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## Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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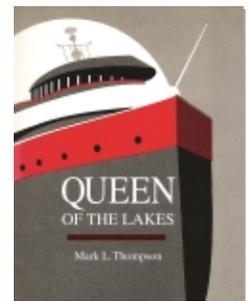
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## 25

# Victory

In 1957, the *Joseph H. Thompson* became the longest ship on the lakes as a result of being lengthened while undergoing conversion from a saltwater vessel to a Great Lakes bulk freighter. She was the first ship to become Queen of the Lakes as the result of being lengthened. The vessel that succeeded the *Thompson* as Queen of the Lakes took an even more circuitous route to the title.

*Cliffs Victory* was launched at Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation in Portland, Oregon, in 1945 as the *Notre Dame Victory*, one of scores of the famous Victory-class cargo ships launched during World War II. Built late in the war, the 455-foot Maritime Commission vessel saw little service before the war ended, and very early in her career she was retired to the James River reserve fleet. There the *Notre Dame Victory* rapidly faded into obscurity, becoming just another nondescript hull in an idle fleet made up of scores of similarly nondescript hulls. The fresh coat of grey paint applied to her hull before her launching initially distinguished her from most of the other mothballed cargo ships—many of which bore the clear scars of battle. It was soon dulled, however, by the unrelenting exposure to sun and rain. For five long and uneventful years, the *Notre Dame Victory* languished amidst the idle flotilla, her career seemingly ended virtually before it had begun.

Then, in 1950, the guns of war were once again un-

leashed, and the U.S. became embroiled in the escalating conflict on the Korean peninsula. Many vessels from the reserve fleet were recommissioned and placed back in service by the Maritime Commission to ferry troops and supplies to the war zone. Yet, the *Victory*, small by the standards of the shipping industry in 1950, was not one of the vessels earmarked for a return to government service. She might well have ended her days in the reserve fleet had the war not resulted in an acute shortage of cargo ships on the Great Lakes.

The stepping up of steel production to support the war in Korea accounts for only part of the increases in shipping that occurred on the lakes during the early 1950s, however. It was also a period of immense prosperity in the states. Spurred on in part by the war effort, the U.S. economy burgeoned in a frenzy of unparalleled consumerism that also increased demand for raw materials shipped on the lakes.

Between 1950 and the end of the Korean War in 1953, total shipments of bulk cargoes on the Great Lakes increased by more than twenty million tons. With the largest and most modern lake freighters capable of carrying about one million tons of cargo in a season, it immediately became obvious to shipping officials that they needed to expand their fleets in order to keep up with the rapidly growing demand. U.S. Steel, Columbia Transportation, Interlake Steamship, Ford Motor Company,

and Cleveland-Cliffs rapidly placed orders for AAA-class boats. Almost overnight, order books at all the major Great Lakes shipyards were filled.

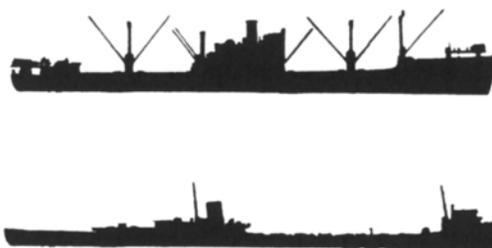
Cleveland-Cliffs had signed a contract with American Ship Building for construction of an AAA-class freighter that would become the fleet's new flagship. It would not be ready for service until 1952, however, and Cliffs's officials saw a more immediate need to add tonnage to their fleet. In what can only be viewed as a classic example of successful problem-solving, fleet executives in Cleveland carefully studied their options and determined that it would be possible to convert an idle saltwater ship for use on the lakes. As the highly successful 1950 shipping season approached its end, officials from Cliffs negotiated with Admiral Cochrane, head of the Maritime Commission, to purchase a vessel from the reserve fleet and convert it for use on the lakes.

When word of the negotiations leaked out, many in the Great Lakes industry merely shook their heads and branded the venture a boondoggle that would bring nothing but grief to Cliffs. It seemed patently obvious to the coterie of naysayers that saltwater cargo ships were totally unsuited to operation on the lakes: few had carrying capacities comparable to freighters on the lakes, their engines and pilothouses were in the wrong place—amidships—they didn't have sufficient ballasting capability to get under the rigs at the loading docks or to weather a November storm on the lakes, their flared bows would get tangled up with the loading rigs when they attempted to make a dock, their hatches were all wrong, and so on. The list of reasons why a saltwater ship was unsuited for service on the lakes was long and impressive.<sup>1</sup>

### STR. CLIFFS VICTORY

716'3" x 62' x 38'  
 Queen of the Lakes  
 1957 to June 7, 1958

Undaunted, Cliffs proceeded with their novel plan and contracted with the Maritime Commission for purchase of the *Notre Dame Victory*. The ink was barely dry on the contracts before Cliffs had arranged to have the long-idle ship towed from its berth in the James River to Bethlehem Ship Building's Key Highway Yard at Baltimore, Maryland. By the time Great Lakes sailors sat down to their Christmas dinners in 1950, shipwrights at the Bethlehem yard were already at work on the



*Cliffs Victory* was the first large ocean freighter converted for service in the bulk trade on the Great Lakes. It was launched in 1945 as one of the famous Victory-class ships of World War II, shown in the top silhouette. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Cleveland-Cliffs purchased the mothballed cargo ship and had it rebuilt to augment their cargo carrying capacity on the lakes. The bottom silhouette shows the *Victory* after her conversion. With one cargo hold located aft of her midship engine room, the *Victory* had a unique profile. (Author's collection)

complicated task of converting the *Victory*. The project included removal of the ship's midship superstructure, the top deck of which was the pilothouse, and construction of two new sets of cabins. One, which would later be installed over the engine room, where the original superstructure had been, would house the galley and accommodations for engine and galley personnel. The second set of new cabins, three decks high, would be set atop the vessel's forecastle deck at the bow. It included accommodations for deck department personnel, including a suite for the captain, and was topped by the pilothouse.

The *Victory*'s hull was split apart forward of the midships engine room to allow the installation of a new section of cargo hold that would lengthen the ship by 165 feet, 6 inches and greatly increase her carrying capacity. Simultaneously, the cargo hold was rebuilt along the lines that had long since become standard on the lakes. A double bottom was constructed, and sidetanks were installed between the outer hull of the vessel and the walls of the cargo hold to provide sufficient ballasting capability.

On deck, workers removed the *Victory* ship's large saltwater hatches and replaced them with the narrower hatches used by lakere. The original wooden hatch covers were discarded and replaced by single-piece steel lids. The heavy steel hatch covers would be lifted on and off the hatch coamings by a hatch crane, or "iron deckhand." Because *Victory* had one cargo hold with five hatches located abaft of her midship engine room and cabins, two hatch cranes had to be installed, one

to handle the hatches covering the four cargo holds between her forward cabins and her engine room and a second for use on the hatches located between the engine room and the stern.

To the astonishment of many in the industry, the massive conversion project was completed in less than ninety days. By comparison, it had taken more than a year to build Inland Steel's *Wilfred Sykes*. On March 21, 1951, in ceremonies at the yard in Baltimore, the refitted vessel was rechristened by proud officials from Cleveland-Cliffs as *Cliffs Victory*. The name made the ship's new ownership clear to all, while retaining a tie to the vessel's historic roots. At the same time, it made a bold statement about Cliffs's decision to abandon a hundred years of tradition and acquire a saltwater vessel for use on the lakes. The acquisition and conversion of the ship was indeed a victory for Cleveland-Cliffs.

The odyssey of *Cliffs Victory* was far from over that spring day in 1951, however. Ahead of her lay a three-thousand-mile journey down the Atlantic coast, around the peninsula of Florida, across the Gulf of Mexico, and up the Mississippi River to her new home on the Great Lakes. She made the entire voyage as a "dead ship," under tow of tugs, with only a skeleton crew aboard. Because the *Victory* would encounter a number of low bridges on the trip up the Mississippi and through the Illinois River and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal to the lakes, her fore and aft masts, stack, and cabins were removed and stowed either on deck or deep inside the cargo hold. Even then, one bridge was cleared by only a matter of about five inches.

The *Victory* also had to pass through nine locks, and the last of the nine presented a particularly tricky obstacle for those overseeing the ship's passage to the lakes. The lock at Chicago that would lift the vessel to the level of Lake Michigan was only 600 feet long; after her lengthening *Victory* was 620 feet long. Under the watchful eye of the experienced lock operators, the big freighter was winched slowly into the lock. It was like trying to shoehorn a size ten foot into a size nine shoe. Sailors aboard the *Victory* paced nervously on deck, not at all convinced that their massive ship could be squeezed through the undersized lock. When *Victory* had been moved tight against the forward lock gate, her stern still sticking out of the rear gate, the lock-master signalled for the forward gate to be opened. As the doors of the gate parted, a torrent of tens of thousands of gallons of water from Lake Michigan rushed into the lock, buffeting the *Victory* and threatening to tear her loose and carry her uncontrollably downstream. The powerful winches on her deck strained, and the steel cables that held her in the lock groaned under the awesome strain, but they held. With crewmen holding their

breaths, *Victory* was carefully winched forward until the rear gate of the lock could be shut. As the huge gate swung closed, shutting off the deluge of water, *Victory* settled comfortably in the lock. The beaming lockmaster signalled the relieved and elated crewmembers aboard *Victory* that they could move their big ship out of the lock. The way was clear for them to proceed to Lake Michigan.<sup>2</sup>

*Victory* was towed to the Chicago yard of American Ship Building, where the freighter was made ready to go into service for Cleveland-Cliffs. On June 4, 1951, less than six months after work had begun on her conversion, she steamed out of the shipyard and headed up Lake Michigan, bound for Marquette to take on her first load of iron ore. Onlookers lined the banks of the St. Marys River at Sault Ste. Marie when she passed up-bound through the Soo Locks for the first time, eager to get a look at the distinctive ship. Her colors were familiar. *Victory* had a stark black hull topped by cabins painted in a peculiar, some would say ugly, olive green. Over her engine room, the streamlined black stack bore the big orange "C" of the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet. At first glance, she looked like the scores of other freighters that had been turned out at Great Lakes shipyards for almost a hundred years. But closer scrutiny revealed the telltale flare to her bow that marked her as a saltwater ship, and as she drew abreast, onlookers could plainly see that her engine room and after cabins were not at the stern, where they would have been on a conventional laker, but almost amidships. And behind the after cabin trailed a long expanse of deck that looked like the tail of a crocodile. In profile, *Victory* was easy to distinguish from any other ship operating on the lakes.

On that maiden voyage, *Victory* also sailed into the record books of the Great Lakes shipping industry. Her entry in trade on the lakes marked the first time that a large saltwater vessel had been converted for use by a U.S. Great Lakes fleet. She would also lay claim to several other honors. In short order, *Victory* was recognized as the fastest freighter on the lakes. Her 8,500 horsepower steam turbine engine pushed her along at speeds of more than twenty miles an hour, well in excess of that recorded by the less-streamlined ships built on the lakes. In 1957, twelve years after she was launched in Oregon and six years after joining the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet, *Victory* also became the Queen of the Lakes.

During the winter of 1956–57, *Victory* went into the AmShip yard at Chicago to be lengthened a second time. A section of new cargo hold 96 feet, 3 inches long was inserted into her deck between her forward cabins and the midship engine room. When the gates of the drydock were swung open and *Victory* steamed out to begin the 1957 shipping season, the



*Cliffs Victory* became Queen of the Lakes in 1957, after her second lengthening. She was first lengthened in early 1951 during conversion from a saltwater cargo ship to a lake freighter. The former Victory-class freighter was one of the fastest ships on the Great Lakes, with a distinctive profile that made her a favorite with boatwatchers around the lakes. Sold to a Liberian shipping company in 1985, the colorful career of the *Victory* ended in 1987 when she was scrapped in Taiwan. (State Archives of Michigan)

716-foot, 3-inch former salty edged out Hanna's *Joseph H. Thompson* for honors as the longest ship on the lakes. Again, the name *Cliffs Victory* found its way into the record books of the Great Lakes shipping industry.

The marine division of the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, which had pioneered the shipment of ore on the lakes in 1867, prospered during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1972, the fleet beat out several competitors and won the giant Republic Steel contract, the largest ever awarded on the lakes. In 1978, Cliffs signed a major contract with Detroit Edison to move Western low-sulphur coal from Superior, Wisconsin, to Edison's power generating plants at Monroe and St. Clair, Michigan. As part of the agreement, Cliffs and Detroit Edison signed a letter of intent to jointly build a steam-powered, 1,000-foot-long freighter<sup>3</sup> for use in the coal trade.

The first thousand-footer, Bethlehem's *Stewart J. Cort*, had gone into service on the lakes in 1971, marking the begin-

ning of a new era in Great Lakes shipping. The *Cort* and the thousand-footers that followed her were capable of carrying three times as much cargo as ships like the *Victory*. That translated into increased profits for the shipping companies that operated them and reduced costs for shippers. With the letter of intent in hand, officials from Cliffs arranged with American Ship Building to schedule construction of the new ship at their Lorain, Ohio, yard, which had a drydock specially designed for the construction of thousand-footers.

Cleveland-Cliffs's fortunes took a turn for the worse shortly after entering into the agreement with Detroit Edison. As fleet engineering personnel enthusiastically set to work on designs for their planned thousand-footer, Republic Steel notified Cliffs of their intent to renegotiate their iron ore delivery contract. Republic was moving ahead with plans to build an ore transshipment terminal at the mouth of the Black River in Lorain, Ohio, just a few hundred yards downstream from the AmShip yard where Cliffs's thousand-footer was scheduled to be built. The transshipment terminal would allow Republic to have ore brought down the lakes on efficient 1,000-foot-long self-unloaders and offloaded at Lorain. The ore would then be loaded onto smaller self-unloaders that would carry it to nearby Cleveland and up the Cuyahoga River to Republic's mills. Even though the ore would have to be handled twice, Republic would realize significant economies by bringing it down the lakes in thousand-footers and moving it up the Cuy-



The massive black smokestack installed on *Cliffs Victory* in 1950 bore the big orange "C" that indicated she was part of the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet, one of the oldest on the lakes. (Author's collection)

ahoga in self-unloaders that would allow them to abandon their aging shoreside unloading equipment. Cliffs was at a disadvantage in the fierce bidding war that followed, for they didn't yet have a thousand-footer, and the only two self-unloaders in their fleet—the *Edward B. Greene* and *Walter A. Sterling*—were too long to negotiate the tight turns in the winding Cuyahoa. As a result, Cliffs lost the lucrative Republic contract, effective with the start of shipping in 1980.

To further compound Cliffs's problems, the Great Lakes shipping industry slipped into a recession in 1980 that reached depression-like proportions by 1982. From 220 million total tons in 1979, shipments fell off to only 128 million tons in 1982. Iron ore shipments, the mainstay for U.S. shipping companies on the lakes, dropped from a respectable 92 million tons in 1979—the second highest tonnage of ore ever shipped—to a mere 38 million tons in 1982. Cliffs, already crippled by loss of the Republic contract, struggled to stay alive. By 1982, they could find only enough cargo to operate the *Greene* and *Sterling*.

The *Victory* and the other ships in the once-proud Cleveland Cliffs fleet were laid-up at docks around the lakes, as were vessels from all of the other shipping companies. Over a thousand sailors were idled by the downturn in shipping. At Cliffs, and in the other fleets, only those at the top of the seniority list were able to hold jobs. On the *Greene* and *Sterling*, all of the mates who stood watches had previously commanded their own ships, all of the assistant engineers had previously been chief engineers. Most of the deckhands were in their fifties and sixties, sailors who had long ago achieved enough seniority to leave the deck for less strenuous positions as watchmen and wheelmen. But they were the lucky ones. Hundreds of their peers would never work aboard ship again. Others somehow persevered during the recession and eventually returned to work on the boats after being unable to find a job on the lakes for three or four years.

In the fall of 1984, top fleet officials from the Cleveland office boarded both the *Greene* and *Sterling* to inform shocked crewmembers that Cleveland-Cliffs had made the difficult decision to abandon its shipping operations. The last two operating vessels in the fleet, the *Greene* and *Sterling*, had been sold to the Ford Motor Company. While the *Greene* and *Sterling* were being readied to begin the 1985 shipping season in Ford colors, Cleveland-Cliffs began to dispose of the remaining ships in the fleet, most of which had not operated since the end of the 1979 season. Most were destined for scrapping, but the diehard *Victory* was to be given yet another new lease on life.

In 1985, the former Victory ship was sold to a Liberian shipping company that announced plans to operate her in the

coastal trade in the Pacific. After more than three decades on the freshwaters of the Great Lakes, the *Victory* would be returning to the venue where she first slipped into the water. *Victory*'s new owners transferred her registry to Panama and renamed her *Savic*. There was no significance to her new name. It was, rather, conveniently arrived at by having a crewmember paint out the CLIFF from CLIFFS and the TORY in VICTORY, then insert an *A* between her former two names. Voilà, the *Savic* is born!

The *Savic* took on a load of scrap iron and departed the lakes, wintering at Montreal before make the long voyage out the St. Lawrence Seaway to the ocean. Still sporting the distinctive black hull and pea-green cabins that had been associated with the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet for so many years, the distinctive ship left the friendly waters of the lakes for good. Little is known about her voyages on the oceans, but word filtered back to the lakes in 1987 that she was being scrapped in Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> When her registry was finally surrendered, she claimed yet another record: the *Savic*, née *Cliffs Victory*, née *Notre Dame Victory*, was the last of the famous World War II Victory ships to operate anywhere in the world.

While *Victory* may be best remembered for her peculiar appearance, she unalterably affected the history of shipping on the Great Lakes by forging a path for a long line of saltwater vessels that found their way onto the lakes. In the months and years after *Victory* first took her place in the U.S. fleet on the lakes, no less than thirteen converted saltwater ships and three new ships built at an East Coast shipyard followed in her wake.

Following the *Victory* to the lakes during the Korean War years were the converted C4 cargo ships, including Hanna's *Joseph H. Thompson*, Republic's *Tom M. Girdler*, *Troy H. Browning*, and *Charles M. White*, and Amersand's *McKee Sons*. During the same period, Huron Cement converted a C1 cargo ship and put it into the Great Lakes cement trade as the *Paul H. Townsend*. In addition to the converted ships, three new vessels were built for service on the lakes at Bethlehem Steel's shipyard at Sparrows Point, Maryland. They included Bethlehem's *Johnstown* and *Sparrows Point* and Interlake's *Elton Hoyt, 2d*. In 1956, the ships of the Korean War-era were joined by the *Aquarama*, a C4 that was converted into a passenger ship for operation between Detroit and Cleveland. It was owned by the McKee family, principals in Sand Products, who were also partners in ownership of the *McKee Sons*.

When tonnages shipped on the lakes began to increase in the early 1960s, six other former saltwater vessels were converted and brought in by way of the St. Lawrence Seaway, which had opened in 1959. All were former tankers operated by the Maritime Commission. They included Cleveland-Cliffs's

*Walter A. Sterling*, Columbia Transportation's *Middletown*, National Steel's *Paul H. Carnahan* and *Leon Falk, Jr.*, American Steamship's *H. Lee White*, and Huron Cement's *J.A. W. Iglehart*. American's *H. Lee White* was the last of the parade, entering service on the lakes in 1966.

The *Victory* and the thirteen ships that followed her on the long journey to the lakes played vital roles in the bulk shipping industry on the Great Lakes throughout their careers. Of the converted former Maritime Commission vessels, the *Thompson*, now operated as a tug-barge; *Sterling*, now the *Lee A. Tregurtha* of the Interlake fleet; Columbia's *Middletown*; and the *Iglehart* and *Townsend* of the Huron Cement fleet continue to operate yet today, as do the *Sparrows Point* and the *Hoyt*. It is also rumored that the *McKee Sons*, idle since the shipping recession of the 1980s, may be put back into service in the near future, possibly as a tug-barge. The contributions that all of the ships have made to their operating companies and to the Great Lakes shipping industry must to some degree be attributed to the leadership shown in 1950 by Cleveland-Cliffs and the incontrovertible fact that the way was paved for them by *Cliffs Victory*.

## Notes

1. People in the Great Lakes shipping industry, particularly the sailors, are naysayers of world-class proportions. Historically, they have vocally and vehemently cast aspersions on almost any suggested deviation from the norm. They've unhesitatingly spoken out against longer ships, longer locks at the Soo, building ships with pilothouses at the stern, self-unloaders, the shift to diesel engines, cafeteria-style food service, and outfitting the ships for radio communications, among other changes. In an article entitled "The Captain Turned Red, the Air Turned Blue" in the March 1981 issue of *Telescope*, R. H. Davison recounts that, "Because they weren't served mashed potatoes for dinner, six firemen of the *Steamer Eastland* ... went on strike just two hours out of South Haven [Michigan]. They not only wouldn't work, but they banked the fires." That's reflective of the intransigence that is common in the industry.
2. James Clary, *Ladies of the Lakes* (Lansing, MI: Michigan Natural Resources Magazine, 1981), 176.
3. The planned Cliffs-Detroit Edison vessel would have been the only thousand-footer on the lakes to be powered by a steam turbine engine. All of the other thousand-footers have diesel engines. Cliffs's officials felt that the higher initial construction cost of a steam plant would have been more than offset during the life of the vessel by reduced fuel and maintenance costs.
4. Ship Biography, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.