



STEWARD AL CHESKY

A five-year plan turns into 40 seasons on the Lakes

As the *Edwin H. Gott* sailed from its winter berth at Sturgeon Bay north into Lake Michigan, it was heading into one of the most abnormal spring seasons on the upper Great Lakes.

Based on a mild winter in 2009/10 and extremely favorable ice conditions on Lake Superior, the shipping companies petitioned the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to open the locks at Sault Ste. Marie a week earlier than normal. While the *Gott* headed through the Straits of Mackinac toward the ice-free lower St. Marys River, the captains of fleetmates *Edgar B. Speer* and *Presque Isle* were at a standstill at the bottom of Lake Huron, their vessels trapped with several other ships in a typical spring ice jam.

In the *Gott's* galley, Steward Al Chesky was already back into the routine of planning and preparing three meals a day while picking up bits and pieces from various conversations as the crew filed in for meals. A ship's galley, in addition to being the communal eating area, is its community center. During the first few weeks of the season several months worth of news about family, vacations and friends intermingle with talk about the ship and the outlook for the coming year.

Like many, Chesky's career began as a simple five-year plan to make some money on the boats during the summer and then attend to college in the winter. His father was the unloading boss at the limestone dock (Cutler-Magner) in Superior.

"He knew all the skippers and suggested that I go get a card for the summer and he'd get me on with the Steinbrenner fleet," Chesky said.

Steinbrenner was in the grain trade, running a handful of ships from the head of the Lakes to Buffalo. Chesky, a native of Superior, Wisconsin caught his first ship at one of that port's busy grain elevators.

"I was excited and scared at the same time," Chesky said.

The 1906-era *Uhlmann Brothers* was a typical under-powered, elderly ship eking out its final years under the Kinsman Ma-

rine flag. Chesky's job was to shovel coal into the belly of the beast while praying the ship made it across the lake every time.

"That thing was the slow boat from China. It took like 40 hours from Duluth to the Soo," Chesky said, his voice cracking as he talked. "I said to myself, 'What did I get into?'"

Moving to the galley. It didn't take long for Chesky to figure out that being a coal passer was not a skill in which he wanted to become proficient. Since he'd had experience working in restaurants during high school, he transferred to the galley, taking a porter's job on the "dirty" *McCurdy* (*Merle M. McCurdy*), another derelict from the turn-of-the-century.

Taking advantage of his time in the galley, Chesky moved up to 2nd Cook before deciding to attend the MEBA-AMO cooking school in Toledo at the end of the 1973 shipping season. That winter, over several months, he learned to cut meat, bake, cook and manage supplies. It was an intense period of time, but the hard work paid off when Chesky took his first Steward's job

the following spring on the *William A. Reiss*.

He describes the dining arrangements on the older ships as more "family style" in comparison to today's ships. The older boats employed more men, usually between 30 to 35 crewmen per ship. Back then, "you served each person individually," with the porter taking care of the non-licensed and the 2nd Cook waiting for the licensed personnel. The cafeteria style kitchen didn't exist in that era, Chesky recalls.

Over the past few decades some sailing traditions have changed, but when Chesky began sailing, nowhere on the ship was the division of labor more apparent than in the dining rooms of an old school steamer. There was a distinct separation of a ship's two main departments, the deck department and engine room, otherwise known as the End Forward and the After End.

"The After End sat facing the Forward End. The Forward End faced the After End. They didn't mingle," Chesky said, "and each guy more or less had his own place to sit, depending on the position you had."

During his first few years as a Steward,



The Edwin H. Gott, bow on, looking west toward the south tower of the Mackinac Bridge.

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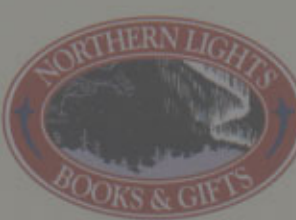
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Chesky kept his bag lightly packed while filling the role of relief Steward as he gained seniority. In 1976, he took up residence beneath the big orange C of the Cleveland-Cliffs organization. Chesky worked on Cliffs' fleet of river rats ferrying ore up the "Cleveland Creek."

A time of change. The steel recession of the early 1980s caught many by surprise. Wires were hauled out and lockers emptied for the last time on a flotilla of aging steamers. The Great Lakes shipping industry had entered a period of change. Large new ships were entering service on the Lakes while the older, smaller ships slowly began disappearing, their scrap metal firing the new mini-mills to which the once mighty steel industry had succumbed.

One of the casualties of the recession was the fleet of ships operated by Cleveland-Cliffs. During the winter of 1980, Chesky drove past the shipyard in his hometown of Superior, Wisconsin uncertain of his future. He recalled seeing the *Irvin L. Clymer* undergoing a refurbishment after sitting idle for a number of years.

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It was nothing short of ironic that the *Clymer* is exactly where Chesky ended up that spring. He took it in stride.

"It was a job at least," he conceded.

With the bottom falling out of the steel market, many of the senior generation of sailors with U.S. Steel's Great Lakes Fleet were retiring, marking the recession as their time to get out, giving younger guys like Chesky a chance to move up relatively fast. He stayed on the *Clymer* the remainder of that year and into the next before moving over to the *Calcite II* and the *Myron C. Taylor* in 1982. After riding out the recession on the old "scrap heaps," Chesky has staked a claim to longevity with the Great Lakes Fleet.

Chesky favors the independence that sailing affords him, and he no longer travels as light as he did in the early years. Until his assignment on the *Gott*, he spent 16 seasons on the *Roger Blough*. The *Blough*, because of its dedicated runs and stately passenger accommodations, carried not only its share of cargo, but the most important guests of U.S. Steel.

"We had people from all walks of life," Chesky recalls. "Steel buyers, politicians, executives of the company; you name it. Neil Armstrong, the astronaut, took a trip. I had carte blanche to buy whatever they needed."

Six years ago, Chesky moved over to the *Edwin H. Gott*.

"I like the pace here. It's a little more laid back compared to the *Blough* and with our unloading boom we go to more docks," he said.

Chesky reported back to work on March 13 of this year.

"Usually when the After End comes aboard there's no water, no heat, no nothing," he said. "No food. But by the end of the day, you've got everything running—nine times out of 10."

And as for his five-year plan? "I'm still waiting to go to college," Chesky said, laughing as he begins his 40th season on the Lakes.

Patrick Lapinski ■