

## Veteran longshoremen recall Seaway's early days

"My first ship was the *Ramon de Larrinaga*," recalls Ken "Bootsy" Stringer Jr. "We loaded it at Elevator O in the East End of Superior ..."

"I worked the first ship at Globe Elevator, the *Herald*. I was in the first group that began the Local 1037," says James Dembroski Jr. "We drew numbers from a hat. That's how we determined the seniority."



The Port's Past  
Patrick Lapinski



"I started in the ILA at age 18 in 1960," remembers Nick O'Kash. "Then I joined the Navy. I came back in 1963. My first ship was the *Francois LD* at either Cargill Allouez, or Great Northern..."

"My first day was a grain tanker at Great Northern," says Nick's younger brother Mike. "I can still see it, walking onto it."

Stringer laughs when thinking back to the early days of the Seaway. "The elevators weren't ready. The loading spouts were too low, the pipes too short. They

had to re-ballast the ships to get them under the spouts. They did it backwards."

Dembroski remembers working on the "machine gangs" in the old days. "On the 'tween deckers, we had two men at a time in the hold. The grain was spouted into the trimming machine, and we would shoot it into the corners and empty voids. The machines would always break down ..."

"I started in the union on my birthday, November 18, 1965," recalls Tom Fisher, currently Number 3 on the ILA 1037 seniority list. "We were loading 40-pound bales of twine onto a ship at the Great Lakes Storage dock. Before that I began working as an extra on the docks when the Seaway opened."

These are the memories of just some of the men who handled cargoes that arrived in Port in the early days of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Many of the men were not just co-workers, but neighbors as well. Superior contributed a lot of longshoremen to the Twin Ports.

Several long-time members of Superior's old general cargo workers union formed the leadership nucleus of the newly chartered International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) Local 1037 in the fall of 1959. Ken

Stringer Sr. was appointed president and Alex O'Kash secretary-treasurer. These were men who had been on the waterfront since the hard times of the Great Depression.

Following in the steps of his father, Ken Stringer Jr. began his career on the docks in 1951 at the age of 14. At the time it was not at all unusual for kids his age to sign on as extras when work was available. "My first job was hand trucking in and out of freight sheds onto railroad cars," he says.

"Our father was a strong union man," recall Mike and Nick O'Kash. "He wouldn't let us start until we were 18." Their father, George, began working on the docks in 1933. Along with his brother Mike, and joined later by Alex, the O'Kash boys were dock wallopers, moving freight from the ships to the freight sheds. It was backbreaking work.

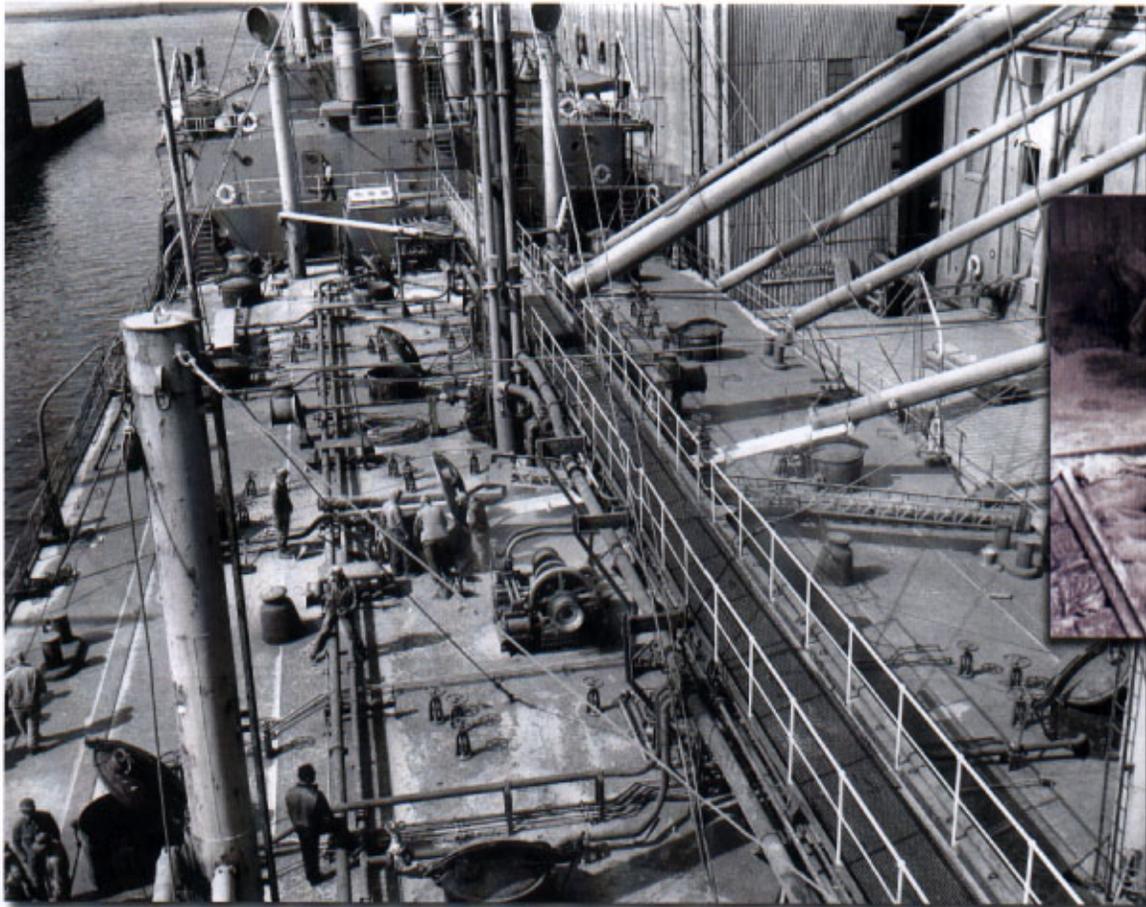
Charles Dembroski had also worked on the old Great Northern freight sheds in the 1930s. There weren't enough ships to make it a full-time job, and the work was sporadic so everyone had "other jobs," and when a ship came in they would use vacation days to work it.

"I was still in high school when I started working at the freight shed," recalls Dembroski's son Jim, now 70. "The dock boss would call up the school and get us out so we could go and work — they were always shorthanded. This must have been around 1954. Heck, I was in high school and I was drawing unemployment, for crying out loud." Jim says with a laugh.

Tom Fisher's uncle Joe was one of a small group of grain trimmers known as the "Twelve Apostles." "They handled all the grain loading and unloading before the Seaway. It's a bit confusing because they didn't belong to the union," explains Tom. Two of Tom's uncles, John and Francis, also worked as extras in the pre-Seaway days when ships came in to unload grain at one of the city's elevators. Going further back in the family lineage, Jack and Ed "Big Daddy" Fisher were part of the old freight workers union.

"The spouts were all short on the elevators. They were used to those small Canadian ships that would take grain," says Jim Dembroski. American lakers of the time also were relatively small, so when bigger ships came in via the Seaway, loading them was a new experience. "You had to put chute extensions on the ends of the pipes," Dembroski said. "Then you had to put a plank trough from there and get it way to the outside. That's when it was tough."

Some of the earliest ships coming up the Seaway



Photos courtesy ILA.

Chute extensions are evident as longshoremen swarm over the *Merlin*, loading at the Great Northern Elevator S, early 1960s.  
**Inset:** Finesse was not a part of the job of loading potatoes.

were old T-2 oil tankers, Liberty and Victory ships mass-produced during World War II. Tom Stringer remembers the tankers being very labor intensive when used to transport grain. "A lot of times we had to clean the tanks," Stringer says. "Each ship had about 27 of them. The entrance was through a three-foot diameter cap ... we'd put a dozen guys with shovels into the tank to clean up crude oil. On some days," says Tom, "we'd have 120 to 130 guys washing the tanks, and it would take three or four days to clean them. And then they wanted to know why it took so long to load those ships," he said.

"The union's a tight knit group. Work gangs are based on seniority, so you couldn't depend on your older brother to take care of you," explains John Reed. "You basically grew up with your gang. I worked on the Third Gang for 12 years," he recalls.

With 36 years of service, ILA District Vice President John Reed is one of the youngsters in the hall today. John started as an extra in 1971 before joining the union two years later. John's father, "Gabby," and his younger brothers, Lester and Robert, worked in the old ILA 1279

as well as the IBL 1811 before retiring from the Local 1037. "They worked their way up to the Big Gang before they retired," says John.

Many of the early dock workers are mentioned only in passing now. Their names are etched into plaques that hang on the walls of the ILA Hall in Superior's North End. When they began working in the '30s it was for survival. They held on to their seniority until the Seaway came before passing their legacy to their children and nephews. Now, 50 years later, many of those men are grown old and retired.

The remaining few look back on the glory days of the early Seaway years when Superior's North End put out 300 men or more a day to work on ships from around the world.

"Being raised in the North End made you street smart," says Mike O'Kash. "You learned how to treat people with kindness and friendship," he adds. "It was an honor to be raised in the North End."

For more on Superior native Pat Lapinski: [www.inlandmariners.com](http://www.inlandmariners.com)