Queen of the Lakes

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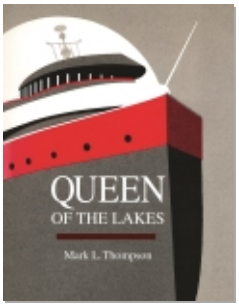

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Queen by Inches

Before CSL's *Baie St. Paul* had a chance to go into service as one of the thirteen 730s that shared honors as Queen of the Lakes during the 1962 season,[1] the distinction of being the longest ship on the lakes shifted to a vessel launched at Lauzon just eight days after the *Baie St. Paul*. The *Frankcliffe Hall* is always referred to as a 730, but she is actually two inches longer than that. A trifling amount, to be sure, but enough for her to wrest the Queen of the Lakes title from the *Baie St. Paul* and the other pure 730s.

STR. FRANKCLIFFE HALL

730'2"x75'2"x35'7"
Queen of the Lakes
December 7, 1962 to April 14, 1965

Frankcliffe Hall was launched at the Davie shipyard on December 7, 1962, for the account of the Hall Corporation. Although marginally longer than the original batch of 730s, the ship set no new cargo records. Like most freighters on the Great Lakes, she has operated in relative obscurity throughout her career. The little notoriety the *Frankcliffe Hall* has received came as the result of several relatively minor casualties the vessel was involved in.

Two years after the *Leecliffe Hall* collided with a Greek freighter and sank in the St. Lawrence River, officials in the Hall fleet's offices received a start when they learned that the *Frankcliffe Hall* had also been involved in a collision near Montreal. The July 13, 1966, collision between the Hall freighter and the British-flag *Gloxinia* during a heavy rainstorm was minor, however, and neither ship was seriously damaged. A more serious casualty occurred on June 6, 1967, when the ship ran hard aground off Thunder Cape on Lake Superior while operating in heavy fog. Because she was heavily laden with 800,000 bushels of wheat at the time, it took salvors four days to pull the ship free. Fortunately, the *Frankcliffe Hall* suffered only relatively minor damage as a result of the grounding.

After operating as part of the Canadian straight-decker fleet for seventeen years, the ship was converted to a self-unloader and strengthened for ice operations at Port Arthur Ship Building during the winter of 1979-80.[2] When the new self-unloader returned to service at the start of the 1980 shipping season on the lakes, the *Frankcliffe Hall* joined a fleet that had changed markedly in the eighteen seasons that had passed since she was launched. In fact, the Hall freighter's conversion to a self-unloader reflected one of those changes.

By 1980, half of the ships in the U.S. fleet on the Great Lakes and one-quarter of the Canadian vessels were self-

unloaders. Much larger percentages of the U.S. and Canadian ships actually in operation that year were self-unloaders. After reaching record levels during the 1979 season, tonnages shipped on the lakes fell off by over 33 million tons in 1980, as the industry plummeted into a severe and prolonged recession. The economic conditions that descended on the industry forced shipowners to put only their most efficient vessels into operation. For most fleets, that meant putting self-unloaders into service, while straight-deckers remained idle.

Although the U.S. and Canadian grain trade is still dominated by straight-deckers, by the time economic conditions on the lakes began to turn around in 1987, iron ore, coal, and stone were being hauled almost exclusively by self-unloaders. The shift to reliance on the efficient self-unloaders was most pronounced on the U.S. side of the industry. Since 1987, the

The stack of the *Frankcliffe Hall* is slightly taller than those on most U.S. freighters built during the same period. The black Halco stacks feature an inverted white chevron topped by a white "H." (Author's collection)

Halco's *Frankcliffe Hall* at National Steel's mill on Zug Island in the Detroit River, in 1987. The Hall freighter is two inches longer than the 730s that preceded her, possibly a result of her builders having used the metric system when designing the ship. During the winter of 1979–80, the *Frankcliffe Hall* was converted to a self-unloader and strengthened for ice operations. (Captain Sam Buchanan, J. W. Westcott Co.)

only U.S. straight-decker regularly engaged in carrying iron ore, coal, or stone is Inland's *Edward L. Ryerson*. The last straight-deckers added to the U.S. fleet were the *Carnahan, Falk, Sterling,* and *Middletown,* the four T2 tankers converted for use on the lakes in 1961. In 1978, the *Sterling* was converted to a self-unloader, followed in 1982 by the *Middletown*. Both survived the shipping recession of the 1980s. The *Carnahan* and *Falk,* on the other hand, remained as straight-deckers and were scrapped in the mid-1980s. The *Sterling* and *Middletown* were among seventeen U.S. ships converted from straight-deckers to self-unloaders during the 1970s and 1980s. Included were six of the eight AAA-class boats built during the Korean War. In addition, the twenty-seven new ships added by U.S. owners during the same period were all self-unloaders. On the U.S. side of the lakes today, the classic Great Lakes straight-decker is a vanishing breed.

In addition to shifting to self-unloaders, shipowners eager to increase the efficiency of their ships had also adopted several other design innovations. In 1961, Columbia's *J. R. Sensibar* and American Steamship's *J. F. Schoellkopf* were the first vessels on the lakes to be fitted with bow thrusters. The thruster is a propeller mounted transversely in a tunnel at the bow of the ship, below the waterline. In the same way that the ship's regular propeller drives it forward or backward, the thruster can be used to move the bow of the ship to the left or right.

The first record of attempts to develop thrusters dates to 1844. At that time, the *Storckton Collier,* a British vessel, was equipped with a thruster propeller mounted transversely in its stern skeg. Power to the rudimentary thruster was supplied by ten crewmen manning winches inside the hull of the ship. By cranking furiously at the winches, they were able to turn the ship around in four minutes and twenty-five seconds. While many patents had been issued for various types of thrusters over the years, the first modern thrusters weren't developed until the 1950s. By the early 1960s, the major manufacturers of thrusters had all targeted the Great Lakes as a prime market for their systems.

Since the earliest days of commerce on the lakes, vessel captains have had to maneuver their ships in and out of confined harbors and up and down narrow and winding rivers. Very often, they had to rely on assistance from tugs to help them negotiate the rivers and harbors. It was a common sight around the lakes to see tugs towing a freighter up or down the narrow confines of the Cuyahoga River at Cleveland, the Rouge River at Detroit, or the Calumet River outside Chicago. But "taking tugs"was expensive. Thruster manufacturers convinced fleets like Columbia and American that installing thrusters on their ships would actually save them money over the long term by greatly reducing their need to rely on assistance from tugs. The fleets decided to try the thrusters, despite outspoken opposition from most of their captains. The captains, who personally conned their ships when in maneuvering situations, preferred to follow the long-established practice of hiring tugs. In spite of the objections of the captains, Columbia and American pressed forward with their plans to try thrusters.

The first sea trials of a thruster-equipped ship were conducted aboard Columbia's *Sensibar* in 1961. The vessel was under the command of a young captain by the name of Ernest McSorley that season.[3] When the *Sensibar* left the American Ship Building yard in South Chicago after having the thruster installed, McSorley found that the new equipment greatly increased the ship's maneuverability at low speeds. The thruster was found to work best at speeds of less than three miles an hour. It was virtually ineffective if the vessel was moving at more than five miles an hour. Gradually, fleets on the lakes began to install thrusters on their ships. In 1965, thirty-six vessels had been equipped with bow thrusters, but by the end of the 1970s they were in almost universal usage. At the same time, tug business on the lakes declined in direct proportion to the number of ships equipped with thrusters.

Another design innovation that emerged on the lakes at about the same time the *Frankcliffe Hall* came out were the stern-enders, freighters with their pilothouses and all accommodations at their stern. Stern-enders became common in the ocean trades during the 1950s, rapidly replacing the three-island ships that had been used previously. People on the lakes weren't totally unfamiliar with stern-enders. A number of them had been built on the lakes over the years, but they had never caught on and were generally regarded as oddities.

There are a couple of possible explanations for why lakes sailors preferred to stick with the standard design that dated back to the *Hackett:* pilothouse and deck department accommodations forward, engine room and engine department accommodations aft.[4] The explanation heard most often is that having the pilothouse at the bow helped captains when they were docking or maneuvering their ships. If he were far forward on the ship, the captain had a better view of how far off a dock his ship was, and he could better gauge if the ship was closing at the appropriate speed.

An alternative explanation is that deck personnel simply didn't want to have to live with engine personnel! As a rule, people in the deck department don't have much use for people in the engine department, and vice versa. On traditional lakers, the two groups didn't come in contact with each other too often. In fact, they only had to mingle at mealtimes. During the rest of the day, people in the deck department stayed forward and engine room personnel stayed aft. It could easily be argued that the hostility that developed between the two departments

is largely the result of their being segregated by the design of the ships they served on. Nevertheless, many sailors on the Great Lakes would not have looked favorably on a ship design that would force deck and engine personnel to share the same living spaces. And since many officials in the fleet offices were former sailors, it is reasonable to assume that they would have shared the same bias. Their feelings might not have been openly expressed, but they could easily have influenced decisions about ship designs.

Despite the arguments in favor of sticking with the traditional pilothouse forward design, Misener Shipping of Canada placed an order for a stern-ender in 1961. The decision may have been influenced by the fact that the new ship was built at the Verolme Shipyard in Cork, Ireland, a yard with extensive experience in building stern-enders for ocean trades. They would undoubtedly have discussed with Misener officials the economic savings that could be generated by putting the pilothouse and all accommodations aft over the engine room. That would eliminate the need to run miles of electrical cable and many hundreds of feet of piping for heating, water, and sewage between the two ends of the ship. With no forward cabin to impede it, the cargo hold could also be extended a little farther forward, increasing the ship's carrying capacity and profits.

The new Misener freighter first went into the water at Cork on November 23, 1962, and was christened the *Silver Isle* to commemorate the ship's Irish heritage. It crossed the Atlantic in the spring of the following year and arrived at Seven Island, Quebec, for formal commissioning ceremonies on May 8, 1963. Shortly after, the 730-foot ship departed on its first voyage into the lakes. While ships on their maiden voyages are generally accorded whistle salutes by passing freighters, the *Silver Isle* was often greeted only by cold stares from crewmembers aboard traditional lakers. As if to lend credence to the argument that stern-enders were not well-suited to conditions on the lakes, the *Silver Isle* was involved in a minor mishap on the return leg of that first voyage. On June 9, while running in a rain squall, the new freighter collided with the Dutch motor-ship *Prin Alexander* near Carleton Island in the St. Lawrence. Neither ship sustained serious damage, but the fact that both of the vessels were stern-enders did not go unnoticed by sailors on traditional lakers.[5]

Despite objections, the stern-enders gained a foothold on the lakes. In 1973, the first stern-ender on the U.S. side of the lakes was launched. Built at American Ship Building in Lorain, Ohio, the 630-foot *William R. Roesch* joined the Kinsman Marine fleet. The Kinsman fleet and American Ship Building were then both owned by George Steinbrenner, who also owned the New York Yankees baseball team. The *Roesch* and a sister ship, the *Paul Thayer,* were river-class freighters designed specifically to operate on the Cuyahoga River at Cleveland. The choice of the stern-ender design for the two ships was clearly one of economics, always a factor of paramount interest to the tight-fisted Steinbrenner.

The successes of the *Silver Isle, Roesch,* and *Thayer* paved the way for acceptance of the stern-ender design by shipowners on the Great Lakes. All of the ships launched after 1973 have their pilothouses and all accommodations on their sterns. After more than a century, the Great Lakes shipping industry scuttled the design pioneered in 1869 by Eli Peck and his *R. J. Hackett*. While many traditional lakers like the *Frankcliffe Hall* still operate on the lakes today, they are the last of a line. When they reach the ends of their useful lives and their owners send them off to the shipbreakers, the ships that replace them will be stern-enders.[6]

Notes

1. The *Leecliffe Hall,* one of the thirteen 730s that shared Queen of the Lakes honors, had sunk in 1964.
2. Ship Biography, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
3. Later in his career, McSorley was captain of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* when it sank in 1975.
4. Additionally, sailors on the lakes are simply slow to accept change.
5. Ship Biography.
6. The *Frankcliffe Hall* was renamed the *Halifax* in 1988.