Herbert R. O'Conor, to handle the increased traffic of the post-World War II era. The 1946 photograph shows the O'Conor shortly after it was launched painted in the Chesapeake Bay Ferry System colors and logo.



The Governor Herbert O'Conor 1946 – Maryland Historical Society

The fate of these ferries was set in 1949 when ground was broken for the new Chesapeake Bay Bridge. The new bridge opened on July 30, 1952, and the last ferry run was made six-months later on New Year's Eve 1952. According to the Baltimore Sun, "It was the end – and the beginning – of an era."

The Washington State Ferries, then known as the Washington State Toll Bridge Authority, was formed in 1951 when the state purchased the monopolistic Puget Sound Navigation Company (known as the Black Ball Fleet) after a series of shutdowns and strikes disrupted ferry service on the Sound. These disruptions were so severe that Vashon raised \$1,500, formed King County Ferry District 1, and operated a three-boat ferry service from 1948 to 1951. When the state ferry system was created, the Vashon system was incorporated into the new state system.

The new state ferry system desperately needed ferries until the new Evergreen class ferries were completed. The two relatively new Chesapeake ferries were for sale, so Washington State purchased them and had them towed to Seattle through the Panama Canal by the Puget Sound Tug & Barge Company tugs Monarch and Wando. The trip took over a month. When the ferries arrived, they were overhauled, cleaned, repainted in the green and white of the Washington ferry fleet, and renamed. The *Gov. Herbert R. O'Conor* was renamed the *Rhododendron* and the *Gov. Harry W. Nice* was renamed the *Olympic*. The 1954 photograph shows the *Rhododendron* in Washington State Toll Bridge Authority colors.



The *Rhododendron* 1954– EvergreenFleet.com

The *Rhododendron* worked the Lofall-Southpoint route on Hood Canal for 8 years until the new Hood Canal Bridge was completed in 1961. The *Rhododendron*, by then affectionately called the *Rhody*, was shifted to the Mukilteo-Clinton route to Whidbey Island where she worked alongside the *Olympic*. In 1974, Washington State took over the Port Townsend-Keystone route when Olympic Ferries went out of business. The *Rhody* and the *Olympic* worked that route until the early 1980s. In 1983, the *Rhody* was mothballed for nearly a decade. In 1990 the *Rhody* was sent for a rebuild, but the condition was so deteriorated that the entire cabin had to be replaced, new engines installed and the hull substantially rebuilt. The cost overruns caused a similar project for the *Olympic* to be cancelled leading to her being mothballed in 1993, sold at auction in 1997, and currently moored on Ketron Island.



The *Rhododendron* 2010 – Matt Masouka

When the *Rhody* emerged from the shipyard in 1993 she was assigned to the Point Defiance-Tahlequah route, where she still serves. But her time is short. The new Kwa-di Tabil Class Ferry *Chetzemoka* is scheduled to replace the *Rhododendron* on the Point Defiance-Tahlequah route in January 2012. The 2010 photograph shows the *Rhody* as she appears today, and the 2011 photograph shows the *Chetzemoka* shortly after she was launched at work on the Port Townsend-Coupeville run.



2011 Photo – *Chetzemoka* – Courtesy Brandon Swan

Each day as I ride the *Rhody* in the shadow of Mount Rainier and watch the ever-changing activity of Dalco Passage, I think back to those days of sailing on the same ship, crossing the Chesapeake Bay, watching the crabbers and shrimpers working the Bay. These nostalgic dreams will not last much longer. Soon, the *Chetzemoka* will begin a new set of dreams that I will hopefully be able to look back upon with equal nostalgia.



Tahlequah Dock – Terry Donnelly