Queen of the Lakes

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William Penn Snyder, president of Shenango Furnace Company of Sharpsville, Pennsylvania, beamed with justifiable pride on Saturday, May 1, 1909, as he presided over the launching ceremonies for the newest ship in the growing Shenango fleet. The foundry company he headed was not the largest or best known in the iron and steel industry, and many of the six thousand people who had gathered to watch the launching had probably never heard of Shenango Furnace before. But Snyder felt the new ship that sat regally on the ways at Great Lakes Engineering Works' shipyard in Ecorse, Michigan, would clearly establish his firm as a leader in the Great Lakes shipping industry.

Snyder had hired special railroad cars and brought many of his friends and business associates the more than four hundred miles from the Pittsburgh area to share the historic moment with him. Next to Snyder on the raised platform that had been built directly in front of the bow of the new ship was Miss Sarah Chaplin of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, who was to have the honor of christening the new freighter. She, too, made the long train trip from Pittsburgh to Ecorse, bringing along twelve girlfriends to share the special moment with her.

The exuberant crowd of onlookers hushed when the signal was given to launch the ship. At the very instant that the massive vessel began its slide down the ways and into the water, Miss Chaplin raised a bottle of champagne wrapped in a silk American flag and swung it vigorously at the steel hull. Fearing that the bottle would not break, a common occurrence at launchings, Miss Chaplin had gripped the bottle with both hands and used every ounce of energy in her young body to smash it against the bow of the freighter. She accomplished her task admirably, except that when the bottom of the bottle shattered from the force of her blow, the frothy champagne spewed out and into her face—and into the face of William Penn Snyder. Temporarily blinded, neither the owner of the ship nor its young sponsor saw the vessel slide into the water. By the time they dried their eyes and regained their vision, the 606-foot Shenango rocked gently upon the waters of the launching slip as the immense crowd of onlookers boisterously cheered the newest Queen of the Lakes. Snyder graciously made light of the incident later at a luncheon he hosted aboard the Str. Wilpen, which had been tied up at the shipyard for the festivities.

The 579-foot Wilpen had been the second ship built for the Shenango Furnace fleet after Snyder had taken over the company in 1906. The first Shenango ship, a 552-foot freighter, Snyder had named after himself. The William P. Snyder had been launched at Ecorse in 1906, while the larger Wilpen came out of the same yard in 1907. Both were large, modern freighters, but smaller than some of their contemporaries. The little
they might have lacked in size, they more than made up for in the extraordinary craftsmanship that had gone into their construction.

By the time the $450,000 Shenango went into the water, the fleet had established a reputation as having some of the finest ships in operation on the Great Lakes. While many fleets cut every corner when they built new ships, turning out spartan, utilitarian vessels totally devoid of any hint of luxury, Snyder spared no expense on his ships. Vessels in the Shenango fleet had many frills that other fleets normally reserved only for their flagships. All of them had extravagant passenger quarters, providing accommodations as fine as could be found in any of the best hotels around the lakes. On the Wilpen, for example, guests who gathered for the luncheon following the launch of the Shenango were entertained by music played on the pipe organ installed in the passenger lounge. Several members of the Snyder family were proficient organists, and organs were included on two of the Shenango boats so they could entertain themselves and guests during their frequent trips aboard the freighters. The many added touches included on the Shenango vessels added significantly to their cost, but Snyder felt the extra outlays were justifiable. The boats projected an image of quality, just the kind of reputation that Snyder wanted to build for his company. To make sure that people would recognize his magnificent ships, Snyder departed from traditional painting schemes used for Great Lakes freighters—black or rust-red hulls—and had his ships painted a striking green.

STR. SHENANGO
606′x58′2″x33′
Queen of the Lakes
May 1, 1909 to July 1, 1911

While some Great Lakes shipowners were probably put off by what they would have considered the many unnecessary expenses that Snyder had borne in the construction of the Shenango boats, they would have at the same time been impressed by their carrying capacities. Measured at 8,047 gross tons, the Shenango could haul more than 12,000 tons of iron ore or an astonishing 488,000 bushels of wheat. It would take the total yield of 19,500 acres of wheat to fill the immense cargo hold of the Shenango. A freight train three miles long would be needed to move the wheat to the loading docks. Ground into
flour, a single cargo of wheat hauled by the big freighter would allow bakers to produce thirty million loaves of bread.1

It took two months after her launching for shipyard workers to finish fitting out the Shenango. She finally made her maiden voyage on the lakes in early July under the command of Andrew Peterson, fleet captain. Among those occupying the big freighter’s lavish passenger quarters on that first trip were Snyder; Harvey Brown of Cleveland, a well known vessel owner and general manager of Northwestern Transportation Company, the fleet founded more than thirty years earlier by Captain Eli Peck; the attorney for Shenango Furnace; and a Mr. Black, described as “the Pittsburgh steel man.” After loading ore at Duluth, the Shenango departed for Erie, Pennsylvania, where the ore would be carried overland by train to the Shenango foundry at Sharpsville.2

The record-breaking Shenango operated in the fleet’s eye-catching colors for almost fifty years. Her machinery underwent a major upgrading in 1952, when the original 1,900-horsepower triple-expansion steam engine was replaced by a 4,400-horsepower steam turbine. In 1957, the ship was sold to American Steamship Company. Renamed the B. W. Druckenmiller and with her hull repainted black, the former Queen of the Lakes was operated by Boland and Cornelius, managers of the American Steamship fleet.1

After fifty-five seasons on the lakes, the still serviceable freighter was purchased by Wilson Marine Transit in 1963 for $300,000. The new Wilson freighter was immediately sent to a shipyard for installation of automatic boiler controls and a bow thruster.3 Bow thrusters were a new development on the lakes, designed to aid the big ships in maneuvering at docks or in the narrow and winding river channels that they frequently had to negotiate. The bow thruster is a propeller set into a tunnel running transversely through the bow of the ship, just below the waterline. The thruster is driven by an electric motor powered by a diesel engine installed in the ship’s forepeak. When activated by controls in the pilothouse, the thruster can be used to push the bow of the ship to the left or right. The thrusters were intended to reduce the ships’ reliance on tugs when maneuvering in constricted waters. With a major contract to haul ore to the Republic Steel mills on the serpentine Cuyahoga River at Cleveland, Wilson was one of the first fleets on the lakes to install bow thrusters on their vessels.

Renamed the A. T. Lawson, the former Shenango freighter went into service for Wilson Transit at the start of the 1965 shipping season. She operated as part of the large Wilson fleet until 1972, although her ownership changed twice during that period. In 1967, the Wilson vessels were sold to Ingalls Ship Building of Pascagoula, Mississippi. In 1968, both the Wilson fleet and Ingalls Ship Building became part of Litton Industries, a diverse, multinational corporation. Litton had decided to make a major investment in shipping on the Great Lakes. In addition to their acquisition of Wilson Marine Transit, Litton announced plans to construct a modern shipyard at Erie, Pennsylvania. That yard would go into the record books a few years later when it turned out the first of the 1,000-foot ore carriers, the M/V Stewart J. Cort and the integrated tug-barge Presque Isle. Under Litton ownership, the ships continued to operate in Wilson colors, capped off by their familiar black stacks bearing the large, white block “W.”

The shipping industry on the lakes was not as profitable as Litton officials had thought it would be. After struggling financially for several seasons, the death knell of the Litton-owned Wilson fleet was sounded in 1970 when Republic Steel announced that after the 1971 season Cleveland-Cliffs would carry most of their ore. Industry insiders knew that without the lucrative Republic contract, it was unlikely that the Wilson fleet could continue operating. Wilson had grossed about $8.5 million during the 1969 shipping season. The Republic contract represented $5.5 million of that total, while shipments for Jones and Laughlin Steel (J&L) amounted to almost $2 million, and the balance of Wilson’s customers brought in another $1 million. To add insult to injury, Litton soon found out that they had lost the J&L contract to Pickands Mother’s Interlake Steamship Company.

Cleveland-Cliffs, knowing that they would need to augment their fleet in order to handle the giant Republic contract—the largest ever awarded to a Great Lakes shipping company—made a proposal to buy the Wilson fleet. Litton officials rejected the offer. We have no way of knowing whether that decision was based on an optimistic belief that they would be able to pick up additional contracts to offset the loss of the Republic tonnage, or whether it was merely a “sour grapes” reaction to having been bested by Cliffs in bidding for the Republic contract. Regardless, it proved to be a poor business decision. Officials at Cleveland-Cliffs immediately negotiated to buy two ships from Interlake.

It didn’t take the officials at Litton long to realize that they had made a serious error in rejecting the offer from Cliffs.
By that time, however, Cliffs had reached agreement to purchase two large ships from Interlake, and they were no longer interested in the Wilson boats. With Litton’s marine operations tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, a group of long-time Wilson employees attempted to purchase the fleet. Their offer was summarily rejected.

On August 15, 1972, after negotiations that had spanned more than twelve months, Litton agreed to sell the Wilson fleet to George Steinbrenner’s American Ship Building Company for $4,300,000. The Wilson boats would become part of Steinbrenner’s Kinsman Marine Transit, a wholly-owned subsidiary of AmShip. The Lawson and the other Wilson vessels went into service as part of the Kinsman fleet in 1972.

Throughout much of the period during which Steinbrenner was negotiating with Litton for the purchase of the Wilson fleet, there had been rumors that if the sale was consummated the U.S. Department of Justice would bring an anti-trust action against American Ship Building. Other Great Lakes shipyards strongly objected to the potential sale, arguing that control of the Wilson fleet by AmShip would cost them business. They knew that it was unlikely they would ever see another Wilson ship in their yards if ownership of the fleet passed to American Ship Building. The ink on the contract between Litton and AmShip had barely dried before the federal government intervened.

Under threat of an anti-trust suit that might totally set aside the purchase of the Wilson boats, Steinbrenner acquiesced in 1974 to Department of Justice demands that he reduce the size of his fleet. Under terms of the agreement, Steinbrenner would sell three of the former Wilson ships, sell or scrap six others, and operate a total of not more than twenty vessels. As a result of the agreement, the Lawson was sold in 1974 to S&E Shipping. Interestingly, Steinbrenner was a major owner of S&E, and the S&E vessels were managed by Kinsman personnel, as they are yet today.

In 1975, the Lawson was purchased by Roech Transports, a Canadian shipowner. Renamed the George G. Henderson, it went into service in the Canadian grain trade, managed by Soo River Company. In 1978, the freighter was rechristened as the Howard F. Andrews. In 1982, the seventy-three-year-old freighter was purchased by P&H Shipping, another Canadian fleet, and renamed Elmglen. After two more seasons in the grain trade, operating primarily between Thunder Bay, Ontario, and ports on the upper St. Lawrence River, the tired old ship was finally sent to the boneyard at Port Maitland, Ontario. Shipbreakers began cutting up the former Queen of the Lakes on November 1, 1984.

The Great Lakes shipping industry had changed dramatically during the long career of the Shenango. When the giant ore boat first went into service, it was part of a U.S. fleet on the lakes that totalled 597 ships. Like the Shenango, all but a handful of the freighters were straight-deckers that needed to be unloaded by shoreside equipment. As shipbreakers turned the Shenango into a pile of scrap metal, the U.S. fleet had shrunk to only 113 ships. Of those, fully 65 were self-unloading freighters—only 39 were traditional straight-deckers, and most of those were slated to follow the Shenango to the shipbreakers over the next few years. Included among the self-unloaders were 13 gigantic thousand-footers with carrying capacities of around 60,000 gross tons each, more than four times the capacity of ships like the Shenango.

Once the Queen of the Lakes and the pride of the Shenango fleet, the old freighter had weathered more than seven decades, travelled hundreds of thousands of miles, and carried millions of tons of iron ore and grain. Few of the newest, most modern freighters would ever achieve such a record. She made an incalculable contribution to the growth and development of North America and, in the end, the Elmglen, née Shenango, could go to the shipbreakers with the same pride that she had when she first slid down the ways.

Notes

5. Ibid., 323-37.
7. 1907 Annual Report (Cleveland: Lake Carriers’ Association, 1908), 94.