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Queen of the Lakes

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Published by Wayne State University Press

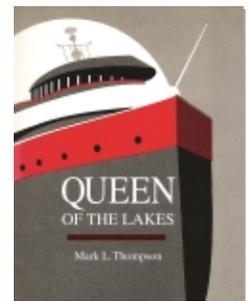
Thompson, Mark L.

Queen of the Lakes.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

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3

The Union Twins

If the plaudits that attended the launching of the *Susquehanna* seemed more subdued than usual for a Queen of the Lakes, it was probably because everyone attending the ceremonies had walked past the partially completed hulls of two ships that were actually bigger than the new Anchor Line freighter. Even the Anchor Line and Pennsylvania Railroad officials present for the launching appeared slightly uncomfortable, and several commented under their breaths that they felt as if they were in “hostile territory.”

In a way, they were in the camp of the enemy. Union Dry Dock Company was partially owned by the Erie Railroad, the Pennsylvania Railroad’s strongest competitor for the growing freight trade on the lakes. Prior to the launching of the *Susquehanna*, the largest package freighter in operation was the iron-hulled *Tioga*, owned by Erie’s Union Steamboat Company. Since its launching in 1884, Erie officials had enthusiastically advertised the *Tioga* as the largest and most modern freight vessel serving the Great Lakes. It was a point of great pride for the railroad, and clearly an asset in attracting business for both its overland and steamboat services.

The ink had barely dried on the contract for construction of the *Susquehanna* before it was announced that the shipyard would be building not one, but two new package freighters for Erie’s Union fleet. The ships would be virtually identical and, most importantly, they would be 24 feet, 1 inch longer than the

Susquehanna. The significance of the announcement was not lost on anyone, least of all the other railroads and steamboat lines. It was a clear message: the Erie Railroad had not bought a twenty-five percent interest in a shipyard only to stand idly by while the yard built a record-breaking vessel for one of their competitors.

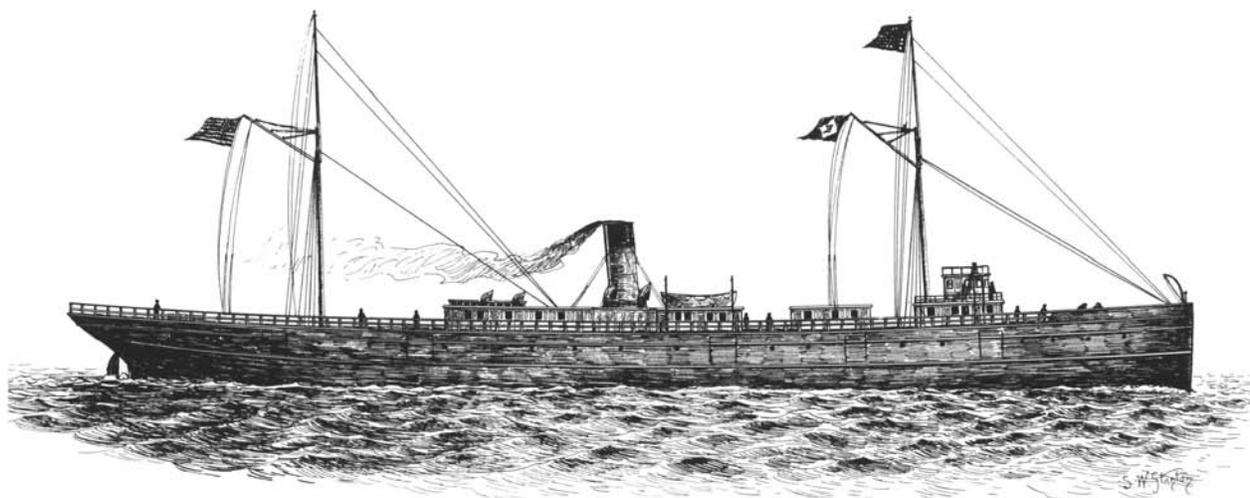
STR. OWEGO

350’7”x41’2”x13’7”

Queen of the Lakes

July 7, 1887 to December 3, 1892

The first of the two freighters was launched on July 7, 1887, less than a year after the *Susquehanna* made her debut. Christened *Owego* in honor of the city of Owego, New York, an important stop on Erie’s railroad line, the grand new ship was just as sleek in appearance as the *Susquehanna*, despite its awe-inspiring dimensions. The *Owego* was 350 feet, 7 inches long and had a beam of 41 feet, 2 inches and a depth of 13 feet 7 inches. Wider, but several feet shallower, than the *Susquehanna*, the *Owego*’s gross tonnage was 2,615, compared to 2,500 for the previous Queen. Not only was she the biggest ship



In 1887, the package freighter *Owego*, shown here in a Stanton drawing, replaced the *Susquehanna* as Queen of the Lakes. Built by the Erie Railroad for their Union Steamboat Company, the 350-foot steamer was easily identifiable because of the long sweep of its uncluttered fantail. While intended to operate in the grain trade between Chicago and Buffalo, the *Owego* proved to be too long to negotiate the upper reaches of the winding Chicago River. (Author's collection)

on the lakes, her sleek lines were more than merely pleasing to the eye. For almost a decade, the *Owego* and her sistership were generally regarded as the fastest freight vessels on the Great Lakes.¹ On a trip from Chicago to Buffalo, for example, the *Owego* set a record by averaging an astounding 16.4 miles per hour, a speed that few of today's bulk freighters could match.²

While the *Susquehanna's* silhouette was pleasingly symmetrical, the cabins of the *Owego* had been pushed as far forward as possible on her deck. That resulted in more of a tapered look, with the mass of her structure tailing off into a long, clean afterdeck in the same way that the body of a fish narrows down toward its tail. The *Owego's* design was much the same as that of the *Tioga*. Her wheelhouse was set atop the small forward cabin, well back from the bow. Just aft of the forward cabin was a second small cabin to house crewmembers. Over the midship engine room was a very large cabin, which included crew quarters, the galley, and the dining room. The midship house was topped by the eye-catching black and white striped smokestack, sloping gracefully backward like a dorsal fin. Like the *Susquehanna*, the *Owego* had two masts from which gaff-rigged sails could be set to provide auxiliary power.³ Given her speed, it is likely that the sails were seldom set, but the masts would have done double-duty as booms for use in handling cargo.

It was a major marketing coup for the Union Steamboat Company to own the largest ship on the Great Lakes, but before the *Owego* went into the water company officials had discovered that big is not necessarily always best. The giant freighter had been intended to operate primarily in the grain trade between Chicago and Buffalo, but careful measurements made in the days just before her launching showed that the *Owego* would be too long to negotiate the narrow upper reaches of the river at Chicago where many of the grain terminals were located. Dismayed, and probably more than a little embarrassed by their *faux pas*, Union officials announced that the *Owego* would be placed in the grain and merchandise trade between Buffalo and Duluth, with only occasional trips to grain terminals at Chicago. The red-faced shipping executives also



The distinctive white-striped stack of the vessels operated by the Union Steamboat Company. At that time, most ships on the lakes had plain black smokestacks. (Author's collection)

ordered the shipyard to stop work on construction of the second freighter while they huddled to determine whether it would be feasible to shorten it forty feet. Work was already well underway on the second ship, however, and the decision was ultimately made to build her to the planned dimensions.⁴

STR. CHEMUNG

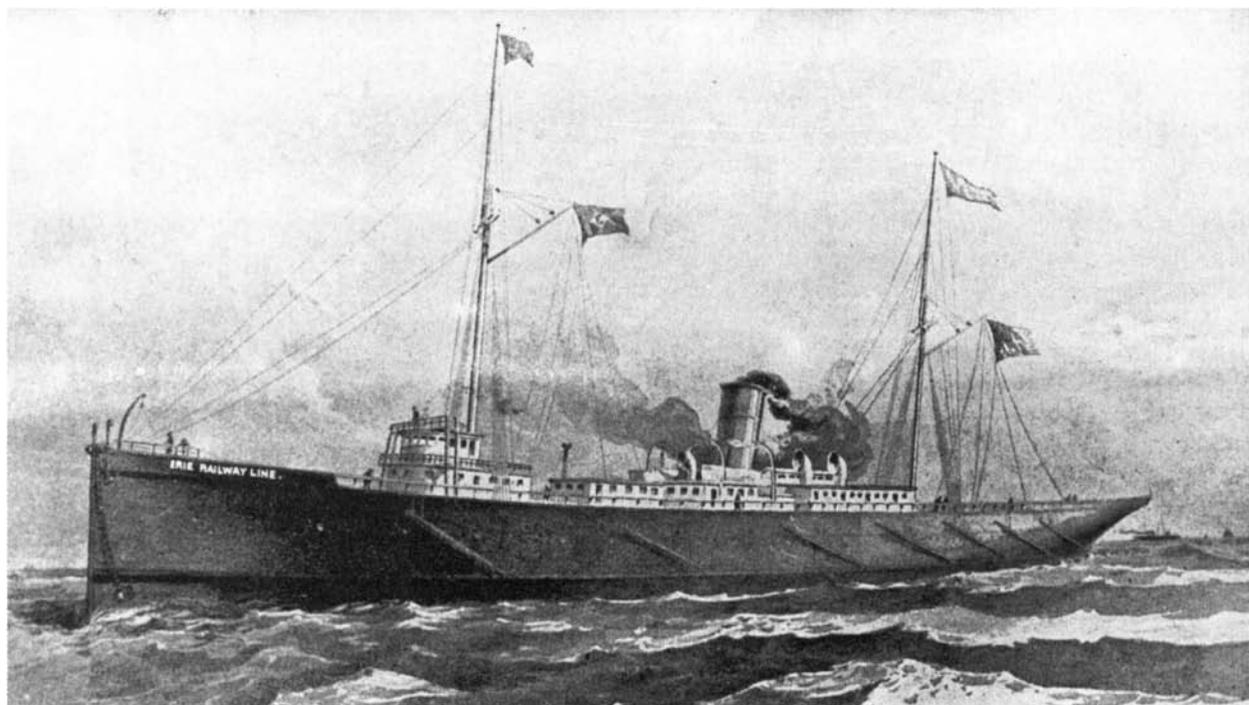
350'7"x41'2"x14'8"

Queen of the Lakes

February 29, 1888 to December 3, 1892

The *Chemung*, launched seven months after the *Owego*, on February 2, 1888, was named after the New York city and river of the same name. She was a twin of the *Owego*, except that she had a depth of only 13 feet, 7 inches, making her a little more than a foot shallower.

A striking painting of the *Chemung*, sister ship to the *Owego*. Launched in 1888, the vessel was renamed *George F. Brownell* in 1914 after undergoing rebuilding. Both ships were sold off the lakes in 1915, when U.S. railroads were forced to dispose of their shipping lines. After being renamed the *Chemung* in 1916, the package freighter was sunk off the Spanish coast by an Austrian submarine during World War I. (The Great Lakes Historical Society)



During the winter of 1897-98, the twins went back to the shipyard in Buffalo for rebuilding. Details of the rebuilding have been lost over time, but official documents updated when they went back into service in May of 1898 show that both had their net tonnage reduced by about 165 tons, although their gross tonnage was not affected.⁵ The reduction is almost exactly the amount that would have resulted if the depth of their cargo holds had been reduced by one foot. That may suggest that the ships were originally built without 'tween decks, and the owners later decided to have them installed. Whatever changes were made, however, the cargo holds of both ships were slightly smaller after the rebuilding.

The *Chemung* went through another rebuilding during the winter of 1913-14. In addition to new boilers and a new draft system, she got a new propeller, a new electrical system, and her cabins were extensively refurbished. Before she went back into service in 1914, she was renamed the *George F. Brownell*, in honor of the attorney who served as vice president

of the Erie Railroad. This represented a departure from the traditional naming scheme the fleet had followed.

In 1914 and 1915, the federal government went on an anti-trust rampage that led to a provision being included in the Panama Canal Act of 1915 prohibiting railroads from owning steamship companies. Forced to divest themselves of their shipping line, the Erie Railroad sold both the *Owego* and *Brownell* off the lakes. They thus joined the Pennsylvania Railroad's *Susquehanna*, which had suffered the same fate. The *Owego* was purchased by Federal Operating Company, while the *Chemung* went to the Staten Island Shipbuilding Company, both of New York. The trip to the Atlantic Coast required that the ships be cut in half to transit the Welland Canal, a procedure carried out at Buffalo.

Both were subsequently rebuilt by their owners to deepen them for service on the oceans. The *Owego* came out on saltwater with a depth of just over twenty-four feet, while the *Chemung* was rebuilt to twenty-three feet. Interestingly, while the deepening raised the gross tonnage of both vessels to more than 3,060, their net tonnage actually dropped slightly. This means that the additional space within their hulls was not intended for cargo, at least not freight cargo.

While America managed to stay out of World War I until after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in the spring of 1917, many U.S. shipping companies were reaping healthy profits by carrying cargo for the various combatants. Return passages from Europe also presented them with opportunities to transport some of the thousands of people who were fleeing the war-torn continent, emigrés who were willing to pay premium rates for passage on any vessel bound for the U.S. or Canada. In all likelihood, the additional space created by deepening the *Owego* and *Browning* was devoted to passenger cabins.

After being rebuilt at Staten Island Shipbuilding, the *Brownell* was sold to the Harby Steamship Company of New York, which restored her original name. She went into service on the Atlantic in 1916 with the familiar name *Chemung* again painted on her bow and stern. Her service on the ocean would be short, however. On November 26, 1916, while crossing the Mediterranean on a voyage from New York to Genoa, Italy, the *Chemung* found herself in the sights of an Austrian submarine off Cabo de Gata, Spain. It was not a fair fight. The defenseless freighter came under attack by both gunfire and torpedoes from the U-boat, and in a matter of minutes her fate was sealed. Ignored by the submarine, the crew abandoned ship and watched the *Chemung* plunge to her watery grave as they rowed away from the scene.⁶

The *Owego* survived the war and continued to operate on the Atlantic under U.S. flag until sold in 1923 to Brewster and Company of Seattle, Washington. Taken through the Panama

Canal to the Pacific, the *Owego* was reflagged by her new owners in China in 1924 and her name changed to *Yin Tung*. A prominent China trader for the balance of her career, she sailed under Brewster colors until 1927, when she was sold to the first of two Chinese shipping firms that would own her. They again changed her name, and she became the *Ting On*. Sometime prior to 1944, the aging former Queen of the Lakes changed hands for a final time, and with it came a fourth name. When they registered their new vessel in Shanghai, the Chi Ping Steamship Company called her the *Voo Yang*.

Records on the *Owego*'s service in China are scarce and somewhat contradictory. One report indicates that she sank in China in 1944, possibly a victim of World War II Pacific combat. A second source has her continuing in operation until being scrapped in 1955 after sixty-nine years of total service, including an astonishing thirty-nine years on saltwater. It is possible, of course, that the *Voo Yang* was sunk during World War II, but was subsequently salvaged and returned to service following the war.

If she went to the shipbreakers in 1955, it is unlikely that that any of those involved in dismantling her would have been aware of her colorful career.⁷ They would not have known that until 1916 she had a twin sister, or that she had once been revered as Queen of the Lakes.

Notes

1. Rev. Peter Van Der Linden, ed., *Great Lakes Ships We Remember II* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1984), 60.
2. John O. Greenwood, *Namesakes, 1900–1919* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1986), 156.
3. Details derived from drawings in the American Ship Building Collection, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
4. *Marine Record*, July 7, 1887.
5. Gross tonnage is really a volumetric measurement, not a weight. It is arrived at by calculating the total cubic footage of the vessel and dividing by 100, assuming that 100 cubic feet of space would contain one long ton of cargo (2,240 pounds). In calculating net tonnage, on the other hand, only those areas of the ship actually intended for the carriage of cargo are measured. Machinery spaces, passenger and crew quarters, storerooms, and spaces devoted to navigation of the vessel are not included in the net tonnage measurement; this dimension is, therefore, always smaller than a vessel's gross tonnage.
6. Greenwood, 154.
7. Ship Biographies, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.