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Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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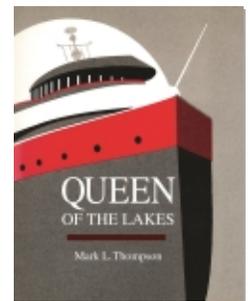
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A Saltwater Successor

From the launching of the *Onoko* in 1882 through the debut of the *Wilfred Sykes* in 1949, all of the ships that held the Queen of the Lakes title were new vessels built at shipyards around the lakes. In 1952, for the very first time, a ship claimed honors as the longest vessel as the result of being lengthened. It was also an adopted member of the bulk industry on the lakes, having been built at a shipyard on the East Coast.

STR. JOSEPH H. THOMPSON

714'3"x71'6"x38'6"
Queen of the Lakes
1952 to 1957

The *Marine Robin* had been launched at Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock in Chester, Pennsylvania, early in 1944. Built for the U.S. Maritime Commission for use in World War II, the C4-class cargo carrier had participated in the D-Day invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Following the war, the 515-foot *Marine Robin* was laid up as part of the James River Reserve Fleet in Virginia.

In June of 1950, communist troops from North Korea crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and invaded South Korea.

Within days, President Harry Truman committed U.S. ground, air, and naval forces under the command of General Douglas MacArthur to support our South Korean allies against the communist insurgency. By October, military forces of the United Nations Command had pushed the North Koreans back across the Yalu River at the thirty-eighth parallel, and MacArthur predicted that the troops under his command would conquer North Korea and unite the country by Thanksgiving. U.S. hopes for a speedy victory in Korea were dashed on November 26, when an estimated 550,000 Chinese soldiers came to the aid of their North Korean allies and drove Mac-Arthur's troops back across the Yalu. It was then obvious to all observers that the United Nations forces were embroiled in what would be a protracted conflict.

On the home front, the Office of Defense Mobilization called for increases in U.S. steel production. On the lakes, shipments of iron ore needed to support higher steel production rose from 69.5 million tons in 1949 to more than 78 million tons in 1950, with similar increases in stone and coal movements. By 1953, iron ore shipments would reach almost 96 million tons, reflecting an increase of thirty-seven percent over 1949 levels.¹

U.S. fleets on the lakes struggled to find enough ships to meet the increasing demands placed on them by the war effort. By the time the Chinese troops entered the war late in 1950, all

of the U.S. shipbuilding capacity on the lakes had been reserved, and new freighters were under construction at all of the yards. Fleet executives soon realized that the Great Lakes shipyards would not be able to react fast enough to meet the escalating demands for shipments of ore, coal, and stone. They needed more ships immediately.

Shortly after the Chinese entered the war, officials of Cleveland-Cliffs conceived the idea of contracting with the Maritime Commission for the purchase of the *Notre Dame Victory*. The ship was one of the famous Victory-class cargo ships built by the government during World War II. Like the *Marine Robin*, the *Notre Dame Victory* had been laid up after the war as part of the reserve fleet moored in the James River. Cliffs had the *Victory* towed to Bethlehem Shipbuilding in Baltimore, Maryland, for lengthening and conversion for use on the lakes. The ship was rebuilt in less than ninety days, and on March 21, 1951, the vessel was rechristened as *Cliffs Victory*. Too large to fit through the locks on the St. Lawrence River, the 620-foot freighter was towed on a circuitous, three-thousand-mile voyage to the lakes via the Mississippi River, entering Lake Michigan through the ship and sanitary canal at Chicago. On June 4, 1951, *Cliffs Victory* went into service on the lakes.

Even before the *Victory* had reached the lakes, three other fleets had followed Cliffs's lead and purchased mothballed cargo ships from the Maritime Commission. Nicholson-Universal Steamship Company, seventy percent owned by Republic Steel, bought the *Louis McHenry Howe*, *Scott E. Land*, and *Mount Mansfield*. After lengthening and conversion at Maryland Drydock Company, they entered service on the lakes as the *Tom M. Girdler*, *Troy H. Browning*, and *Charles M. White*, respectively. Amersand Steamship Company, partly owned by American Steamship, bought the *Marine Angel* and rechristened her as the *McKee Sons*. Hansand Steamship Company, partly owned by M. A. Hanna Company, purchased the *Marine Robin*, which they renamed the *Joseph H. Thompson*. All five ships had originally been built as C4-S-A4-class ships; these were slightly longer and wider than vessels of the Victory-class. While the steam turbines that drove *Cliffs Victory* were rated at 8,500 horsepower, the C4s boasted 9,900 horsepower steam turbines. All six of the former saltwater ships were more powerful than any ships then in operation on the lakes. Prior to the arrival of the former saltwater vessels, the *Sykes*, with only 7,000 horsepower, was the most powerful ship on the lakes.

The three ships converted by the Nicholson fleet were all intended to operate on the Cuyahoga River, serving Republic's mills on the winding waterway that bisects Cleveland. They were lengthened to 600 feet, what was then considered to be the maximum size limit for ships negotiating the Cuyahoga. *Cliffs Victory* came out of the Bethlehem shipyard at Baltimore



The *Joseph H. Thompson* was launched in 1944 as the *Marine Robin*, a C-4 cargo carrier built for the U.S. Maritime Commission. Before it was ready to go into service on the lakes in 1952, the ship underwent a dramatic transformation. The top silhouette is of a C-4, outfitted with armament for use during World War II. On the bottom is a silhouette of the *Thompson* after her conversion to a lake freighter. (Author's collection)

slightly longer, at 620 feet. The *McKee Sons*, the only one of the saltwater ships to be converted to a self-unloader while being rebuilt for service on the lakes, was lengthened to 633 feet. The longest of the converted ships was the *Thompson*. She was intended to operate primarily in the ore trade between Lake Superior and National Steel's mills on the Detroit River. Her owners were more concerned about maximizing her carrying capacity than they were about ending up with a ship that would be too long to negotiate some of the narrow river channels around the lakes. The *Thompson* was stretched 199 feet, 3 inches to a new overall length of 714 feet, 3 inches. The Hansand freighter was then too long to fit through the locks on the Mississippi and the canal at Chicago, so it had to be towed into the lakes in two halves. When the two sections were rejoined at American Ship Building's yard in South Chicago, the *Thompson* became the longest freight vessel in the world and the new Queen of the Lakes.

Even before final touches had been put on the *Thompson* at South Chicago, Great Lakes shipyards had begun to turn out the first of the new freighters ordered at the outset of the Korean War. The first of the new ships was the *Philip R. Clarke*, built at AmShip's Lorain yard for the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet of U.S. Steel. Launched on November 26, 1951, the *Clarke* was the first of what was to become known as the Pittsburgh-class or AAA-class.²

The *Clarke* and the seven ships that followed her down the ways over the next eighteen months were basically built from plans developed by AmShip for the Pittsburgh fleet in 1947. When officials of the Pittsburgh fleet decided to delay building any boats from those plans, AmShip used them as the starting point for the design of the *Sykes*. With the coming of

the Korean War, Pittsburgh officials had finally placed an order for three ships to be built from the plans. AmShip designers tried to talk officials of the Pittsburgh fleet into incorporating some of the features of the *Sykes* into their new ships, but “the Pittsburgh technical staff was rather more conservative than Inland and many of the more innovative design features of the *Sykes* were modified.”³ In other words, officials of the Pittsburgh fleet were cheaper than their colleagues at Inland. Two of the new Pittsburgh freighters were to be built by AmShip, with the third constructed at Great Lakes Engineering Works. AmShip was designated as the lead yard for the project, and they supplied plans to Great Lakes Engineering.

The *Clarke* and the other AAA-boats were 647 feet long, 31 feet shorter than the *Sykes* and 67 feet less than the *Thompson*. That had been judged to be the maximum length vessel that could be turned in the basin at Conneaut, Ohio, a major railhead for shipments of both iron ore and coal. Beams for the new ships were set at 70 feet, believed to be the widest width of vessel that could be loaded at the chute-type ore docks on the upper lakes.

The original 1947 plans for the Pittsburgh boats called for them to be powered by 4,500-horsepower steam turbine engines. Before construction began, a decision was made to in-

stall turbines rated at 7,000 horsepower, the same size used on the *Sykes*. Like the *Sykes*, the *Clarke* and the other AAA-class freighters proved to be slightly overpowered and all have experienced vibration problems throughout their careers. Model basin tests conducted later showed that the full hull form of the ships was not well suited to the new high power engines. The water just ahead of the propeller circulated and eddied, causing flow separation. As a result, the propeller operated in disturbed water and transmitted varying lateral and vertical forces to the propeller shaft. The annoying vibrations that result could be felt throughout the stern areas of the ships.

The stern cabin arrangement of the new Pittsburgh ships was substantially the same as that on the *Sykes*. In this scheme, main deck cabins were enclosed within the heightened bulwarks of the stern, topped by a poop deck cabin. On the Pittsburgh boats, however, the galley and dining rooms were located in the main deck cabin, while the poop deck house contained staterooms for engineering officers. In most other respects, the *Clarke* and the other AAA-class boats mimicked the *Sykes*, except that many of the aesthetic details were missing. They looked like the “poor cousins” of the beautiful Inland ship.⁴

At about the same time that Pittsburgh Steamship placed

The *Joseph H. Thompson* in Hanna colors on the St. Marys River. The 714-foot freighter was the first Queen of the Lakes built at a non-Great Lakes shipyard. The *Thompson* was constructed at Sun Shipbuilding in Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1944 for the U.S. Maritime Commission. Originally christened the *Marine Robin*, the ship participated in the D-Day invasion at Normandy. It was converted for use on the lakes during the Korean War. (State Archives of Michigan)



its order for the three AAA-class boats, it also ordered a fourth new ship for its fleet. Built at Manitowac Shipbuilding in Manitowac, Wisconsin, and launched two days after the *Clarke*, the *John G. Munson* was a big self-unloader that would become a sister ship to the *Carl D. Bradley* in U.S. Steel's Bradley Transportation Division at Rogers City, Michigan.⁵ When it was launched, the *Munson* was the largest self-unloader on the lakes. In terms of overall dimensions, it was also the biggest ship on the lakes. The giant, grey-hulled self-unloader was just over 666 feet long, 72 feet wide, and 36 feet deep. She measured at 13,143 gross tons, compared to 11,623 gross tons for the *Clarke* and 12,729 for the *Sykes*. Although her gross tonnage set a new record for the lakes, the *Munson's* net tonnage was slightly less than that of the *Clarke* and other ships in the AAA-class. While the *Clarke* had a boxy cargo hold typical of straight-deckers, the *Munson's* hold was slightly smaller because she was built as a self-unloader. Her hold was hopper-shaped so that cargo would slide down the sides of the hold to the conveyor belt system located below it. The *Clarke* was measured at 8,690 net tons, while the longer, wider, and deeper *Munson* was rated at just 8,116 net tons.

All four of the new Pittsburgh boats were built to be prodigious haulers. Each of them had net tonnages larger than that of the *Sykes*, which measured at 7,875 tons. The *Munson*, for example, dominated the stone trade on the lakes for more than a decade. On July 4, 1953, she established a record by loading 21,011 gross tons of limestone at her home port of Calcite. That record stood for thirteen years.⁶

Shortly after the Pittsburgh fleet placed its order for the *Clarke* and its two sister ships, Cleveland-Cliffs placed an order with American Ship Building for a new flagship for their fleet. Launched on January 10, 1952, at AmShip's Toledo yard and christened the *Edward B. Greene* in honor of the president of Cleveland-Cliffs, the new freighter had been built from the same basic plans as the *Clarke*. From her main deck down, the *Greene* was virtually a twin of the *Clarke*, but her cabin arrangement was slightly different. Designed to be the fleet's "Board of Directors' ship," the *Greene* had an extra deck of cabins at her bow. The additional deck accommodated four single staterooms and two large double staterooms for use by Cliffs's executives and their guests. The deck above the staterooms included a large observation lounge for use by passengers, as well as an office and stateroom for the captain. As on the *Sykes*, the *Greene's* galley, dining rooms, and quarters for the steward, or chief cook, were located in the poop deck cabin at the stern. The main deck cabin at the stern provided rooms for the other engineering and galley personnel.⁷

The two sisters to the *Clarke* were launched shortly after the *Greene*. The *Arthur M. Anderson* went into the water on

February 16, 1952, at AmShip's Lorain yard. The *Cason J. Calloway* was launched on March 22, 1952, at the River Rouge, Michigan, shipyard of Great Lakes Engineering.

Following the lead of the Pittsburgh fleet and Cleveland-Cliffs, Columbia Transportation, Ford Motor Company, and Interlake Steamship also placed orders for AAA-class vessels to help meet their wartime cargo commitments. Interlake's *J. L. Mauthe* was launched at River Rouge on June 21, 1952. Five months later, on November 15, 1952, Columbia's *Reserve* took to the water at River Rouge, followed in early 1953 by the launching of their *Armco* at American Ship Building's Lorain yard. The last of the eight AAA-class vessels was launched for the Ford fleet in August of 1953 at River Rouge and christened the *William Clay Ford*.

The AAA-class freighters weren't the only boats built at Great Lakes yards during the Korean War, however. On November 19, 1952, workers at AmShip's Lorain yard who were putting the finishing touches on the hull of the *Armco* took time out from their activities to watch the launching of a ship that was even larger than the AAA-boats. Built for the National Steel fleet, the *Ernest T. Weir* was 690 feet in overall length. Like the *Thompson*, the *Weir* would be managed by Hanna. While the *Weir* was not as long as the *Thompson*, it did displace the *Munson* as the longest ship actually built on the lakes.

Another large freighter joined the Hanna fleet on October 5, 1954, with the launching at Lorain of National Steel's *George M. Humphrey*. The *Humphrey* was the longest and widest ship ever constructed at a Great Lakes yard. It was 710 feet long, with a beam of 75 feet, 9 inches. With a gross tonnage of 14,034 and net tonnage measured at 10,528, the massive *Humphrey* had the greatest carrying capacity of any ship on the lakes. On October 21, 1954, she set a new Great Lakes cargo record by loading 22,605 gross tons of iron ore at the docks in Superior, Wisconsin. That record would stand until 1960.

While her Queen of the Lakes title passed to a slightly longer ship in 1957, the *Joseph H. Thompson* continued to operate in Hanna colors until the bottom fell out of the industry in the early 1980s. After being laid up at a slip on the Detroit River for several years, the former salty entered another phase of its colorful career in 1984, when it was sold to Upper Lakes



When the AAA-class *William Clay Ford* was launched in 1953, the Ford name on its stack was in block lettering. It was later placed by the more familiar oval logo of the Detroit-based automaker. (Author's collection)

Towing Company of Escanaba, Michigan. Upper Lakes Towing operated the tug *Olive Moore* and the 524-foot barge *Buckeye* in various bulk trades on the lakes, and they announced their plans to convert the *Thompson* to a barge.

The converted *Thompson* reentered service in the 1991 season as a self-unloading barge, pushed by the tug *Joseph H. Thompson, Jr.* She had once again undergone a dramatic metamorphosis. Her fore and aft cabins had been removed, and a notch was cut into the stern to accommodate the bow of the pusher tug. The self-unloading rig installed near her stern is typical of those found on many other ships, but it has a bucket elevator rather than the more common loop belt or inclined belt normally used on U.S. vessels. The bucket elevator, while slower than belt elevators, can handle a greater variety of cargo. Many Canadian self-unloaders also use bucket elevators because of their flexibility. They have even been used to offload grain, a cargo that cannot easily be handled by belt-type elevator systems.

Upper Lakes bought the *Thompson* at bargain-basement prices. While they have made a substantial capital outlay to convert her to a self-unloading barge, they still have far less invested in the vessel than other operators have in their self-unloading ships. At the same time, as a barge the *Thompson* can operate with far less crewmembers than are required on self-propelled vessels. With tonnages rising on the lakes and the downsized U.S. fleet struggling to meet demand, combined with the barge's lower overhead and operating costs, the *Thompson* should represent a profitable venture for her owners. While she operates today at the periphery of the industry, the former Queen of the Lakes has had her life significantly extended through conversion to a barge. The *Weir* left the Hanna fleet even before the *Thompson*. In 1978, she was sold to Oglebay Norton's Columbia Transportation Division. Renamed the *Courtney Burton*, she was converted to a self-unloader in 1981 and continues to operate on the lakes today.

But not all of the Hanna boats were as fortunate as the *Thompson* and *Weir*. In the mid-1980s, Hanna and National Steel made the decision to abandon their shipping operations after more than 125 years. With tonnages shipped on the lakes dropping to their lowest levels since the Great Depression of the 1930s and scores of freighters lying idle at docks around the lakes, the ships of the Hanna fleet were put up for sale. All of the fleets had excess vessels at that time, however, and there were no buyers. One by one, the Hanna ships were towed off to the shipbreakers.⁸ Even the thirty-two-year-old *Humphrey*, in the prime of her life by Great Lakes standards, was tabbed for the cutting torches. On August 13, 1986, the *Humphrey* departed her dock on the Detroit River under her own power and crewed by Hanna office personnel and former Hanna sailors for

a nostalgic last trip out the St. Lawrence Seaway. At Quebec City, the Hanna personnel bid farewell to the big freighter, and it was taken under tow by a Dutch tug, bound for scrapping in Taiwan.

Most of the AAA-class boats fared better than the ships in the Hanna fleet. After the 1,100-foot long and 110-foot wide Poe Lock was opened at Sault Ste. Marie in 1968, all of the AAA-boats except Interlake's *Mauthe* were lengthened by 120 feet to increase their carrying capacity. The lengthening operations involved installing a new 120-foot section of midbody, bringing their overall lengths to 767 feet. The *Munson* was also lengthened, but by only 102 feet, bringing her overall length to 768 feet. Between 1981 and 1983, all but two of the AAA-class vessels were also converted to self-unloaders.

Only Interlake's *J. L. Mauthe* and Ford's *William Clay Ford* remained as straight-deckers in an industry that was rapidly being dominated by self-unloaders. The *Mauthe* was involved in the grain trade between the American lakehead and terminals in Buffalo, New York. Had she been lengthened or converted to a self-unloader, her owners would have had to withdraw her from that trade. Ford, on the other hand, was operating two other straight-deckers in addition to the *William Clay Ford*. Those vessels were unloaded by bridge cranes at Ford's Rouge Steel complex in the Detroit suburbs. Like those of Pittsburgh Steamship, Inland Steel, and Bethlehem Steel, the Ford vessels were part of a "captive fleet." They were involved almost solely in carrying Ford cargoes of ore, stone, and coal to the Rouge plant. In that respect, they were not in competition with other fleets, and there was little impetus to convert them to self-unloaders.

By the fall of 1984, however, Ford executives decided to compete for cargoes from other shippers. At that time, straight-deckers like the *William Clay Ford* put the fleet at a serious disadvantage. The majority of cargo moving on the lakes was destined for ports where there was no shoreside unloading equipment. To overcome that obstacle, Ford negotiated with Cleveland-Cliffs for the purchase of the AAA-class *Edward B. Greene* and the *Walter A. Sterling*, an 826-foot former saltwater tanker that Cliffs had brought into the lakes in 1961. The *Greene* and *Sterling* were the last two ships being operated by Cliffs. Like Hanna, the 125-year-old company had decided to get out of the marine shipping business and concentrate its efforts on more profitable ventures.

With the purchase of the two self-unloaders from Cliffs, Ford decided to liquidate its fleet of straight-deckers, keeping only the self-unloader *Henry Ford II*. The 642-foot *Ernest R. Breech* was sold to George Steinbrenner's S&E Shipping, the Kinsman Marine fleet, for operation in the grain trade. Steinbrenner renamed the vessel the *Kinsman Independent* and

placed it in the grain trade. The other Ford ships, the 644-foot *Benson Ford* and the *William Clay Ford*, were scrapped. The *Clay Ford*, the last of the AAA-class to be built, had the dubious distinction of being the first to go to the shipbreakers.

Notes

1. *1981 Annual Report* (Cleveland: Lake Carriers' Association, 1982), 21.
2. Many people puzzle over the AAA-class designation that was eventually attached to the new ships. The AAA identification was an internal U.S. Steel accounting code used to classify the various types of vessels in their fleet for use in computing the pay of shipboard personnel. In those days, pay for deck and engine officers varied based on the size of the ship and the type of propulsion system it had. The larger and more powerful the ship was, the more the officers were paid. Other accounting designations in use at the time included AA for the supers of the Fraser-class, AM for their Maritime-class boats, AT for turbine-powered vessels, AO for ships with hand-fired reciprocating engines, AS for boats with stoker-fired reciprocating engines, B for barges, and C for tow-boats.
3. Walter C. Cowles, "A Decade of Great Ships: 1948–1958," *Inland Seas*, 45, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 199.
4. *Ibid.*, 195–201.
5. While the *Munson* was technically not from the same class as the *Clarke* and the other AAA-boats, she was close to their size and classified as AAA by U.S. Steel's accounting office.
6. John O. Greenwood, *Namesakes of the Lakes* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1970), 372.
7. Cowles, 199–201.
8. Unable to find a buyer for the *George A. Stinson*, a modern thousand-footer launched in 1978, Hanna and National decided to continue operating that one vessel.