



PROJECT MUSE®

Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

Published by Wayne State University Press

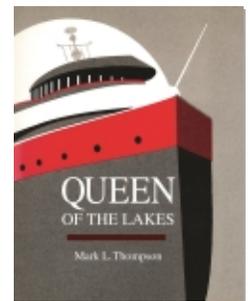
Thompson, Mark L.

Queen of the Lakes.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56556>

Access provided at 6 Apr 2020 16:57 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Rogers City's Big Self-Unloader

With few exceptions, U.S. ships on the Great Lakes don't really have home ports. While the freighters are owned by shipping companies with headquarters in port cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, or Duluth, the ships themselves are vagabonds. During the operating season, they may never call at the port where their fleet is headquartered. When they are ordered into lay-up at the end of the shipping season, they may spend the winter months at any port around the lakes where their owners can rent suitable dock space. One year they might be tied up in the Maumee River at Toledo, while at the end of the next season they're sent to a dock at Duluth or Milwaukee. Attached to most ships on the lakes, the term "home port" would clearly be a misnomer.¹ That was not the case in 1927 for ships of the Bradley Transportation Company.

In every respect, Rogers City, Michigan, had been home port for the Bradley boats since the fleet was formed in 1912.² Located on the northern shore of Lake Huron, the community of less than four thousand residents was adjacent to U.S. Steel's Calcite Plant, one of the world's largest limestone quarries. The "plant," as it was known locally, was the major employer for residents of Rogers City and the small farming settlements in eastern Presque Isle County, most of whom were of German or Polish descent.

It is well known that during the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, millions of rural Americans abandoned their family farms and migrated to the growing industrial cities of the Midwest in search of wage-paying jobs. Young people, in particular, flocked to cities like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo to work in steel mills and auto factories. To them, working as a laborer in a mill or factory was a more attractive and exciting prospect than trying to eke out a meager living on a farm.

What many people don't realize, however, is that the farm-to-factory migrations weren't just limited to the great smokestack cities. In the rural areas around the northern lakes, for example, thousands left farming to take jobs in the growing mining industry. On Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, they were drawn to Houghton, Ishpeming, and Negaunee by jobs in the copper mines and mills. At Marquette, Iron Mountain, and Norway, Michigan, and in Ashland, Wisconsin, they stood in line to apply for jobs in the iron mines or at the ore docks where the big freighters were loaded. In the north woods of Minnesota, young men left their dairy farms and wheat fields and gathered at mine offices "up on the range" north of Duluth. And at Rogers City farm boys from Posen, Hawks, Metz, and Moltke put their names on waiting lists for jobs at the Calcite Plant. Descendants of families that had tilled the soils of Europe and North America for untold centuries became drill op-

erators, blasters, mechanics, mill-wrights, steam shovel operators, truck drivers, locomotive engineers, crusher operators, and dockworkers at the sprawling limestone quarry.

When the Bradley fleet was formed in 1912 with the launching of the *Str. Calcite*, many young men who would normally have gone to work in the quarry took jobs as seamen. The jobs aboard ship paid better than those in the quarry, and seaman had the added opportunity to travel to ports around the Great Lakes. Compared to working on a farm or in the quarry, sailing was an exciting vocation for young men, many of whom had never been out of Presque Isle County before.

From its beginnings in 1912, the Bradley fleet grew steadily. In 1915, the *Str. W. F. White* was added to the fleet, followed in 1917 by the *Str. Carl D. Bradley*. The *Str. B. H. Taylor* was launched in 1923, and it was joined by the *T. W. Robinson* in 1925. With five freighters operating out of the port at Calcite, several hundred residents of the small community were employed on the boats during the sailing season. Despite the good wages and the opportunities to travel, however, many of those attracted to the boats didn't stay for more than a season or two. The sailing season was a long one, eight or nine months from fitout to lay-up, and there were no vacations in those days. Many could not adjust to being away from families and friends for such extended periods. Most of those who went to work on the boats eventually left to take jobs in the quarry or with other local businesses. They settled down, got married, and began families, but they never forgot the thrill they felt when they first signed articles on one of the Bradley boats or first cast off the mooring cables and steamed out of the harbor onto the waters of the Great Lakes. They were proud to have been "steamboaters."

By 1927, it's safe to say, everyone in Rogers City was either a sailor, a former sailor, or the friend, relative, or family member of a sailor or former sailor. The boats were a part of everyday life in the small community, and local residents were immensely proud of "their" fleet. In every sense, Rogers City was "home port" for the Bradley freighters. A major point of pride for residents of Rogers City was that the Bradley fleet was unique on the lakes. It was the first fleet composed entirely of self-unloading ships. While the vast majority of the freighters then in operation were "straight deckers," ships that needed to be unloaded by shoreside equipment, the Bradley boats were self-unloaders.

The first Great Lakes self-unloader was the *Str. Hennepin* of the Lake Shore Stone Company of Milwaukee. A 220-foot, wood-hulled package freighter launched in 1888 as the *George H. Dyer*, the *Hennepin* was converted to a self-unloading bulk freighter at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, in 1902. The *Hennepin*

was a scraper, or pan-type, self-unloader. Her conversion involved rebuilding the cargo hold above a box-like tunnel running the length of the hold. The sides of the cargo hold sloped inward toward the top of the tunnel so that cargo in the hold would slide down toward a series of gates, or trap doors, located along the top of the tunnel. When the gates were swung open by crewmembers, cargo would fall from the hold into the tunnel. At each end of the tunnel a large steel scraper, or scoop, could be pulled through the tunnel by a system of chains and cables. The scrapers scooped up cargo that had fallen into the tunnel and carried it to an opening in the tunnel near the middle of the cargo hold. From there a vertical bucket elevator carried the cargo up to the level of the main deck. On the main deck was a skeleton-like conveyor boom housing an endless rubber belt that ran on rollers. The end of the boom over the bucket elevator was hinged, and the boom could be raised and swung over the side of the ship by a system of cables. In that way, cargo dumped onto the conveyor belt by the bucket elevator would be carried the length of the boom and spill off the end and onto a dock. While information on the *Hennepin* is scanty, it is unlikely that the little self-unloader could carry more than a thousand tons of cargo. With her primitive scraper system, cargo would probably not have been unloaded at more than 100-200 tons per hour.

Compared to traditional straight-deckers, the *Hennepin* was an odd-looking affair, and it was widely ridiculed. Critics claimed that the self-unloader was just another sea-going aberration that would never catch on within the industry. Shipping executives were quick to point out that in order to make room for the tunnel and sloping sides of the cargo hold, a lot of cargo space had to be sacrificed. As a result of those modifications, the *Hennepin* could carry far less cargo than straight-deckers of her size. Since shipowners were paid based on the amount of cargo their ships carried, they weren't about to install equipment that would reduce the carrying capacities of their vessels. Besides, unloading equipment was available at all of the major ports around the lakes.

While many quickly dismissed the *Hennepin*, her owners were very pleased with their pioneering self-unloader. For the first time, it allowed them to transport cargoes of stone to hundreds of small ports around that lakes that did not have Hulets or other unloading systems. The *Hennepin* opened vast new markets for Lake Shore Stone.

Despite the utility of the *Hennepin*, self-unloaders did not catch on rapidly within the Great Lakes shipping industry. A few other small freighters were converted to self-unloaders after the *Hennepin* went into service, but it was not until the launching of the *Str. Wyandotte* on July 2, 1908, that many

people in the industry began to take them seriously. The 286-foot, steel-hulled *Wyandotte* was the first ship designed and built as a self-unloader. The 2,095 gross ton vessel was owned by the Wyandotte Chemical Company, which had built a major manufacturing plant on the Detroit River. Company officials were looking for a way to bring shiploads of raw materials into the plant, primarily limestone, without going to the expense of installing expensive shoreside unloading rigs. George Palmer, head of engineering at Wyandotte, spent a great deal of time studying the efficiency of the few crude self-unloaders then in service. He also held extensive discussions with a firm that specialized in building conveying systems. With all of the data he gathered in hand, Palmer recommended to Wyandotte executives that the company commission a self-unloading freighter. Built at Great Lakes Engineering Works in nearby Ecorse, Michigan, the *Wyandotte* could carry 2,000 tons of cargo. The unloading equipment, an updated version of the system used on the *Hennepin*, could discharge cargo at a rate of about 500 tons per hour.³

By the time the first of the Bradley self-unloaders was launched in 1912, naval architects and conveyor system designers had decided to abandon the midship-mounted vertical elevator and unloading boom. On the *Calcite*, the boom and elevator apparatus were installed at the forward end of the cargo hold, directly behind the forward deckhouse. It was raised and lowered by means of cables running to it from a massive steel A-frame that towered above the forward end of the boom. The practice of placing the boom and elevator at the forward end of the cargo hold became quite universal on self-unloaders on the lakes after 1912, and the basic layout continued to be followed until the 1970s.

By the time the *Str. Charles C. West* was built for the Rockport Steamship Company of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in 1925, self-unloading equipment had gone through a dramatic metamorphosis. Instead of a scraper-type conveying system, the 470-foot *West* had two forty-inch-wide rubber conveyor belts in the tunnels beneath her cargo hold. They carried cargo to the forward end of the hold where two inclined rubber belts replaced the previously used bucket elevators to move the cargo up and out of the hold to a hopper that fed the boom on deck. The *West* could carry 8,000 tons of cargo, and with its updated unloading system, it could discharge that cargo at the impressive rate of 1,800 tons per hour.⁴

While it was a state-of-the-art vessel, the *West* was not the largest self-unloader on the lakes in 1925. Honors for having the largest self-unloaders went to the Bradley fleet of Rogers City. All of the Bradley ships except the *Calcite* were bigger than the *West*. The newest Bradley boat, the 588-foot *Str. T. W. Robinson* launched the same year as the *West*, was more than a

hundred feet longer than the Rockport self-unloader. Although the Bradley freighters were not suited to the important iron ore trade, fleet executives were from the very beginning committed to building boats that could, in every other respect, operate in the mainstream of shipping on the Great Lakes.⁵ If the proud residents of Rogers City found it at all necessary to be defensive about their boats, it was only because their size still lagged behind that of the big straight-deckers then in operation.

STR. CARL D. BRADLEY

640'x65'2"x30'2"

Queen of the Lakes

April 9, 1927 to June 28, 1949

Any inferiority the people of Rogers City might have felt vanished completely at eight o'clock in the morning on July 28, 1927, when the *Str. Carl D. Bradley*⁶ first poked its nose around Adams Point and steamed grandly into the harbor at Calcite. Built at Lorain, Ohio, by American Ship Building, the mammoth self-unloader was a record-breaking 640 feet long. In the stillness of that warm summer morning, hundreds of plant workers and local residents joined with officials of the Bradley fleet to welcome the new Queen of the Lakes to her home port.

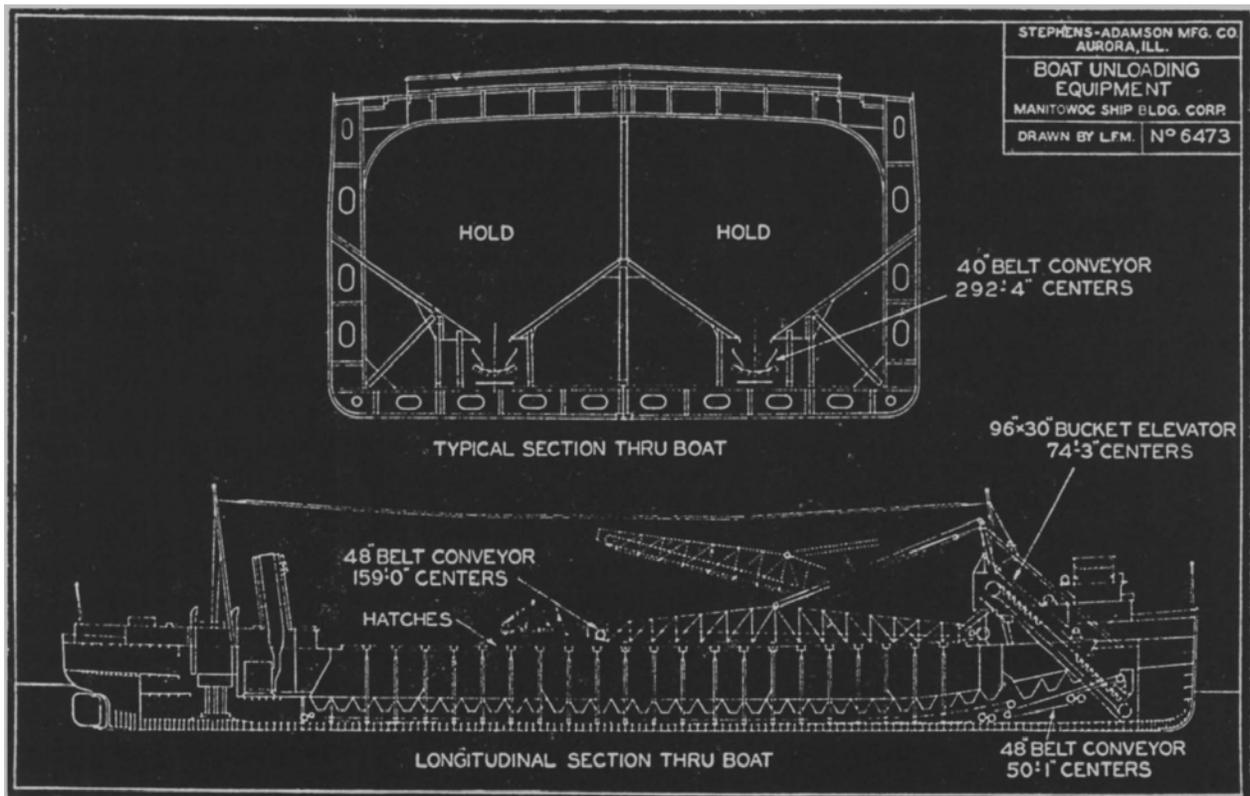
Few ships in the history of the lakes have been greeted with such enthusiasm. Quarry operations were suspended for several hours so that all of the employees could attend the gala welcoming ceremonies. "Hundreds of flags placed on the numerous buildings, locomotives, trucks, etc., fluttered in the morning breeze and the whole affair presented a holiday appearance." The new harbor tug *Rogers City* carried the community band and Mrs. Carl D. Bradley and her guests out to meet the *Bradley* "and escorted her into the loading slip amid the shrieking of whistles and the waving of flags by spectators." Once the massive grey-hulled freighter had been docked, the village president formally greeted the *Bradley* and its crew on behalf of the citizens of Rogers City, stressing "the warm interest of the community in the [fleet] and its welfare." Carl D. Bradley, the president of Bradley Transportation and namesake of the new ship, also addressed the exuberant crowd. He thanked them for the warm welcome they had given the new freighter and described in detail its many attributes. The new Queen was, according to Bradley, "the last word in freighter construction."⁷

Seven feet longer than the Canadian *Lemoyne* and eighty-eight feet longer than Columbia's *John A. Topping*, the next

largest U.S. ship on the lakes, the *Bradley* had a beam of just over sixty-five feet and a hull depth of more than thirty feet. She was measured at 10,028 gross tons, just a few hundred tons less than the wider *Lemoyne*. She was also one of the most powerful bulk freighters ever built. Her turbo-electric engine was rated at an impressive 4,800 horsepower,⁸ almost twice that of the standard triple-expansion engines that were then being installed on most freighters.⁹ The bottom line for shipowners, though, is carrying capacity, and during her early seasons on the lakes the *Bradley* set a number of new records for the stone trade. She carried her largest cargo during the summer of 1929, when she loaded 18,114 tons of limestone at Calcite for shipment to the U.S. Steel mills at Gary, Indiana.¹⁰

When the U.S. entered the Great Depression following the "Black Tuesday" stock market crash on October 29, 1929, the *Bradley* was one of 410 U.S. freighters owned by forty-two fleets.¹¹ Together, the ships had a combined single-trip carrying capacity of just over three million tons. As the U.S. economy ground to a virtual standstill, tonnages shipped on the lakes plummeted. After transporting more than 138 million tons during the 1929 season, less than 42 million tons was hauled in 1932 during the depths of the Depression. If all of the U.S. ships had been in operation that year, they could have hauled the total tonnage by making just fourteen trips each. By comparison, they would have been expected to make forty-five or fifty trips in a normal season. Of the forty-nine freighters

Engineering drawings of the self-unloading system and cargo hold of the *Charles C. West*, built at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, in 1925 for the Rockport Steamship Company. Cargo fell through gates at the bottom of the hopper-shaped hold and onto two rubber conveyor belts that carried it to a bucket elevator at the bow of the ship. From there, the elevator carried the cargo up to the self-unloading boom on the main deck. Today's self-unloading systems are very similar to that designed by Stephens-Adamson for use on the *West*. (Author's collection)





The *Carl D. Bradley* was the first self-unloader to hold the Queen of the Lakes title. Shown at the Soo Locks on its first trip to Lake Superior in 1927, the grey-hulled ship is flying a large pennant bearing its name. The *Bradley* sank in a killer storm that swept across the lakes on November 18, 1958. (State Archives of Michigan)

owned by Interlake Steamship Company, second only to Pittsburgh Steamship among the U.S. fleets, only thirty vessels operated in 1932. Together, they carried just over three million tons of cargo, mainly coal. During a normal season, that tonnage could have been carried by just eleven ships operating full-time.

Needless to say, most of the thirty Interlake boats that saw service during 1932 did not operate for the full season. Some were, in fact, in commission for as little as twelve days, just long enough to insure that their equipment received minimal maintenance attention. Fleet employees with enough seniority to hold a job were shifted from one boat to another. Most of the crewmembers holding unlicensed jobs aboard the Interlake boats were actually licensed officers. In better years they had sailed as mates and assistant engineers, but during the 1932 season they were glad to have work as deckhands or wipers in the engine room.¹²

Shipbuilding ground to a halt on the lakes by 1930. It wasn't until 1937 that a new U.S. ship came off the ways at a Great Lakes shipyard, that being the tanker *Amoco Indiana*. It was followed later that year by three new dry bulk freighters built for Pittsburgh Steamship, while a fourth Pittsburgh freighter was launched on January 8, 1938. The *William S. Irvin*, *Ralph H. Watson*, *Governor Miller*, and *John Hulst* were 610–611 feet long and measured at 8,200–8,300 gross tons. Smaller than the *Bradley*, they are best remembered as the first ships to have direct-drive, steam turbine engines and enclosed passageways, or “tunnels.” The tunnels ran down each side of the ship, sandwiched between the sidetanks and the main deck in an otherwise unusable area of the cargo hold. The tunnels connected the engine room at the stern with the forepeak area at the bow and provided a way for crewmembers to travel between the fore and aft cabin areas and work spaces without going out on deck during inclement weather.

When caught out on the lakes in a storm, crewmembers often found it impossible to move between the bow and stern areas of their ships. That was a particular annoyance for members of the deck department. While they were housed at the bow, the galley was at the stern. In a bad storm, the galley might as well have been on the moon, for there was no way for deck crewmembers to get aft to eat. During the November 1926 storm in which the *Str. Peter A. B. Widener* lost its rudder, deck crewmembers couldn't get aft to the galley for three days. It's likely that they had some food stashed forward, but nothing to compare with the generous quantities of delicious hot food turned out by the galley crew. The tunnels that first appeared on the *Irvin*, *Watson*, *Miller*, and *Hulst* proved to be very popular with crewmembers, especially those in the deck department. Almost immediately, these tunnels became standard features on lake freighters.

The four new Pittsburgh Steamship vessels joined a Great Lakes fleet that had been decimated by the Depression. Only twenty-one fleets, with just over three hundred ships, were still operating in 1938.¹³ Between 1929 and 1938, twenty-one U.S. fleets had disappeared from the lakes, along with over a hundred ships.¹⁴ The owners of low-capacity steamers and sailing vessels that had hung on at the periphery of the industry for decades failed to survive the depression years. The ships still in operation averaged a very respectable 8,572 gross tons, slightly larger than the *Schoonmaker* and *Snyder, Jr.*, that had been launched in 1911–12. For the Great Lakes shipping industry, the Great Depression was sort of an unplanned “urban renewal” program. Small, inefficient vessels were forced out of business, making room for the construction of big new ships like the *Irvin*, *Watson*, *Miller*, and *Hulst* that began to appear in the post-Depression years.

The next notable class of ships to make their appearance after the Depression were the five “supers” of World War II that were launched in 1942 for Pittsburgh Steamship. The latest generation of tin-stackers were just inches short of the *Bradley*, but they were almost two feet wider and had slightly higher gross tonnages. Their carrying capacities were similar to those of the *Bradley* and *Lemoyne*.

The first of the “supers” was the *Str. Leon Fraser*, launched on February 28, 1942, at the River Rouge, Michigan, shipyard of Great Lakes Engineering Works. In April, two more of the big freighters went into the water, the *Enders Voorhees* at River Rouge and the *Benjamin Fairless* at Am-Ship's Lorain, Ohio, yard. The fourth and fifth ships were both launched on May 22. The *Irving S. Olds* came off the ways at Lorain, while the *A. H. Ferbert* went into the water at River Rouge. In design, the *Fraser*-class ships were very similar to the

earlier *Irvin*-class boats, and they were also powered by steam turbine engines.

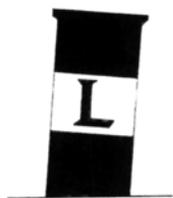
The *Fraser*-class freighters were the last privately-built ships launched on the lakes during World War II. In the 1940s, the government took control of the vital shipyards and redirected their efforts to support the U.S. war machine. During the war years, U.S. yards on the lakes turned out cargo ships, submarines, frigates, landing craft, motor torpedo boats, and minesweepers. To meet the heavy wartime demand for iron ore and other raw materials needed by the steel industry, the U.S. Maritime Commission also contracted for the construction of sixteen new bulk freighters for service on the lakes.

The first of the sixteen virtually identical Maritime-class boats was launched on September 19, 1942, at Great Lakes Engineering Works' shipyard in River Rouge. Christened the *Adirondack* at her launching, the new freighter was 620 feet long, with a 60-foot beam. Between September of 1942 and the end of 1943, fifteen other Maritime boats were built at yards around the lakes. The *Adirondack* and five other boats were built at the Great Lakes Engineering Works at River Rouge, while three more boats were turned out at their facility in Ash-tabula, Ohio. American Ship Building constructed a total of six Maritime boats, four at Lorain, Ohio, and two at Cleveland. After launching, the new freighters were turned over to Great Lakes fleets. By the end of 1943, Maritime-class boats were being operated by Bethlehem, Boland and Cornelius, Columbia, Interlake, Reiss, Wilson, and Pittsburgh Steamship.

Smaller than the *Bradley* and the ships of the *Irvin* and *Fraser* classes, the *Adirondack* and the Maritime boats that followed her could carry only 16–17,000 tons at maximum draft. Their propulsion systems were also slightly out-of-date. Since all of the diesels and steam turbine engines built in the U.S. during the war years were earmarked for use on military vessels, the *Adirondack* and her sisters were outfitted with 2,500-horsepower, triple-expansion steam engines. While they weren't exactly state-of-the-art vessels, the sixteen Maritime boats added greatly to the carrying capacity of the fleet during the war years.

By the time the war ended in 1945, the U.S. fleet on the lakes stood at 404 ships, with a combined single-trip carrying capacity of 3,352,000 tons. By comparison, in 1945 the Canadian fleet was made up of 212 ships with a total single-trip carrying capacity of only 842,000 tons.¹⁵

Tonnages levelled off after the war, and there was little new U.S. construction at yards on the lakes. The few ships that came out were smaller than the *Bradley*, and she would retain her title as Queen of the Lakes for a record twenty-two years, until the launching of the *Wilfred Sykes* in 1949. She continued



The white “L” on the stack of the *Carl D. Bradley* stood for limestone, the cargo most often carried by ships in the Bradley fleet. Most of the limestone carried by the Bradley self-unloaders was mined at Rogers City, Michigan, which was also home port for the fleet. (Author’s collection)

to be the longest self-unloader on the lakes until the *Str. John G. Munson* joined the Bradley fleet in 1952. Unfortunately, the *Carl D. Bradley* is most often remembered today not for having been the longest reigning Queen of the Lakes, but as the tragic victim of a vicious storm that raged across the inland seas on November 18, 1958.

There’s a special telephone number you can call in Rogers City to hear a tape-recorded report of scheduled boat arrivals and departures at the Calcite Plant. Had you called the tape on the morning of Tuesday, November 18, 1958, as family members of many of the *Bradley*’s crew did, you would have heard that the big self-unloader was scheduled to arrive at Calcite at 2 a.m. on Wednesday and go into lay-up. In Rogers City and the nearby communities of Onaway and Posen, many wives of *Bradley* crewmembers set about cleaning house and making shopping lists for the trips they would make to the grocery store later in the day. A few made babysitting arrangements so they could meet the boat when it arrived during the night, while others planned to drop their cars off at Calcite in the evening so their husbands could drive themselves home. The *Bradley* had been into its home port more than forty times during the season. While crewmembers were usually able to run home to see their families for at least a couple of hours while the boat was being loaded, this trip into Calcite would be different. For the crew of the *Bradley*, the 1958 shipping season would end when the boat arrived at Calcite on November 19. For the next four months, the sailors on the *Bradley* would be reunited with their families and friends.

The *Bradley* finished unloading a cargo of limestone at Gary, Indiana, and departed the dock at 10 p.m. on Monday, November 17, 1958, bound for Rogers City. Moderate southerly winds were blowing, but the latest weather forecast called for winds to increase to gale force and shift around to the southwest, so fifty-two-year-old Captain Roland Bryan set a course up the west shore of Lake Michigan, to stay in the lee of the land. Winds increased steadily after the *Bradley* passed Milwaukee at 4 a.m. on Tuesday, and Captain Bryan instructed engineering personnel to take on the maximum amount of water ballast so the ship would ride better in the growing seas. Af-

ter hugging the Wisconsin shoreline all day, the *Bradley* altered course late in the afternoon to angle across northern Lake Michigan toward the Straits of Mackinac at the top of the lake.

There wasn’t much traffic out on the lake that afternoon. As the wind and seas had intensified, most freighters had sought out sheltered anchorages where they could safely ride out the storm. Captain Bryan, who had been sailing since he was a lad of fourteen and a captain for the past seven seasons, was apparently undaunted by the storm. We have no way of knowing what went on in his head that afternoon—why he chose to take his ship out onto the northern reaches of Lake Michigan when so many others were going to anchor. Earlier the bachelor captain had written a letter to his girlfriend in Port Huron, Michigan, in which he said that the thirty-one-year-old *Bradley* was “pretty ripe for too much weather.” To another friend in Port Huron, Bryan wrote that “the hull is not good,” adding that he had to “nurse her along.”¹⁶ Maybe he underestimated the severity of the storm, or maybe he was just in a hurry to get back to Rogers City and lay-up the boat. Sailors have a tendency to be very impatient at the end of the season, and Bryan knew that in just a few hours his ship would pass through the Straits and into Lake Huron. From there they could safely beachcomb their way down the shore to Rogers City in the shelter of the lee of the land. There are no rules that help a captain to decide whether to sail or go to anchor. The captains alone make those decisions.

At 5:31 p.m., as the *Bradley* was being buffeted by 20–25 foot waves, Captain Bryan and the mate and wheelsman on watch in the pilothouse heard a loud thud. The ship shuddered, like ships often do when pounding in heavy seas, but there was something different about it this time, and the three men in the pilothouse instinctively realized that their vessel was in trouble. Looking aft, they saw that the stern of the *Bradley* was sagging. Without hesitation, Captain Bryan sounded the general alarm. Throughout the ship, loud bells rang, alerting crewmembers that they should don their lifejackets and hurry to the two lifeboats located on top of the stern cabin. Bryan immediately began to blow the steam whistle, seven short blasts and one long one, the terrifying signal for crewmembers to abandon ship.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday,” First Mate Elmer Fleming spoke into the microphone on the ship’s radio set. “Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is the *Carl D. Bradley*, about twelve miles southwest of Gull Island. The ship is breaking up in heavy seas. We’re breaking up. We’re going to sink. We’re going down!”¹⁷ The mayday message was heard by many ships and Coast Guard stations in the area that maintained a radio watch on the international distress channel.

In the conveyor room, deep inside the bow of the ship,

watchman Frank Mayes heard the disturbing thud. He, too, realized that the vessel was in serious trouble. Even before the general alarm bells sounded, Mayes ran for the ladder leading topside.

There was yet another loud thud, and crewmembers in the pilothouse stared in shock as they saw a crack appear across the deck of the *Bradley*. Simultaneously, the lights went off and the radio went dead as the power cables running the length of the ship were torn apart. As crewmembers hurried toward the lifeboats at the stern or the life raft behind the pilothouse, the bow section lurched and settled deeply into the water, the main deck awash in the furious seas. In an instant, the bow listed to port, rolled over, and sank. The stern settled on an even keel until it too lost buoyancy and plunged beneath the storm-tossed surface.

A German cargo ship, the *M/V Christian Sartori*, was downbound on Lake Michigan at the time, about four miles from the *Bradley*'s location. Struggling almost directly into the high seas, the little *Sartori* was making forward progress of only about two miles an hour. Crewmembers in the pilothouse had picked up the approaching *Bradley* on the radar scope and were able to see her lights across the water. Just after 5:30 p.m.,



The *Bradley* sank during the late afternoon hours of November 18, 1958, while trying to cross the northern reaches of Lake Michigan in a violent storm. Most of the thirty-three crewmembers who died in the disaster were from the *Bradley*'s home port of Rogers City, Michigan, a small community on the north shore of Lake Huron. (Author's collection)

they noticed that the lights on the bow of the *Bradley* had gone out. Several minutes later, they were startled when the sky in the vicinity of the *Bradley* was illuminated by what appeared to be a massive explosion.¹⁸ Checking their radar, they found that the "blip" indicating the *Bradley*'s position had disappeared from the screen. Although he had not heard the *Bradley*'s may-day call, the master of the *Sartori* knew the freighter was in serious trouble. He immediately altered his ship's course and headed for the location of the explosion.

Despite the angry seas, the Coast Guard Cutter *Sundew* and a thirty-six-foot lifeboat got underway from their moorings at Charlevoix, Michigan, shortly after they monitored the *Bradley*'s distress call. A forty-foot lifeboat from the Coast Guard station at Plum Island and the *Hollyhock*, a cutter stationed at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, were also ordered to go to the assistance of the freighter. Because of the severity of the storm, the two smaller boats were recalled about an hour after they set out. The Pittsburgh Steamship Maritime-class steamer *Robert C. Stanley*, anchored in the lee of Garden Island near the top of Lake Michigan, heard the distress call from the *Bradley* and got underway about an hour later.

The *Christian Sartori* was the first vessel to arrive at the scene. Battered by brutal seas, the German freighter began to crisscross the area, searching for survivors. At about 10:30 p.m., it was joined by the *Sundew*. The *Stanley* joined the search at midnight, while the *Hollyhock* arrived on the scene several hours later. Throughout the night, crewmembers aboard the search vessels maintained a constant vigil as they put themselves and their ships at risk to run search patterns in the turbulent waters where the *Bradley* had gone down. It was a terrifying night for those aboard the search vessels, but no one complained. They were seamen, and they knew that out there among the towering black seas other seamen were fighting for their lives in the frigid waters of Lake Michigan.

After searching in vain throughout the long night, the *Sundew* recovered the *Bradley*'s life raft at 8:25 a.m. on November 19. Clinging to the raft, battered, bruised, and suffering from exposure . . . but alive, were First Mate Elmer Fleming and watchman Frank Mayes.

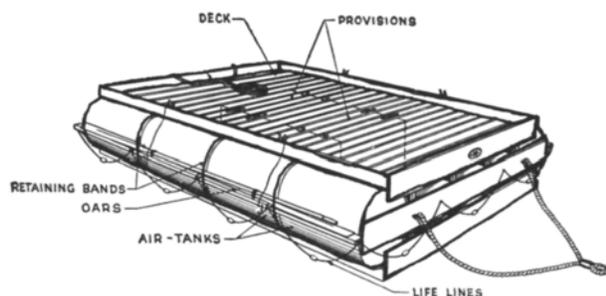
Word that two survivors had been found was flashed to the waiting world. In Rogers City, *Bradley* fleet officials and the friends and family members of the *Bradley* crewmembers—virtually everyone in the small community—had maintained their own vigils through the agonizingly long night. Even before word came that Fleming and Mayes had been picked up by the *Sundew*, the people of Rogers City were confident that their loved ones would survive the tragedy. They believed that the sailors would be found in the ship's lifeboats, or on one of the many islands dotting the northern stretches of Lake Michigan.

They refused to give up hope. When word came that two survivors had been picked up, it merely reinforced their belief that all of the *Bradley* crewmembers would eventually be found.

An hour after recovering Fleming and Mayes, searchers found one of the *Bradley*'s two lifeboats, but it was empty. As the day progressed, searchers began to find the lifejacket-clad bodies of crewmembers who had not survived the sinking. As the bodies were recovered and identified, teams of management personnel from the Calcite Plant had the onerous task of notifying family members that their loved ones were dead. Surprisingly, many of the children of the *Bradley* crewmembers had gone to school that morning. It was almost as if they believed that to break their normal routine would be bad luck. By going to school, as they would on any other day, they demonstrated their confidence that their fathers would be found safe. Their optimism was buoyed that morning when the school principal enthusiastically announced over the intercom system that two survivors had been found. As the day wore on, however, one child after another was called out of class by the principal. From the look on his face, it was obvious to all that he was not delivering good news.

During the day, searchers recovered a total of eighteen bodies from the waters north of where the *Bradley* had gone down. Elmer Fleming and Frank Mayes were the only survivors from the crew of thirty-five. Fifteen bodies, including that of Captain Roland Bryan, were never recovered. Rogers City went into mourning.

Twenty-three of the thirty-three seamen who died on the *Bradley* were from Rogers City, while five others were from the



Frank Mayes and Elmer Fleming, the only crewmembers to survive the sinking of the *Bradley*, spent the night on a double-sided life raft. The massive waves that rolled across Lake Michigan that night flipped the raft over many times, and Mayes and Fleming had to struggle in the frigid waters to climb back aboard. Rigid rafts like the one carried aboard the *Bradley* have since been replaced by inflatable life rafts enclosed by a canopy to provide occupants much more protection. (Author's collection)

nearby communities of Posen and Onaway. The recovered bodies of the dead seamen were returned to their home port, and a mass wake was held in the gym at Rogers City High School, the only facility in town large enough to hold the caskets of the dead and accommodate the thousands who wanted to pay their respects. Funeral services for most of the sailors were held at noon on Saturday, November 22. The town virtually closed down while the services were going on.

At ports around the lakes, the other eight *Bradley* freighters broke with tradition by halting operations. From fitout in the spring until they reach the lay-up docks at the end of the season, ships in the Great Lakes fleets normally never stop operating. Not even on Easter Sunday, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or Christmas do they take a break. The big ships operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week from fitout to lay-up. But at noon on November 22, 1958, the remaining eight, grey-hulled freighters of the fleet were tied up out of respect for those who had died on the *Bradley*. Four ships were docked at Calcite, while the others were at ports around the lakes. The *Myron C. Taylor* was at Conneaut, Ohio, the *T. W. Robinson* was at Buffalo, New York, the *Rogers City* was in South Chicago, Illinois, and the *Cedarville* docked at Port Huron. Local clergymen went aboard each of the four ships to conduct memorial services at the same time that services were being held in Rogers City.¹⁹ While far distant from their home port, the crewmembers aboard the four ships had an opportunity to pay their final respects to their colleagues.

Even before the *Bradley* dead were buried, the Coast Guard had launched a massive inquiry into the sinking. Their findings, released the following summer, concluded that the casualty had been due to excessive hogging stress that the vessel had endured during the storm. The unrelenting pounding the ship took in the hours before her sinking may have aggravated a structural weakness existing prior to the storm. In her thirty-first season on the lakes, the *Bradley* was no more than middle-aged as lake freighters go. All freighters take a beating during the operating season, though, and it's common for them to undergo extensive repairs at least every five years. The *Carl D. Bradley* was scheduled for such repairs during the winter of 1958-59. As a result of the wear and tear she had suffered during the previous seasons, the *Bradley* was scheduled to have many loose or broken rivets replaced and her cargo hold almost completely rebuilt at the end of the 1958 season. Unfortunately, the former Queen of the Lakes would never keep that appointment at the shipyard.²⁰

Notes

1. And don't be misled by the hailing port painted on the stern below the vessel's name. Most U.S. ships on the lakes claim distant Wilmington, Delaware, as their hailing port. They are documented there so they can qualify for tax breaks. Of all the ships in the U.S. Great Lakes fleet, the *MIV Presque Isle* has the distinction of having the hailing port farthest from the lakes. It uses Los Angeles, California, headquarters for its owners, Litton Industries.
2. Originally known as the Calcite Transportation Company, its name was changed to Bradley Transportation Company in 1923.
3. Letter from R. W. Frederick, Stephens-Adamson Division of Allis-Chalmers, Canada, August 12, 1987.
4. "S. S. Chas. C. West," *The Labor Saver*, no. 147 (October 1925): 3–8.
5. The early self-unloaders operated only in the stone, coal, and salt trades. Natural iron ore tended to hang up in the cargo hold, so it was generally not carried by self-unloaders until after the development of pelletizing processes in the 1950s. Grain, on the other hand, flowed too fast and could not be elevated out of the cargo hold by inclined conveyor elevators. The lightweight grains would simply spill off the elevators. In the 1970s, some Canadian fleets began carrying grain on self-unloaders with modern bucket elevator systems.
6. The first *Carl D. Bradley* had been launched in 1917 for the Bradley fleet. Named for the firm's president, it was renamed as the *Irvin L. Clymer* in 1927 when the new *Bradley* came out. The *Clymer* operated on the lakes until it was retired during the 1991 season.
7. "1927—Do You Remember?" *Michigan Limestone Screening (Winter 1958-59)*: 16–17.
8. Ship Biography, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
9. The *Bradley*'s sister ship, the *T. W. Robinson*, built in 1925, was the first vessel on the lakes equipped with a turbo-electric engine. In both the *Bradley* and *Robinson* a steam turbine generator produced electricity to drive electric motors that actually propelled the ship. Few ships were equipped with the complicated propulsion systems.
10. Dana Thomas Bowen, *Lore of the Lakes* (Daytona Beach: Dana Thomas Bowen, 1940), 229.
11. Pittsburgh Steamship was the largest fleet on the lakes, with eighty-four vessels, followed by Interlake Steamship, which owned forty-nine.
12. Walter Havighurst, *Vein of Iron* (New York: World Publishing, 1958), 169.
13. Jacques LesStrang, *Cargo Carriers of the Great Lakes* (New York: American Legacy Press, 1977), 72.
14. Pittsburgh Steamship, with seventy-nine boats, was still the largest of the U.S. fleets, followed by Interlake Steamship, with forty-five.
15. *1945 Annual Report* (Cleveland: Lake Carriers' Association, 1946), 46–48.
16. William Ratigan, *Great Lakes Shipwrecks and Survivals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), 18.
17. *Ibid.*, 24.
18. While they didn't know it at the time, the crewmembers in the pilothouse of the *Sartori* had witnessed the explosion of the steam boilers aboard the *Bradley*. The boilers exploded when cold water from the lake flooded into the engine room.
19. "1927—Do You Remember?" 18.
20. Unless otherwise indicated, details regarding the sinking of the *Bradley* are from Marine Casualty Report: SS Carl D. Bradley (Washington: U.S. Coast Guard, 1959).