Until around 40 years ago you would have seen two 19th century car ferries still carrying cars, vans, trucks and even horse and carts to and fro across the Bosphorus. One was called the Suhulet and the other the Sahilbent. These two identical ferries with their long open vehicle decks, great paddle wheels and tall black funnels, were not only the oldest of the boats still working in Istanbul harbour, but one was soon to be hailed as the oldest working ship in the world.

Since the day of their arrival in Istanbul they had plied between the European and Asian shores of the Bosphorus. They were already a good age during the First World War when they carried troops and ammunition to the front, braving the shells of the enemy fleet. Both had been built in England for the Istanbul ferryboat company, Sirket-i Hayriye.

In the late 1860s Sirket-i Hayriye had been operating passenger ferries in the Bosphorus for nearly 20 years. These ferries carried freight as well as people, but there was a need for ferries designed to carry horses, livestock, carts and coaches. Above all the army had serious problems transporting its guns, gun carriages and other heavy equipment from one side of the strait to the other. A ferry was needed with an open flat deck which could be boarded easily and quickly by horses, vehicles and field guns, and with a second ramp at the other end so that they could disembark without reversing.

Huseyin Haki Efendi of Crete who had completely reorganised the Sirket-i Hayriye nearly 70 years earlier, made a rough drawing for a new type of ferry which would resolve this problem. He showed the sketch first to Iskender Efendi, a former government inspector, and then to Mehmed Usta, chief architect at Haskoy Shipyard, where the company's steam ferries were overhauled and repaired. Mehmed Usta developed the drawing into a detailed design for what was to be the ancestor of the car ferries still used in Turkey today. This first paddle steamer for ferrying vehicles was built in London at the shipyard of Maudslay Sons and Fields at a cost of 8000 pounds sterling. It weighed 275 tons, was 45.5 metres long.
and 8.5 metres wide, and had a single cylinder 400 horsepower steam engine which could drive it at a speed of nearly seven knots.

Although construction was completed in 1872 it took several months for the vessel to sail the long distance from London via the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Aegean to Istanbul. She was not designed for sailing in the open sea, and in stormy conditions she narrowly escaped being wrecked several times on the journey. Finally she arrived safely, however, and was named Suhulet, meaning 'to be easy' as consolation for the difficulties of the journey. It was ship number 26 in the Sirket-i Hayriye fleet.

But Suhulet's difficulties were not over, despite the name. The Bosphorus boatmen rose up in protest at the prospect of the new vehicle ferry stealing their trade, and if the passengers on its maiden voyage from Uskudar to Kabatas had not been an artillery battery, they might have carried out their intentions to prevent the vessel sailing. Sultan Abdulaziz rewarded the ferry's "father" Huseyin Haki Efendi with a medal following this first journey. The advantages of the Suhulet were soon evident to everyone, and a second car ferry was ordered from the same shipyard that year. It was identical with the exception of a second engine for extra power. This was the Sahilbent which cost 12,000 pounds and became ship number 27 in the Sirket-i Hayriye fleet. Like the Suhulet the Sahilbent - meaning "linking two shores" - was named by the famous Turkish poet Namik Kemal.

While other ferryboats built around the same time dropped out of service one by one for various reasons, these two ferries worked unceasingly between Uskudar and Kabatas for many years. When the Tripolitan war broke out between Turkey and Italy in 1911 the Suhulet was placed under military command to carry equipment to Canakkale. While before it had taken four days for an artillery battalion consisting of four gun batteries to make the dangerous crossing of the Dardanelles, it now took just four hours!

In 1930 the Suhulet was 58 years old. That year her steam engine was removed and replaced by a diesel engine at Haskoy Shipyard. The tall funnel was cut down and other modifications were made. In 1945 the ferry company was purchased by the Ministry of Transport and the double anchor symbol of the Turkish Maritime Lines was painted on her yellow funnel.

At the age of 80, in 1952, the Suhulet was fitted with a new engine and extensive repairs were carried out to her hull. For years she had carried all types of vehicles and all types of loads, including chests of gold bullion destined for the Central Bank. But she was beginning to show her age at last, and in 1958 she was reluctantly withdrawn from service. In 1961 she was sold for scrap after a working life of 86 years.

Her sister ship the 311 ton Sahilbent proved even more durable. For years she too plied from one side of the Bosphorus to the other in all weathers and all seasons, come rain or shine. She too took part in war operations, carrying the troops and
guns on which the hopes of the nation depended.

In 1927, after 55 years in service, the Sahilbent underwent her first extensive overhaul. In 1945 she too had the double anchor painted on her funnel. In 1959, when she was taken out of service as a ferry, the Sahilbent had worked without interruption for 87 years, and was still seaworthy. In 1967 she was sold and converted into a small freight vessel, renamed the Kaptan Sukru. It was at this point that Time Magazine published an article about the century old Sahilbent, now "the oldest ship still in service in the world", as its feature story. The picture on the cover did justice to the old ship. Soon afterwards she was sold again and once more fitted with a new engine. According to the shipping registers for 1996 she was still in service at the grand old age of 124 years. So there you have the story of the world's first two car ferries.

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