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Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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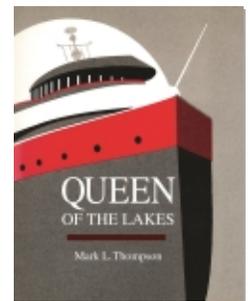
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14

Four Giant Tin-Stackers

Before the *Wolvin* first slid into the water at Lorain, U.S. Steel had already contracted for the construction of four ships that would embody many of the design innovations pioneered by the big Acme freighter and would reclaim the Queen of the Lakes title for the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet. The four were also the first new boats built for the U.S. Steel fleet, which had been formed in 1901.

Two of the ships were to be built at Chicago Ship Building in Chicago, and one each at Superior Ship Building, in Superior, Wisconsin, and West Bay City Ship Building, in West Bay City, Michigan. All three of the yards were subsidiaries of American Ship Building, which had designed and built the *Wolvin*. The total contract for the four ships amounted to \$1,650,000, or an average of just over \$400,000 per ship.¹

STR. ELBERT H. GARY

569'x56'x26'5"

Queen of the Lakes

April 8, 1905 to April 26, 1906

It was a busy spring and summer of 1905 for Miss Jennie Jewell Powell, the daughter of L. W. Powell, an officer of the

Oliver Iron Company of Duluth. Miss Powell travelled first to Chicago on April 8 to christen the *Str. Elbert H. Gary*, the first of the new ships to be launched. On June 24 she was again in Chicago, this time to christen the *Str. William E. Corey*, the new flagship of the giant Pittsburgh fleet. Two days later Miss Powell was back in Superior, across the harbor from her Duluth home, to preside at the June 26 christening of the *Str. George W. Perkins*.

STR. WILLIAM E. COREY

569'x56'x26'5"

Queen of the Lakes

June 24, 1905 to April 26, 1906

While it had been a great honor for the young Miss Powell to be involved in the gala activities planned in conjunction with the launchings of the *Gary* and *Corey* at Chicago—occasions said to have “brought together probably the largest representation of steel interests ever gathered at a similar event”²—she was undoubtedly much more excited at the prospect of christening the *Perkins*, which had literally been built in her backyard. Most residents of Duluth and Superior had report-



The *Elbert H. Gary*, the first new ship built for the giant U.S. Steel fleet after it was formed in 1901. The freighter is shown entering a lock at Sault Ste. Marie on a journey up the lakes. A group of crewmembers can be seen gathered at the forward end of the deck for the trip through the locks. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)

edly become quite blasé about launchings, however. In the eighteen years that had transpired since the opening of Alexander McDougall's American Steel Barge Company in 1888, fifty-eight large ships had been put into the water at shipyards in Duluth and Superior. Initially, the launchings were very popular events. It was not unusual for thousands of local residents to turn out to watch a new freighter slide off the ways, as had been the case with the launching of the passenger steamer *Christopher Columbus* in 1892. In recent years, however, atten-

dance at the launchings had been sparse.³ Miss Powell and the officials of Pittsburgh Steamship must have been delighted, and possibly a little surprised, when they arrived at the Superior shipyard on that Monday afternoon and found that thousands of spectators had gathered to watch the launching of the *Perkins*. It was, according to a local newspaper, the biggest event since the launching of the *Christopher Columbus*.⁴

STR. GEORGE W. PERKINS

569'x56'x26'5"

Queen of the Lakes

June 26, 1905 to April 26, 1906

Two months later, the *Str. Henry C. Frick* was launched at West Bay City, without the aid of Miss Powell. In a simple ceremony, Mrs. E. R. Collins, wife of the Pittsburgh fleet's traffic manager, broke the traditional bottle of champagne on the bow of the "last of the big four" as the freighter plunged into the water. Mrs. Collins was assisted by Captain Neil Campbell, "as canny a Scot as ever came across," who had been selected to be master of the *Frick* during her maiden season on the lakes. Unlike the other three new Pittsburgh ships, all of the *Frick*'s machinery had been installed prior to the launching, so she was ready to go into service immediately after sea trials.⁵

STR. HENRY C. FRICK

569'x56'x26'4"

Queen of the Lakes

August 26, 1905 to April 26, 1906

Those attending the launching reported that the *Frick* was "magnificently furnished." According to one writer, "her appointments could not be more luxuriant and costly were they ordered for a millionaire's private yacht." Rooms aboard the *Frick* had individual toilets and bathrooms, electric call bells, telephones that could be used to call various parts of the vessel, electric fans, electric lights, and unusually fine woodwork. The dining room, according to one report, "was a symphony in the woodworker's art."⁶

By the time the *Frick* went into the water at West Bay City, the final outfitting of the *Gary* had been completed, and this magnificent new addition to the giant tin-stacker fleet had gone into service. Early reports on her performance undoubtedly thrilled fleet officials. Measured at 6,331 gross tons and 4,988 net tons, she proved capable of carrying in excess of 10,500 long tons of iron ore. At the same time, while her triple expansion steam engine was rated at only 1,800 horsepower and many thought she was underpowered for her size, the *Gary* was actually making better speed than her designers had anticipated. While they had predicted that the *Gary* would be able to average ten miles an hour when loaded, she averaged an impressive twelve miles an hour between the Straits of Macki-

nac and South Chicago on the down-bound leg of her maiden voyage.⁷

The four ships were almost carbon copies, with a few exceptions. Most notable was the fuller Texas deck cabin⁸ and deckhouse installed on the *Corey*, the new flagship of the Pittsburgh fleet. The enlarged Texas deck cabin was necessary to accommodate a suite of five passenger cabins for use by guests of the vessel's owners.⁹ The deckhouse, located where the other three ships had their number two hatch, housed deck department personnel, augmenting the normal accommodations in the forecabin.

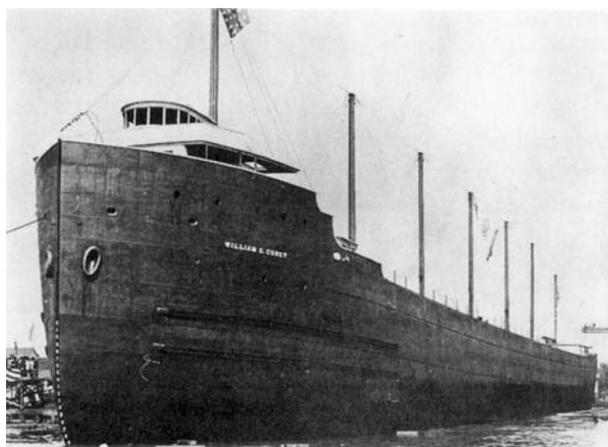
The *Corey* and her three sister ships had long and distinguished careers on the lakes. The *Corey*, *Gary*, and *Frick* each operated for more than six decades, while the fourth, the *Perkins*, saw a remarkable seventy-six seasons before going to the shipbreakers. For a few days in 1905, however, Pittsburgh Steamship officials weren't certain that their new flagship was going to make it through her first season.

On November 28, only a little over three months after she made her first trip on the lakes, the *Corey*'s career almost came to an end on Gull Island in the Apostle Island system at the west end of Lake Superior. Under the command of Captain F. A. Bailey, the *Corey* was running for cover from an unusually fast moving northeasterly gale of extreme intensity when she was driven hard aground on Gull Island Reef. The big Pittsburgh flagship wasn't the only Great Lakes ship travelling in harm's way that day. Off the Keweenaw Peninsula, Pickands Mather's *Str. Victory* was separated from her consort, the barge *Constitution*, and limped on to the Soo alone. At the entrance to Duluth harbor, the Pittsburgh fleet's *Isaac L. Ellwood* and *Mataafa* were fighting for their lives as they tried to reach the safety of the harbor. At Fourteen Mile Point on the Keweenaw, the 430-foot freighter *Western Star* was driven aground so high and dry that after the storm was over people could walk all the way around her without getting their feet wet.¹⁰

When Harry Coulby, president of Pittsburgh Steamship, received word that his fleet's new flagship was aground, he personally rushed to the scene to supervise salvage operations. Coulby found the *Corey* intact, but in a dangerously exposed position. If it could not be pulled off the reef before another storm struck the lakes, the stranded vessel would be battered into a pile of scrap metal by the force of the sea. Even if Lake Superior was spared from any more late season storms, the mercury was steadily moving downward, and in a matter of weeks heavy ice would begin to form in the shallow waters of the Apostles. Once ice set in, salvage efforts would be futile, and the *Corey* would spend the long northern winter locked in the grinding ice pack. By spring there would be little left.

Coulby spared no expense in the effort to free the *Corey*. The tugs *Crosby*, *Edna G.*, and *Gladiator*, three of the most powerful on Lake Superior, were already at the site and working feverishly to pull the freighter off the reef. When their valiant efforts failed to budge the *Corey*, Coulby sent out orders for four of the Pittsburgh ore boats to steam to the site and join the salvage effort. Within days, the *Houghton*, *Manola*, *Marina*, and *Sir William Siemens* arrived at the site and were harnessed to their recalcitrant flagship with stout hawsers. The reef's grip on the torn and battered hull of the *Corey* was finally broken, and she began to move astern slowly, gradually sliding back toward deep water. Finally, twelve days after she was driven onto the reef, the *Houghton* and *Marina* managed to pull her completely free, and the crippled ship was taken in tow to the shipyard at Superior for repairs. Before she was ready to resume service the next spring, her owners spent \$100,000 to erase the damages caused by the grounding, amounting to almost a quarter of her original cost.¹¹

It wasn't the only repair bill that came into the Pittsburgh Steamship offices in the aftermath of the late November storm. The *Corey* was just one of eleven Pittsburgh vessels damaged in the blow. At Duluth, the *Mataafa* was broken in half, and her barge, the *Nasmyth*, was damaged. A few miles down the shore, their steamer *Crescent City* had blown ashore. Near Two



The *Str. William E. Corey*, which almost had its career ended by a killer storm that struck the lakes only five months after the big U.S. Steel freighter was launched. The twin to the *Gary* is shown here just after being launched at Chicago on June 24, 1905. Cables were attached to the seven temporary masts that lined the deck of the *Corey* and tied off to bollards adjacent to the launching ways to prevent the ship from rolling over when it splashed into the water. The ship's smokestack has not yet been installed. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)

Harbors, the *Lafayette* was driven on the rocks and broke in two. The already crippled ship was further damaged when her barge, the *Manila*, crashed into her. The *William Edenborn* was beached at Split Rock and her consort, the barge *Madeira*, was broken in two. The *Cornelia* and her barge, the *Maia*, had been driven ashore at Point Isabelle, while the steamer *German* grounded at Glencoe.¹²

Sailors on the Great Lakes always look toward November with great trepidation. It is the month of killer storms, and seldom are the lakes spared the fury of at least one good blow. Even by Great Lakes standards, though, that November of 1905 was exceptionally brutal. The lakes were torn by three furious storms in the *Corey*'s first season. In their aftermath, seventy vessels had been wrecked and 149 lives lost.¹³

While the late November storm marred the *Corey*'s debut on the lakes, she and her crew were luckier than many. The *Mataafa* was in two pieces at Duluth, and nine of her crewmembers had frozen to death. The *Str. Ira Owen*, which had been downbound from the American lakehead with a cargo of 116,000 bushels of barley, vanished in the storm. Crewmembers from the *Str. H. B. Nye* reported that they had caught a glimpse of the *Owen* at the peak of the storm, about forty miles off Outer Island in the Apostles. She was laboring heavily in the furious seas and blowing distress signals. The *Nye* was itself in jeopardy of sinking and could lend no help. When the storm had abated, the 280-foot freighter and her nineteen crewmembers had disappeared from the face of the lake. Several days later, a steamer reported finding floating wreckage from the *Owen*, including marked life preservers, east of Michigan Island, near where the ill-fated freighter was last seen.¹⁴ Such vessel disappearances were not at all uncommon in the days before ships were equipped with radio equipment.

It was not the last Lake Superior storm that the *Corey* would have to weather, nor the last damage she would sustain. Lake Superior never treated the *Corey* very well. In May of 1917, she was blown ashore on Gros Cap Reef and sustained \$25,000 in damage. During the night of October 22-23, 1929, while downbound with a load of ore from Two Harbors, the *Corey* was again battered by a killer storm, causing damage of \$3,500.¹⁵ In comparison, the *Corey*'s three sisters had relatively uneventful careers. The *Gary* and *Frick* escaped involvement in any serious casualties, while the *Perkins* ran aground in the fog near Two Harbors in 1908 and suffered relatively minor damage in a collision with the *Str. William P. Snyder, Jr.*, in Duluth Harbor in 1918.¹⁶

The unfortunate *Corey* was also the first of the four to be sold by the Pittsburgh fleet, and the first to have her career ended. In 1963, following several years of declining cargo tonnage on the lakes, the *Corey* was declared excess by her owners

and sold to Upper Lakes Shipping of Toronto. Her Canadian owners renamed her *Ridgetown* in honor of the hometown of the firm's president. Until 1969, she operated in the iron ore and grain trade on the Canadian side of the lakes. At the end of that season she was laid up at Toronto with a load of storage grain, and the former Queen of the Lakes was never to sail again.

In the spring of 1970, the *Ridgetown* was sold to Canadian Dredge and Dock, which was then involved in the construction of harbor facilities at Nanticoke, on the north shore of Lake Ontario. They sunk her as a temporary breakwater at Nanticoke during the summer of 1970. Raised later, the *Ridgetown* was towed to Port Credit, Ontario, for use in another construction project. Loaded with stone, she was sunk to form a portion of the breakwater at the entrance to the Port Credit harbor. The retired freighter is still there today, just off the shipping lanes she sailed for sixty-five seasons.

Only months after the *Corey* was sold to Upper Lakes Shipping, the Pittsburgh fleet conveyed the *Gary* to Kinsman Marine Transit, successor to the historic Minch fleet. Renamed the *R. E. Webster*, she was put into service in the grain trade between Duluth-Superior and Buffalo. By the end of the 1972 season, the freighter's hull and machinery were badly showing the wear that accumulates after sixty-seven seasons. Unable to justify the expense of bringing the *Webster* into compliance with Coast Guard inspection standards, Kinsman officials decided to send the vessel to the shipbreakers. Sold to Marine Salvage of Port Colborne, Ontario, the *Webster* was towed out of her berth at Toledo, Ohio, on June 9, 1973, by the Canadian tugs *Helen McAllister* and *Salvage Monarch*, en route for Quebec. On June 15, the Polish tug *Jantar* took the *Webster* and the former Wilson Marine Transit freighter *A. E. Nettleton* in tow for the long trip out the St. Lawrence and across the North Atlantic. They arrived in Santander, Spain, on July 5, 1973, and scrapping operations commenced soon afterward on the two freighters.¹⁷

The Pittsburgh fleet sold the *Frick* and *Perkins* in 1964. The *Frick* was purchased by Providence Shipping of Nassau in the Bahamas, and she was managed and operated by Algoma Central Marine of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Renamed the *Michipicoten*, she was used mainly in the Canadian ore trade until October 27, 1972, when she passed through the Welland Canal carrying her final cargo, a load of salt bound from Goderich, Ontario, for Trois-Rivières, Quebec. Sold to Spanish ship-breakers, the *Michipicoten* departed Quebec in tow of the Polish tug *Koral* on November 15, 1972. On November 17, she broke adrift in heavy seas in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and split in two off Anticosti Island.

Word of the drama at the mouth of the St. Lawrence

flashed back to the lakes. At ports from Montreal to Duluth and aboard scores of freighters plying the trade routes the *Frick* had travelled for so many seasons, hundreds of her former crewmembers listened intently for news of the historic ship's desperate struggle. As darkness settled over the lakes, word came that the bow of the *Michipicoten* had sunk, but the stern section remained afloat. The old ship was putting up a valiant fight against overwhelming odds. Former crewmembers and thousands of boatwatchers on both sides of the lakes clung to the hope that tugs would be able to take the stern section in tow and at least a part of the ship would survive her last bout with a November storm. Their hopes were dashed the following day when news broadcasts solemnly reported that the stern section had flooded and sunk to the bottom.¹⁸ Some would conjecture that the old ship simply refused to leave the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence system that she had been such a vital part of for so many years. A few even celebrated the sinking, pleased that the once proud vessel had deprived the shipbreakers of irreverently picking over her bones.

The loss of the *Michipicoten* left the *George W. Perkins* as the only survivor of the four Pittsburgh steamers launched in 1905. Sold in 1964 to a Canadian holding company, she was renamed the *Westdale* and operated primarily in the parcel grain trade between Georgian Bay and Goderich, Ontario, under management of Westdale Shipping. In 1977, ownership of the vessel passed to the Soo River Company, and she was renamed the *H. C. Heimbecker*. Her new owners operated her in the Canadian grain trade until 1981, when they traded the seventy-six-year-old ship to Triad Salvage in exchange for the fifty-eight-year-old *Maxine*.¹⁹ On November 3, 1981, the *Heimbecker* arrived at Triad's dock in Ashtabula, Ohio, and scrapping operations began.²⁰ The last of the *Gary*-class ships finally disappeared from the lakes.

Notes

1. Gary S. Dewar, "A Forgotten Class," *Telescope* (March–April 1989): 31–39.
2. "The Corey Launched," *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 24, 1905.
3. "Christen Ship," *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 24, 1905.
4. "Perkins Goes In," *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 26, 1905.
5. "Is Queen of Fresh Water," *Bay City Tribune*, August 27, 1905.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 21, 1905.
8. The Texas deck is located one deck above the main deck or spar deck at the bow. The cabin area on main deck at the bow is generally referred to as the forecabin. For a distance back from the

bow, the sides of the hull are extended some distance above the main deck, an aid in keeping water off the deck when the vessel is heading into a sea. Those extensions of the hull form the outer bulkheads for the forecastle cabin. At the stern, the deck above the main deck is referred to as the poop deck.

9. "The Corey Launched." Unlike many of their saltwater counterparts, freighters on the Great Lakes do not carry paying passengers, although many have what are alternately referred to as passenger, guest, or owner's quarters. Most of the guests carried on the bulk freighters are influential officials from companies that are customers of the shipping line.
10. William Ratigan, *Great Lakes Shipwrecks and Survivals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), 273–74.
11. Julius F. Wolff, Jr., "Grim November," in Walter Havighurst, ed., *The Great Lakes Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 319.
12. Ratigan, 274.
13. Frederick Stonehouse, *Went Missing, II* (AuTrain, MI: Avery Color Studios, 1987), 50.
14. Wolff, 317–18.
15. Ship Biography, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Rev. Peter Van Der Linden, ed., *Ships We Remember* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1979), 195.
19. Rev. Peter Van Der Linden, ed., *Ships We Remember, II* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1984), 263.
20. The *Maxine* had been launched in 1923 as the *William H. Warner*, a standard 600-footer. In 1934, the ship had been purchased by International Harvester, the maker of farm equipment, and renamed *The International*. That company operated the ship in the iron ore trade, serving its steel mill in South Chicago, Illinois, until the firm withdrew from the shipping business in 1977.