



Meet the Crew

JACK CALLAHAN

Captain Callahan persists through the storms of life, career

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

The steamer *Kaye E. Barker* is on the run in Lake Michigan, the crew enjoying a rare full day's sailing time as the ship heads from Toledo, Ohio to Muskegon, Michigan with steam plant coal. The *Barker* is a working ship, a real "tramp" in a sailor's parlance. By the end of a week's time, the *Kaye Barker* will have loaded or unloaded at half a dozen ports on Lakes Superior, Erie, Huron and Michigan. While the work is hard and the hours often long and disconnected, the crew is proud of its ship and their work.

In command of the *Kaye Barker* is Captain Jack Callahan. For Jack, the *Kaye* is a special ship. In 1996, he enjoyed his first job as a relief captain on the *Kaye*, and this spring, he was appointed as the ship's permanent captain.

In Jack's estimation, he feels fortunate to have the opportunity to serve as captain. In 2004 he was diagnosed with cancer, making his future on the Lakes as uncertain as the coming day's weather.

As a mariner, Jack has endured the hardships known to this line of work. Hardships that often reflect the ambiguities that occur between mind and soul of a person and his environment. Sailing is as much a psychological pursuit as it is a vocation; long stretches of time away from home are expected and dealt with. Yet, for even the most hardened individual, the loneliness and isolation can have an impact. Sailing has been aptly described as a career akin to being a lifetime prisoner, with benefits. Following his diagnosis with cancer, this all seems suddenly so insignificant.

As a young man, Jack started out as a deckhand on the Bob Lo Island ferries before taking a position with the Ford Motor Company fleet in the summer of 1965. Jack soon left the Lakes to pursue work in the greater Detroit area, only to return to Ford the following year. This time he lasted longer, working on the *Henry Ford II* until he quit again in 1968. The broader need to live and work within a larger society was a major factor in this decision.

For Jack, sailing was a part of the fam-

ily fabric. His father, sailing as a wheelsman on the Great Lakes, was seldom home. As one of 12 kids growing up in the Callahan home in Detroit, Michigan, Jack learned to be resourceful at an early age. Yet it was no surprise that he would turn to something familiar for his livelihood, sailing. At one point or another, during the decades of the 1960s and '70s, five of the Callahan boys, including Jack, sailed. On his father's side of the family, Jack also had an uncle who sailed his entire career on the same ship, beginning in 1933, and ending some 30 years later, on the *Benson Ford*.

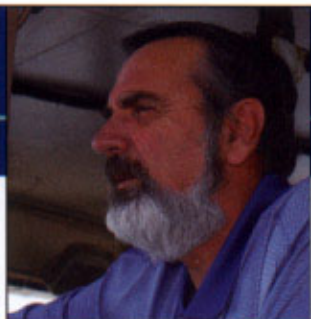
Jack's return to sailing from his self-imposed hiatus came unexpectedly in the spring of 1973, while working construction on a new, 10 story-building along the Detroit River.

"The elevator was broken so I was hauling everything up and down 10 flights of stairs," he said. "I was looking out over the river and along came the old steamer *Sylvania*, puffing past me. I quit that day and packed out the next day on the *Henry Ford II*."

In 1977 Jack stood his first watch as a licensed officer. "I started the day as a wheelsman on the four-to-eight watch and finished that evening as the 3rd Mate on the eight-to-12 watch," he recalled.

During the next seven years, Jack worked as a mate on all of the ships in the Ford fleet. Over the winter of 1988-89, he successfully wrote his master's license. With many of the Ford captains aiming for retirement, Jack looked forward to the coming season with the anticipation of earning a top spot within a few years. His hopes for a captain's spot were soon dashed when Ford sold the fleet in 1989 to the Interlake Steamship Company, of Cleveland. For Jack, it was a bump back to a 3rd Mate's job at the bottom of the seniority list, and the beginning of another long climb.

It took some time, but Jack was able to work his way up, finally gaining status as a relief captain in 1997, starting on the *Kaye E. Barker*, and from there winding his way among all of the Interlake steamers, as well as some hands-on training



Captain
Jack Callahan

aboard the 1,000-footer *Mesabi Miner*. With his career back on track, Jack was ready to take the next step, a permanent captain's job. But, before he could do that, he would face the ultimate challenge of his life—his battle with cancer.

In 2004 Jack was diagnosed with bladder cancer and took immediate steps to combat the disease. His ordeal would prove to be difficult, with the cancer returning several times over the next two years. In spite of the setbacks, Jack remained optimistic, even following a third bout with the cancer. Unwilling to give in, Jack continued to sail as his health permitted.

As he prepared for the start of the 2007 shipping season all indications from his doctor pointed to the successful removal of the cancer. Just to be certain, there would be yet another set of tests. The timing of the tests coincided with a call from the Interlake office, asking Jack if he would accept a permanent captain's position aboard the *Kaye E. Barker*. Jack heartily accepted the offer, continuing to feel optimistic about the future. He was further buoyed that winter with the birth of his first great-granddaughter, born on his birthday.

Hoping to hear good news from his doctor, Jack delayed joining his ship until after fit-out. In early May there was still no news, so he headed to Sault Ste. Marie to take the ship from the relief captain with some lingering uncertainty. After climbing aboard in the Poe Lock, Jack made one of the longest walks of his career up the deck to his office before heading to the pilot house. As he entered the room his phone was ringing. The call he had been waiting months for had arrived; the doctor finally had the results.

"He told me I was completely cancer free," beamed Jack. "It was the greatest news I could have gotten and what perfect timing, just as I was about to take the ship out of the lock."

The 2007 sailing season will always be a special one for Captain Callahan. No matter what comes his way, he knows how fortunate he is to have his health, his family and his career. ■