

# HERO OF THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

THE SAGA OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE SCHOONER ST. ROCH

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The three most famous ships to sail in Arctic waters during the past century have been Nansen's *Fram*, which in 1895 drifted to the then farthest north (85 deg. 57 min.), and which is preserved in Oslo; Amundsen's *Gjoa*, the first vessel to navigate the Northwest Passage (1903-1906) and which went on display in San Francisco but its condition went downhill and today it is beautifully restored at Oslo; and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police patrol vessel *St. Roch*, which had more firsts to its credit than any other

polar ship and which is a Canadian National Historic Site at the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

The *St. Roch* was constructed in 1928 at the Burrard Dry Dock Shipyards in North Vancouver. She was made primarily of thick Douglas fir with very hard Australian "ironbark" eucalyptus on the outside and an interior hull reinforced with heavy beams to withstand ice pressure during her Arctic duties. Her interior was reinforced with heavy beams to resist the grinding pressure of the ice flows. The tough little schooner weighed

in at 323 tons with a length of 104-ft and a draft of 19-ft when fully laden. She was designed by Tom Halliday.

When she first went into service, *St. Roch* had a diesel engine of 150-hp but an extensive refit in 1944 at Halifax, Nova Scotia, provided her with a much larger and improved deckhouse and a stronger 300-hp diesel engine. She had two masts and three sails and radical alterations to these were carried out at the same time.

The *St. Roch* was assigned, with her crew of nine, to patrol the Canadian Arctic, to convey supplies to various land detachments along the coasts and islands, and to winter in remote places. She certainly did the job she was asked to do, for she spent all her summers and eleven winters in the Arctic.

Never a vessel of great beauty or comfort, the *St. Roch* was dubbed an ugly duckling by her skipper Henry Larsen, who held sergeant's rank in the RCMP. Later, he was promoted to inspector in recognition of his work in the far north. But the rounded hull that made the ship roll violently in heavy seas also saved her on several occasions from being crushed into the ice. Eight times did the flows hold her fast during the polar winters but they never succeeded in pulverizing her. Apart from the discomfort suffered by the crew (and



*St. Roch* heading out on her first voyage to the Arctic from Vancouver on 26 June 1928. At that time, the RCMP hired W.H. Gillen to be the captain.



Insignia of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.



*St. Roch* at sea in clear water. The ship was named after a parish in Quebec.