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MORE VOICES FROM THE LAKES Narrative of a trip on the steamer LEE A. TREGURTHA

By Patrick Lapinski, Robbinsdale, Minn. (Copyright, 1994)

"The leaving and coming is very important. You have to be able to leave and cut yourself loose from your real life. There's an old saying, 'One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead,' and I always find that a curious expression."

Steve Meyers, AB Watchman

The evening sky begins to darken as the day heads toward night. High above the stars slowly emerge filling the sky with their familiar patterns. The large low shape of Isle Royale slips away behind us, its outline defined darkly against the horizon.

As we sail deeper into the heart of Lake Superior, shafts of green light race diagonally into the sky. As their intensity grows, the luminous lines pulsate and fade in a quickening rhythm. I sit silently on deck, taking it all in, knowing that the magic of the northern lights can disappear in an

instant.

Tonight the aurora would last for hours, settling into a graceful arc stretching across Superior's horizon. The grandeur that is Lake Superior can be invoked in many ways. The trick is to leave yourself open to all the possible forms in which it can manifest itself. The northern lights are undeniably my favorite. The serene beauty in which I find myself has the ability to overpower the senses. I am juxtaposed between two worlds: one of grace and beauty, and one of industry and power.

Two decks above me an array of electronic equipment fills a room with their iridescent glows. I'm being propelled across Lake Superior on the LEE A. TREGURTHA, longest steamship on the Great Lakes. The stars above are supplanted here by the consoles of modern navigation. The fathometer shows nothing underneath

us, the radar shows nothing ahead. A small green blip on the screen represents a vessel that trailed us out of Duluth, several hours behind. The blackness outside reveals nothing to the eye. I find myself transfixed between two distinct worlds. Five steps in either direction will take me from one to the other. It is sometimes the paradox of sailing as I've come to find it on the Great Lakes.

Much of what we read and hear about Great Lakes shipping comes to us in the form of historical fiction, centered primarily around the popular topic of shipwrecks and disasters. These stories are full of irony, tinged with tragedy. The role and lifestyles of Great Lakes sailors are portrayed in these stories in a predominantly historical context.

This historical venue is an integral part of the region's maritime community, yet it somehow uniquely overshadows the fact that this is still a healthy, strong working industry. Sailing is a living tradition on the lakes in which today's living becomes tomorrow's history.

The steamer LEE A. TREGURTHA is a part of this living Great Lakes maritime tradition. Like so many vessels on the lakes today the TREGURTHA blends a dual role of

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TREGURTHA loads taconite pellets at Duluth's Missabe ore docks while writer settles in.

Author's photo

MEETING NOTES

Jan. 11 (Wed.)—7 p.m.

Entertainment Meeting; Bob and Ardys Hagman speaking about Log Rafting on Lake Superior. An illustrated talk you won't want to miss!

Feb. 7 (Tues.)—Noon Board Meeting.

Mar. 9 (Wed.)—7 p.m.

Entertainment Meeting; Patrick Lapinski talks about traveling as a guest on several lake freighters.

Apr. 4 (Tues.)—Noon Board Meeting.

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active freighter with the historical footnotes which cover its shipping career. The vessel was launched in 1942 as the oil tanker CHIWAWA, but did not begin her Great Lakes career until 1961. At that time the vessel was converted to use on the lakes for the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company as the steamer WALTER A. STERLING. The STERLING was sold in the 1980's to the Ford Motor Company for service as the WILLIAM CLAY FORD until purchased by the Interlake Steamship Company under a buyout of the Ford fleet. The most recent change of ownership brought the vessel its present name, the LEE A. TREGURTHA.

I joined the TREGURTHA after they had shifted over to the Duluth ore docks during the early morning hours following a short visit to Superior's Fraser Shipyard for some scheduled

maintenance. A thick fog which covered the harbor overnight quickly evaporated with the arrival of the morning sun.

On deck the mate stands with a radio in one hand and the ship's loading logbook in the other, one foot perched high on a stack of hatchcovers. He looks upward to a small figure on the top of the dock as he talks. A few more cars of pellets and the TREGURTHA can head back down the lakes. As the mate concludes the loading process the deck crew is busy preparing the vessel to leave the dock. The passage down the St. Louis River from the ore docks will take about a half hour before reaching the Duluth piers. The activity level has stepped up a notch on the TREGURTHA.

"Early in the year I talk to the fellows and tell them we have three objectives," explains the LEE'S captain, Jim Nuzzo. "To not hit anything on top of or below the water is our first

objective. Number two, to load the boat in a safe and efficient manner and then to unload it in a safe and efficient manner. As long as we can accomplish those three tasks we really won't be in a lot of trouble with our company objectives."

This will be the twenty-second trip of the season for the LEE. This is roughly one-fourth of the total assignments the vessel will handle during an average year. With the trip there comes a sense of appreciation of what it takes to push a boat this size day in and day out up and down the lakes.

"Duluth can be a lot of fun. You're going through there and you're saluting people...it's a big highlight for them."

Bob Thibadeau, First Mate

Our early morning departure on a weekday makes for a sparse crowd at Duluth's popular Canal Park. The sleek rust colored hull glides quickly into the canal separating the harbor from Lake Superior. The TREGURTHA'S deep steam whistle reverberates off the aft boom housing as the pilot house crew sounds the traditional and expected master's salute.

First Mate Bob Thibadeau describes the reaction of the pilot house crew to one of the most popular tourist/boatwatching sites on the lakes.

"It's nice to see people appreciate the Great Lakes, and people do have an interest in the Great Lakes. When they've gone through that museum and all of a sudden they see a vessel coming through the lift bridge it makes it more enjoyable to them. It's nice for us to see a lot of people out there when we blow a salute...to see the reaction of the people. It's fun to see."

A young mother holds up her baby's hand to wave a final farewell as the mate rings the engine room to open up the throttles for the lake. Just past the outer piers the TREGURTHA slashes to the right as a course is laid in for the passage across Lake Superior. The omnipresent forces of nature which seem to possess Lake Superior at will are nowhere to be found as we head downbound from Duluth. The protective north and south shorelines which funnel the lake toward Duluth-Superior fan out to the east, separating water and sky with lush strips of green.

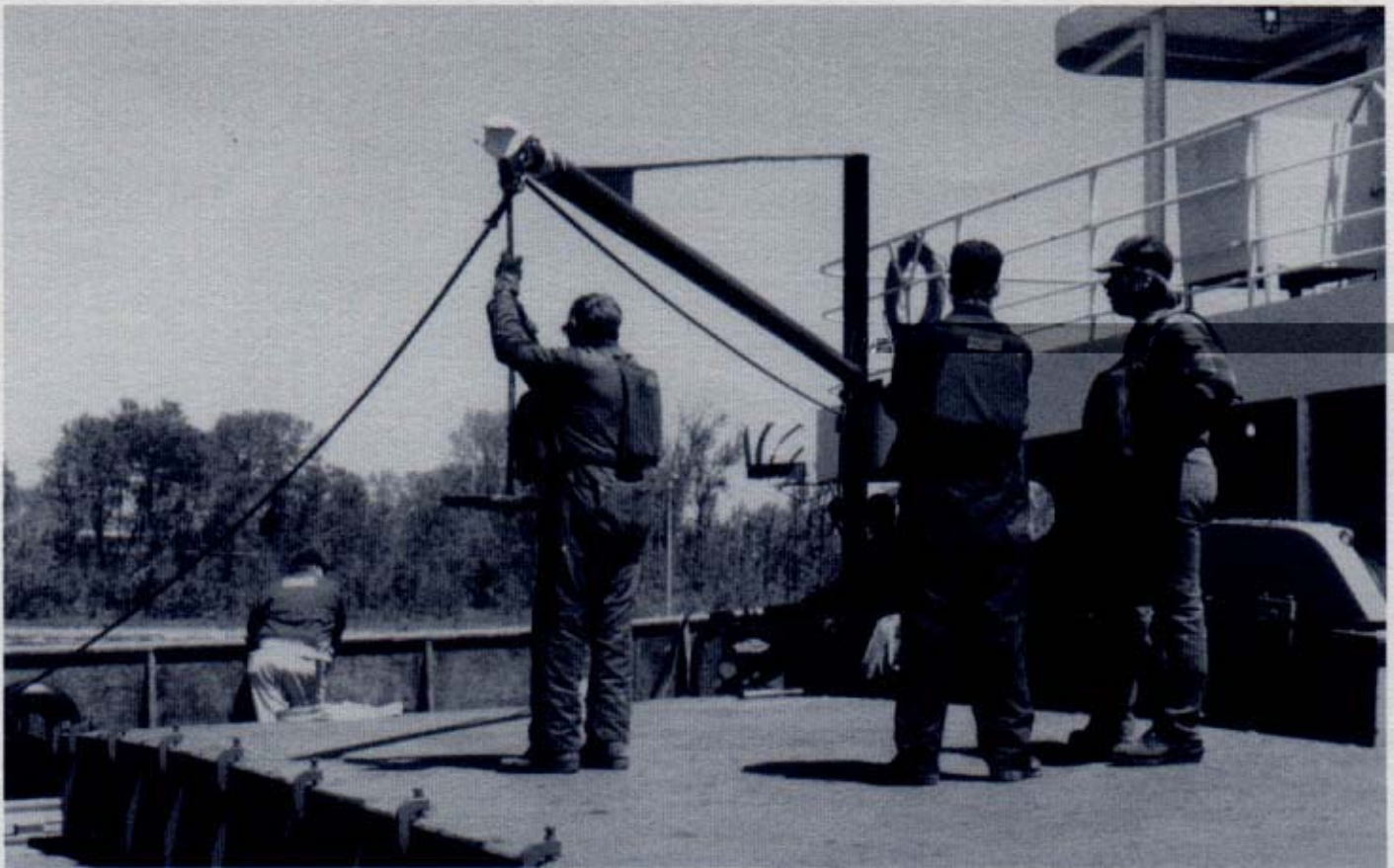
Passing upbound the cream colored cement carrier ALPENA is one of only two vessels the TREGURTHA will pass during the next 24 hours enroute to the Soo. The downsizing and restructuring of the lake fleets has led to dramatic reductions in the number of vessels plying the open waters during the past two decades.

All of the hectic activity associated with the departure has disappeared. The thundering boom of hatch covers



First Mate Bob Thibadeau enjoys visiting the Twin Ports.

Author's photo



Crewmen ready bosun's chair to put a line-handler over the side of the Soo Locks.

Author's photo

closing has retreated behind us, trailing off like the unanswered queries hailed from the breakwall at Canal Park. A quiet, reflective calm has replaced all these, accented with the fresh rushing sound of water being pushed away underneath the bow.

During the course of the trip AB Watchman Steve Meyers, a native of New York City, tried to explain the nature of being a sailor on the Great Lakes for nine months out of the year, while trying to simultaneously maintain the connections ashore.

"Most people don't refer to this as their real life, even though they spend most of their time on a boat, because they have wives and children. The things that they own, all those things, are somewhere else. So they look at this as a form of making a living. Yet there are a lot of people that actually enjoy being out here," Steve conceded. "They sacrifice all the alternatives to be out here."

"Sailing is interesting...a lot of the information that we use here is not picked up through books, it's passed on and it always has been. It's the individuals ability to get along with the people that have that knowledge, and receive that knowledge from them somehow that's probably going to be a big part of their success."

Jim Nuzzo, Captain

It's been nearly 24 hours since the TREGURTHA left the shelter of the ore docks. We've cleared Lake Superior and are well within the confines of Whitefish Bay. A gentleman's wager is laid out between the mate on duty and his wheelsman. At odds is whether the TREGURTHA will lose an hour at the Soo to wait for the Two Harbors-bound EDWIN H. GOTT. Before the turn at Iroquois Light at the bottom of Whitefish, the GOTT is assured of locking through ahead of us, quickly settling the bet.

The approach to the locks at Sault Ste. Marie has slowed to a crawl as we await the transit of the upbound 1,000-footer. The deck crew has readied the TREGURTHA to make dock as the break wall draws closer. The whine of the winches forward and aft has ended with the cables inched out along the deck. Up forward the bosun's chair is swung out and lashed to a hatch cover while the deckhands find a comfortable seat atop their lifejackets to join in the waiting.

For deckhands Dave Greig and Steve Chapates it's become a familiar routine. One of the main duties of a deckhand is to tie up the boat when arriving at a dock. This is Steve's first year of sailing, while Dave is out for only his second season. Both come from families with sailing experience on the lakes but Dave and Steve are

finding this doesn't account for much when it comes to working long hard days. Life on the lakes as a deckhand is a very physical job, one of the most strenuous on the boats.

In the long run Steve plans to attend the Great Lakes Maritime Academy to study engineering. The experience he's gaining now will help keep him focused on his goals when he returns to shore. Dave's approach is to stay on deck and work his way up the ranks, or "through the hawsepipe" as it is called. It's a route that the majority of people on the lakes have travelled. In recent years the traditional method of being a hawsepiper, as opposed to coming in through the academy, is beginning to even out. Technological demands on the industry is making schooling more advantageous to many newcomers.

Throughout the trip the captain allows the young deckhands to come up to the pilot house when they're off work. Any evening watch on the lakes can be a learning experience. Captain Nuzzo realizes the benefits of nurturing the enthusiasm of the young men. It's an opportunity to broaden their horizons beyond the daily physical labor. The aspects of wheeling, piloting and navigation are worked into the conversation on a given night.

This season each of the deckhands have had a chance to wheel the boat.

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Steve laughed when recalling his first time at the wheel. "You kind of have a sense of God-like control of the boat. If you want to you can just keep the boat going round and round in a circle. It's almost like you control the destiny of where the boat's gonna go!"

Shortly past two o'clock the TREGURTHA is finally through the Poe lock. The captain rings for more power on the pilothouse chadburn. In the engine room below an engineer steps forward to the throttle deck in response to the command. An intake vent blows a wind tunnel volume of air across his face, his hair flying back, giving the authentic appearance of sailing before the mast. The TREGURTHA slowly begins to move forward out of the lock to continue on its never ending journey.

Transiting the locks is a busy time on the vessel, requiring the efforts of nearly everyone on board. Separated by the entire length of the ship, as well as several layers of deck, the well-orchestrated lines of communication, fore and aft, run smoothly.

My knowledge of how the engine room works never seems to expand beyond the basics. If anything, I've learned to simplify the entire system. There are engines which power the boat. In the case of the LEE it's a steam turbine. There are smaller engines which provide the ship's "hotel" electrical power as well as power to other machinery within the boat. In addition, the engine room pumps water.

On a laker, when you're loading you're pumping water out, when you're unloading you're pumping water in.

Chief Engineer Steve Frazier has been sailing on the lakes since 1951. In that span of time he's seen some big changes in how the boats are operated. "I can remember being on one of those coal fired boats when I was a Third Assistant," recalled the Chief. "I think we shipped 78 firemen in one month because it was a killer job. It was a self-unloading, hand-fired, coal burning ship. It burned just as much coal at the dock unloading as it did running full speed out in the open lake." Steve shook his head as he concluded, "It was a tough job."

My limited ability to comprehend the intricate working of the engines is made up for with my fascination at all the myriad meters, gauges and lights found below. Chief Frazier patiently tried to explain to me the basics about the TREGURTHA'S steam plant. "This is the longest steamship on the Great Lakes! She has a 7,700 horse Bethlehem Steam turbine. She'll run along empty at about 16 to 17 miles an hour, around 15 miles an hour loaded. Very efficient for a steam plant."

Proportional to the size of the vessel and its immense cargo, the laker's fuel consumption rivals tales of Paul Bunyan. "Running at full speed we run about 600 gallons an hour of Bunker C fuel," continued Steve. "We'll make a round trip from Detroit to Duluth and we burn approximately 52,000 gallons of fuel. We carry approximately 28,000

tons of iron ore in the process."

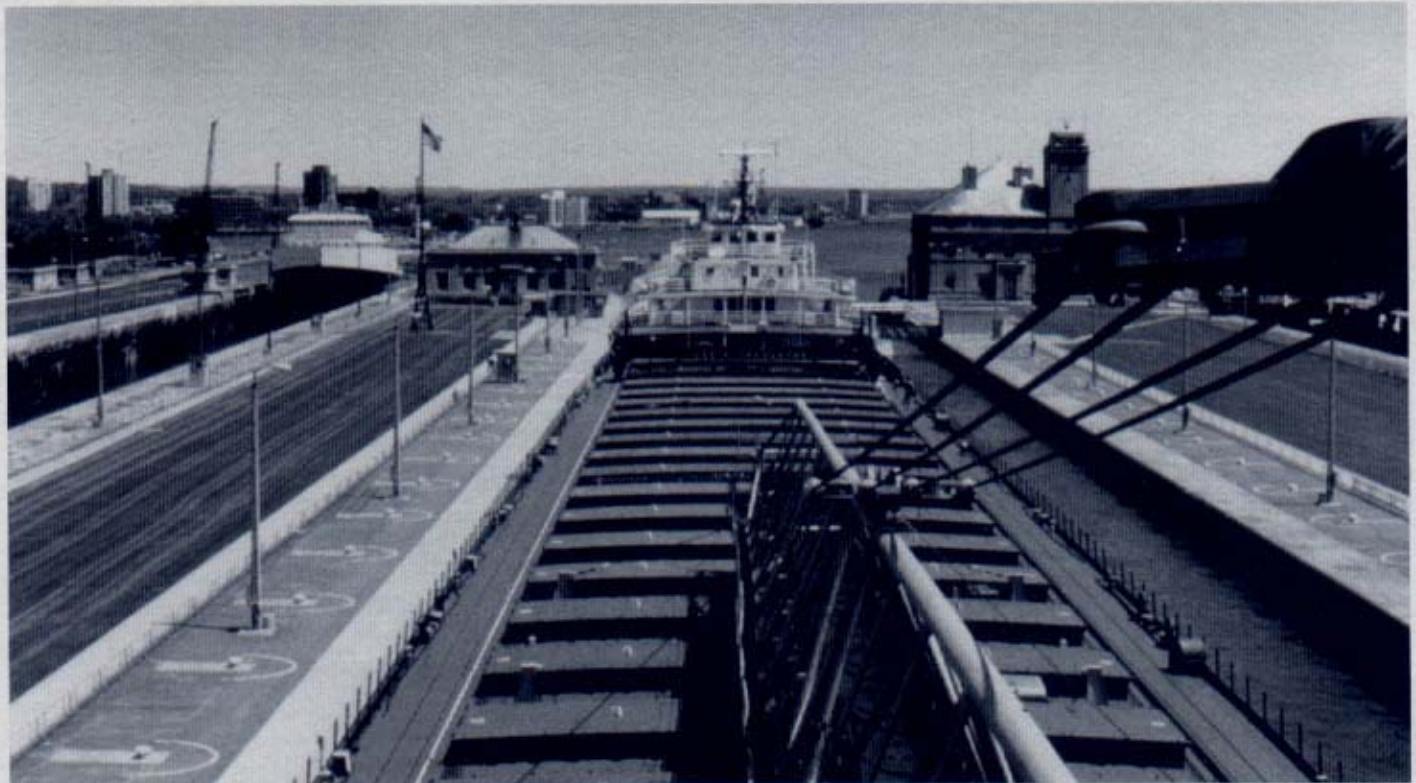
As I climb back on deck to head forward the TREGURTHA seems small in the expanse of the open lake. The sun is setting as we head for the Mackinac Bridge, the dividing line between northern Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. The lights along the bridge twinkle in the distance, forming a graceful necklace across the straits. The casual sense of beauty inspired by the bridge at sunset brings many of the crew out on deck to watch as we pass beneath. The upbound Columbia freighter JOSEPH FRANTZ rushes past just east of the bridge, its running lights fading quickly behind us. My first passage into Lake Michigan is a memorable one.

"The tonal dimension of a boat is obvious to anybody who's there. You may not see anything is wrong, but you hear it by the timbre of a creaking."

Steve Meyers, AB Watchman

Every vessel has its own sensory identification, its peculiarities. Distinct to each vessel are its sounds and vibrations. A rhythm is sent out that is subtly present everywhere on board.

Day three finds the TREGURTHA on Lake Michigan with the course locked on for our unloading destination at Indiana Harbor. A thin haze obscures any sign of land, blending with the water to form a virtually seamless panorama. Even in the calm lake there's a feeling of motion and sound present despite the effortless ease in



826-foot TREGURTHA eases her way into Sault Ste. Marie's huge Poe navigation lock. She will be lowered 21 feet to the level of the Straits of Mackinac and Lake Michigan. *Author's photo*

which the TREGURTHA travels.

Steve Meyers discussed his job as watchman as it related to assisting the pilothouse crew in the overall navigation of the vessel. The vigilance maintained on the watch extends beyond what can be seen physically. Steve went on to detail that a good watchman must rely on his sense of the boat in many instances. This relationship with the often intangible elements is frequently called upon, especially in heavy weather or fog.

"The person who I think feels comfortable on a boat, in a sense feels like they're someplace they want to be, believes that the boat as a whole is kind of like a living entity. Something that deserves respect," explained Steve. "It's a historical thing that all sailors have shared with their boats, and that is the identity of the boat, the personality of the boat. Each boat has a personality with different sounds," concluded Steve. "The different sounds is the way a boat speaks to you. So I think the acoustical dimension of a boat is the conversational dimension of a boat."

* * *

"The direction of Great Lakes shipping as we know it is the direction of the American steel company, which has been in tough times for many years."

Jim Nuzzo, Captain

The port of Indiana Harbor slowly grows larger as we approach the narrow entry. We will unload at night and be underway by sunrise. The pier light flashes its intermittent green welcome accompanied by its monochromatic tone repeated over and over.

As we draw closer the distant scream of sirens and the roar of engines competes with the commands in the pilothouse. Sparks fly from traincars carrying molten metal along switching tracks. We're surrounded by flames and darkness. This lack of daylight adds dramatically to the fiery, looming stacks and buildings.

Just inside the entry, the mate checks down to allow a tug pushing a barge of coal up river to pass us. I can see a small figure outlined on the bow, silhouetted against the reflections of light in the water. They disappear around a corner. I'm reminded of Joseph Conrad's images of man entering the darkness of the continent, swallowed up by the enormity of it.

The LEE A. TREGURTHA is entering its own realm to deliver its cargo in a ritual of supply and demand that comprises the very heart of the American industrial machine. The vitality of the Great Lakes shipping industry is directly linked to the strength of the steel economy.



The big ship makes her way up a placid Lake Michigan toward Indiana Harbor. She will discharge some 28,000 tons of taconite. *Author's photo*

Many of the crew have mixed feelings about places like Indiana Harbor. "There's something anachronistic or historical about it," ventured Steve Meyers. "I get the feeling of 19th century clunky industrialism...I mean it's bound to become extinct eventually. It's also a cesspool in a lot of ways. I feel mixed about it," admitted Steve, "because my job is dependent upon this toxic industry."

The LEE is nudged slowly closer to the dock with the forward bow thruster. On deck the crew go over the side one by one, disappearing from sight to land on the dock below. The TREGURTHA'S 250-foot unloading boom has already begun to move to the port side hopper to begin the discharge of pellets. As I head back aft small specks of fireworks erupt over the distant Chicago skyline. Welcome to the heart of the industrial beast!

A night spent at a dark and dirty docksite can certainly erase much of the notion of glamour often associated with the lakers by onshore boatwatchers. The romantic lore of the lakes is met with skepticism by many of the men and women who work on the boats. When questioned about the Great Lakes mystique Captain Nuzzo countered with a very pragmatic response.

"I think some of the worst fans of the steamboats are the guys that work out here. I think it has something to do with the human nature when they see something from afar and in the distance and they wonder and they have questions about something and maybe that's the case with steamboats," reasoned the captain. "They're large and we can't quite put our hands on

them and information on them may be a little bit sketchy...whereas the fellows that work out here understand the steamboats and look at it a little bit more as an everyday job and don't see the lore in them as people ashore who may be interested in them."

* * *

"I think personnel does a good job because they really try to get people on boats that get them home. They all know where we live and they understand what it's like to be away."

Sandy Van Tassel, Porter

Light and color are beginning to return to the sky. It's almost 5 a.m. The forward cable has been let go and the deckhand begins his sprint to the aft ladder as the bow begins to swing away from the dock. On a scrap of paper in the pilothouse our departure time is noted for entry into the ship's log. Before the day shift begins at the steel mill we slip silently away like thieves in the night.

After staying up nearly all night during the unloading it's easier to chase ghosts around the deck than to find many of the crew. The LEE is running light and empty up Lake Michigan. The next 48 hours will see the TREGURTHA roughly retrace her route back into Lake Superior enroute to the ore port of Marquette.

If there is such a thing as a "home port" for vessels on the lakes Marquette fits the bill for a number of the TREGURTHA'S crew. A majority of the cargoes carried by the vessel travel the route from Marquette to Detroit. The TREGURTHA inherited the Ford Motor Company run to Rouge Steel when Interlake purchased the

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OBSERVATIONS

by Thom Holden with Terry Sechen, Beth Duncan, and Kevin Gange



Capt. Jim Nuzzo chuckles at landlubbers and hobbyists who romanticize steamboating.

Author's photo

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remaining vessels in the Ford fleet.*

Ship's porter Sandy Van Tassel was looking ahead to returning home to her family in Marquette. "You can't get caught up in the boat life and leave your family life alone," Sandy told me as we drew closer to her home port. "I think you've always got to keep focused, keep family first in your life."

It is not unusual to find strong family ties to sailing on the Great Lakes. The regionality of the Great Lakes has led to many multi-generational maritime families. Sandy comes from this family tradition on the lakes.

"My father sailed, my uncle sails. The whole family sailed. I was destined to try it. When I was young we used to come to the ships to see my father. It wasn't anything that was unfamiliar."

For Second Cook Jim Kehoe of Washburn, Wis., the time away from family has its mixed blessings as well as its humorous moments. Jim remembered one time when he had to tell his wife how to fix the garage door opener over the telephone. "This was not easy...but things like that.." Jim shrugged, "It's just altogether different."

Like many of the sailors on the lakes Jim has a nomadic side to him which makes it difficult to stay ashore. He is drawn to the lakes and a life on the boats but can't really put a finger on exactly what it is that keeps him there. "It's like a disease," Jim told me, "It's hard to explain why a person feels this way out here. It gets boring out here, yet you put up with it." It's a story heard over and over on the lakes.

The TREGURTHA is veiled in a layer of fog that we've been in since we rounded Whitefish Point. The radar in the pilothouse shows the thin green

outline of the Marquette shoreline. My memory of the area fills in the look of the lower harbor where the LEE will load for a run to Rouge Steel.

Our approach is slowed by the fog yet the repetitious ritual of preparation to make the dock has begun again. The deck crew works its way back aft releasing the hatch clamps while the cables are threaded out onto the deck. The sound of the clamps and hatch covers coming undone thunders against the fog, the deck vibrates and shudders.

My stay on the TREGURTHA has come to an end. In the morning the dock will be empty and the LEE back on Lake Superior running for another port. As I carry my bags back down the deck the large reddish-brown loading chutes will soon drop one by one down to the open holds to fill the TREGURTHA for another trip.

*The Interlake buyout of Ford/Rouge Steel fleet included the contract to haul taconite pellets for the Ford plants in Detroit, as well as the steamers WILLIAM CLAY FORD (LEE TREGURTHA), and the BENSON FORD (KAYE BARKER). Most of the licensed crew of the Ford fleet were absorbed by Interlake in the deal.



Steve Meyers is TREGURTHA'S watchman and philosopher.

Author's photo

Oct. 1 Congress recently approved \$4.7 million to continue operations of USCGC MACKINAW (1944) another year.

Oct. 2 AMERICAN MARINER (1980) is unloading part of her cargo at the Dakota Dock and then proceeds to C. Reiss Coal Dock to complete unloading before shifting to the Midwest Energy Terminal to load coal.

Oct. 4 ALGORIVER (JOHN A. FRANCE - 1960) is unloading at St. Lawrence Cement on her second visit since being renamed. She carried a partial grain cargo of 300,000 bu. wheat on her first trip, clearing the Twin Ports on July 6.

CANADIAN VENTURE (LAWRENCECLIFFE HALL - 1965) is loading grain at Thunder Bay Harbour's Cargill and Pool 7A elevators on her first trip since being renamed. She was layed up in Samia as the DAVID K. GARDINER since 1992. She clears tomorrow with a partial load and will top off in Toledo before heading down the Seaway.

Oct. 7 ALGOWEST (1982) cleared the Twin Ports for Port Cartier laden with 1,000,000 bu. soybeans.

CANADIAN MINER (MAPLECLIFFE HALL - 1966) cleared Thunder Bay with a full load of grain on her first trip to the upper lake since being renamed and since 1992. She arrived on the 5th.

Oct. 8 CASON J. CALLAWAY (1952) arrived in Ashland with coal. She is the seventh vessel of the season.

Oct. 9 ROGER BLOUGH (1972) was driven aground south of Belle Isle in the Detroit River after her anchors dragged in a strong westerly gale. She will need lightering before she can be pulled off.

Oct. 10 Our sister Corps Visitor Center at the Soo closed today to begin a substantial expansion project which will nearly double the building's current size. The half-million dollar, 3,200 square foot addition will be on the lock side. Future exhibits will focus on the Corps of Engineers and the history of the Soo Locks.

Oct. 12 ROGER BLOUGH (1972) was finally refloated in the Detroit River just south of Belle Isle where she grounded on the 9th after dragging her anchors. Tugs GAELIC CHALLENGE, PATRICIA HOEY, CAROLINE HOEY, SHANNON, COLORADO, WISCONSIN, JOHN SPENCE, and TUG MALCOLM all participated in getting her off along with four lightering barges. Inspection revealed no apparent damage. She continued downbound for Lorain.

The Canadian Safety Board recommended that ship captains should be provided comprehensive written instructions on loading and unloading to prevent vessel damage, this the result of three years deliberation following the Apr. 1991 incident in which the BEECHGLEN (CHARLES M. SCHWAB - 1923) broke her back while unloading corn at Cardinal, Ontario. BEECHGLEN was enroute to shipbreakers last August.

Oct. 13 JOHN J. BOLAND (1953) made her first visit of the season to the Twin Ports to take on a cargo of 13,553 tons of coal bound for the Abitibi Paper plant on the Mission River in Thunder Bay. She will load light because of draft restrictions on the river and make about a half dozen trips.

Oct. 14 The pilothouse and cabin area below were lifted off IRVIN L. CLYMER (CARL D. BRADLEY - 1917) today by a crane barge and moved to the old Zenith Dredge slip in Duluth. Future use is unknown.

Oct. 15 Peterson Builders of Sturgeon Bay were recently awarded a \$6.4 million contract to