Queen of the Lakes

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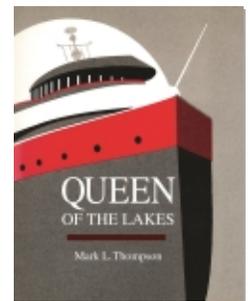➡ For additional information about this book

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Queens for Hanna and Rockefeller

Selecting a name for a new ship is always a serious matter for a shipping company. Many different naming schemes have been used, but new vessels are most often named for executives of the owning company or top officials of one of the shipping company's major customers. Only one name can go on any hull, so there will always be people who are very pleased with the choice, and others who will be disappointed. For that reason, while many people may be involved in suggesting names for a new ship, the final choice is always reserved for top-ranking corporate executives, who weigh their decision carefully. Well, almost always.

STR. CORALIA

432'x48'x24'
Queen of the Lakes
February 22, 1896 to August 8, 1896

The steamer *Coralia* was apparently an exception to the rule. Launched on February 22, 1896, it is said that her name was not picked until five minutes before she was launched.[1] Huddling in the moments before the launching, officials of the

Mutual Transportation Company of Escanaba, Michigan, decided to name their new ship for Coralia Hanna, wife of fleet manager L. C. Hanna. In all likelihood, word of the name that had been selected spread rapidly through the crowd gathered at Globe Ship Building in Cleveland to see the giant vessel plummet sideways into the water. Their reaction upon hearing the chosen name was not recorded, but it is likely that many thought *Coralia* was a fittingly melodic name for the beautiful new freighter.

Even though she had been built with an extra stiff and strong hull and was longer than any other ship on the lakes, the experienced staff of designers and shipwrights at Globe had created a vessel that was truly a masterpiece of proportioning. Not since the launching of the *Onoko* fourteen years earlier had Globe built a record-breaking ship, and it appears as if the staff there had gone out of their way to insure that it would be a vessel worthy of the title Queen of the Lakes.

After the launching of the 350-foot bulk freighter *Globe* in the fall of 1894, the once highly respected shipyard had fallen on hard times. In the seventeen months that passed between the launchings of the *Globe* and the *Coralia,* the yard that had pioneered the construction of both iron and steel ships found its only work in the construction of a 90-foot canal towboat and

seven barges, six of which were just 100 feet long. It must have been a difficult time for the talented staff at Globe, trying to find some modicum of satisfaction in building the utilitarian towboat and barges while other yards were launching impressive ships like the *Victory, Zenith City,* and *Rees.*

The opportunity to design and build the *Coralia* undoubtedly breathed new life into the Globe yard on the banks of the Cuyahoga. At 432 feet in overall length, she was fully 34 feet longer than *Victory,* which had been launched just eight months earlier, and 19 feet longer than the *Rees,* launched only two months before. At 4,330 gross tons, she was fifteen percent larger than the *Rees* or *Victory,* representing a phenomenal leap in size.

The forecastle deck on the *Coralia* was very low and did not extend as far back from the bow as was common on the ships immediately preceding her. This was achieved by eliminating the forecastle cabin and locating quarters for unlicensed crewmembers one deck down. The *Coralia*'s forward cabin was set well aft of the forecastle, making room for two hatches between the forecastle and the cabin structure. The blocky profile of the stern cabin was softened by beginning the stern gunwale at the forward end of the cabin, so that much of the cabin was concealed by the clean line of the black hull.

On her maiden voyage in 1896, *Coralia* established a new Great Lakes cargo record by loading 4,869 net tons of ore at Escanaba. Early in her career, it was also common to see her towing a barge, which further increased the amount of cargo she could move on a single trip.

The *Coralia* was actually the first of three sisterships built from the same plans. The other two vessels followed her into the water on May 9 and July 25, 1896. They were two of twelve new ships built for John D. Rockefeller's Bessemer Steamship Company, which had just been organized.

Rockefeller had decided in 1895 that it was critical for mine owners like himself to operate their own fleets, rather than to be at the mercy of shipowners. Because the amount of ore to be shipped was increasing so rapidly, Rockefeller had found that shipowners were often in an advantageous position

Mutual Transportation's *Coralia* preparing to load at a chute-type ore dock on the upper lakes. A chute has already been lowered into one of the forward hatches on the big freighter, and her wooden hatch covers can be seen stacked along the outboard wing of the deck. In 1901, the *Coralia* and the other ships in the Mutual fleet were purchased by U.S. Steel's Pittsburgh Steamship Company. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)
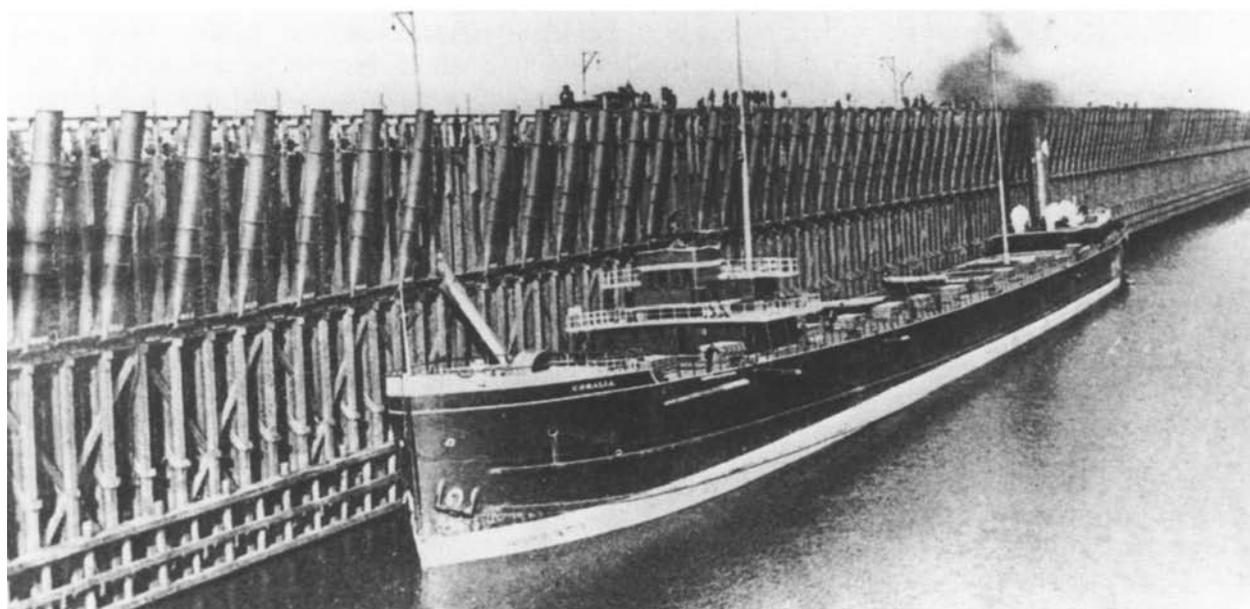
when negotiating contracts with mine owners. Rockefeller cajoled Samuel Mather of Pickands Mather into helping him establish his new fleet. While Pickands Mather was in the shipping business and stood to lose some cargoes if mine owners had their own boats, Rockefeller informed Mather that he was committed to building a fleet and Mather could either help him or stand by while someone else earned the healthy fees for assisting with the $3 million project. With the situation expressed so boldly, Mather saw the light and agreed to help establish the Bessemer fleet.

Within months, each of the major shipyards around the lakes recieved letters from Pickands Mather asking them to bid on the construction of one or two ships or barges. All of the yards were eager to land new contracts, so each quoted the lowest possible costs, hoping to outbid the other yards for the work. Officials from all of the yards were subsequently summoned to Cleveland. One by one they were called in to meet with Sam Mather, and each and every one of them came out of the meeting with a signed contract. When the shipyard officials later compared notes, they were stunned. They found they hadn't really been bidding against each other at all. Mather had simply requested the bids as a ploy to cover the fact that he intended to have twelve vessels built simultaneously for Rockefeller, and to force the yards to quote realistic, rather than inflated, prices. If the yards had known in advance that they were going to get an order for one or two ships, they would undoubtedly have padded their prices. Once the yards became aware of the remarkable coup masterminded by Mather, they had to admit that the resulting contract prices were fair. What's more, they were glad to have the work.[2]

STR. SIR HENRY BESSEMER
432'x48'x24'
Queen of the Lakes
May 9, 1896 to August 8, 1896

The first of the two ships launched at Globe for the Bessemer fleet was the *Sir Henry Bessemer,* followed several months later by the *Sir William Siemens.* Within two years the fleet boasted ten steamers and eleven barges, all of which were named in honor of famous inventors. Together, the twenty-one vessels in the new Rockefeller fleet had a combined carrying capacity of 100,000 tons.[3] By 1901, the fleet had swelled to fifty-six vessels, making it the largest on the lakes.[4]

The stack of the *Coralia* when it was operated by Mutual Transportation, prior to 1901. (Author's collection)

STR. SIR WILLIAM SIEMENS
432'x48'x24'
Queen of the Lakes
July 25, 1896 to August 8, 1896

The three identical sister ships—*Coralia, Bessemer,* and *Siemens*—were united in 1901 when the holdings of the Mutual and Bessemer fleets became part of the new U.S. Steel Corporation. The vessels operated as part of the subsidiary Pittsburgh Steamship Company, often referred to as the "steel trust" fleet. Over one hundred vessels flew the Pittsburgh flag; it was the largest shipping company on the lakes and would continue as such for the next eight decades.

As part of the Pittsburgh fleet, *Coralia* often towed the barge *Maia.* The 395-foot *Maia* had been built in 1898 for the Minnesota Steamship Company, which had also been absorbed into the steel trust fleet. In May of 1906, the 455-foot freighter *Howard L. Shaw* made the mistake of trying to pass between the *Coralia* and the *Maia,* apparently not seeing the towline connecting the two vessels. The unfortunate *Shaw* was raked by the cable, which unceremoniously snapped off both of her masts and tore off her smokestack.[5] It was one of the few incidents that would blemish the *Coralia*'s long career.

Around 1920, the *Coralia* was rebuilt. Her pilothouse was moved atop her forecastle at that time, following a pattern that had by then become standard on the lakes. Like most of the ships built before the change from a two-watch to a three-watch system, the *Coralia* also needed additional accommodations for crewmembers. While most of the older ships were having "doghouse" cabins added on their decks to provide the necessary rooms, the *Coralia* had her doghouse placed atop the stern cabin instead. She may, in fact, have been the first ship with a two-story cabin at her stern. In time, the design became standard on the lakes.[6]

In 1927, *Coralia* was sold to Nicholson Universal Steamship Company of Detroit and, like the *Rees,* she was rebuilt for

service in the automobile trade. When the demand for bulk cargoes increased and auto production dropped off during World War II, she was reconverted for the bulk trade. The shipping business dropped off after the war, and in 1949 the *Coralia* was sold to the T. H. Browning Steamship Company. Her new owners changed her name to *T. H. Browning* in 1950 and, again, to *L. D. Browning* in 1952. During the winter of 1953–54, her coal-fired boilers were modified to burn oil with the installation of burners that had previously been used on two other ships. In 1955, Browning sold her to the Continental Grain Company's Beta Lake Steamship Company, which used her as a storage barge at Buffalo for several years. No longer deemed to be an efficient carrier, she was finally sent to the ship-breakers at Hamilton, Ontario, in 1964, after sixty-eight years of service.[7]

The *Bessemer* and *Siemens* operated under Pittsburgh colors until the end of the 1928 season, when both were sold to the Paisley Steamship Company. In 1929, the *Bessemer* was renamed *Michael J. Bartelme,* while the *Siemens* became the *William B. Pilkey.* When Columbia Transportation Company was formed in 1935 by Oglebay-Norton, both ships were transferred into that fleet.

In 1941, Columbia had the *Pilkey* rebuilt as a crane vessel at the Fairport Machine Shop in Fairport, Ohio. Two large, movable, electromagnetic cranes were installed on her deck so that she could handle scrap steel and pig iron in addition to bulk cargoes. The addition of the cranes was not the first change in the appearance of the vessel, however. While still part of the Pittsburgh fleet, the flying bridge atop the *Siemens*'s wheelhouse was enclosed and became a pilothouse, while still retaining the old wheelhouse structure. After that, she looked as if she had a two-story pilothouse. The old wheelhouse was removed sometime before 1930, at which time the pilothouse was placed directly on top of the forward cabin and her bridge wings and cabin overhang were eliminated. Before that date, a doghouse had also been added on her deck, just forward of the stern cabin, to provide additional accommodations for crew. The doghouse had to be removed when she was converted to a craneship, for it would have interferred with operation of the cranes. At that time, a doghouse-type cabin was built just ahead of the ship's forward cabin, sitting atop the forecastle.

When she returned to service after being converted to a crane vessel, the former *Siemens* was renamed *Frank E. Vigor.* On the morning of April 27, 1944, the *Vigor* was downbound on Lake Erie in a dense spring fog, carrying a cargo of sulphur. It would be another year before the first radar would make its debut on the lakes, and the captain of the *Vigor* was feeling his way along slowly in the fog. Lookouts were posted, the ship's foghorn was being sounded regularly, and everyone on duty lis-

The *Vigor,* launched in 1896 as the *Sir William Siemens,* sank off Lake Erie's Long Point in 1944 after colliding in the fog with the *Str. Philip Minch.* The crane ship was carrying a load of sulphur at the time. (Author's collection)

tened intently for an answering signal that would alert them to another vessel in the area. Despite the precautions, while negotiating the dangerous waters of Pelee Passage between Pelee Island and the Canadian mainland, she collided with the 500-foot steamer *Philip Minch.*

She was holed badly, and it became immediately obvious that the *Vigor*'s fate was sealed. Her thirty-two crewmembers abandoned ship successfully and were picked up by the *Minch.* As her cargo hold and side tanks flooded, the *Vigor,* perhaps made slightly top-heavy because of her cranes, capsized and sank in seventy-five feet of water. She was the first of the three sisters to go, but she had by then given her various owners forty-eight years of faithful service. No doubt, the *Vigor*'s hull and machinery would have been good for another decade or more, but not every ship on the lakes is fortunate enough to survive to its maximum longevity.

The *Bartelme,* the former *Bessemer,* had her name changed again in 1943, when Columbia renamed her *Wolverine.* She operated in the bulk trade through the end of the Korean War, when she was sold to a construction company for use as a floating warehouse. In 1955, while being used during the construction of the Mackinac Bridge that spans Michigan's two peninsulas, the hull of the *Wolverine* gave way, and she cracked badly amidships. Whether the hull failure was the result of age or improper loading is unknown, but the damaged hull was towed to a shipyard at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. It was determined that the cost of repairing her could not be justified, so the *Wolverine* languished there until 1971, when her seventy-five-year-old hull was finally scrapped. She was the last of the three sisters to disappear from the lakes.

Notes

1. Rev. Peter Van Der Linden, ed., *Great Lakes Ships We Remember* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1979), 144.
2. James P. Barry, *Ships of the Great Lakes* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1973), 175.
3. J. B. Mansfield, ed., *History of the Great Lakes,* vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1972), 452–53.
4. Barry, 175.
5. Skip Gillham, "The Last of the Consorts," *Telescope* 25, no.6 (November-December 1976): 159.
6. Van Der Linden, 144.
7. Ibid.