



North Sydney

# Heritage Leaflet 29

## HEGARTY'S FERRY SERVICE

**For over 90 years, the distinctive wooden Hegarty's ferry fleet graced the waters of Sydney Harbour. In October 1932, seven months after the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney Ferry Ltd. was unable to continue the Mc-Mahon's Point-Lavender Bay and Circular Quay service with the heavy losses have they incurred. Captain Norman Downard Hegarty was one of two companies to tender for the licence to operate a ferry service between Circular Quay and McMahon's Point and Lavender Bay.**

Captain Norman Downard Hegarty was born 18 September 1876. He died at Cowes, Phillip Island, Victoria on 19 November 1950 where he is buried. He spent his early life in southern New South Wales and Victoria and attended Eden School part of the time. Norman lived and loved the water-his early youth and most of his working life was spent on or was strongly tied in with the sea. Norman married Mary Evelyn in 1908. The newly married Hegartys moved to Sydney and started the business, N.D. Hegarty and Son.

They soon settled at Drummoyne where they built a boatshed and slipway on the water's edge. Like other 'ferry' families, Hegarty built some of his ferries in his 'front yard' at Drummoyne and ran the business from home. In the 1920s, N. D. Hegarty also ran excursions and picnic trips on the harbour.

On 3 November 1932 N.D. Hegarty and Son took over the Circular Quay-McMahons Point route from Sydney Ferries, a mere seven months after the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Undertaking to provide a quarter-hour service, he was commended by the McMahon's Point-Lavender Bay Progress Association in a 1933 letter expressing their appreciation and thanks to N. D. Hegarty for coming to the rescue of the residents of the area. Captain Hegarty sold the business in 1949 in order to concentrate on the family's Victorian interests.

### **The Star Service**

When his son, Leonard Starr, was born on 4 February 1910, Norman D. Hegarty decided that instead of giving his ferries male names, he would use female names suffixed with the word 'star'. Thus a succession of vessels added to his original fleet carried names like *Estelle Star* (named after his daughter, Adrienne Beatrice Estelle), *Evelyn Star* (named after his wife), *Emerald Star*, etc. There were of course exceptions to the female name rule, and so the harbour was also graced by the likes of *Leura*, *Eagle Star*, *Sunrise Star* and others.

In the few years before the Second World War, the Hegarty fleet consisted of *Evelyn*, *Estelle*, *Kurnell*, *Ettalong*, *Aster* and *Mt. Pleasant*. Only the former four were suffixed with star. Although *Mt. Pleasant* did not have the 'star' quality, she nevertheless bore her fair share of Hegarty's harbour business, being principally a picnic launch of 63-passenger capacity but also doubling as a back-up on the ferry runs. Subsequent N. D. Hegarty and Son owners continued the tradition of giving the boats names with the 'star' suffix. In 1972 when J.C. Needham commissioned a new boat at Woodley's Slipway, Berrys Bay, he named it the *Twin Star* after his newly born grandchildren.

### **The McMahons' Point-Lavender Bay and Circular Quay route**

Prior to the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, ferry travel was a way of life for most who lived on the north side of the City. It was the only means of crossing the Harbour, unlike our range of options today. Ferry traffic declined immediately after the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge; by mid-1933 just 27 passenger ferries were operating on the harbour making 14,750,000 passenger journeys for the previous 12 months, down from the 1929 peak of 51 passenger ferries and 40,350,000 passenger journeys. The Milsons Point-Circular Quay service became redundant and ceased completely, whilst other routes were severely curtailed.

The Sydney Morning Herald announced on 16 March 1932, that Sydney Ferries would continue to operate the ferry service between McMahons Point and Circular Quay for a 'curiosity period' from 16 March "to ascertain

*whether residents of McMahons Point and Lavender Bay prefer to travel to the city by that means instead of crossing the bridge via North Sydney station". Captain Hegarty's tender was accepted, though Sydney Ferries Limited continued to maintain local services until the former's boats were ready to take up the route.*

### **A quarter hour service**

When on 3rd November 1932 N.D. Hegarty and Son took over running of the service between Circular Quay and McMahons Point from Sydney Ferries Ltd. they had undertaken with North Sydney Council to operate

*a 15 minutes service on the McMahons Point/Lavender Bay services, and at the same fares and concessions as now allowed". North Sydney Council Minute Book, 13/9/1932*

A quarter-hour service was not always possible, nor, in the proprietors opinion, justified all day, every day. Consequently, N .D. Hegarty applied to Council on more than one occasion to adjust the timetable in the light of issues about availability of the pontoons and the small number of people using the ferry service in the early morning and late evening hours.

The following year, N. D. Hegarty received a letter from the McMahon's Point-Lavender Bay Progress Association thanking them for their prompt, courteous and obliging service. By 1940 N. D. Hegarty and Son was also running services to Kirribilli and Milsons Point. However they often had trouble maintaining the 15- minute timetable all day. Consequently, the Captain applied to Council, on more than one occasion, to adjust the timetable in the light of issues about availability of the pontoons and the small number of people using the ferry service in the early morning and late evening hours.

Some passengers complained that the boats ran late "*owing to the wait at McMahons Point for the bus*" (North Sydney Council Minute no. 137). Vandalism and maintenance of the wharves was also an ongoing problem. In the 1940s, N.D. Hegarty and Son were nearly forced to shut down due to incurring heavy losses. Not only was Hegarty responsible for repairing the wharves they leased when "*there are two other services operating from Lavender Bay*", he explained that they "*find it very hard to carry on this service in these difficult times*" with the added trips between Circular Quay and the Olympic Pool all through the summer months.

### **End of an era**

Although Norman Hegarty sold the business in 1949, the ferries continued to operate on Sydney Harbour under a succession of owners, including Stannard Brothers Ltd, J. C. Needham, Mrs Barber and Miss Jean Porter. Captain Cook Cruises, purchased the ferries in 1987 from Stannards and ran the service from Circular Quay until 7<sup>th</sup> January 2003, when they lost exclusive use of Wharf 6 and auctioned the remaining three boats.

There followed a public battle to save Sydney's last "little ferries", led by Lavender Bay artist Peter Kingston and North Sydney Council, with the support of North Sydney residents. The distinctive blue and white-hulled *Emerald Star* and *Twin Star* were once again travelling back and forth across the Harbour under the management of a new Hegarty's Ferry Company, formed by a trio of businessmen who purchased the boats at the auction in February.

A new chapter in the Hegarty's Ferry story unfolded in May 2003 and the final trip was run on Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2003. Insufficient patronage and increasing losses led the new owners to make the hard decision to cease ferry services. According to Tim Lloyd, "*we had to pull the plug to stop further losses, it is very sad-we thought we could make a go of it but we couldn't*". The *Twin Star* and *Emerald Star* can still be seen operating on Sydney Harbour as charter vessels.

### **North Sydney Heritage Centre**

1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
Stanton Library  
234 Miller Street  
North Sydney NSW 2060

Phone: **02 99368400**  
Fax: 02 99368440

Email: [infodesk@northsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:infodesk@northsydney.nsw.gov.au)  
[www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au](http://www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au)



North Sydney  
**Heritage Centre**