Queen of the Lakes

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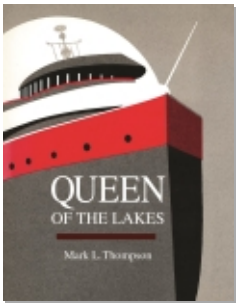

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One Era Ends, Another Begins

In 1965, Hall Corporation officials gathered at the Davie shipyard in Lauzon, Quebec, for the launching of a 730-class freighter that was two inches longer than their *Frankcliffe Hall.* Christened the *Lawrencecliffe Hall,* the new $8 million ship was then the longest vessel on the Great Lakes. Its launching marked the most significant watershed in the long history of steel ships that have been Queen of the Lakes. First, the *Frankcliffe Hall* was diesel-powered; every previous Queen of the Lakes had been driven by steam engines. Second, while those gathered at Lauzon for the ceremonies could not have known, the new Hall freighter would also be the last straight-decker to claim the honor of being the Queen of the Lakes.

M/V LAWRENCECLIFFE HALL[1]

730'4"x75'x39'2"
Queen of the Lakes
April 14, 1965 to April 1, 1972

The "Lawrence" in the ship's name honored the St. Lawrence River, a waterway that was of immense importance to the Hall Corporation and the other Canadian fleets. The "cliffe" suffix in the vessel's first name followed a naming scheme established previously for bulk freighters in the Hall fleet. Use of the unusual suffix had originated with Albert Hutchinson, who had been president and chairman of the board of the shipping company in the 1940s and 1950s. Hutchinson was a native of Ayecliffe, in the craggy northeastern region of England. Many communities in that area had names ending in -cliffe, and Hutchinson decided to attach the suffix to the names of ships in the Hall fleet.[2]

The revelry surrounding the launching of the new ship provided a badly-needed break for Hall officials, who were still mired in the legal quagmire resulting from the loss the previous September of the *Leecliffe Hall.* They hoped that the launching of the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* would mark a turning point for them. Perhaps they would now be able to devote their efforts to the future of their fleet, instead of being mired in the past.

The positive atmosphere pervading the Hall Corporation offices in the days after the launching of the new freighter was rocked on November 16, 1965, when they received the shocking news that the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* had been seriously damaged in a collision in the St. Lawrence. Off the Ile de'Orléans, fourteen miles downstream from Quebec City, the freighter had collided with an approaching saltwater ship when both vessels had strayed into the middle of the narrow channel. The *Lawrencecliffe Hall* was struck on her starboard side by the bow of the *Sunek,* ripping a long gash from bow to midships be-

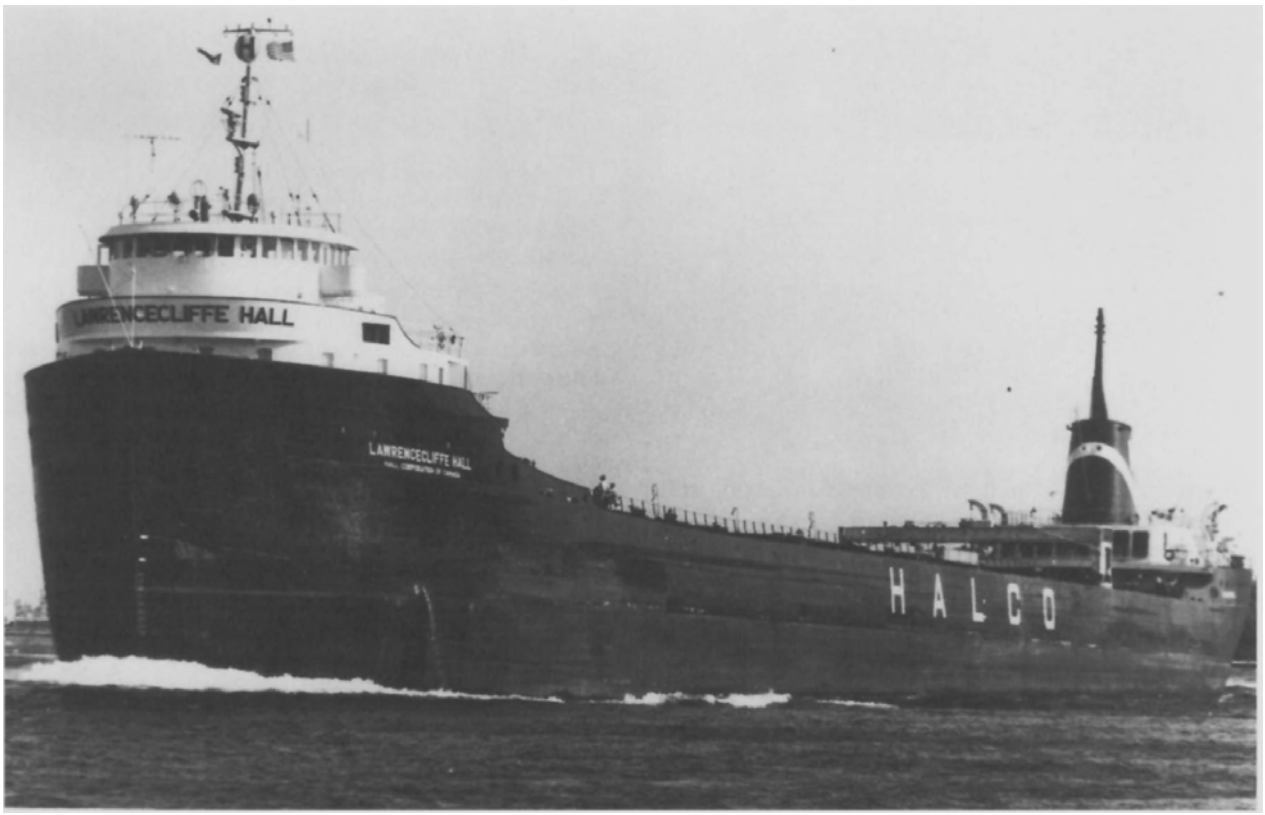
low the waterline. Aware that their ship had received a fatal injury, the crew of the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* attempted to beach the big freighter. They managed to ground the ship in shallow water, but the rising tide lifted her, and she floated away from the shore and began to sink. Her crew abandoned ship and watched helplessly as the seven-month-old freighter settled to the bottom on its starboard side in thirty feet of water. The *Sunek,* with her bow crumbled and both anchors torn away, returned to Quebec under her own power.[3]

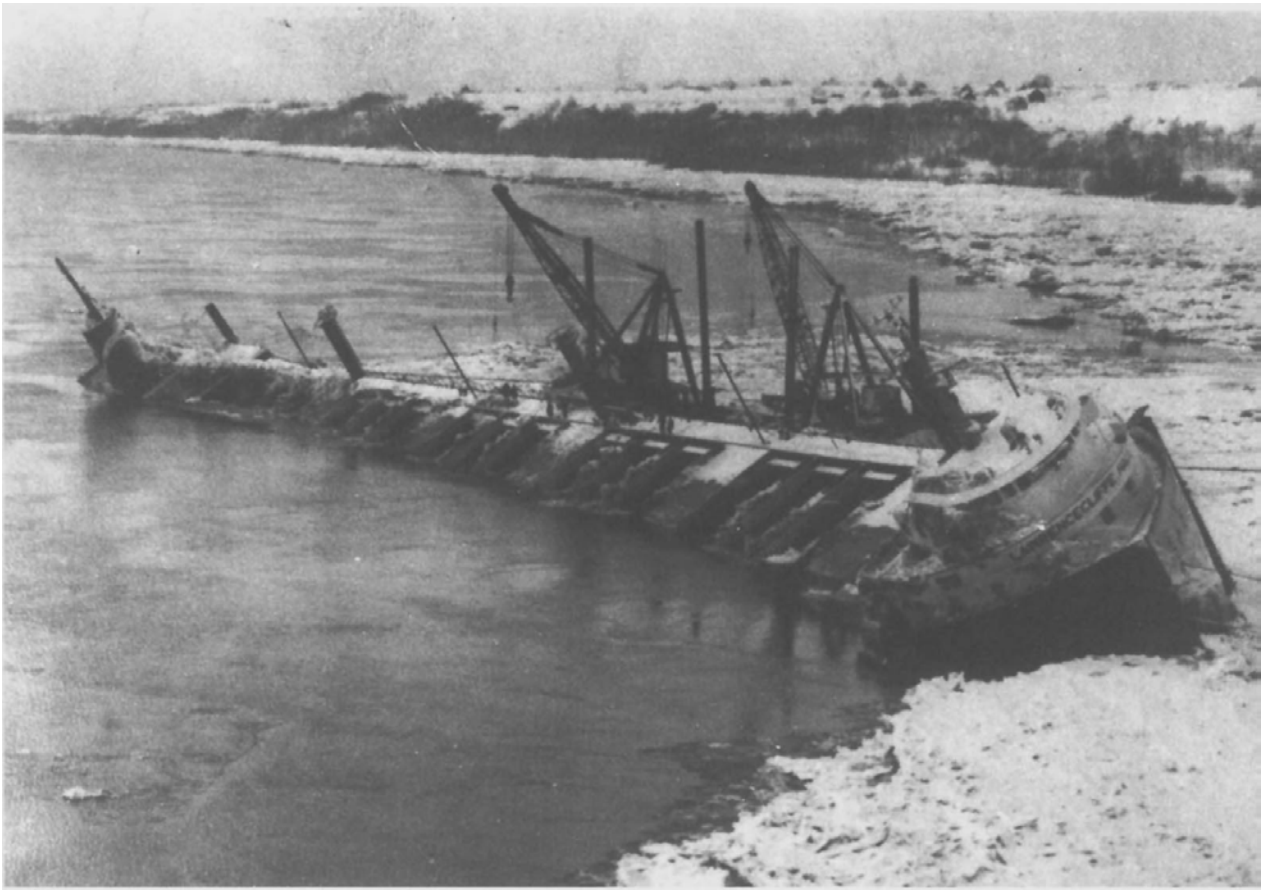
After a careful survey of the sunken hull, Hall executives decided to attempt to refloat the ship. The complex salvage effort involved divers putting a temporary patch on the long tear in the starboard side of the *Leecliffe Hall*. Because the ship was lying on its starboard side, the divers had to rig the patch from inside the hull. Working inside the hull of a sunken ship is always a dangerous undertaking, but salvage efforts on the Hall freighter were simplified by the fact that the ship was in relatively shallow water.

Once the patch was successfully rigged, twenty-seven electric submersible pumps were placed within the hull, and salvors began pumping water out of the sunken ship. After thousands of tons of water had been removed from the hull, the ship began to rise slowly out of the mud at the bottom of the St. Lawrence. A flotilla of tugs attached lines to the ship as it began to float clear of the bottom and managed to pull it into an upright position so that the deck of the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* was once again high and dry.

Stout hawsers were rigged from the wallowing hull to the

After unloading her cargo, the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* heads back up the lakes. As is the case with most ships in the Canadian fleet, the builders of the Hall freighter maximized her cubic capacity so that she could operate efficiently in the important grain trade between Lake Superior and elevators along the St. Lawrence Seaway. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University





The sunken hull of the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* being raised from the bottom of the St. Lawrence River. Launched in April of 1965, the Hall freighter sank on November 16 of that same year after being holed in a collision with a saltwater ship near Quebec City. Crews worked furiously to raise the Queen of the Lakes before the worsening winter weather made salvage impossible. Towed to a shipyard at nearby Lauzon, Quebec, the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* underwent extensive repairs before returning to service the following August. (Author's collection)

six tugs which would tow it the fifteen miles to the shipyard at Lauzon. By the time the tugs were ready to take the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* in tow, night had desccended on the St. Lawrence. Many of those involved in the salvage effort argued that they should wait until daylight to begin the tricky operation of moving the crippled freighter. Weather conditions were deteriorating, however, and the risks associated with attempting to maneuver the wrecked ship to the safety of the shipyard at Lauzon in darkness were outweighed by fear that the temporary patch might not hold if the ship was caught in a storm. With a powerful Canadian icebreaker in the lead, the flotilla of tugs began to move toward Lauzon. In retrospect, the decision proved to be a sound one. By the time storm clouds swept over the St. Lawrence, the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* had been safely drydocked at the Davie shipyard. By August of the 1966 shipping season, the necessary repairs had been made. Engineers once again lit off the *Lawrencecliffe Hall*'s diesels, and the Queen of the Lakes returned to its rightful place in the Great Lakes fleet.[4]

While the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* was the first diesel-powered Queen of the Lakes, there were already a number of motor vessels in the U.S. and Canadian fleets when the Hall freighter first took to the water at Lauzon. The first diesel ship on the

lakes was the *Toiler,* a 250-foot canaller built for James Playfair's fleet in 1910 at Newcastle, England, and brought into the lakes. While little is known about the *Toiler*'s rudimentary 400-horsepower engine, there is evidence to suggest that the experiment with diesel propulsion was not totally satisfactory. In 1914 the canaller's diesel was replaced with a more conventional steam plant.[5]

The first large ships on the lakes with diesel engines were the *Henry Ford II* and *Benson Ford*. The *Henry Ford II,* often referred to simply as the *Henry,* was the first freighter built for the Ford fleet, and its gala launching at the Lorain yard of American Ship Building in the summer of 1924 marked the giant automaker's entry into the Great Lakes shipping business. The first ship in the Ford fleet was powered by a 3,000-horsepower diesel engine, a reflection of Henry Ford's bias in favor of internal combustion engines. The second Ford freighter, the *Benson Ford,* was launched shortly after the *Henry* at Great Lakes Engineering Works on the Rouge River, within sight of the sprawling Ford steel mill and auto factory at Dearborn, Michigan. Both of the new ships were named for grandsons of Henry Ford, and the young boys played major roles in the launching festivities. There were only a handful of ships in the Great Lakes industry at that time larger than the 611-foot *Henry* and the 612-foot *Benson*. And by the standards of that era, their diesel engines were the most powerful propulsion systems in use. For example, the 625-foot *W. Grant Morden,* then the Queen of the Lakes, was driven by a more-conventional triple-expansion steam engine of only 2,000 horsepower. Even the most powerful steam engines in use in 1924 achieved a maximum of only about 2,600 horsepower. The landmark Ford motorships joined an industry that was at that time made up of 1,320 steamers and 75 sailing ships.[6]

Despite the success of the two Ford freighters, diesel engines didn't come into widespread use on the lakes until the 1960s. The shift from the use of steam turbines to diesel engines began north of the border with ships such as the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* that came out when the Canadian industry was retooling after the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. After the launching of the steamer *Edward L. Ryerson* in 1960, U.S. shipowners didn't build any new vessels until after the opening of the new Poe Lock at Sault Ste. Marie in 1971. All U.S. ships built since then, however, have been diesel-powered.

Not only was the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* the first Queen of the Lakes with a diesel engine. It also went into the record books as the last straight-decker to hold that title. All of the ships that have followed the Hall freighter as Queen of the Lakes have been self-unloaders. While the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* operates yet today as a classic straight-decker, it is part of an industry that relies almost totally on self-unloading ships in the iron ore, coal, and stone trades. Ships like the *Lawrencecliffe Hall* are now found almost solely in the grain trade, because most self-unloading systems are not well-suited to handling grain.

Iron ore, stone, and coal are the meat and potatoes of the U.S. shipping companies. Straight-deckers can no longer compete in those trades on the American side of the lakes. The need to operate and maintain shoreside unloading systems to service the straight-deckers proved to be too inefficient. Even more significantly, most of the ore, coal, and stone unloading ports at which today's ships call no longer have shoreside unloading systems. The Huletts and bridge cranes are either gone or have fallen into such disrepair that it would be too costly to put them back into service.

The situation is very different on the Canadian side of the lakes. The highly profitable grain trade is critical to most Canadian shipowners. While most U.S. grain is moved by railroads, or by barges operating on the Mississippi River, a relatively large percentage of Canadian grain is still shipped aboard lake freighters. From terminals in Duluth, Superior, and Thunder Bay, Canadian ships carry the grain to a score of elevators located along the St. Lawrence River in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The trade is made even more lucrative by the fact that many of the ships carrying grain out the Seaway return to the lakes with backhaul loads of iron ore mined in eastern Canada. While most Canadian coal and stone unloading docks are served by self-unloaders, shoreside unloading systems have been preserved at the largest of the Canadian steel mills,[7] which can still be served by straight-deckers.

Between 1972 and 1991, a total of thirty-two new ships were added to the Canadian fleet. Of those, fifteen were straight-deckers. That figure reflects the continuing importance of the grain trade to Canadian shipowners. At the same time, however, seventeen of the new ships, including the *Lawrencecliffe Hall,* were self-unloaders. Another five former straight-deckers were converted to self-unloaders during the same time frame. As the Canadian shipping industry sailed into the decade of the 1990s, a record forty-four percent of the fleet was made up of self-unloaders. In 1967, they had accounted for only seventeen percent.

It is obvious that under the influence of the compelling grain trade, straight-deckers will continue to play an important role in the Canadian fleet over the next several decades. At the same time, however, the tide is clearly turning. A growing number of Canadian self-unloaders are capable of carrying grain. Most of them are equipped with bucket-type elevator systems, as opposed to the more common loop belt elevators that cannot readily be used to unload grain. The biggest impediment to the use of self-unloaders in the grain trade today is

the inability of most terminals to handle grain discharged by them. We can expect to see more Canadian grain-unloading ports installing the equipment necessary to handle self-unloaders, although such a trend is likely to generate strong opposition from the unions representing scoopers at the terminals who now unload the straight-deckers.

They will be battling some hard economic realities. A shift to the use of self-unloading ships in the grain trade will significantly increase the versatility of the Canadian fleets. When they're not hauling grain, the vessels will be more competitive in the ore, stone, and coal trades. At the same time, it is likely that using self-unloaders will produce significant savings for grain shippers by reducing vessel turnaround time at the unloading ports, eliminating the need to maintain shoreside unloading systems and cutting personnel costs.

The change will be a traumatic one for many of those who are employed by the elevators to unload grain from straight-deckers. Many of their well-paying jobs would be eliminated by a shift to the use of self-unloaders. It will also be a difficult time for fleets that are now operating a large number of straight-deckers in the grain trade. Some may go out of business because they lack the financial resources needed to convert their ships to self-unloaders. Those are the hard economic realities, probably unavoidable realities, of a switch to the use of self-unloaders in the grain trade. But the economies that would result from the reliance on self-unloaders in the grain trade can be expected to steadily push the industry in that direction. Even on the Canadian side of the lakes, the straight-decker seems to be facing eventual extinction.

Notes

1. The abbreviation M/V denotes "motor vessel," the terminology used to identify a diesel-powered ship. Throughout the world maritime community, the designation M/S, for "motor ship," is also used, though the industry on the Great Lakes has shown a preference for M/V.
2. Tankers in the Hall fleet followed a different naming scheme. All of the tankers have two names, the second of which is always "transport."The fleet included the *Bay Transport, Cape Transport,* and *Fuel Transport,* among others.
3. *Telescope* 14, no. 12 (December 1965): 281.
4. *Telescope* 15, no. 4 (April 1966): 94.
5. *Telescope* 13, no. 7 (July 1964): 12.
6. Ernest S. Clowes, *Shipways to the Seas* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1929), 69.
7. The massive Stelco mill of the Steel Company of Canada, located in Hamilton, Ontario.