

LAKE EFFECT

A Deckhand's Journey On the Great Lakes Freighters

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Stirrings

The early morning mist hovered over the quiet waters of the St. Mary's River, slightly obscuring the passing freighters. The rocks along the bank where I sat felt damp and mossy. Further down the river, in the narrow channel, the ferry sounded a muffled horn blast as it departed for Sugar Island. Along the Canadian side of the river, the sugar maples blushed as they awoke in the chill fall air. I had come down to the water with my coffee thermos and my *Free Press* to catch up on the news and enjoy a few quiet moments. I read about the Iraq War that seemed to drag on forever as well as the surging Tigers hot in pursuit of a division championship. There was complete stillness but for the Canada geese foraging in the nearby grass and a thousand-foot freighter, the *Columbia Star*, steaming silently down the river. But, soon enough, several cars showed up and out popped the tourists with their brimmed hats, sunglasses, and telephoto digital cameras. They were on a mission and did not want to miss any of the action. They quickly went to work setting up their tripods and

equipment, kindly ignoring my newspaper and me. The buzz of activity began to remind me of a Hollywood set as the giant freighter churned closer towards us. Mission Point, just a mile below the Soo Locks, is one of the narrowest points in the river channel; it's hard to believe that a ship of such mammoth size could squeeze through this tight of an opening. Of course, it's also a photographer's dream location.

The shoreside perspective, or landlubber's view, of life on a Great Lakes freighter has always been a bit too romanticized. Tourists from all parts of the world who visit the area imagine that sailing on these vessels must be a very gallant and noble way of earning a living in today's world. Those devil-may-care sailors must lead very exciting lives traversing the bold blue waters of the Great Lakes, in and out of new ports every week. Not a care in the world. What a great life! Or so it seems.

A tourist shouted out to a deckhand, "Hey! What are you carrying?"

"Iron ore," the deckhand yelled back. "Where are you headed?" asked the tourist. "South Chicago." This exchange would never occur at an airport or a train station. The captain or conductor would never get asked about his inventory or his destination. But here, it's quite common.

Thirty-some years ago, I worked on several U.S. Steel freighters as a deckhand and deckwatch. Back

then, U.S. Steel could proudly boast about their fleet of fifty Great Lakes vessels. Whether a college student or a guy down on his luck, a fellow could find work on the freighters quite easily. All one needed was a Merchant Marine Document from the Coast Guard and a little persistence down at Tom Craig's fleet office on the river—that and a sea bag packed and ready to go; a call would usually come with only two or three hours notice, sometimes in the middle of the night. The freighters ran from daylight to dusk and all night long as well, stopping only to load or unload the cargo. The money was good, and room and board was free. It was a great place to save a few dollars for those who could handle the lifestyle.



As a kid growing up in Sault Ste. Marie, or “the Soo” as locals call it, back in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the Great Lakes freighters held a fascination for me like none other. My friends and I watched them sail up and down the St. Mary's River hauling their cargoes of coal, limestone, and iron ore from exotic ports like Duluth, Two Harbors, and Silver Bay. They were bound for even more mysterious places like Conneaut, Toledo, and South Chicago. For entertainment, we hung around the Soo Locks in the summertime watching the giant ore boats as they were raised or lowered through the MacArthur and the Poe Locks. From a close-up view, we admired the surly looks

and the windburned faces of the hulking deckhands. They led a life, no doubt, that was way beyond our humdrum existence. What was it like, we wondered, to be part of a ship's crew and sail into the open blue waters of the Great Lakes? We envied the deckhands' swagger as they nonchalantly went about their duties.

When I graduated from high school in 1970, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do next. School had been mentally exhausting for me. Even though I had done well gradewise, I wasn't ready to dive into a college curriculum. The Vietnam War was still dragging on endlessly, and the country had just survived a decade of incredible turbulence. On many college campuses and in several major cities, there were war protests, draft card burnings, and riots, as well as confrontations with the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and the Chicago Seven. We had lost President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy to assassination. Hippies and the counterculture movement questioned our values as a nation and our identities as individuals. It seemed as though the entire country had been turned inside out and was searching for new directions.

As soon as school ended, I hitchhiked out to Boston and lived with friends for a few months. I found a job working in the kitchen of the New England Medical Center cafeteria. When I returned to the Soo, I quickly found an apartment so I could be on

my own. I, too, was searching for a new course, a new direction to head in. The following summer, my friends and I waited anxiously to see what our draft numbers would be in the lottery. The Army hadn't been sending as many draftees to Vietnam as they had done earlier, but one could never be too sure. I didn't believe in the war. The United States had been propping up a corrupt dictator in South Vietnam and had sacrificed countless American lives for the sake of stopping the advance of communism. Our country was mired in a deep black hole and couldn't seem to find a way out. Our involvement was slowly tearing our country apart. I filed as a conscientious objector with the local draft board but was turned down. The draft in 1971 went as high as number 95; two of my friends were drafted. I was the lucky one with number 125.

After a two-year breather, I was ready to head back to school and applied to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. My goal was to become a short-story writer. I wanted to write about people in my life, events, and ideas that meant something to me. Instead of simply finding a good-paying job, I needed to understand the world around me and try to put it into words. The degree didn't interest me as much as the opportunity to take as many English and writing courses as possible. Meanwhile, to finance this scheme, I would need to find a job on the freighters as soon as possible. My brothers had followed this plan

successfully by working several summers between college years. With my newly acquired Merchant Marine Document from the Coast Guard, my next job was to find a ship. Every week in October, I found myself down at the waterfront office of Tom Craig, the fellow in charge of hiring seamen through the Great Lakes Fleet warehouse. Slouching behind his desk, his glasses propped on the end of his nose, he would gruffly warn, “Look, I’ve got a list of over a hundred guys ahead of you. I have to hire them out first before I ever get to your name.” So I’d leave his office and gently pester him again the following week. Finally, the call came from Craig: “Be down at the dock with your bags by 9:00 tonight; you’re a deckhand on the *Leon Fraser*. And don’t be late.”

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