

Last call: Farewell to the *Algocen*

Classic laker with champagne tastes will become a containment barge for dredge materials

The *Algocen* has battled its way west and north through the first big snowstorm of the season, a storm that deposits a half-foot and more along parts of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. Strong winds whittle away minutes and hours of every day, forcing the ship to anchor several times before proceeding doggedly on. On the



The Port's Past
By Patrick Lapinski

morning of December 16, 2004, the *Algocen* finally approaches the Duluth Ship Canal, nearly two days later than expected. Captain Doug Parsons has nursed her all the way across the Great Lakes. About three miles out, a snow squall engulfs the vessel. In an instant the *Algocen* disappears from sight, swallowed by a wall of gray moving across the lake.

As the squall moves rapidly towards the distant south shore, the *Algocen* emerges in full sunlight, bearing down upon the north pier lighthouse, or so it appears. With his ship in ballast, and fighting winds of 20 to 25 m.p.h., Captain Parsons keeps the *Algocen* as far over as he can before nosing into the entry. "I almost turned around and went to anchor," he later concedes, "but we were able to use the wind to help pull us over and into the canal." The ship glides diagonally through the entry, the murky water churning up from its propeller, thrashing frantically beneath the fantail, keeping the wind from laying the stern against the north wall. The *Algocen* clears the Aerial Lift Bridge with

room to spare, but in these conditions nothing is taken for granted.

The *Algocen* is making her final trip of the season — and the last of her career. She will take a split load of No. 2 Spring Wheat from Duluth's General Mills elevator and No. 1 Spring Wheat from Superior's Cenex-Harvest States elevator across the harbor. Once unloaded at Les Silos in Port-Carrier the *Algocen* will proceed to Pointe-Noire, where she will be stripped of navigation equipment and other items before being towed to New Jersey to begin life as a containment and reclamation barge for dredge materials.

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Collingwood Shipbuilding on the southern shore of the Georgian Bay in Collingwood, Ontario, completed construction of Hull #191 in the spring of 1968, and the *Algocen* was launched on June 18. She was the last Collingwood-built ship with fore and aft cabins, a stylistic look referred to as the "classic laker" design. Power is provided by four Fairbanks-Morse 12-cylinder diesel engines. Chief Engineer Doug Kilpatrick, who's been aboard for nine years — roughly a third of his career — says the combined output of the engines is 8,000 horsepower, plenty of power to move the 730-foot ship. The caveat, he explains, is that the engines burn marine diesel fuel, more expensive than the blended fuels used on other ships. "It's champagne," adds Third Engineer Larry Meade. At 12,000 gallons a day (roughly 40 tons) in a ship doing 12.5 knots loaded, the fuel costs are under close scrutiny by the vessel's owners and managers. Twenty years ago it wasn't as big a factor, but today it is a contributor to the demise of the *Algocen*.

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With relatively predictable markets for their services, Canadian fleets on the Great Lakes have sought new ways to leverage their assets. The *Algocen* is operated by Seaway Marine Transport of St. Catharines, Ontario, a partnership of two of Canada's largest fleets, Algoma Central Marine and Upper Lakes Group. Until recently, partnerships of this magnitude were uncommon. Seaway Marine Transport was formed in 2000 as a successor to earlier partnerships between Algoma and Upper Lakes for vessel management. Such arrangements have led to increased efficiency dispatching and scheduling and a reduction in operating costs.

Bill Beatty began his career with Algoma as third mate on the *R. Bruce Angus* after 9 1/2 years in the Canadian Coast Guard. Thirty-six years later he sits quietly in the officer's lounge as the *Algocen* loads its last cargo. For the past seven years, the *Algocen* has been home to Bill, as well as many of the crew, the majority hailing from Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces. "Sadness and disappointment" are the words Bill uses as he reflects on the sale of the *Algocen* and the demise of many other fine lakes ships.

Bill can still picture an iced-up Whitefish Bay, packed with ships in early season. "You'd go up in the pilothouse at midnight and you'd be surrounded by ships." Today, the large spring convoys are a thing of the past. The reduction in eastbound grain exports, particularly from Thunder Bay, has been a significant factor in reducing the Canadian fleet. In 1985, 65 percent of the flow of Canada's export grain went eastbound. Today, 65 percent goes to the West Coast. The most tangible effect is the reduction in ships, many called

from the Upper Lakes and Algoma fleets. Among the recent casualties were the *Seaway Queen*, *Algogulf*, *Algoriver*, *Mapleglen*, *Oakglen*, *Quedoc*, *Vandoc*, *Algosound*, *Canadian Harvester*, *Canadian Hunter*, *Canadian Voyageur*, *Canadian Venture* and now the *Algoceen*.

"If you look around and see the shape she's in, it seems well enough to keep going," says Capt. Parsons. But on the inside, the *Algoceen* needs a lot of work. The estimated price tag for repairs and structural renewal runs well into the millions of dollars. While he is pragmatic about its loss, Capt. Parsons will always have fond memories of the ship. A 1980 graduate of the Marine Institute of St. John's, Newfoundland, he began his career with Algoma as a third mate on the *Algoceen*, Capt. Before working on the lakes he sailed deep sea for eight years. On this trip, he was relieving the *Algoceen's* regular skipper, Captain Jens Hougesen, who was away on personal leave.

Everyone understands the competitive nature of the industry. The loss of ships is inevitable, but the loss of people is harder to take. The general populace doesn't think often about the St. Lawrence Seaway, or the Great Lakes, explains Bill Beatty. "If a plant on shore closes and 200 jobs are eliminated, it's all over the news headlines. Out here, when a ship goes away no one notices, but that's roughly 20 jobs."

Throughout the ship, the uncertainty over where they'll be next spring is on the minds of nearly all the crew. Leslie Harvey has sailed all of his 17 years on the *Algoceen*. While he is looking forward to working on a self-unloader, he is sad to part with long-time friends such as Ted Thorne and Henry Baggs.

In the galley, Chief Steward Guylaine Diamond and her staff are talking about Christmas dinner. The Christmas dinner is one of the biggest celebrations on a ship

during the year, and this year will be special. "We are going to have a good time," says Diamond in her French-Canadian accent. "This will be the last Christmas meal, and maybe the last one we have together. We will celebrate."

On deck, Second Mate Dennis Thayer, from Midland, Ontario, shakes

We all have our ways of saying goodbye. Near the end of his watch, with the winter sun low on the horizon, First Mate Bill Beatty poses for a photo with the *Algoceen* as his backdrop. If ever a photo tells a story for someone, for Bill, this will be his photo. The role of Canadian flatbacks in moving grain across a conti-

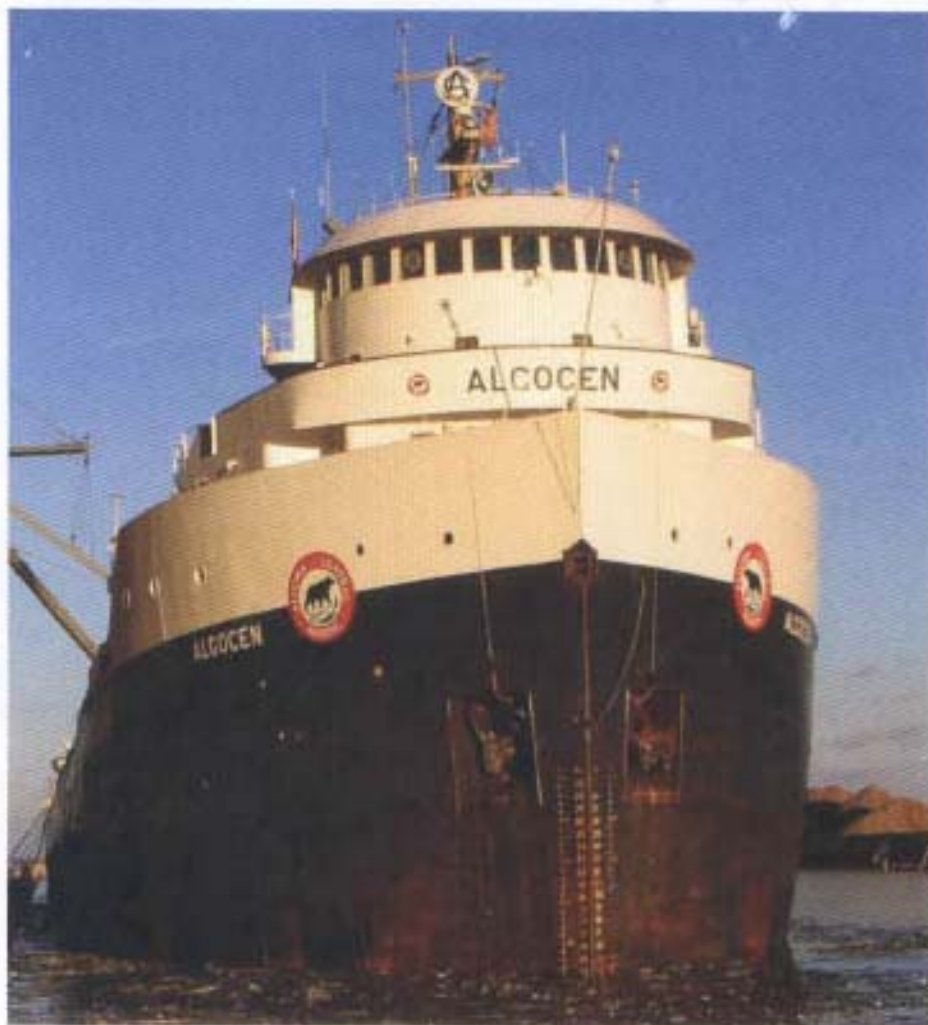


Photo by Sam Lapinski

The Algoceen was Hull #191 at Collingwood Shipbuilding and was launched on June 18, 1968, at Collingwood, Ontario.

hands with one of the longshoremen. Standing amidships, on top of a hatch cover, a group has gathered next to where grain is pouring into an adjacent open hatch; the stevedore manager, longshoremen, grain inspectors, elevator personnel and men from the ship congregate to bid farewell.

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ment has diminished, but the memories of stately ships like the *Algoceen* will be recalled for many years to come.

Pat Lapinski, a native of Superior, Wisconsin, is a writer and photographer who concentrates on the Great Lakes maritime industry. Visit www.inlandmariners.com.