



Meet the Crew

RAY SHELDON

Sheldon sails through his dreams

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Two long, thin strips of lights hover in the watery darkness beyond the windswept beach at the end of Wisconsin Point. Our two-meter radio crackles out bits of a conversation between the captains on the *CSL Tadoussac* and the *Wilfred Sykes*, the next ship in line for the Allouez taconite dock. It was no accident that Captain Ray Sheldon of the *Sykes* finds himself at anchor off the Superior entry on a somewhat balmy December evening, his ship's schedule sandwiched between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day.

From his early childhood in Ludington, Michigan, Captain Sheldon knew he would some day sail the Great Lakes. In the late 1950s, Ludington was a regular port of call for cross-lake rail and passenger ferries to Wisconsin. Sheldon's father started his sailing career on the Lake Michigan ferries before finding a bigger paycheck on the regional Medusa Cement carriers. Influenced by his father, Ray developed an early passion for the Lakes, his curiosity fueled by reading the astute books of two early pioneers of Lakes lore, Dana Thomas Bowen and Dwight Boyer. By the time he graduated from high school, Sheldon's life was on pace for the maritime academy and a career on the Lakes.

Standing over six feet tall, he is trim and fit, a shock of white hair the only tell-tale sign of age. He is cordial, his demeanor relaxing and friendly, his personality lacking the stern reputation of some captains.

"It is a fun job being captain," says Sheldon, as he talks several hours later in the subdued light of the pilothouse.

In 1976 Ray graduated from the maritime academy at Traverse City and began working for Inland Steel (now Mittal Steel). Thirty years afterward, he laughs at the irony of it. The Inland fleet has always had one of the finest paint schemes on the Great Lakes; narrow bands of color accenting the length of the hull, along with the Inland Steel name proudly displayed in large, white billboard-sized lettering above the waterline at midship. "You'd see one of these boats and you'd say, 'Oh, I'm glad I'm not

over there you know...all that painting, all that cleaning.' And look where I end up," he says.

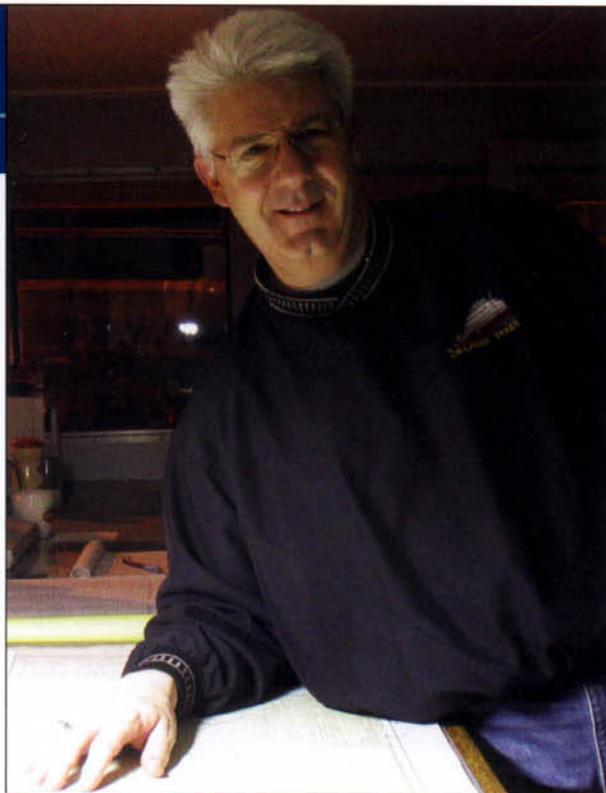
The *Sykes* will load approximately 18,200 tons of taconite for the old U.S. Steel mill at Lorain. Over the past three or four years, the *Sykes* has carried on average more than two million tons a season. This is the first trip to the Twin Ports for the *Wilfred Sykes* in nearly a decade, and Sheldon's first trip to Superior as a captain. For Sheldon and his crew, this is considered a long run—two-and-a-half days—not quite on the order of a vacation at sea, but as close to it as they ever come.

The "normal" runs for the *Sykes* are from Presque Isle to Indiana Harbor, Muskegon, Grand Haven, or Holland, Michigan with limestone and Escanaba to Indiana Harbor with taconite. The schedule can be hectic so the job can give you a little "wear and tear" says Sheldon. So, how does a Great Lakes captain define "wear and tear?"

"In one 24-hour period, and I've done it a couple of times," he qualifies, "I've made three different ports. I've tied up in Indiana Harbor and unloaded, departed there, went to South Chicago, loaded there, departed and made the dock in Holland, Michigan," Ray says. "So, it does bring a little wear and tear."

The ascent to captain took Sheldon 18 years. Those years were spent on all of the present day Mittal fleet, including the old Inland boats, *E. J. Block*, *L. E. Block* and *Philip D. Block*. When asked about his peer influences, Captain Sheldon noted the many skilled captains who acted as mentors in his career. "I like to think I took the good parts of a bunch of captains and molded them together," captains like Dudley Paquette, Victor Foshion, Patrick McMahon, Ray Lundquist, Jerry Black, Ernie Schultz and Lee Riley Ward come to mind.

Sheldon credits Captain Ward's mantra, 'As long as you remember that you're reacting to the boat and the boat's not reacting to you' as one of the best pieces of advice he's ever received. "When I'm making a dock and



Captain Ray Sheldon

if it's [the ship] not doing what I want to do, I'm changing."

On May 10, 1994, Sheldon took command of the *Sykes* at the C. Reiss Coal Dock in South Chicago, his first permanent captain's job. "My very first trip was turning around and backing into a dock after backing through a couple of bridges," Ray says. Since that time he's made many docks bow first, working primarily on the *Wilfred Sykes* and the *Joseph L. Block*, but making a dock stern first still remains one of Captain Sheldon's specialties.

"We back into Port Inland all the time. Sometimes I've had to back into Grand Haven to the dock there, which is about four miles. For some reason," laughs Ray, "it seems like I can make a dock better going stern first than I do going head in."

Captain Sheldon has many years ahead of him on the Lakes. It has been a long time since he fulfilled the dream of following in his father's footsteps, yet he continues, honoring the legacy of his predecessors in the Inland fleet while living the life envisioned from the books of his youth.

"Did I ever dream it would happen? You know, probably not." In 2005, Sheldon was selected by his peers to be the Grand Master of the Ship Masters' Association, another "pinnacle" in his career. Sheldon is quick, however, to point out that he is only just one person working on a ship with people from all walks of life. ■