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## Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

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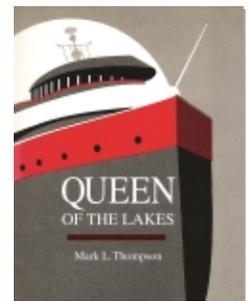
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## Columbia's Ill-Fated Queen

The freshwater of the Great Lakes drains into the saltwater of the Atlantic Ocean by way of the St. Lawrence River. The lakes lie at an elevation more than six hundred feet above that of the Atlantic, and as the lakewater flows unceasingly downhill to the sea it drops over the towering falls on the Niagara River and swirls through a series of turbulent rapids on the lower St. Lawrence. While a series of small locks and canals had been built around Niagara and the worst of the rapids on the St. Lawrence as early as 1829, it was impossible for large ships to travel between the lakes and the ocean until the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959.<sup>1</sup> The Great Lakes were, for all intents and purposes, an inland waterway system.

Construction of a “seaway” connecting the Great Lakes with the Atlantic had been proposed by a Minnesota Congressman as early as 1892, during the presidency of Benjamin Harrison. The proposal generated immediate and strong opposition from a variety of powerful interests, including the railroads, utility companies, coal producers, Eastern and Gulf ports, the Lake Carriers’ Association that represented bulk shipping interests on the lakes, and even Great Lakes ports like Cleveland, Chicago, and Buffalo. Over the next six decades, seaway proposals were regularly introduced in the U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament, and just as regularly they were defeated. It wasn’t until 1954, under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, that U.S. and Canadian governments finally reached

accord on a joint plan to build a route between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic.

Work on the monumental project began almost immediately. Over the next five years, scores of U.S. and Canadian construction firms worked virtually nonstop to create a waterway between Lake Erie and the upper St. Lawrence that could be navigated by large ships. In the process, they relocated the residents of all or parts of eight communities, moved 360 million tons of earth, raised bridges, and poured 6 million cubic yards of concrete. They built eight large locks on the Welland Canal around Niagara and seven on the lower St. Lawrence, constructed several massive power plants, and dredged the entire route to a depth of twenty-seven feet. The actual construction areas stretched for more than a hundred miles through some of the hardest rock on the North American continent. The cost exceeded \$1 billion.

The St. Lawrence Seaway first opened to vessel traffic on April 25, 1959, and was officially dedicated by Queen Elizabeth II and U.S. Vice President Richard M. Nixon in late June of 1959 in ceremonies in both the U.S. and Canada. The natural barriers that lay between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean had finally been breached. For the first time, it was possible for large vessels to travel from the Atlantic Ocean more than 2,300 miles inland to Great Lakes ports such as Duluth, Minnesota, and Chicago, Illinois. Overnight, the inland ports

of the Great Lakes became international ports, and North America's industrial and agricultural heartland was connected by a water route to ports around the world.<sup>2</sup>

For U.S. and Canadian bulk shipping companies on the lakes, opening the Seaway meant that the resource-rich regions of the upper lakes were linked for the first time with the heavily populated industrial regions of Canada concentrated along the shore of Lake Ontario and the lower St. Lawrence. At the same time, the way was also open for iron ore being mined in the Province of Labrador to be shipped by water to steel mills on the lakes. In the days prior to the actual opening of the Seaway, several U.S. and Canadian shipping companies moved to build new freighters to the maximum size that could be handled by the locks on the Welland and St. Lawrence.<sup>3</sup>

### STR. EDMUND FITZGERALD

729'3"x75'1"x33'4"

Queen of the Lakes

June 7, 1958 to January 26, 1960

The first of the new "maximum Seaway-size" freighters was launched on June 7, 1958, at Great Lakes Engineering Works on the Rouge River at Detroit. While few people had been on hand in Chicago in 1957 when the lengthened *Cliffs Victory* emerged from the drydock at American Ship Building to claim honors as Queen of the Lakes, the 1958 launching of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* attracted a large and boisterous throng of onlookers and received much media coverage. In general terms, it was not a good year for Great Lakes shipping. The total tonnage carried on the lakes dropped from 196 million tons in 1957 to only 141 million tons in 1958. As workers at the Rouge River shipyard prepared the *Fitzgerald* for launching, only 104 of 205 U.S. freighters were in service.<sup>4</sup> For the industry, the launching of the new Queen of the Lake was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal season.

The "*Fitz*," as the massive new ship soon came to be called, had been built as an investment by Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and had been named for the firm's chairman of the board.<sup>5</sup> It was to be operated under a long-term charter arrangement by Oglebay Norton's Columbia Transportation Division.

The *Fitzgerald* was 729 feet long and just over 75 feet wide. She was a classic Great Lakes straight-decker, built along the lines of the *Sykes* and the AAA-class boats, but bigger. She was a splendidly outfitted ship, with passenger quarters that featured tiled baths, deep pile carpeting, and special furnish-

ings purchased from the J. L. Hudson department store in Detroit.<sup>6</sup> But the *Fitz* was more than an aesthetically pleasing ship: the big freighter was a workhorse. She established many cargo records during her career, often breaking records she had set previously.

The *Fitz* was the first ship to carry more than 26,000 gross tons of iron ore and the first ship to carry more than 27,000 gross tons of ore.<sup>7</sup> In 1964 she set a new record by moving 1,159,805 tons through the Soo Locks during the season. During a period of exceptionally high water levels in 1968, *Fitz* again went into the record books as the first ship to carry more than 30,000 tons of iron ore through the Soo,<sup>8</sup> a record she broke during the 1969 season with a load that totalled 30,690 net tons.<sup>9</sup> That same year she set a new season record by carrying 1,230,553 net tons in forty-three trips down the lakes<sup>10</sup> and received a safety award for having completed eight years of operation without a lost-time accident.<sup>11</sup> While setting record after record, the *Fitz* also became a favorite with boatwatchers around the lakes. Her popularity was due in varying degrees to her size, her classic lines, the long string of records she amassed, and the antics of one of her captains.

Captain Peter Pulcer was in command of the *Fitzgerald* when many of the cargo records were set. He is best remembered, however, as the "dee jay captain" for his habit of piping music over the ship's intercom system to serenade people along the shore of the Detroit, St. Clair, and St. Marys rivers. His serenading wasn't limited to daytime hours: many tourists in campgrounds along the St. Marys River were aroused from their sleep by the sound of loud music blaring from the passing *Fitz*. The affable Pulcer would also frequently come out of the pilothouse when his ship was being raised or lowered in the Soo Locks and use a bullhorn to pass along information about the *Fitz* to the gathered throngs of delighted tourists.<sup>12</sup>

Although the *Fitzgerald's* reign as Queen of the Lakes ended after less than a year, she remained exceptionally popular with boat buffs throughout her career. Even when the first of the thousand-footers came along in the early 1970s, the *Fitz* continued to be a favorite of boatwatchers. In all likelihood, however, she would eventually have suffered the fate of most other aging freighters, slipping gradually into obscurity, had it



The *Fitzgerald* was operated by Oglebay Norton's Columbia Transportation Division. The rust-red Columbia stack on the *Fitz* featured a fire engine red star with a white "C" on a band of gold. (Author's collection)

not been for a savage November storm in 1975 and a ballad by a Canadian songwriter that forever etched the memory of the *Fitz* into our minds.

In the early afternoon hours of November 9, 1975, having finished loading iron ore at the Burlington Northern Railroad dock in Superior, Wisconsin, the *Fitzgerald* steamed out onto Lake Superior and into the lore of shipwrecks on the lakes. Bound for an unloading dock at Detroit, Captain Ernest McSorley set a course along the north shore of Lake Superior, seeking shelter from a typical November storm passing across the lakes. Shortly after 10 a.m. on November 10, the *Fitzgerald* reached the eastern limits of the north shore, and a new course was set to carry the vessel southeast to the sheltered waters of Whitefish Bay at the headwaters of the St. Marys River. Gale warnings had been supplanted by storm warnings, and the steadily growing winds were whipping the lake into a frenzy. The seas had built until there were 12-16 foot waves. With just over 11 feet of freeboard, the *Fitz* was regularly shipping blackish-green water over her deck. In fact, the heavily-laden freighter was taking an awesome pounding in the furious seas.

At 3:30 in the afternoon, Captain McSorley made a radio call to the captain of the *Arthur M. Anderson*, a U.S. Steel freighter that was about seventeen miles behind the *Fitz* and also headed for the shelter of Whitefish Bay. McSorley told Captain Jesse Cooper of the *Anderson* that two vents on his ship had been damaged or lost and that it had taken on a list, even though he had his ballast pumps on. McSorley said that

he was going to “check down,” reduce speed, to close the distance between the two ships. Cooper told McSorley that he and his crew would keep an eye on the *Fitz*. Cooper and the two deck officers in the pilothouse with him at the time of the call from McSorley<sup>13</sup> later told Coast Guard investigators that none of them felt the *Fitzgerald*'s captain expressed any real concern for the safety of his ship during that conversation.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after 4 p.m., the *Fitzgerald* made a second radio call to the *Anderson*, reporting that her two radars weren't working. With snow falling and darkness settling over the lake, and without radar to navigate by, the *Fitz* would have to rely on the *Anderson*'s crew to navigate for her. The radar set on the U.S. Steel freighter showed that the *Fitzgerald* was then about sixteen miles ahead of the *Anderson*, passing to the east of Caribou Island.

At 7:10 p.m., with winds of fifty to sixty miles an hour and seas as high as twenty-five feet, the *Anderson*'s first mate called the *Fitzgerald* to let them know there was a ship coming out of Whitefish Bay ahead of them. The *Fitz* was then about ten miles ahead of the *Anderson* and only fifteen miles from Whitefish Bay. The mate on the *Anderson* told the *Fitzgerald* that the ship leaving Whitefish Bay on its way up the lakes would pass west of them. “By the way, how are you making out with your problems?” asked the mate on the *Anderson*. “We are holding our own,” came the reply from the *Fitzgerald*.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after the radio conversation, the snow stopped and visibility improved considerably. In the darkened pilot-

**The *Edmund Fitzgerald* was the first ship built to the maximum dimensions of the St. Lawrence Seaway, which was opened to vessel traffic in 1959. The “*Fitz*” was built by Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company of Milwaukee as an investment. The classic freighter was always immensely popular with boatwatchers around the lakes, due in part to the antics of one of the ship’s captains. The *Fitzgerald* sank with all hands on November 10, 1975. (State Archives of Michigan)**



house of the *Anderson*, the captain, mate, and wheelsman could see the running lights of three saltwater ships leaving Whitefish Bay and heading up the lake. The *Fitzgerald* should have been between the *Anderson* and the convoy of salties, but no one in the pilothouse could spot her lights. Captain Cooper thought the *Fitz* might have suffered a blackout, so he looked for her on his radar screen. He could clearly make out three targets on the green radar scope—the three salties—but nothing to indicate the location of the *Fitzgerald*. After trying unsuccessfully to call the Columbia freighter on the radio, Cooper contacted the U.S. pilot aboard one of the saltwater ships and asked him to look for the *Fitzgerald* on his radar. The pilot reported back that he could find no targets on his radar screen which could be the *Fitzgerald*. Cooper then called the Coast Guard.

At 8:32 p.m., radio operators at Coast Guard Group Sault Ste. Marie logged a call from the *Arthur M. Anderson* in which Captain Cooper told them: “I am very concerned with the welfare of the steamer *Edmund Fitzgerald*. He was right in front of us experiencing a little difficulty. He was taking on a small amount of water and none of the upbound ships have passed him. I can see no lights as before and don’t have him on radar. I just hope he didn’t take a nose dive.” The radio operator in Sault Ste. Marie made several attempts to contact the *Fitzgerald* by radio before calling the Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center in Cleveland at 8:40 to inform them that there was “an uncertainty” concerning the freighter.<sup>16</sup>

By the time the *Anderson* reached Whitefish Bay at about 9 p.m., Captain Cooper “was sure that the *Fitzgerald* was gone.” At 9:03 p.m. he again called the Coast Guard station at Sault Ste. Marie. This time his message was more forceful: the *Fitzgerald* is missing! The call set in motion a major search and rescue effort involving Coast Guard surface units from Sault Ste. Marie and Duluth, Coast Guard helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft from the air station at Traverse City, Michigan, and the freighters *Anderson* and *William Clay Ford*. The Coast Guard also called six other freighters lying at anchor in Whitefish Bay and asked them to join in the search. Captains on five of the ships told the Coast Guard that venturing out of the sheltered waters of the bay would put their ships and crews in jeopardy. The sixth vessel, the *Hilda Marjanne*, a Canadian freighter operated by Upper Lakes Shipping, lifted anchor and got underway, but she had to turn back after only twenty or thirty minutes because conditions were too severe. The commanding officer of the Coast Guard Group Sault Ste. Marie also contacted pilots aboard the *Nanfri*, *Benfri*, and *Avafors*, the three saltwater ships that had headed up the lake earlier in the evening, and asked that they join in the search for the *Fitzgerald*.



The *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank with all hands during the evening hours of November 10, 1975, only sixteen miles from the sheltered waters of Whitefish Bay. After loading ore, the Columbia freighter had departed the American lakehead at Duluth on the morning of November 9 in the midst of a typical late season storm. Seeking shelter from the foul weather, the *Fitz* hugged the north shore of Lake Superior before changing course for the run down to Whitefish Bay and the headwaters of the St. Marys River. That leg of the voyage was never completed. (Author’s collection)

All three answered that they did not believe they could safely turn their vessels around in the high seas.

The search continued throughout the night of November 10 and was expanded on November 11, 12, and 13, when additional U.S. and Canadian Coast Guard vessels and aircraft arrived in the area and a number of U.S. and Canadian freighters joined the effort. The *Anderson* found a piece of one of the *Fitzgerald*’s lifeboats on the morning of November 11, and a second lifeboat a few hours later. Two twenty-five-person inflatable life rafts from the *Fitzgerald* were found floating near the Canadian shore that same morning. Searchers also recovered twenty life preservers, or pieces of life preservers; eight oars or pieces of oars; one piece of a ballast tank sounding board, of the type used on the *Fitzgerald*; eight flotation tanks, identified as having come from the *Fitz*’s lifeboats; one large wooden fender block; two propane cylinders, similar to those used to fuel galley equipment on the *Fitzgerald*; thirteen life rings; two 2”x12” planks; one wooden stool; one heaving line; one-half of a lifeboat cover; one rudder from a lifeboat; one floodlight, like those that had been installed on the pilothouse and after deck of the *Fitzgerald*; one plastic spray bottle marked “pilothouse window”; one broken extension ladder; and assorted pieces of broken scrap wood. No survivors were found, nor were the bodies of any of the *Fitzgerald*’s twenty-nine crewmembers ever recovered. Captain Ernest McSorley and his crew disappeared with their ship.

A sonar search of the area was conducted by the Coast Guard Cutter *Woodrush* a few days later. Underwater wreckage, believed to be that of the *Fitzgerald*, was located in 530

feet of water, seventeen miles northwest of Whitefish Point. In May of 1976, the Coast Guard used an unmanned submersible borrowed from the Navy to confirm that the previously located wreckage was that of the missing Columbia freighter. The submersible was fitted with video and still-picture cameras, and over a period of twelve days more than 43,000 feet of videotape was shot of the sunken hull, along with 895 color slides. Early video confirmed that the wreckage was that of the *Fitzgerald*, her name clearly readable on her overturned stern. The freighter was found to be in two pieces. The bow section, 276 feet long, was resting upright on the bottom, while a 253-foot section of the overturned stern was found about 170 feet away. The bottom of the lake between the two intact sections was strewn with twisted metal and spilled iron ore pellets.<sup>17</sup>

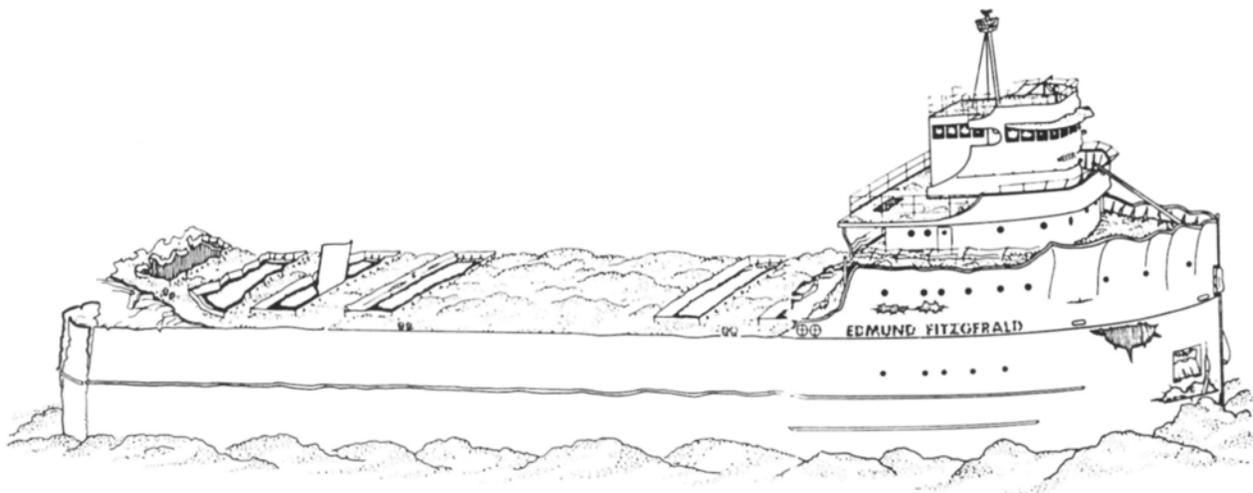
After an eighteen-month study, a Coast Guard Board of Investigation concluded that the most probable cause of the sinking of the *Fitzgerald* was massive flooding of the cargo hold. Water had entered the cargo hold through "ineffective hatch closures," hatch covers which had not been properly maintained. Evidence suggested the possibility that not all of the clamps used to secure the covers to the hatch coamings had been in place at the time of the accident. As a result, waves

breaking over the *Fitzgerald's* deck throughout the day of November 10 had forced water into the ship's cargo hold. As water rose in the cargo hold, the vessel progressively lost buoyancy. With high seas swirling around the ship and no way to check the cargo hold for water, Captain McSorley and his crew might not have been aware that their ship was gradually sinking out from under them. Finally, one last deluge of water entered the cargo hold, the vessel lost its last measure of buoyancy, and the *Edmund Fitzgerald* dove like a rock to the bottom of the lake.<sup>18</sup>

The last moments would have been terrifying for the crew. As the bow dove below the turbulent waters of Lake Superior, the windows of the pilothouse would have exploded inward. A wall of water would have instantly filled the pilothouse, driving Captain McSorley, the first mate who was on watch, the wheelsman and anyone else in the *Fitzgerald's* pilothouse at the time back against the aft bulkhead or sweeping them out the rear windows.

Elsewhere on the ship, most crewmembers would have been in their rooms, watching television, reading, or sleeping when their ship dove toward the bottom. As the ship tipped toward the bottom, they would have been thrown from their beds or chairs and sent crashing against the forward bulkheads

**A Coast Guard drawing of the sunken bow section of the *Fitzgerald* as it lies in 530 feet of water. The drawing was constructed from videotape and still photos of the wreck taken by an unmanned Navy submersible. Much of the damage to the bow section resulted when the freighter impacted with the muddy bottom of the lake. Burrowed deeply into the mud, the *Fitzgerald* sits amid tons of taconite pellets that spilled from her hold when she hit bottom and tore in half. (Author's collection)**



or furnishings in their rooms. Many would have been seriously injured. All would have been disoriented and probably unable to gain their footings. At least a few crewmembers would probably have been in the galley, always a popular gathering spot during the evening hours. They would have undoubtedly grabbed onto their stools or the messroom table, thinking that it was just another roll—a little worse than the ones they had been experiencing all day. But their ship would have continued to tip, and eventually they would have been thrown from their stools and into the forward bulkhead, showered by bottles of condiments, plates, silverware, drinking glasses, cookie jars, and boxes of cereal cluttering the messroom table. In the engine room, the engineer and oiler on watch would probably first have heard the ship's giant propeller overrev as it lifted clear of the water, something that had been happening intermittently throughout the day as big waves lifted the stern. As they moved to cut back on the throttle, they would have scrambled for footing as the stern continued to rise in the air and the ship plummeted toward the bottom of the lake.

Starting at the bow and proceeding toward the stern, portholes and deadlights would have exploded inward under the increasing pressure of the water. Rooms would have filled rapidly with frothing torrents of water. In minutes, the occupants of the rooms would have been dead. Once the *Fitzgerald* began her dive toward the bottom of Lake Superior there was nothing that anyone on the ship could have done to escape the fury of the angry seas. Nobody would have had time to don a life-jacket, much less get to the ship's lifeboats or life rafts. Virtually all would have died wherever they were when the ship lost buoyancy.

The story of the sinking of the big Columbia freighter was told in a popular song: "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*," by Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot. For almost two decades now, the song's familiar lyrics and haunting melody have fixed in the minds of listeners the plight of *Fitz* and her crew.<sup>19</sup> It reminds us all of the massive freighters' fragility when pitted against the fury of nature on North America's inland seas. Even the biggest and strongest ship can be sent to a watery grave by the hurricane-strength winds and towering black waves of the Great Lakes—even the Queen of the Lakes.

## Notes

1. Many Great Lakes cargo ships were put into operation on the oceans by the U.S. and Canadian governments during World War I and World War II, but they first had to be cut in half and towed out of the lakes in pieces. Similarly, cargo ships built in England and Scotland for the Canadian fleet had to be brought into the lakes in the same fashion.
2. Jacques LesStrang, *Seaway* (Vancouver: Superior Publishing, 1976).
3. The new locks on the Welland and St. Lawrence were 766 feet long, 80 feet wide, and had 30 feet of water over their sills. They were designed to handle ships of up to 730 feet in length and about 75 feet wide. The channels of the Welland and St. Lawrence were dredged to a minimum depth of 27 feet so ships drawing up to slightly more than 26 feet of water could pass through the system.
4. *1981 Annual Report* (Cleveland: Lake Carriers' Association, 1982), 21.
5. John O. Greenwood, *Namesakes of the Lakes* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1970), 106.
6. James Clary, *Ladies of the Lakes* (Lansing, MI: Michigan Natural Resources Magazine, 1981), 157.
7. Greenwood, 106.
8. Dr. James A. Clark, "The Edmund Fitzgerald," *Telescope* 25, no. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1976): 16.
9. Clary, 158.
10. *Telescope* 17, no. 8 (Nov.–Dec. 1968): 194.
11. Clary, 158.
12. *Ibid.*
13. The first mate was just in the process of relieving the second mate of the watch when the call was received. Normally, only one mate at a time is on watch in the pilothouse.
14. *Marine Casualty Report: SS Edmund Fitzgerald* (Washington: U.S. Coast Guard, 1977), 29.
15. *Ibid.*, 29.
16. *Ibid.*, 30.
17. *Ibid.*, 34–55.
18. *Ibid.*, 89–104.
19. There are, however, a number of factual errors in the song. The *Fitz* was not coming from a "mill" in Wisconsin, nor was it bound for Cleveland. It's also unlikely that the cook said it was too rough to feed the crew, and Captain McSorley never radioed that his ship was in peril. Despite those errors, it's a good song.