Preface

Because I grew up in a small port community on the northern shores of Lake Huron, some of my earliest memories are of the lake freighters. From the bathing beach where I spent most of my summer days, I regularly saw the long ships passing across the horizon or steaming in and out of the Port of Calcite, which was just down the shore. To a small boy, the freighters were a source of fascination and mystery.

Being totally unfamiliar with Archimedes' Law, I was amazed that the massive ships could float. After all, steel doesn't float, nor does stone, so a steel ship full of stone shouldn't either! (Even understanding Archimedes' Law, I still find it miraculous that the huge freighters float.)

What went on aboard the freighters was also a complete mystery to me as a child. From my vantage point on the beach, the ships were nothing more than hulls and superstructures. I had no concept whatsoever of their inner complexities, or what crewmembers did aboard them. My friends and I were sure that crewmembers spent a lot of their time swimming during the hot summer months, as we did, and presumed that they also fished on nice days, trolling for whitefish or lake trout off the fantail. A constant point of debate was whether crewmembers water-skied behind the boats. We never saw anyone skiing along behind a freighter, but it just made sense that they would.

The time I have spent aboard freighters in the ensuing years has removed many of the mysteries about the ships, but none of my fascination with them. It is always a thrill to go aboard, and I will still drive miles out of my way merely to watch boats in the rivers or at ports around the lakes.

In my travels, I have come across hundreds of people from all walks of life who share my fascination with ships—people hungry for information about the boats and the maritime industry on the Great Lakes. Since I would rather talk boats than eat (and I am a prodigious eater), I have always enjoyed sharing my knowledge with other boatwatchers.

While working as an administrator at the Great Lakes Maritime Academy several years ago, I developed an introductory course about the industry for new cadets, each of whom had an insatiable appetite for information about the shipping industry on the lakes. In the course I tried to present a general overview of the industry, including information on the evolution of bulk freighters, crews, ports, cargoes, loading and unloading equipment, and so on. My lecture notes for that course eventually evolved into this book.

In writing Steamboats and Sailors, my goal has been to remove some of the mysteries about the ships and the industry, providing readers with the factual information necessary to arrive at a basic understanding of the Great Lakes shipping industry. It is not a definitive work on the industry, but I have tried to answer the questions that have been asked most often over the years by people who share, at least to some degree, my ongoing fascination with the boats.

There are many people around the lakes far more qualified to write a book about the industry than I am. On every topic I have covered, it has become
clear to me how much I don’t know. Nonetheless, I
think readers will find that I have been able to deal
adequately, if not always expertly, with each topic.
After all, expertise is relative, and I know that there
are many people with an interest in the industry
who have far less knowledge about it than I do. It is
for them, the boatwatchers and armchair captains,
that this book is written.

For those who know more about the industry than
I do, I hope they will accept *Steamboats and Sailors*
in the spirit in which it was written: As a testimony
to the sailors and ships that have played such pivotal
roles in the development of North America, and in
my life.

Most of all, I hope that readers enjoy the book, and
that it contributes to their enjoyment and apprecia-
tion of the Great Lakes maritime industry.

Over the years, many people have contributed to
the writing of this book, but none more than my fam-
ily. My father, a former Great Lakes sailor and for
many years a dock foreman at Presque Isle Corpora-
tion—the Port of Stoneport—loved the boats, and
some of his fascination with the shipping industry
rubbed off on me at an early age. My interest in writ-
ing was always encouraged by my mother, whose un-
wavering love and support has also helped steer me
through some stormy seas. The rest of the Thompson
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this endeavor.

Betty and Jim Wilson have always run the best
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and good friend for more than twenty years. He is an
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men” I’ve ever shipped with.

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