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## Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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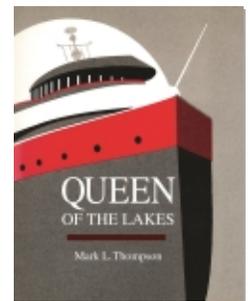
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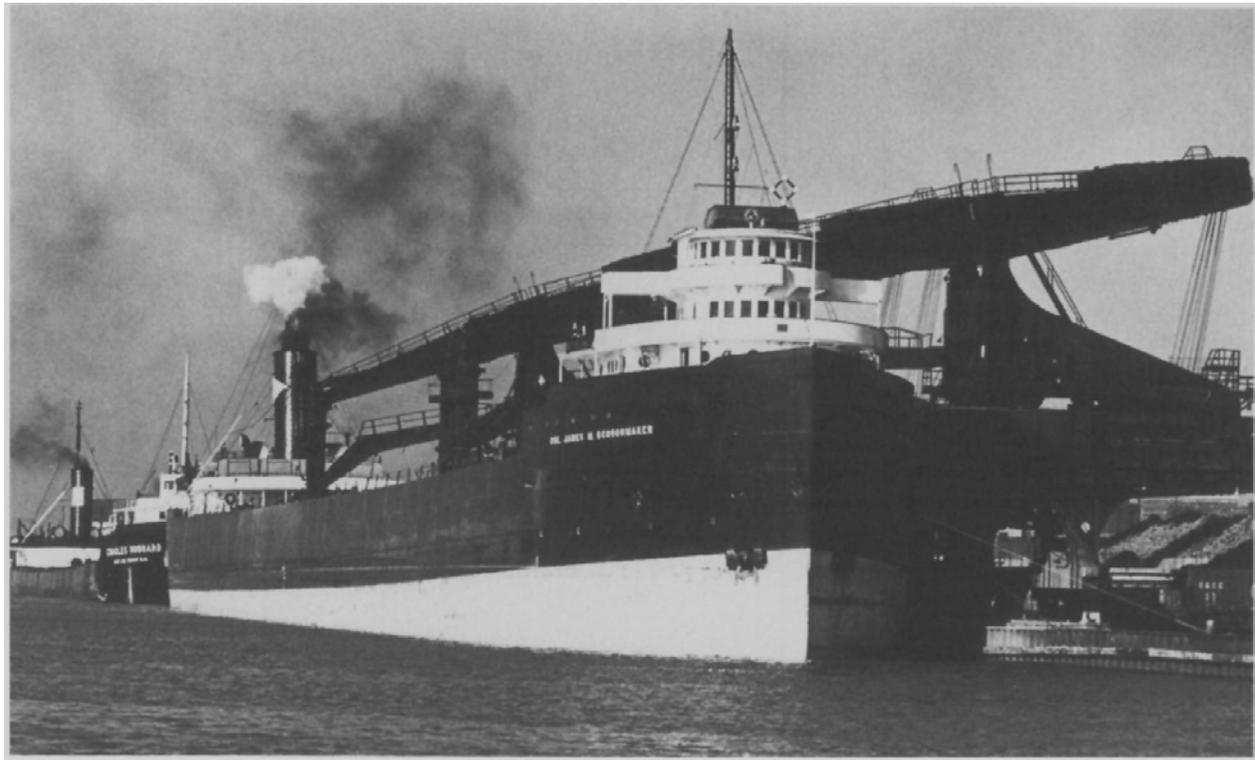
# Shenango Retains the Crown

Shenango Furnace Company expanded dramatically under the leadership of William Penn Snyder. Snyder was an experienced and respected steel executive long before he joined Shenango. He had been named president of Clairton Steel Company in 1904, but left that company in 1906 when it was taken over by U.S. Steel. During his career in the steel industry, Snyder amassed a personal fortune through his holdings in ore mining operations, blast furnaces, coke ovens, and coal mines. Those diverse assets were consolidated under Shenango Furnace when he took over the foundry firm in 1906. Later that year, Shenango also expanded into the shipping industry with the launching at Ecorse, Michigan, of the *William P. Snyder*. It was clear to all onlookers that the aggressive and talented Snyder intended to make Shenango Furnace a major force in the U.S. steel industry.

Creating a diversified steel company is an expensive proposition, however, and after launching the record-breaking *Shenango* in 1909, Snyder found that a shortage of capital was threatening to delay his expansion plans. He badly wanted to add several more freighters to the Shenango fleet, but company accountants advised him that funds were not available to finance construction. Undaunted, Snyder used his ingenuity and reputation to put together one of the most creative ship financing plans in the history of the industry.

Snyder first approached Jones and Laughlin Steel with his plan. Snyder told J&L officials that the Shenango fleet would carry ore for them in exchange for enough plate steel to build two large ships. The J&L executives grabbed at the opportunity. It allowed them to move a substantial amount of ore without any cash outlay. The plate steel they needed to provide really represented what might otherwise have been excess production at their mills. With the J&L agreement in his pocket, essentially representing Shenango's down payment for two ships, Snyder floated a bond issue to cover the construction and machinery costs. The bonds, which promised an attractive rate of return for investors, were to be repaid out of the profits made by the new ships. The bonds sold rapidly. Investors showed great confidence both in Snyder's dynamic business acumen and the profitability of the Great Lakes shipping industry. With the plate steel from J&L and the revenue from the construction bonds, Shenango contracted with Great Lakes Engineering Works in Ecorse for the delivery of two giant bulk freighters.

The first of the new ships went into the water just before noon on Saturday, July 1, 1911, in what local newspapers hailed as "one of the prettiest launches that ever has taken place in a local yard." Gretchen V. Schoonmaker christened the vessel that had been named in honor of her father, Colonel



The Shenango freighter *Col. James M. Schoonmaker* being unloaded by Hulett's. Below the pilothouse is an observation lounge for use by the many guests who were carried aboard the finely outfitted freighter. Behind the *Schoonmaker* is the *Charles S. Hebard*, a 1906-built freighter that was sunk along with the *Str. Amasa Stone* to build a pier at the Medusa Cement dock at Charlevoix, Michigan, in 1965. The hulls of the two freighters can be seen there yet today. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)

James M. Schoonmaker, vice president of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad and a veteran of the Civil War. Several hundred adventurous persons stayed aboard the new ship as it roared down the ways and dropped into the water for the first time.

### STR. COL. JAMES M. SCHOONMAKER

617'x64'2"x34'2"  
Queen of the Lakes  
July 1, 1911 to April 14, 1914

The shipyard hosted a luncheon following the launching at the Hotel Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit. The distin-

guished list of guests included the Schoonmakers; Mr. and Mrs. William P. Snyder; twenty-two-year-old William P. Snyder, Jr., who had just gone to work for Shenango Furnace; and many family friends and business associates from the Pittsburgh area. Photos taken at the luncheon show the women attired in long, pastel-colored summer dresses and the broad-brimmed, flowery hats that were fashionable during that period. The men were all dressed in business attire: conservative, dark-colored, three-piece suits that might have been better suited for wear in a stodgy board room than at the festive events taking place that hot summer day in Detroit. Perhaps the men saw the launching less as a gala social affair than as an important business function. They weren't there to launch a yacht, a toy for the idle rich. The ship they watched slide into the water that day was a machine, a cog in the great wheel of American industry. Above

all else, the *Str. Col. James M. Schoonmaker* was a workboat, the largest bulk freighter in the world.

Built at a cost of about \$400,000, the *Schoonmaker* was 617 feet in overall length, 11 feet longer than the *Shenango*. Stood on end, the green-hulled ship would have towered ten feet above the Singer Building, the second tallest structure in New York City, and it would have dwarfed any building in Detroit. When it went into service in September of 1911, the big ship would carry an estimated 14,000 tons of iron ore from the ore fields of the Lake Superior region to the docks at Ashtabula, Ohio, the Lake Erie terminus of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad. On back-hauls up the lake, the *Schoonmaker* would carry coal brought by rail to Ashtabula from the coal fields of Appalachian.<sup>1</sup>

Like the earlier *Shenango*, the new Queen of the Lakes looked much like the *J. Pierpont Morgan* and the other standard 600-footers. Her basic design followed the plan pioneered by Captain Eli Peck when he built the *R. J. Hackett* in 1869—pilot-house forward, engine room aft. Power was supplied by a quadruple-expansion steam engine rated at an impressive 2,600 horsepower.<sup>2</sup> Once the *Schoonmaker* went into service in the fall of 1911, it didn't take long for the big freighter to fulfill the high expectations of her owners. Before the 1911 season ended, the *Schoonmaker* had established cargo records for iron ore, coal, and rye.<sup>3</sup>

### STR. WILLIAM P. SNYDER, JR.

617x64'2"x34'2"

Queen of the Lakes

January 27, 1912 to April 14, 1914

The twin to the *Schoonmaker* was launched at Ecorse at 11:30 a.m. on Saturday, January 27, 1912, without special ceremony.<sup>4</sup> Several hundred people, mostly shipyard employees, watched as Miss Elizabeth Russel, daughter of John Russel, vice president and treasurer of Great Lakes Engineering Works, christened the new freighter as the *William P. Snyder, Jr.* There is no explanation for why the Snyder family and Shenango officials didn't play a greater role in the launching of the new ship. Perhaps it was because the *Snyder, Jr.*, did not set any new size records for Great Lakes ore boats, as the *Schoonmaker* and *Shenango* had. Or maybe the Snyders had merely tired of participating in the frivolities that went along with the launchings. On the other hand, the downscaled christening activities may have been due to the fact that the ship was launched in the middle of the winter, when the weather in Detroit was not very conducive to outdoor events.

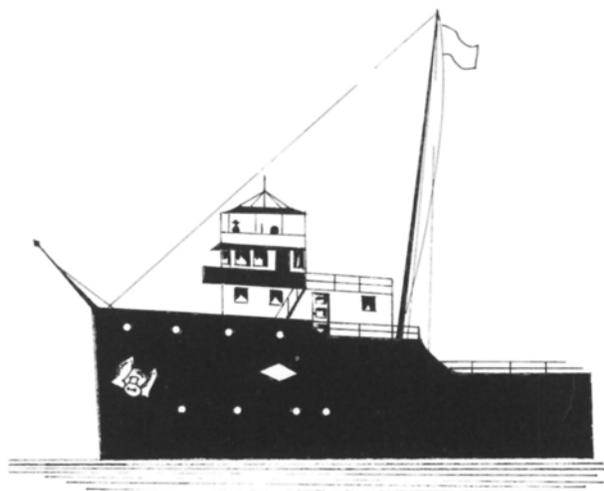
Through the balance of the long Michigan winter, workers at Great Lakes Engineering finished fitting out the new freighter so that it would be ready to go into service at the start of the 1912 shipping season. Its engine and machinery were virtually identical to that installed on the *Schoonmaker*; but its Texas deck passenger quarters were slightly more lavish. Like the *Wilpen*, the *Snyder, Jr.*, had a pipe organ installed in its passenger quarters. Interior bulkheads in the passenger quarters were also panelled in mahogany and "prolifically finished with lavish moldings in the style of the day." Like the other Shenango ships, the *Snyder, Jr.*, was a prodigious carrier. While she could not top the records set by the *Schoonmaker*, the *Snyder, Jr.*, did establish a cargo record for wheat during her second season. On July 10, 1913, the big freighter loaded 464,000 bushels of wheat at Duluth for shipment to Buffalo.<sup>5</sup>

Built from the same plans, the two Shenango ships had careers that closely paralleled each other. In 1950, the *Snyder, Jr.*, was repowered with a five-cylinder Skinner Unaflo engine, rated at 5,000 horsepower. At the same time, her original Scotch boilers were replaced by more efficient water tube boilers. The *Schoonmaker* was repowered in 1952, receiving a 4,950 horsepower steam turbine engine and new water tube boilers. Both ships were also converted to burn oil rather than coal. Around 1954, the forward cabins on both ships were modernized. On the *Snyder, Jr.*, the organ was removed and the Texas deck passenger lounge was converted to a recreation room for crewmembers.<sup>6</sup> Both ships also received new pilot-houses.

Like virtually all ships built before World War II, the *Schoonmaker* and *Snyder, Jr.*, originally had "flying bridges" on top of their wheelhouses. The flying bridge was the domain of the captain or the mate of the watch who navigated the ship. Early on, the flying bridge was really nothing more than a railed-in area on top of the wheelhouse where the captain or mate stood while on duty. The open air bridge provided the navigational personnel with totally unobstructed vision and hearing, so critical to safe navigation in the days before radar. From their perch high atop the forward superstructure, the captain or mate could see lighthouses or the lights of approaching ships and hear foghorns or ship's bells sounding across the water. A speaking tube allowed the officer on the flying bridge to give orders to the wheelsman who was in the enclosed wheelhouse below. The wheelhouse was heated, to keep the steering mechanism and other equipment from freezing up during cold weather, but there was no heat on the flying bridge. On some ships, such as the 1895 *Zenith City*, bridge wings extended out from each side of the flying bridge so that the captain could see around the smokestack and cabin at the stern and get a better view of how far his ship was from a dock or pier.

Over time, efforts were made to make the flying bridges a more hospitable environment for the deck officers. An awning was often installed over the bridge to protect the captain and mates from sun, rain, and snow. Later, canvas windscreens enclosed the area below the railing as a wind barrier. Even with the modifications, watches stood on the flying bridges were often punishing ordeals for deck officers. In an article that appeared before the turn of the century, a writer for *Midland* magazine asked readers to “Imagine yourself standing in a little coop, perhaps eight feet square, with no shelter other than a canvas fence chin high, with a bleak, howling wind, and the snow, sleet, and spray encasing you in a rigid frozen mold; there to be tossed up, down, and sideways.”<sup>7</sup> It’s no wonder old sailors are often described as having “weathered” faces.

On some ships, the flying bridges were converted to pilothouses, with the canvas awnings and windscreens replaced by wooden walls and ceilings. Even then, open areas were left at eye level all the way around the pilothouse so that the vision and hearing of the deck officer on duty wouldn’t be diminished. Ships were built with flying bridges as late as 1946, but when radar sets began to be installed on commercial ships at the end



A drawing of the bow section of a typical pre-World War II lake freighter, copied from a drawing in the American Ship Building collection at Bowling Green State University’s Institute for Great Lakes Research. Shown is the open-air flying bridge from which the captain and mates navigated the ship; from this vantage point their vision and hearing would not be obscured. One deck below the flying bridge is the enclosed and heated wheelhouse where the wheelsman steered the ship. Wheelhouses were enclosed to protect the steering machinery from rain and snow. Deck officers on the flying bridge had no such protection. (Author’s collection)

of World War II, they were soon replaced by pilothouses like those we find on contemporary ships.

On the *Schoonmaker* and *Snyder, Jr.*, the flying bridges were replaced by pilothouses that stood above the old wheel-houses on top of the forward cabin. When they were rebuilt, the ships looked like they had two wheelhouses, one stacked on top of the other. It might have been simpler to convert the existing, enclosed wheelhouse into a pilothouse, but deck officers were used to navigating from the higher vantage point afforded them from the top of the wheelhouse, and they were loath to change. With the emergence of the modern pilothouse, deck officers no longer stood their watches alone in the open air. The wheelsman now stands on a platform toward the back of the pilothouse, raised so that he can see past the officer of the watch, who generally takes up a position in the center window, directly behind the steering pole jutting out from the bow of the ship. Many an old wheelsman will tell you that it was a sad day in the annals of Great Lakes shipping when they were first forced to share their domain with the often haughty deck officers.

With their new pilothouses and engine machinery, the *Schoonmaker* and *Snyder, Jr.*, continued to operate in Shenango colors until 1965. That year the *Schoonmaker* was chartered out to Wilson Marine Transit. While she retained her original name, the *Schoonmaker* was repainted in Wilson colors for the duration of the charter, which lasted until the end of the 1966 season when that fleet was taken over by Litton Industries and the ship reverted to Shenango. During the 1966 season, the *Snyder, Jr.*, was chartered out to Pickands Mather’s Interlake Steamship Company. The following year brought the death at age seventy-eight of William P. Snyder, Jr., who had succeeded his father at the firm’s helm in 1918. Even before his passing, Shenango executives had decided to sell the three ships remaining in their fleet and contract with other shipping companies to haul their raw materials.

The *Snyder, Jr.*, and the 710-foot *Str. Shenango II*, which had replaced the original *Shenango* in 1959, were sold to Interlake early in 1967. Their unique green hulls were covered over with a fresh coat of Interlake’s rust-red hull paint before they went into service with Interlake during the 1967 season. In 1969, Interlake also purchased the *Schoonmaker*, the last of the Shenango vessels. Renaming it the *Willis B. Boyer* in honor of the president of Republic Steel, Interlake operated the ship under charter to Republic from 1969–72.

In 1971, Cleveland-Cliffs was scheduled to take over the lucrative Republic Steel ore contract from Wilson Marine. It was obvious to all industry insiders that Wilson would not survive the loss of the Republic tonnage. Cliffs was in need of additional ships to fulfill their new contract commitments, and

they attempted unsuccessfully to purchase the Wilson fleet from Litton Industries. Their offer rejected by Litton, Cliffs' officials negotiated with Interlake Steamship and struck a deal to buy the *Snyder, Jr.*, and *Boyer*, the former *Schoonmaker*. Once again, the twin freighters were repainted. Like the other ships in the growing Cleveland-Cliffs fleet, the *Snyder, Jr.*, and *Boyer* went into service in 1971 with black hulls and pea-green cabins. Their black smokestacks now bore the radiant orange "C" that was the logo of the Cliffs fleet.

The Cleveland-Cliffs fleet was one of the most successful on the lakes during the 1970s. Buoyed by the giant Republic Steel contract, the largest ever awarded on the lakes, the fleet grew to more than twenty ships. In addition to their ore contracts, managers of the Cliffs fleet secured a major contract to supply coal to power generation plants on the lakes. There was even serious talk that the fleet would build a thousand-footer to augment their coal-carrying capacity. Then, in 1980, Cleveland-Cliffs lost the critical Republic Steel contract to Interlake Steamship. Like Wilson, Cliffs would not survive the loss of their largest contract. They managed to hang on until 1984, but seldom could they find enough cargoes to operate more than two ships. Between 1980 and 1984, most of the Cliffs fleet lay idle at docks around the lakes. Some of the older, smaller vessels began to be sent to the shipbreakers, while Cliffs executives scrambled to try to find cargoes for ships like the *Snyder, Jr.*, and *Boyer*.

In 1983, both of the former Shenango freighters were sold to American Bulk Shipping of Los Angeles. That firm hoped to revamp the two ships to carry container cargoes. Containers ultimately destined for shipment overseas would be loaded at major U.S. ports on the lakes and hauled to Canadian ports on the St. Lawrence Seaway. From there the containers would be transferred to ocean vessels for overseas shipment. While the plan sounded very feasible to many within the Great Lakes shipping community, it was found that water transportation of containers could not compete with rates offered by the railroads.

In 1986, the *Boyer* was purchased by the city of Toledo, Ohio, for her scrap value. City officials intended to convert the former Queen of the Lakes to a museum ship that would attract visitors to the riverfront area along the Maumee River.<sup>8</sup> That plan never reached fruition, however, and the weatherbeaten hulls of the *Boyer* and *Snyder, Jr.*, still sit idle at Toledo. There is virtually unanimous agreement within the Great Lakes maritime community that neither ship will ever see service again and that they are but a short step away from the shipbreakers' torches.

## Notes

1. "Largest Steel Bulk Freighter in the World Is Successfully Dropped Off at Ecorse Shipyard," *Detroit Free Press*, July 2, 1911.
2. Ship Biography, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
3. John O. Greenwood, *Namesakes of the Lakes* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1970), 208.
4. A third identical freighter was built in 1922 for the Franklin Steamship Company of Duluth. The *Fred G. Hartwell* was sold to Hanna in 1946, and in 1951 they renamed her the *Matthew Andrews*. In 1962, the *Hartwell* was sold to Misener Transportation, a Canadian shipping company, and she entered service for them as the *George M. Carl*. The *Carl* was scrapped in Spain in 1984–85.
5. Christine Rohn Hilston, "A Queen in Limbo," *Telescope* 31, no. 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1982): 117.
6. *Ibid.*, 118.
7. J. B. Mansfield, ed. *History of the Great Lakes*, vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1972), 481.
8. Ship Biographies, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.