

# INLAND SEAS<sup>®</sup>



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QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF  
THE GREAT LAKES  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY



*This Journal's charter is history. So how can a boat which is still working be history?*

*Because she launched in 1952 which to our younger readers is a . . .*

## **LEGEND OF A STEAMER:**

**The *John J. Boland***

by PATRICK LAPINSKI

I threw my bags on the floor and picked up the phone. I'd literally just arrived in Buffalo, but I had to try to make contact. The phone rang several times before a recorded voice came on line telling me the number was out of range. Catching a boat is not an exact science. They were out there somewhere. I drew back the curtains and studied the darkness. Maybe they were heading back up along the southern shore of Lake Erie.

I'd come a long way to catch this boat. A thousand miles more than where I was first told they would be. In order to respond to customers' needs the schedule had changed almost daily for the two weeks prior to my arrival. This boat was not like many that run the lakes, which is really part of its charm. The chances of the boat being there in the morning were not a hundred percent. All I knew was that they were due in at 6 A.M. at the Lackawanna Slip and Union Canal. I wasn't so sure that my chances of getting a cab driver who knew where that was were very good either. I just figured all I could do was believe that they'd be there when I showed up. It's that way with any boat.

The next morning I found a cab driver who knew where to go and a boat that was where they said it would be. Sooner or later it all comes together. The steamer *John J. Boland* lay half hidden behind a growing pile of salt. The massive coke ovens of Bethlehem Steel loomed ominously behind it while blasts of white steam periodically rose from the blackened structure. The drama of industrial shipping was playing out before me. It was pure power, everything on a grand scale.

A short ten years ago the *Boland* sat idle in the virtually deserted West Duluth waterfront. Long forgotten before being shifted to the upper reaches of the Fraser Shipyard in Superior, the *Boland* has reached a renaissance in popularity among boat watchers since returning to service in 1992.

On board I was greeted by Third Mate Mark Frahley. Mark was on watch, the eight-to-twelve watch, keeping an eye on the unloading process. We had met almost eight years earlier when Mark was bosun on the *Indiana Harbor*. There'd be plenty of time to catch up with Mark later on so I headed forward to stow my gear and check in with the captain.





Captain Van Dongen



*The Boland*



*John J. Boland* loading: Fairport Harbor



*Boland* Unloading



Engine Room



Throttle Deck



2nd Mate Dan Bartels & Captain Van Dongen



Mike Kowalski 1st Asst. Engineer



3rd Mate Mark Frahley



Jana Staron Cadet



At Akzo Nobel Salt Cleveland



Fantail on *Boland*

### Decisions From Sentiment

Jim VanDongen is master of the *Boland*. He is a well respected skipper and serves as the fleet representative on the Captains' Committee for the Lake Carriers' Association. Captain Jim VanDongen was asked by the company to bring the *Boland* back out in 1992. Jim remembers what went through his mind when given the chance to return the aging *Boland* to service. It was a decision he based more on sentiment than on working a state of the art vessel.

"I started in the company on this boat. That's the only reason I came back when they asked me if I wanted to sail it," Jim recalled. "I



started here as a wheelsman with the company. I figured it'd be kind of neat . . . to sail it. So that's why I took the job."

Many a young man has been lured to sea by the promise of freedom, easy money and adventure. Bob Stark, steward for the crew of the *Boland*, has seen over thirty years of his life given to the nomadic calling. "I used to see these boats going up the Cleveland creek you know. They looked like they'd be all right. So I got my seaman's card. I was about nineteen . . . I shipped with Wilson Marine Transit."

"It's still a good life," Bob told me after we'd left his home town of Cleveland. "It's a different life. It ain't for everybody. Kinda like a vagabond life," he explained. "Even though you're going the same place all the time, still you're moving around a little bit."

From the deserted docks of Bethlehem Steel's Lackawanna slip to the piles of stone lining the Old River in the Cleveland waterfront, Bob is a congenial host, quick with a smile and a story. Each port is a chance to get in on one of Bob's "fantail" tours.

"The first boat I shipped on was the *C.L. Austin*, 1965, at the C & P ore dock." Bob walked me around the port side and pointed across the train tracks to the idle Hulett's. "I caught that boat right there," he told me with matter of fact pride. Describing adventure in ports from Buffalo to Superior, Bob walked me through the Cleveland of his childhood, a city with a waterfront jammed full of boats, warehouses and dark sailor bars. The atmosphere created by today's rejuvenated waterfront caused Bob to recall some of his trips up the street back in the proverbial good old days. "They had a bar called Young's Bar. They kinda catered to the sailors. We used to get off years ago . . ." Bob paused to explain to me how the crew members learned to take advantage of the opportunity to go up the street. "You got into Cleveland," he continued, "these old skippers on these boats . . . would take them five or six hours to get up that creek. So you'd jump off," he said, explaining the short cut. "The grocery boat years ago would come out and take the grocery order and you'd get off on the grocery boat. And you'd go up the street." If you didn't have a watch to stand it was a great chance to get a jump on some relaxation.

As with many lake veterans, his stories told of change, of time gone by and friends moved on. I think sailors must be the eternal optimists to be able to lead a life that brings them to a new place each day with an uncertain future around every corner.

Norman Fox is another such lake veteran working the *Boland*. In fact, Norm is one of just a handful of men that remain on board who brought the *Boland* back out in 1992. Norm eyes his days upon the *Boland* with a measured amount of respect. If you ask him outright he'll tell you there's no other boat he'd rather be on. "This is what I cut my eye teeth on," he told me. "I know these things inside and out, and this company doesn't have that many people left that can handle



these boats like this." For Norm, it's a pride that comes with hard-earned experience.

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***"The expression, 'they don't make 'em like they used to,' certainly applies here. It's hard to find parts."***

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Norm Fox has been working on the boats since he was in high school, passing coal on a hand fired tug in the Maumee River until he was old enough to go out on the lake boats. A big, soft spoken man, Norm is in charge of keeping the elevator system and unloading boom operating on the *Boland*. This is no small job. On a boat the age of the *Boland* it's hard to find parts for repairs. Nothing is routine. The expression, "They don't make them like they used to," certainly applies here. Many parts have to be custom machined and fitted to keep the equipment running. Finding people qualified to do the work is every bit as difficult. Every day can be a challenge says Norm. "You're stepping back to 1953. You're operating 1953 vintage and there's no way you can bring it up to 1996," cautioned Norm. "You're operating a maximum capacity of 1953, unloading and everything."

Looking back at a forty-year career on the lakes, Norm remembered having that same sense of stepping back in time when he first started sailing. "First boat I ever shipped on was the *MacGilvray Shiras*, which was a Steinbrenner boat. It was built in 1886, '96, something like that," he recalled. "That was in 1957. A steel hulled boat . . . I know that I was just amazed at everything I seen, you know. Just like going back in time. It was so old and obsolete."

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***To the younger generation of sailors, the Boland can be intimidating.***

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Many of the crew on the *Boland* experience feelings similar to those Norm felt when he went aboard the *Shiras* so many years ago. To the younger generation of sailors coming up at the close of the century the *Boland* can be a little bit intimidating. Working the *Boland* can be a hard, challenging experience, but it has its rewards. For the sailor who seeks refuge from the relentless runs of taconite, the *Boland* can become a place called home. This is a working boat whose hull barely has time to dry before another cargo pushes it beneath the waterline. Salt, stone, coal and even taconite once in a while. The *Boland* takes it all, and takes it wherever.

The list of ports served by the *Boland* reads like the roster of minor league towns in the Mineral League, from Alabaster, Marblehead, Port Dolomite and Calcite, to the big cities of Erie and Muskegon, Toledo



and Superior. Long before the geographic references for the Great Lakes became defined by such words as Chicago, Buffalo, Cleveland and Milwaukee, these smaller locations vied for establishment along the perimeter of the lakes. The often remote settlements relied upon waterborne commerce to keep them connected with the world outside. Active ports served a dual role — a transfer point for commodities, as well as a terminus for immigrants new to the country.

“Almost every little city along the lakes had coal docks. Like Cleveland here in Ohio had coal docks, Fairport had coal docks. Erie had coal docks. You’d always get a load of coal somewhere and go back up.” This was the world of sailing to the young Norm Fox. The schedule and pace of the *Boland* today are very reminiscent of those early days for Norm.

To the steamer *John J. Boland* these ports are the lifeblood of this fifties era vessel. They go where the larger boats cannot, carving out a niche in the market surrendered long ago in the last new construction boom. More often than not the ports consist of no more than a large open space watched over by a man in a pickup truck. They stubbornly hold on with a sporadic schedule of vessels that some day may have no future. For now however, products such as coal, stone and salt can still be shipped in large quantities more economically on a boat than by other mode.

The *Boland’s* trip into Lackawanna is the second one this week, with more planned throughout the summer. The blue colored salt streaming out onto the storage pile will be used on roads throughout upstate New York once winter arrives. When the *Boland* returns next spring the process will begin over again.



As the decade of the forties came to a close a new era of shipbuilding on the Great Lakes commenced with the launching of the *Wilfred Sykes* in 1949. The boom culminated just over a decade later with the completion of the steamer *Edward L. Ryerson*. It was an era characterized by innovation through design, when the shipbuilders pioneered many of the features found on today’s lake carriers. Amid the repetitive design frenzy that churned out today’s modern fleet of “Triple A’s” or “Pittsburgh” class vessels, came the *Boland*.

“This boat here, you’d see this boat . . . this boat was like the Queen of the Lakes you know,” said Bob Stark in reference to the *Boland* during its heyday on the lakes. “The *John J. Boland*, *Detroit Edison*, *Edmund Fitzgerald*, *Arthur B. Homer* . . . All them boats built in the fifties, ’52-’53 class, were the big boats of the era.” Casual-



ties of age, technology, foundering and neglect, many of the *Boland's* illustrious contemporaries are gone. The *Humphrey*, the *Homer*, *Sherwin* and *Fitzgerald* and her fleet mate the *Detroit Edison* are all gone or on extended lay-up. Four decades later the *Boland* survives.

### Mr. Boland And Winter Insurance

Launched in 1953, the *John J. Boland* is the third vessel to carry the Boland name on the lakes and one of only three self-unloaders built in the fifties. She was designed for the stone trade, working the Lake Michigan runs more seasons than not. "If you wanted a Lake Michigan boat, this was the boat to be on." Dan Bartels, a third generation sailor on the lakes and second mate on the *Boland*, told me the Boland name dates back to the beginnings of the modern day American Steamship Company in the early 1900s.

An austere black and white portrait of Mr. Boland hangs in the captain's office. The image of the vessel's namesake seems to be at home here among the filing cabinets and tables that fill the room. The large framed print rides the ship's centerline above the keel, facing forward. Like many independent ship owners and operators at the turn of the century, Boland often speculated on the weather and insurance to keep his vessels in the water for the all important late season runs. It often took men made of steel to operate boats made of steel.

The story goes that Boland was short of the money needed to make a late season grain run from the reaches of Lake Superior back to Buffalo, so he forged a financial partnership with Adam Cornelius to cover the costs of the higher insurance premium then associated with winter navigation on the lakes. The Boland and Cornelius relationship lasted well beyond that season and became the forerunner of today's contemporary American Steamship Company.

Ironically today the two vessels named to honor the company founders find themselves in unique positions within, and out of, the ASC fleet. The *John J. Boland*, the lone steamer left with American Steamship, is not owned outright by ASC but runs for them on a charter. The *Adam E. Cornelius*, while owned by ASC, currently operates on a charter to Inland Steel, outside of the ASC fleet. Like its predecessors, the modern day American Steamship Company still does what it takes to keep its boats running at full capacity.

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The cumulative history of the Great Lakes boats is an exhaustive one. Like many men sailing the lakes today Second Mate Bartels takes more than a casual interest in the history and development of



vessels working the lakes. Dan has been able to put his interest in the older lakers to use on many occasions. The art of spotting a distant ship was a good way to pass time on a watch, as well as become more than a bit familiar with the boats. This constant observation and comparison would often leave the identification to minute details, the sound of the whistle, the way the boat smoked, or early on the peculiar sound of a new "diesel" boat like the *Henry Ford II*.

"You could always tell, well, let's see," said Dan, finding an example of comparison between the old *Henry Steinbrenner* and the *Kinsman Enterprise*. "If you looked at them you'd say they were the identical boat, yet if you looked at the after spar on the *Henry Steinbrenner* it was a little . . . it wasn't quite in line with the same angle of the stack. It was leaning forward a little more. It was more straight up and down than the other one. If you could pick out something like that," said Dan, "you kind of knew."

The growth and changes that have taken place in the Great Lakes shipping industry since Dan began sailing have been significant. One look at any of the stern enders will visibly show the development in vessel design and technology.

A more subtle change is still taking place today on the lakes, a change not clearly visible even to those who sail and work on the boats — the role of women on the boats. That has historically been minimal, but this has begun to change, primarily with the influx of cadets from the maritime academies. Upon the completion of their schooling, sea projects and licensing, the deck cadets enter at a third mate's level. This advancement into the licensed officer ranks has not been completely accepted by many veteran sailors. The simple fact is, it is no longer uncommon to find women in these positions on today's lake carriers.

Coming to the *Boland* with aspirations to sail the lakes is Jana Staron, a cadet from the Great Lakes Maritime Academy at Traverse City. The memory of her first sea project is still fresh in Jana's mind.

She caught her first boat at the Soo Locks. It was three o'clock in the morning when she climbed aboard the thousand foot vessel locking down from Lake Superior. It would be a night filled with excitement and trepidation. "We watched it coming in from the park at the end of the locks. It was just so ungodly huge. It was blocking out the skyline of Soo, Canada." Jana admitted that the whole experience proved to be very nerve wracking.

The *Boland* is Jana's third vessel as a cadet and she feels comfortable aboard which makes for a favorable learning environment. The expectations are not high for cadets, but the opportunities to learn are there for the taking. . . . "I like the responsibility," she tells me, "but . . . for four hours at a time I'm basically completely responsible for a multi-million dollar ship and the cargo and thirty people's lives."



## Twelve To Four Watch

It is midnight on Lake Huron. A thin strip of white froth cut from the bow rushes out into the dark waters. The shimmer of distant lights from approaching vessels dance deceptively on the horizon. The click of the ship's wheel and the hum of the wind rippling over the pilothouse awning are the only sounds in the faintly lit wheel room. This is the twelve-to-four watch. The watch of darkness.

At least six decks below a work crew gathers. In contrast to the pilothouse, every move here reverberates off the hard angles of the cargo hold slopes. Donning hard hats with work lights the men look more like miners than sailors. Armed with shovels and water hoses they prepare to enter one of the ship's bottom ballast tanks. In the dark confined space they will shovel and crawl, inch by inch, removing the layers of sediment accumulated in the ballasting process.

Separated from the deep waters of Lake Huron by less than an inch, the men ride atop the riveted sheets of steel, sluicing the mud and sand before them. Sustainable for only short periods of time, this arduous work will continue throughout the season until all of the tanks have been cleaned.

They work in preparation for the upcoming winter lay-up and the vessel's five year Coast Guard inspection. Once the steamer enters the shipyard an array of workers and shipping officials will crawl through these same tanks checking for cracks while sounding literally every rivet in the vessel's forty-three-year-old hull. The crew is confident that the Coast Guard will recertify her for the next five years. None will vouch for her future beyond the year 2000.

A man as familiar as any with riding these hulls to the bone yard is the *Boland's* first assistant engineer. Mike Kowalski has admittedly ridden his share of older vessels. He's taken many of them on their last run before the scrap yard. The *Consumers Power*, the *Joe Young*, the *Hennepin*, and the *Sharon*. Is it fate that Mike is now aboard the *Boland*? Mike hasn't given up completely on the *Boland*. The *Boland* is after all the last real steamer operated by the American Steamship Company of Buffalo, and Mike takes pride in keeping her running. "I like the steamers because there's a lot more to do," Mike told me. "Seems like it keeps you busy, a lot more busy than on the diesel boats."

## A Nightmare Fit-Out

Since joining the *Boland*, Mike has put a lot of hours and hard work into keeping her in shape. Along with fellow crew member Norman Fox, Mike was on board at the shipyard in Superior for fit-out four years ago, fit-out after an eight year lay-up. For all involved it



was not a normal fit-out. Mike remembered vividly his first impression of the *Boland's* engine room. "It was a nightmare! We walked on it and there wasn't any paint on the walls. No light bulbs in. It looked like a dungeon down there."

Mike knew it would take a lot of work before the *Boland* would be ready to go. "You'd fire up a system and it'd plug up instantly from the rust inside the pipes. And I mean rust! Tons of it we'd get out of these ballast lines."

While the engine crew on the *Boland* worked on getting the ship's power plant ready, they relied upon extra help to take care of some of the luxury systems on the boat. "We had to have the shipyard come on. Like all the drains and stuff . . ." Mike paused to explain how some things just weren't on the top of anyone's priority list. "We had to get the plant up. We couldn't be concerned with toilets that wouldn't work, or stuff like that."

I don't know why it surprised me when I asked, but Mike told me the engine started right up when they were ready with the boilers. The *Boland* is powered by a 7,000 horsepower DeLaval steam turbine engine. "It's the same old engine room that was there in 1952. Nothing's changed. It's the same as it was forty years ago, or longer. Forty-five years ago." Well, aside from some replacement pumps and the usual maintenance, Mike told me.

### Up The Ranks

Coming up the ranks through the hawsepipe on a Great Lakes steamer, working your way up from job to job, ship to ship, season through season, is a hard road more often than not. For Mike Kowalski it's a road well traveled from his home of Cadillac, Michigan. The transient nature of shipping refers to not only the ships, but to the people who sail them. Remembrances spun in the "sea story" nature of a sailor's vernacular bring to life many a sailor long gone from Mike's life.

Mike told me about a fireman he once roomed with on the *Hennepin*, one of the most memorable characters he had met on the boats. "They called him Yogi, because he was always doing yoga you know. This guy would stand on his head," he explained. "This boat would be rolling, and he'd be on his head down in the firehold. All you could see were two feet sticking up."

Standing on his head in the firehold wasn't the only unusual thing about Yogi. Looking like a bum more often than not according to Mike, Yogi's unkempt appearance once led him into some trouble with the police. "They picked him up one time for vagrancy down in Toledo, and he had seven thousand dollars in cash in his pocket. Found him going through a dumpster. They brought him back to the boat." Mike



shook his head thinking about it. "Seven thousand dollars!" In spite of all his quirks Yogi and Mike became good friends. "He was a good guy. Kindhearted as hell too," concluded Mike.

Like any job, people come and go, and the longer the stay, the more people pass through your life. The demographics of the *Boland's* crew are comparable to any small community. They come from communities near and far to the Great Lakes. While the work is what brings them to the boats, it is also what keeps them away from their real homes. For nine to ten months out of the year the boat becomes their "other home." For many who sail, the job is their life and their life becomes the boat. "To me your life isn't your own anymore out here. Once you're on the boat, you're on the boat," explained Bob Stark, trying to unravel the seemingly simple paradox. "It's your life on the boat once you get on it until you get off it again. Day and night, twenty-four hours a day. Not eight hours a day!"

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*"When a guy hands you sixty-five-million-dollars worth of ship, you definitely don't want to bend it."*

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The *Boland* is a lower lakes boat. She's a hard working boat. That is her reputation. My final day on board we headed down Lake Michigan. Most of the day we traveled in a shroud of fog. As evening drew near, the air cleared to reveal a black wall of clouds before us. Bolts of lightning shot down toward the water and the wind began to pick up. On shore, tornado sirens were sounding along the eastern shores of the big lake.

Captain VanDongen recalled a tornado touching down on the deck of a laker he was on once. He told us how the funnel scooped a picnic table off the fantail and then jumped midship to grab a barrel full of shovels and brooms before going out over the lake. It might have set a lakes record if it actually had a chance to unload the boat. Out in front of us the whitecaps were beginning to race as we crept closer to the storm.

Storms on the Great Lakes are always a topic treated with trepidation and fascination. To anyone who sails long enough, the experience of riding the lakes in a rough one is added to the list of been there, done that. Exposure to the fury of the gales came at an early age for Norm Fox. He recalled a Lake Michigan storm while working as a fireman with the Steinbrenner fleet. "I just come up out of the firehold," recalled Norm. "We were laying at anchor for the weather. Our captain wouldn't go out, and then we seen this big, well, Bradley boat. It was the Bradley line then, it wasn't U. S. Steel. It went on by



us," explained Norm. The familiar silver band with a large black "L" centered on it was the mark of the Bradley fleet of bulk carriers. The boat was also an easy one to spot when there were fewer self unloaders on the lakes. "It was built something like this. Great big A-frame on it like this one. *Carl D. Bradley*. I seen it go right on by us," Norm told me. The Chief joined young Norm on deck for a breath of air as the *Bradley* steamed past. Norm remembered telling the Chief, "I don't know, but them boys gonna get a hell of a ride I think." "I think so too," answered the Chief, "I'm glad this old captain is gonna stay right here for the night."

Some time after the *Bradley* went past and the storm lessened, Norm's boat continued on its way. Before crossing Lake Michigan Norm would learn that his prophecy about the *Bradley* would become deathly true. As they rocked and rolled their way up the lake, the crew learned that the *Bradley* never made it across Lake Michigan in that storm. "We stopped and searched for survivors. That was in November." Norm shook his head. "We stopped and searched for survivors all around, and it was pretty rough. We seen a lot of debris and stuff floating around. No bodies. A lot of debris. Parts of life jackets, things like that." It is a memory Norm Fox carries with him every time he crosses Lake Michigan.

#### Old Boat — Modern Pilothouse

As the *Boland* continued to move into the storm, the wind began to increase in velocity. I was less mindful of the schedule than the storm, even after I learned that we'd probably lose an hour getting into Milwaukee. A color computer monitor mounted next to the wheelsman showed our speed declining to eleven knots. An instantaneous update displayed our new estimated arrival time at the dock. The navigation system, known as ECPINS, was installed on all American Steamship vessels, including the *Boland*, this year. A larger monitor mounted on a floor stand gives the captain or the mate the same screen that the wheelsman sees. A similar monitor in the captain's office gives him the same view as in the pilothouse.

The ECPINS system integrates the traditional navigation aids in the pilothouse, such as the radar and compass, along with information input by Captain VanDongen. The course or port information can be displayed on the screen to show the pilothouse crew the location and status of the vessel. In situations of limited visibility, like the fog we had just left behind, the ECPINS provides another tool to aid in the safe handling of the *Boland*.

"It is the best thing coming down the road in a long time. It's gonna make navigation a lot safer," said Jim approvingly. Like any aid in the pilothouse it was still no replacement for the seasoned ex-



perience of a lakes captain. "You trust it as far as you're going with it," explained Jim. "You gotta use the other stuff you have at hand to double check to make sure it's giving the right reading."

### The Captain

As ship's master, Captain VanDongen has the responsibility of the practical day-to-day operation of the vessel. It's a job that also includes overseeing this diverse crew in a number of capacities. The job of captain carries a lot of baggage that is a necessary part of the role. Jim described it as sort of a juggling act, balancing the navigation and business part of the job with managerial and personal sides.

While the job of captain on a lake carrier has its share of paper work and headaches, the actual handling of the vessel is what Captain VanDongen likes best. The *Boland's* schedule keeps them on the run to many different ports on the lower lakes, providing more opportunities for the captain to work with the boat. "It gives you more chance to ship handle, which is basically what the game's all about," Jim told me. He recalled that when he got his first boat he wasn't quite so confident in his abilities. "It seemed like it was a hard thing to do at the time, but now I look back at it and I don't even know why I worried about it." But Jim concluded, "When a guy hands you sixty-five-million-dollars worth of ship, you definitely don't want to bend it."

The early days may have carried a bit more stress for the captain but his skillful handling of the *Boland* has given him a good reputation among his peers. When questioned about his vessel-handling skills, Jim quickly laughed it off with a confident nonchalance, simply answering, "I know a little bit more about the job than I did eleven years ago."

We arrived at the dock inside Milwaukee harbor about one o'clock in the morning. A short six hours later the sun was coming up over Lake Michigan. The old bucket elevator system was almost done rumbling the load of salt up from the cargo holds. It was time to pack my bags and head back aft to retrace the steps I'd taken a week earlier and nearly a thousand miles before. Bob was back in the galley making breakfast. No time for a fantail tour this morning. The deck crew was skidding hatch covers, the wheelsman running the boom. The *Boland's* forward cabins glistened in the early morning sunlight. A thin trail of white steam snaked up from the stack to disappear against the Milwaukee skyline. The city was just coming to life, and the *Boland* was preparing to depart. While my brief trip would fill me with stories and experiences to last many a season, life on a steamer never stops. It goes on with or without the influence of the outside world. As I climbed over the side and down the ladder to return to my life I knew everything was in its place in the world of the steamer *John J. Boland*. 