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Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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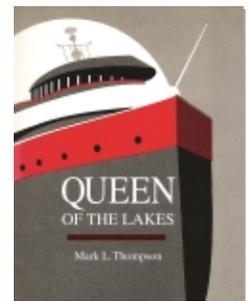
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Ships are the nearest things to dreams that hands have ever made.

—Robert N. Rose
“My Ship o’ Dreams”

Preface

My paternal great-great-great-great-great-grandfather came to the Great Lakes region from France in 1730. A cousin to King Louis XV, Robert Navarre had been appointed sub-intendant and royal notary at Detroit, then known as Fort Pontchartrain. After crossing the Atlantic aboard a sailing ship, the twenty-one-year-old Bourbon noble travelled from Quebec to Montreal in a bateau, then shifted to a canoe for the arduous trip to Georgian Bay on northern Lake Huron by way of the historic river route. Navarre and his retinue then paddled down the eastern shore of Lake Huron to the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, and the Detroit River, arriving after a voyage of two months’ duration at the fledgling frontier settlement on the banks of the Detroit River.

From that time, Robert Navarre and his descendants, my ancestors and I, have lived along the shores of the Great Lakes, mainly at Detroit, Toledo, and, more recently, Rogers City, a small community on the northwest shore of Lake Huron. In 1870, Navarre’s descendants were joined by the family of my maternal great-grandfather, Carl Tosch, who came to the U.S. from Prussia. Carl Tosch, his wife Amalie, and infant son Fritz sailed from Hamburg to New York aboard the sailing ship *Friedeburg*. After an overland trip by rail to Buffalo, they boarded a passenger steamer, like tens of thousands of other immigrants, for the trip across Lake Erie to Detroit. After five years in Detroit, the Tosch family boarded another passenger

steamer for the trip north to Rogers City and the homestead that awaited them.

Since the arrival here of Robert Navarre and the Tosches, the history of my family has been integrally joined with that of the Great Lakes region. Over successive generations we have served as government officials under French, British, and U.S. flags, and we have toiled as farmers, timbermen, miners, railroadmen, autoworkers . . . and sailors.

The ships have always been there, virtually a part of our everyday lives for nine generations, more than 260 years. For most of that period, they were the primary mode of transportation in the region. Before the railroads and, more recently, the highways, ships moved people and goods to and from hundreds of port cities that had developed along the shores of the majestic inland seas of North America. For Robert Navarre and Carl Tosch, and right up until my father’s generation, the passenger and package ships that plied the lakes linked the residents along the northern lakes with the world beyond.

While most of the passenger and package freighters had succumbed to competition from the railroads by the time my father reached manhood, around 1930, ships were still the dominant form of transportation for grain, iron ore, coal, and limestone. The unique Great Lakes bulk freighters that had evolved in the 1870s and 1880s proved to be so efficient that they staved off all competition from other modes of transportation.

The long ships were vital to the economies of many cities around the lakes through which the bulk cargoes moved.

At Rogers City, where my father grew up, a large limestone mining operation had developed, and the small community became home port for a fleet of self-unloading bulk freighters, the first fleet on the Great Lakes to be made up entirely of self-unloaders. Like so many young men from port cities around the lakes who were attracted by the good pay and the chance to avoid the comparatively mundane employment on a farm or in a mine or quarry, my father was drawn inexorably to the ships. While his career as a merchant seaman was a fairly brief one—which is often the case—he never lost his love for the ships, and he never strayed far from them. He lived in Rogers City, and for twenty years worked as a dock foreman at the nearby port of Stoneport; the ships were part of the fabric of his daily life.

It is not unusual, then, that my sister, brother, and I grew to share our father's fascination with the ships, or that my mother would encourage that interest. The freighters have been a constant in our lives. While we developed other interests and pursued careers in other fields, I don't think we have ever had a family get-together where we didn't at some point talk about ships, and the library at our family home in Rogers City has always been well-stocked with books about the shipping industry on the Great Lakes.

My brother Gary sailed summers to support himself while studying chemistry in college, then gave up his studies to opt for a career as a merchant seaman. My route to the boats was a bit more circuitous, with forays into politics and education, but the outcome was the same. Some who know me well undoubtedly realize that it was inevitable, others will be greatly disappointed that I would "settle" for a blue-collar job aboard a freighter. I would merely assure the latter group that I am happy doing what I do, extremely happy. I recall an incident that took place during the summer of 1989 when I first went back to work full-time on the boats. It was a beautiful, warm July morning and the 1,000-foot *Columbia Star* was upbound on northern Lake Michigan. I got off duty at about 9:30 a.m. and decided to sit out on deck for awhile to enjoy the fresh air and scenery. During the next hour the *Star* passed under the majestic expanse of the Mackinac Bridge and threaded its way through the narrow channel separating Mackinac and Round islands. The view was breathtaking and tranquil at the same time, and I remember repeating over and over to myself, "I'm really here, I'm really working aboard a freighter again. Thank you, God!"

Not every day aboard a freighter is cause for such rejoicing, but it is preferable to anything else I've tried during my otherwise white-collar career. I enjoy the work, the pay, the

travel, the camaraderie of my shipmates, the opportunity it gives me to write . . . and the time off, though not necessarily in that order. This book probably wouldn't have been written if I hadn't gone back to work on the boats. It has required considerable research that I wouldn't have had time to do if I didn't have the winters off.

I've been fascinated by the ships that bore the "Queen of the Lakes" title since I first heard my father use the phrase to describe the *Carl D. Bradley*, which was the longest ship on the lakes from 1927 until 1949. I was probably only four or five years old at the time, but I still remember that moment and how excited I was to learn that one of our freighters from Rogers City was the "Queen," the longest ship on the lakes.

While writing my first book on the Great Lakes shipping industry—*Steamboats and Sailors of the Great Lakes*—I began compiling a list of ships that were Queen of the Lakes, based largely on references made in other works. That first list of mine was dramatically different than the list of ships that appears in this book. Another researcher and writer once wrote that "great caution should be exerted when estimating the reliability of translated, diluted, and resurrected data on any subject, especially ships."¹ That point was driven home forcefully in the months I spent researching this book.

The first list I began working with was extracted from one of Dana Thomas Bowen's highly respected books about the lakes. It spanned the period 1887-1942 and listed twenty-three vessels that were "the longest ships on the lakes."² In the ensuing months, I was dismayed to find that the list was filled with errors. In fact, only thirteen of the twenty-three ships listed ever had any claim to the Queen of the Lakes title. The other ten were "also-rans"; big ships, to be sure, but never the longest on the lakes.

Bowen was not the only writer who led me astray, however. Norman Beasley sent me on a wild goose chase when he claimed in his *Freighters of Fortune* that the *Australasia* was the longest ship on the lakes,³ as did Fred Landon in *Lake Huron* when he wrote that "the *Chamberlain* with a capacity of 1,000 tons and the *Marine*, of 1,200 tons, were the largest vessels on the lakes in 1874."⁴ The *Australasia* was never the largest ship on the lakes, and I can find no record whatsoever of either the *Chamberlain* or *Marine*.

Even J. B. Mansfield in his seminal *History of the Great Lakes*, published in 1899, caused me considerable wasted effort with his assertion that "The largest boat ever constructed for the lake service is the Moose."⁵ A bit of detective work on my part revealed that it was the freighter *Morse*, not *Moose*, that Mansfield was referring to—an instance where a simple typographical error caused me a few more gray hairs.

While some of these lapses can be attributed to sloppy

research or typographical errors, many are undoubtedly the result of disparate definitions of “largest” as it applies to ships on the lakes and different means of measuring the lengths of ships. In varying usage within the maritime community, the term “largest” can be used to refer to a ship’s length, its tonnage, or its carrying capacity. The longest ship does not necessarily have the greatest tonnage or carrying capacity, and vice versa. I have reserved usage of the Queen of the Lakes title for ships that have been the longest on the lakes, based on their overall length. Others have accorded the title to ships that had the greatest length between perpendiculars or the greatest carrying capacity. In fact, during the mid-1800s, when the magnificent “palace steamers” dominated shipping on the lakes, the Queen of the Lakes title often went to a particularly luxurious passenger steamer.⁶ While the focus of this book is on the longest ships that have sailed the lakes, I endeavor to alert readers when other ships had larger carrying capacities or higher tonnages than a vessel I’ve identified as Queen of the Lakes.

It should be noted that three different length measurements are commonly used to describe ships. I have reserved the Queen of the Lakes label for ships of the longest length overall (LOA). Other researchers and writers have opted for one of the other measuring schemes in their works, particularly length between perpendiculars (LBP).⁷ While LOA delineates the length of a vessel between its extreme fore and aft extensions, LBP measures the length from the fore side of the stem to the after side of the rudder post along its summer loadline.⁸ LBP thus ignores any rake to the stem or overhang of the stern that lies fore or aft of the vessel’s waterline when loaded to its summer marks. For most contemporary ships on the lakes, the LOA is about twenty feet longer than the LBP, but the difference would be even more extreme for a sailing ship or saltwater ship with a dramatically raked bow. Using LBP instead of LOA is somewhat similar to measuring a building’s height without taking into consideration its roof. I understand why naval architects place so much store in the LBP measurement, but for purposes of identifying the longest ships on the lakes, the overall length of a vessel seems a much more valid criteria and is used throughout this book.⁹

Much of my research was conducted at Bowling Green State University’s Institute for Great Lakes Research, located just outside Toledo, Ohio. Founded by the late Dr. Richard Wright, who devoted most of his life to the study of ships on the Great Lakes, the Institute is a vital resource for anyone seriously interested in doing research on the Great Lakes shipping industry.

I have also extracted considerable information from *Telescope* and *Inland Seas*, the excellent publications, respectively, of the Great Lakes Maritime Institute of Detroit and the

Great Lakes Historical Society of Vermilion, Ohio. Both groups are to be commended for the quality of their publications and their commitment to documenting and preserving the rich heritage of the Great Lakes shipping industry.

My home in Traverse City, Michigan, is far distant from Detroit, Toledo, or Vermilion, and my research efforts have been facilitated by the public libraries in nearby communities, including those in Traverse City, Petoskey, and Charlevoix. The friendly assistance of the local library staffs and the splendid interlibrary loan program have made it possible for me to do a great deal of research without ever leaving my beloved northern Michigan.

When I have needed the resources of a larger library, I have most often used the resources of the Detroit Public Library, a truly outstanding facility. In particular, its Burton Historical Collection contains many valuable works on the early history of the Great Lakes region and the maritime industry on the lakes.

I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to a long list of writers and researchers who have published works on the Great Lakes shipping industry, most of whom I’ve never met. That list has to be headed by the likes of Mansfield, Boyer, Bowen, Barry, Dewar, Rattigan, Rev. Van der Linden, Glick, Greenwood, Benford, Father Dowling, Clary, Hatcher, and LesStrang. I have enjoyed, learned from, and used their works extensively, as have thousands of others who share our common interest.

This book is dedicated to my mother, but everyone in the Thompson family has played a role in writing it. My children are sensational kids who make me very proud to be their father. Meredith and Scott have paid the greatest price for my love affair with ships, for working on the boats takes me away from them for over half the year. I hope they know that every day I’m away from them they are constantly in my thoughts and prayers.

My sister Lizabeth and her husband Gordon Dickson have been supportive in ways too numerous to enumerate here; their hospitality, thoughtfulness, and generosity are unbounded. Suffice it to say that they would make great shipmates.

My brother Gary has sailed on the Great Lakes, Pacific Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, and Atlantic Ocean and shared with me many wonderful sea stories and valuable insights into the maritime industry. We don’t get to spend much time together, but I always look forward to seeing Gary and his daughter Jenny.

Invaluable assistance in writing and publishing this book was also provided by Canada Steamship Lines, N. M. Paterson and Sons, Bethlehem Steel Corporation’s Great Lakes Steamship Division, Dossin Great Lakes Museum, Great

Lakes Maritime Museum, Lake Superior Maritime Museum, Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, Oglebay-Norton's Columbia Transportation Division, Michigan Bureau of History, American Steamship Company, Bay Shipbuilding Corporation, the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, Interlake Steamship Company, and Arthur Evans and the very professional staff at Wayne State University Press.

While I was writing *Queen of the Lakes*, I was also working aboard various ships in the Interlake Steamship fleet. Needless to say, crewmembers I sailed with during that three-year period had a major impact on my life, and on this book. They know who they are: the crews on the *Elton Hoyt*, *2d*, *Herbert C. "Action" Jackson*, *Mesabi Miner*, *Kaye E. Barker*, *George A. Stinson*, *Paul R. Tregurtha* and *James R. Barker*. No sailor could ask for better shipmates. A lot of them share my keen interest in the history of our industry, and many long hours on the run were passed swapping sea stories.

Three of the ships I sailed on, the *George A. Stinson*, *James R. Barker* and *Mesabi Miner*, once shared honors as Queen of the Lakes. A fourth, the *Paul R. Tregurtha*, has been the longest ship on the lakes since its launching in 1981. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to serve on those thousand-footers while working on this book. There was a time when I held nothing but disdain for the "footers" and other ships built in the new stern-ender design. My experiences on the *Barker*, *Miner*, *Stinson*, and *Tregurtha* gave me a new appreciation for the latest generation of ships on the lakes, and I hope that is conveyed to readers.

Most likely, this book will not be a bestseller, but that doesn't detract one iota from my pride in having written it. It is a worthy story, this saga of ships that have been Queen of the Lakes, and I am pleased that I can share it with you.

Notes

1. Loudon G. Wilson, "How Now David Dows," *Telescope* 10 no. 6 (June 1961): 103.
2. Dana Thomas Bowen, *Memories of the Lakes* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1969), 19.
3. Norman Beasley, *Freighters of Fortune* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930), 87.
4. Fred Landon, *Lake Huron* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), 355.
5. J. B. Mansfield, *History of the Great Lakes*, vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1972), 414.
6. James P. Barry, *Ships of the Great Lakes* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1973), 81.
7. See, for example, the discussion given in the "Explanation" section of Rev. Peter J. Van der Linden, ed., *Great Lakes Ships We Remember* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1979).
8. It should be noted that a ship's assigned loadline can change over time, even though no change has been made to the dimensions of the vessel's hull. The loadline is assigned based on standards for safe levels of reserve buoyancy and can be altered by such things as the installation of watertight doors, watertight subdivision of the cargo hold, or even replacement of telescoping hatch covers with single-piece covers. Any raising of a ship's loadline would increase its LBP, but not its LOA, which will remain constant throughout its life unless the vessel is lengthened.
9. LOA measurements used throughout the book have been drawn from a variety of sources: naval architectural drawings, newspaper reports, government documents, various vessel directories, and information supplied by vessel owners. In no instance was a single source used to determine a ship's LOA.