

# ALASKA'S TITANIC

FORGOTTEN TODAY, THE SINKING OF SS PRINCESS SOPHIA AND THE LOSS OF ALL PASSENGERS AND CREW WAS A TRAGIC BLOW TO THE MEN THAT TRIED TO RESCUE THEM

BY ADAM STANTON

She was three hours behind schedule when the captain of SS *Princess Sophia* departed Skagway, Alaska, on 23 October 1918. The route was to take her to Juneau and Wrangell on the 24th; Ketchikan and Prince Rupert on the 25th; Alert Bay on the 26th, while she would pull into Vancouver Harbor on 27 October. Just two-hours out of Skagway the schedule would change — drastically. *Princess Sophia* would become forever associated with Alaska's worst maritime disaster.

The unique properties of the Alaskan and Canadian coastlines and the Inside Passage would see the creation of an interesting category of ship — the coastal liner. Not one type of ship, coastal liners would have many similar qualities. The ship

would have to be sturdy to operate in severe ocean conditions but the majority of its life would be operated in the more protected coastal waters. Coastal liners would be licensed to carry passengers only a short distance from the coastline and their cargoes would be both passengers and vital supplies. Initially constructed of wood, coastal liners would move to iron and then on to steel construction after a number of deadly accidents on the Inside Passage and the Pacific Northwest showed the weakness of wooden-hulled coastal liners compared to those built of steel. Also, the ships would often be referred to as “pocket liners” because they featured many of the amenities of the great ocean liners of the period but on a reduced scale.

At the dawn of the 20th

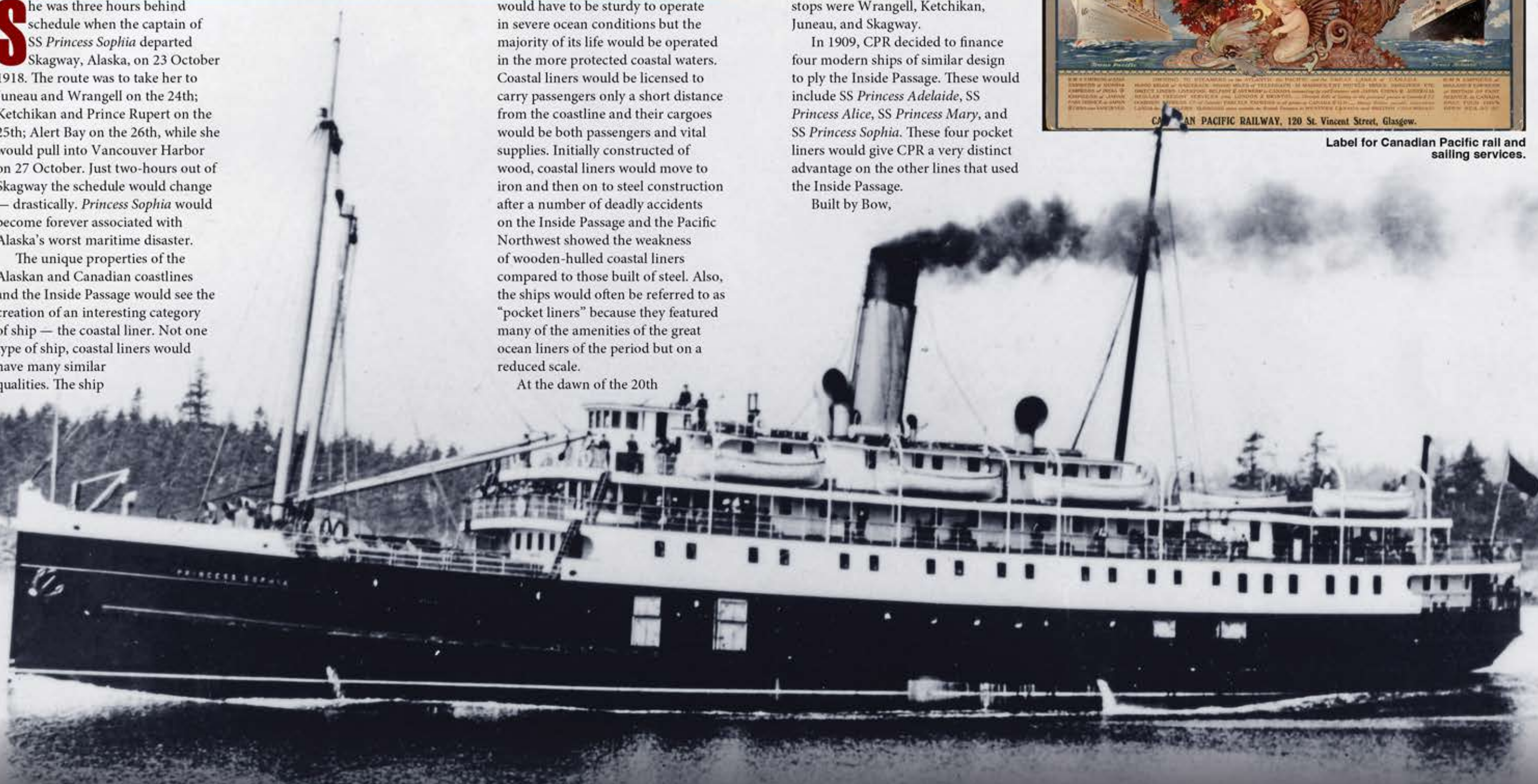
Century, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) ran a line of steamships on the west coast of Canada and the southeast coast of Alaska. The ships sailed the route from Victoria and Vancouver, British Columbia, and ran through the winding channels and fjords along the coast. They would stop at all the principal towns with passengers, cargo, and mail. Major ports of call included British Columbia's Prince Rupert and Alert Bay while Alaskan stops were Wrangell, Ketchikan, Juneau, and Skagway.

In 1909, CPR decided to finance four modern ships of similar design to ply the Inside Passage. These would include SS *Princess Adelaide*, SS *Princess Alice*, SS *Princess Mary*, and SS *Princess Sophia*. These four pocket liners would give CPR a very distinct advantage on the other lines that used the Inside Passage.

Built by Bow,



Label for Canadian Pacific rail and sailing services.



*Princess Sophia* setting off down the Inland Passage. Canadian Pacific's *Princess* ships were extremely popular with passengers travelling between Alaska, Canada, and the USA.