Queen of the Lakes

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Bulk freighters were a sound investment at the time the first standard 600-footers came out, especially those with high carrying capacities. While new ships like the *J. Pierpont Morgan* and *Edward Y. Townsend* were rated at more than 7,000 gross tons, the average for the more than five hundred vessels enrolled with the Lake Carriers' Association was only 3,714 gross tons. Most ships operated by fleets belonging to the association were about the size of the *Str. Victory*, which had been launched more than a decade earlier. It had a carrying capacity of less than 4,000 tons per trip, compared to more than 10,000 tons for the standard 600-footers like the *Morgan* and *Townsend*.

While the *Victory* could still be operated profitably, there were hundreds of ships around that survived only because there weren’t enough big freighters around to handle the tonnages that had to be moved on the lakes each year. The small ships were gradually being displaced by larger, more economical freighters, but the process was a slow one. Vessels like the *Morgan* and *Townsend* represented significant investments for their owners, each costing in excess of $400,000—$30–40 million in today’s inflated dollars. Even though owners of big ships could expect to realize handsome profits, the high cost of building a freighter limited the number of new ships that could be put into operation each year. In 1906, for example, forty new freighters had been launched on the lakes. They had an average per trip carrying capacity of over 9,000 tons, more than double that of most ships then operating. The forty ships built in 1906 could probably have displaced more than a hundred of the older, smaller vessels, except that growth in cargo tonnages allowed many of the small boats to survive on the fringes of the industry.

The early years of the twentieth century were a time of dramatic economic growth and prosperity in the United States. J. Pierpont Morgan formed U.S. Steel in 1901, the same year that huge oil deposits were found in Texas. In 1902, International Harvester was formed to manufacture farm machinery, Gustavus Swift and J. O. Armour opened their huge National Packing Company plant in Chicago, and J. C. Penney established a nationwide retail clothing chain. In 1903, Henry Ford produced the first Model A automobile in Detroit, and Orville and Wilbur Wright successfully flew their first airplane. Bethlehem Steel was formed in 1904, the same year that a drastic cut in steerage fares on steamboats operating between Europe and the U.S. made it possible for tens of thousands of badly needed workers to emigrate to the states. Construction of the Panama Canal began in 1905, linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In 1906, U.S. Steel created Gary, Indiana, as a new steelmaking center on lower Lake Michigan.

This unprecedented economic growth both helped and hindered the modernization of the bulk fleet on the Great
Lakes. While increased demand for iron ore, coal, stone, and grain made new ships a sound investment, the shipping industry had to compete for investment dollars with other business activities, many of which promised even higher profits. The availability of investment dollars could not keep pace with the opportunities for the construction and operation of efficient new ships. Most of the ships built during the period were owned by established Great Lakes shipping companies, but new fleets occasionally appeared on the scene.

In 1906, a group of investors formed the Weston Transit Company of North Tonawanda, New York. They immediately contracted for the construction of three ships that would displace the Townsend as the longest on the lakes. The first of the three giant freighters was launched at Chicago Ship Building on December 29, 1906. Christened the William B. Kerr, the new freighter was 605 feet, 9 inches in overall length, close to four feet longer than the Townsend. With a beam of sixty feet, the Kerr was also two feet wider than the early standard 600-footers. The new Weston freighter was measured at 7,769 gross tons, compared to 7,438 gross tons for the Townsend and 7,161 for the Morgan.

The new Queen of the Lakes went into service at the start of the 1907 shipping season. On June 1, 1907, a second Weston steamer was launched at American Ship Building’s yard in Lorain, Ohio. Virtually identical to the Kerr, the new freighter was launched in a downpour of rain and christened the Legrand S. deGraff. Exactly a month later, the Lorain shipyard launched the third of the new ships, named the William M. Mills in honor of the manager of the Weston fleet.

In appearance, the Kerr, Mills, and deGraff were very similar to the standard 600-footers. In the years since the launching of the R. J. Hackett in 1869, shipbuilders had experimented with many design innovations. In trying to improve on the design pioneered by the Hackett, they had built ships with engines amidship, flush sterns, no raised forecastle deck, a hatch between the bow and the forward deckhouse, and so on. With the design of the Morgan and the other standard 600-footers, builders had reverted to the basic design of Captain Eli Peck’s Hackett. The forward deckhouse sat atop a raised forecastle deck. The engine was placed at the stern, and there was a deckhouse on the stern deck, topped by the smokestack. The Kerr, Mills, deGraff, and most other freighters built between 1906 and 1973 followed that same design.

The three sisters operated in the familiar colors of the tin-stacker fleet for more than five decades. At the start of the 1966 shipping season, U.S. Steel sold the House to Kinsman Marine, the fleet owned and operated by the Steinbrenner family. Henry G. Steinbrenner personally selected the name for his new ship, choosing to call it the Kinsman Independent. The name signified that the Kinsman fleet was a family operation, one of the few shipping companies on the lakes not controlled by mining or steel interests. Kinsman Marine had a portion of the contract to supply iron ore to the Republic Steel mills on the upper Cuyahoga River at Cleveland. The fleet was also one of the last U.S. fleets actively involved in the grain trade between Duluth-Superior and Buffalo. The largest ship in the Kinsman fleet, the Independent participated in both the ore and grain trades.

The Kerr/House had a relatively uneventful career on the lakes for more than six decades, a remarkable feat given the fact that her early years predated radio communications, radar, and marine weather forecasts. Only once had she received any serious damage, that coming on September 1, 1908, when she was struck by the Str. Buffalo while lying at anchor in Duluth.
harbor. Even then, repairs had cost only $10,000. Luck seemed to leave her in her later years, however. On July 18, 1970, the Independent was loading ore at the Burlington Northern dock in Superior, Wisconsin, when the Filbert approached the same slip. Caught in the current that eddied at the end of the dock, the Filbert collided with her former sister ship. The repair bill for the Independent totalled $100,000, almost a quarter of her original cost and probably more than the sixty-four-year-old ship was worth at that time.

If the 1970 damage to the Independent had not been covered by U.S. Steel’s insurance, the old freighter’s career might have ended right then. She went on to operate for three more years, however. On August 21, 1973, the Independent developed steering problems while negotiating the West Neebish Channel of the St. Marys River—the “Rock Cut” that had been excavated after the infamous Houghton blockade of the Middle Neebish Channel in 1899. Miraculously, the Independent managed to make it through the narrow channel without colliding with the rock walls, but it ran aground just after clearing the cut. Having suffered substantial damage, the old ship was towed to Lorain, Ohio, and laid-up for a last time. Repair costs could not be justified, and the Kinsman Independent was sold for salvage the following year. She arrived in Santander, Spain, for scrapping on July 21, 1974, making her last voyage in a tandem tow with the Str. James Davidson. Scrapping operations began on October 1, 1974.

Approaching the end of seven decades of operations on the lakes, the Crawford and Filbert were declared excess by the U.S. Steel fleet in the mid-1970s. The Crawford went to the shipbreakers in 1975, followed the next year by the Filbert.

It is unlikely that the three ships attracted much attention during their final years on the lakes, except, perhaps, from the most avid of boatwatchers or a few aging sailors. The three freighters were relics of a bygone era. Where once people had lined the riverbanks to catch a glimpse of them, the Independent, Crawford, and Filbert now passed almost unnoticed. After 1972, the crowds along the riverbanks waited to see the Stewart J. Cort, the first of the thousand-footers that would dominate the industry on the Great Lakes in the future. The Cort was more than four hundred feet longer and forty-five feet wider than the three former Weston ships, and it could carry four times as much cargo per trip. As the three ships neared the ends of their long careers, it is unlikely that many remembered they had once been Queens of the Lakes.

Built in 1906 for Weston Transit Company, the William B. Kerr was sold to U.S. Steel in 1910 and renamed the Francis E. House. By the time the Kerr was launched, the designs used for freighters on the lakes had been all but standardized; the Kerr looked very much like the Townsend, Morgan, and Gary that preceded her. The basic design would remain standard on the lakes until the early 1970s. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)
Notes

2. The *Kerr* and the two identical Weston freighters launched in 1907 had keel lengths of 585 feet, five feet longer than that of the early standard 600-footers.