Fair Weather and All the Best:
The Maritime Life of Richard D. Bibby

A spiral of black smoke speeds upward, dissipating into the deep blue sky. A long sleek steamer is coming up river, pushing before it a crest of white water that divides the dark river in perfect symmetry. High above the pilothouse a pennant strains against its line. If you close your eyes for a moment you can hear the sound of the water rushing along the hull as the ship sweeps beneath, and you can imagine the thrill it must have been to stand atop of the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit watching the lake boats race past.

The Detroit River was the parade ground for the steamers of the Great Lakes. The late 1930s was a time when there were a great number of fleets, and an even greater number of ships working the lakes and rivers. The ships ran the course of the river up and down bound, gliding past at all hours of the night and day. It was newsreel material, all matter and fact. There was a sense of purpose and urgency to lakes shipping. These were terrific days to follow the boats around the lakes.

Dick Bibby's bicycle on the Ambassador Bridge.
photo: Dick Bibby

This was Dick Bibby's era on the Great Lakes; a more freewheeling time. "I used to ride my bicycle right out on the bridge. I've got pictures of my bicycle, half in Canada and half in the U.S., right on that yellow line in the middle of the bridge." From up on the bridge Dick's whole world stood before him while his dreams sailed a hundred feet beneath. It was the throb of the engines, the wisps of white smoke trailing along the sides of the hulls, curling around the tall funnels, that drew him to the river. Dick knew he wanted to be on the deck of a northbound freighter, riding the soot and ash express to the steel mills and coal docks of the Great Lakes.

Dick had grown up watching these steel giants and now it was finally his turn to climb aboard. "I shipped out while I was still in high school, in the Hanna fleet." Dick recalls going aboard his first ship, the *David M. Wier*, as if it was yesterday. The *David M. Weir*, built by the Superior Shipbuilding Company at Superior, Wisconsin, was launched in 1907 as the *Sheldon Parks*. By the mid thirties the 540-foot steamer had undergone a series of ownership

changes while remaining under the management of the M. A. Hanna Company of Cleveland. "I went on board at the Hanna Furnace, Detroit, at Zug Island. I was very fascinated by it all because after all these years of intense interest in ships now I was a member of the crew and I was actually gonna work on them. That's when we got $87.50 a month for wages."

Dick would have worked for free just to get on the boats, but he learned quickly that his first job on the boats wasn't one he wanted to repeat any time soon. "My first job was in the galley, as a Porter," he conceded. "'Food Handler' is what they call them because they worked seven days a week, eight and a half to nine hours, over a period of twelve or fourteen." Dick knew it wasn't for him. "You have to like working with food. I didn't, so I got out of that real quick. I took the first deck hand's job that opened up."

Dick went back to high school that fall to complete his senior year, but he was anxious to return to the lakes. He had made a good enough impression during his first year to be hired back by the Hanna fleet the following summer. Over the course of the next several seasons Dick worked on the *Louis W. Hill*, the *Emory L. Ford* and the *Fred G. Hartwell*.

Dick Bibby on the Str. ***Louis W. Hill.***
photo: Dick Bibby

A deck hand's life may have looked better to Dick than that of a porter but you couldn't say that it was an easier life. When viewed from the perspective of today's standards it almost seems unbearable to have lived through, but for a nineteen-year old lad from Detroit it was the job of a lifetime, and a chance to see a bit of the world. "Hanna back then was a big coal company, so they loaded lots of coal. We took loads to the Northwest Hanna docks in Milwaukee, and Menomonie. We loaded coal in Sandusky, Toledo, Huron and Cleveland for upper Great Lakes ports."

The Hanna boats took cargoes both up and down bound. The Lake Michigan run usually meant a stop at Escanaba for iron ore. Dick remembered how much work it was for the deck crew. "These ships didn't have any iron deck hand. The *Louis Hill* had thirty two leaf hatches and every one of them needed a tarp, so you had the old strong backs, batten boards, and clamps." It was a regular routine of putting the tarps on after loading. "You always had to have the tarp on, even in the middle of summer if you're loaded."

If life on deck was one of hard work there was little relief for the crew during their off hours. Cramped, hot quarters were the only respite from the daily chores. Many men were just thankful to hold a job after the tough years of the Depression. Complaining would get you nowhere except to another ship. The work was steady, the wages decent, and the room and board free, so living conditions aboard the lakes were not considered an issue when Dick began his sailing days.

"On the *Fred G. Hartwell* we had eight and nine guys in one room. Just a series of double bunks," Dick recalled. "You'd get way back up that river in the middle of Toledo, in mid-

August or September, so hot you can't breathe. Like an iron lung!" You had guys coming and going in port, and some would go uptown and come back a little stinko, and then upchuck in the room. We didn't know anything else so I mean, hey, I was glad to be there. I thought this was great!" Life on the boats was an eye opening experience for the young man from Detroit, but it would take years before Dick could totally understand what a turn his life had suddenly taken. "For any young kid, from the time when they leave home and suddenly go to sea, it's a rude awakening. You've got a lot of pitfalls to leap. Believe me, I was seeing this all first hand."

As enamored with sailing as Dick was his first year, he wasn't blind to what those working conditions did to the men who worked on the boats. Many of the lake steamers were fitted with passenger quarters and regularly carried guests during the summer months. It was clear to many the difference in how the crew was quartered compared to the accommodations provided for the guests on board. "They never worried at all about the crew. They jammed them in like sardines, but they had these big spacious quarters for the passengers." Dick took it in stride like everyone else. "It's not like there was anything better. We were fortunate to go on these ships. That was it, so I mean hey, if you want to sail and compare those conditions with some of the junkers on the lakes, these were nice ships I'm talking about. Hell, these were good jobs."

Sailors on the lakes in the 1940s were in general more transient, more alcoholic, and more prone to frequently change ships. The lake boats created their own form of industrial freeloading and migration. Men would catch a boat on the lower lakes, only to get off in Marquette or Duluth. A few days later they would catch another boat going back in the direction they had just come from. Maybe they'd stay on this one for a few trips or months before getting off. There were as many reasons as there were men to tell them; maybe the ship was a good firing job, maybe she made good ports. "There were lots of jobs and they could spend that paycheck or you know, have fun and then go back up to Lake Carriers, and what the hell, get another job lickety split." This nomadic existence characterized many of the men who sailed the Great Lakes in the middle of the 20th century.

Dick Bibby (R) visits with Captain Lane on the ***Emory L. Ford*** in 1949.
photo: Dick Bibby

The boats were manned with people from all walks of life. You had to take the good

with the bad for many years. "You'd get people, either they're not qualified or they've got a drinking problem, or they're not trustworthy." Dick recalled what a roll of the dice hiring men to work on the boats could be. The majority of the problems could be traced to the solitary life of the sailor, which often led to trouble with alcohol. "A sailor has a reputation that way, which isn't always fair because there are a lot of nice people that are out on the ships. A lot of those guys who were off and on, they could get away with it for a little while, but later on when things began to tighten up, they were outside looking in. When you started to get in to where you had to have seniority to hold a job, and if you'd screw up, miss a ship or get fired or get drunk, then you'd have to go all the way back down the bottom of the seniority list."

A young Dick Bibby watching passenger steamer ***City of Buffalo*** in Conneaut harbor, Ohio.
photo: Dick Bibby

At a very young age Dick found himself extremely interested in the big lake ships. Dick's parents kept a summer cottage on Lake Erie, three miles west of Conneaut harbor. It was during summer visits there that Dick developed a keen interest in watching the small harbor tugs. Little did he know at the time that it would become a lifelong pursuit. "My parents first went to Conneaut when I was one year old," explained Dick. It was during one of these summer visits that Dick met a fellow named Fred Brown. Fred's family owned a fruit stand along old West Lake Road. During one of the stops at the roadside stand Dick accidentally found out that Fred also worked as a fireman on the steam powered harbor tug *New York*. "I went nuts," recalled Dick, after getting an open invitation for a ride on one of the tugs. "Brownie said 'Well, bring the kid down some time and we'll take him out when we're dumping ashes." It was the start of a friendship that would last for many years. "I got some great photographs of the tugs down there, marvelous vintage black and white pictures of the *Michigan*, the *Vermont*, the *Frank W*, the *Kentucky*, the *Texas*, the *New York* and the *Minnesota*."

Dick enjoyed taking pictures of the tugs and brought his Kodak Brownie along on many trips to the waterfront. "They used to turn the ships, or what they call 'wind' them, right inside

the harbor. They would bring them from the ore dock over and they'd put the stem, or the bow of the ship, right up in the corner and the aft tug would pull the stern around," explained Dick. This method of turning the ships around became one of Dick's favorite activities to watch.

In the heyday of U. S. Steel Conneaut harbor was one of the busiest ports on the Great Lakes. "You saw ships representing all the Great Lakes fleets at Conneaut, and with these five Hulletts they could work them out in two and a half or three hours, some of these small boats." After unloading, the steamers would refuel enough coal to make the return trip up the lakes. "There was always somebody going into the coal dock, which was in the back of the harbor, and all these U.S. Steel ships, after they were unloaded and they were turned, and then they were backed into the fuel dock." Dick is still amazed today at the large volume of ship traffic that came into Conneaut when he was growing up.

Dick's friend Brownie eventually became a tug captain. The two men remained friends long after Brownie left the pilothouse to become manager of towing operations for the ports of Fairport, Ashtabula, Conneaut and Erie. Dick has many fond memories of Brownie and the Conneaut tugs. "When that *William Irvin* was brand new she came into Conneaut on her maiden trip," Dick recounted. The *Irvin* was a beautiful ship, headed by a captain who was extremely proud of his new charge. He worked his crew continually to keep her looking clean and sharp for the important guests that would travel with them. Dick recalled one particular trip the *Irvin* made into Conneaut on a blustery November day that went a long way toward tarnishing the *Irvin's* stately reputation. "She had like a tarp out over the bow, for the convenience of the passengers. Everything was for the passengers. She was a "passenger" ship," emphasized Dick. "They had that triple deck house forward that contained those beautiful passenger quarters," he explained. "Brownie was on the *New York*, up forward, and of course she was snugged right under the bow of the *Irvin*, and he was working like a son of a gun. So the chief engineer had to throw the exhaust up through the stack, which makes it draw faster - to make the fires hotter. When they'd work really hard through the stack small

Steamer ***William A. Irvin*** at Conneaut, Ohio.
photo: Dick Bibby

chunks of red-hot coal would just blow right out through the stack. The *New York* was working hard, like an old locomotive, just working to beat hell. The skipper was screaming that those red-hot clinkers were going all over this white paint and catching the tarp on fire. He was screaming to shut it off," laughed Dick. "So the skipper was screaming and my old friend Fred Brown yelled up, 'These tugs don't run on love Cap.' I never forgot that. I thought that was a memorable quotation."

During the first three seasons he worked on the old steamers Dick didn't miss many opportunities to take pictures. It was a trip on Lake Superior aboard the *Louis W. Hill* that presented a series of once in a life time shots for the young deck hand / photographer. "We were up on the north shore, up around Michipicoten Island, in November." Dick set the stage as he retold of their adventure with a crippled Canadian steamer, the *Fort Wildoc*. He explained how in heavy weather when the stern of a ship comes up out of the water it causes the propeller to speed up. The engineer has to throttle her back or risk damaging the engine. The *Fort Wildoc* was pitching so much that one time they didn't get it slowed down quick enough. "They threw one of the propeller blades. When it came off of the hub it took the shoe, which holds the rudder, so she didn't have any rudder. She was drifting in this storm, right in the trough of the sea, just rolling. It was unbelievable."

Photo of stricken ***Fort Wildoc*** on Lake Superior.
photo: Dick Bibby

Dick grabbed his camera and ran back on deck. By now the crew of the *Louis W. Hill* began to assemble on deck to come to the aid of the *Fort Wildoc*. "I'm out there with my Kodak Bantam," recalled Dick of the moments before the rescue began. "We fired I don't know, four or five shots from the Lyle gun, trying to get a line on her. You start with a lighter line, and then you work up to a towing (Jewel) cable." The heavy seas prevented the *Hill* from getting a line on the stricken *Fort Wildoc* and for many hours, into the late afternoon, it was a challenge for Captain Maitland, skipper on the *Louis W. Hill*, to maneuver the *Hill* to a favorable position to assist. "We messed around with her all day; we launched a life boat and all this and that, trying to get over to her. We finally got a line on her and we towed her from up

there right down to just above the Soo." The salvage money garnered by the tow gave the thirty-two men of the *Hill* a nice little Christmas bonus that year.

World War II would put a quick stop to Dick's budding Great Lakes maritime career. Dick received a call from the Pittsburgh draft office, along with an invitation to meet with them in person. "Now, what's your excuse for not wanting to go in the Army?" questioned the draft board officer. Dick learned quickly that his meeting wasn't going to be a pleasant one. He did his level best to explain what he did on the lakes and how his job helped move tons of valuable iron ore needed for the war effort. "I'm an able-bodied seaman," explained Dick. The simple explanation did little to impress the officer, who did little to disguise his feeling of contempt for the young man before him. "He leaned back in his chair and laughed while looking at the other guys," recalled Dick. "We haven't heard that one before. Mr. Bibby, would you like to explain to everybody here, just what is an able-bodied seaman?" Dick practically ran from the draft board meeting to the maritime commission office in downtown Pittsburgh to sign up rather than be put in the Army. He was soon headed off to maritime school in New London, Connecticut. After graduating Dick worked as a mate in the merchant marine, primarily on liberty ships, ore ships, and troop transports. One trip took him as far around the world as Murmansk, Russia. It beat slogging through the mud in the infantry.

Dick Bibby as merchant marine officer.

Dick aboard the liberty ship ***John Merrick.*** photo: Dick Bibby

While the war did its share to disrupt Dick's sailing career on the lakes he also contributed to the cause when he got married. Sailing and being married has rarely been a good mix and Dick felt he had to choose between being at sea or finding a shore job so he could be at home with his new bride. At the time Dick was in the ore fleet working on a steamer hauling bauxite from Trinidad up the east coast of North America. It was steady work, but kept him a long way from home, so it hardly seemed possible when Dick heard about a position in Cleveland with his old employer the M. A. Hanna Company. "They offered me a job and I went back with the Hanna Company on February 28, 1946. I don't know," he shrugged, "it's just a date that stuck to my mind. That's when I came ashore."

Dick and his wife soon moved to Cleveland, though early on Dick had regrets about making the switch from sailing to a life on the beach. "Many of the guys that were way behind me (in the ore fleet) became skippers." It was a difficult decision, but Dick had his hands full as Hanna's director of personnel, and he stayed focused on the job at hand. In some

respects it was a job with a limited amount of control. Dick remembered his efforts as a young man to get on the boats and so he did what he could to help put men on the right boats, but no matter what the company policy, the Captains and Chiefs had a lot of input into who would work on "their" vessel. "Each mate or skipper would bring back the same foundation of a crew every spring," explained Dick. "Wheelsmen were real important because they're the guys that steer the ship. A real good wheelsman can make a skipper or a mate look good, especially an old time wheelsman that knows those rivers and all the turns. The engineers had the same deal aft with oilers, firemen and coal passers." The office gave a lot of leeway when it came to hiring. "We never would thrust anybody down their throat. If a skipper wanted to bring a certain guy along as a bosun, or he had a wheelsman in mind, we'd say 'Sure.' Some of those skippers had the same wheelsmen and watchmen for twelve, fifteen years."

An era of change was coming to the lakes. At the end of the war technology would begin to have a big impact on both the forward and after ends of the ship. In the engine room the automation of the boilers began to eliminate many of the engine room jobs. Dick saw it all from his desk at the office. Having sailed he could see both sides of the story. It wasn't easy to watch. "When they started to automate the boilers, that was the end of two firemen; when they got rail-side controls, that was the end of the deck watches. They got milk dispensing machines and stuff in the galley and that was the end of the night porter. It was just a process of elimination."

Dick never wavered in his passion for knowledge about the lakes and the boats that sailed them. After settling in Cleveland, Dick became a charter member of the Great Lakes Historical Society. One of his early efforts with the society was to serve on the photographic committee. They began to amass and catalog the large collection of vessel and lakes related photographs that the museum has today. He also began to write stories about the boats and the men who sailed them. Dick's advantage of having been a sailor lent a unique perspective to his writing, as when the steamer *Henry Steinbrenner* went down off the west end of Isle Royale. "I was in the Cleveland office at the time, and I had access to the log book of the *Joe Thompson*, which was the first ship that reached the scene where she went down." Dick read the log entries, talked to the men on the *Thompson*, and pieced together the story. It was a story that Dick felt compelled to tell. All too often the loss of a ship under these circumstances is tinged with irony. The loss of the *Steinbrenner* carried with it a personal price that shook many members of the Hanna family. "The Chief Engineer that was on the *Steinbrenner*, Harold Race, had been in the Hanna line his entire career, but he wasn't going up fast enough and they offered him a chief's job over in Steinbrenner, so he left Hanna and went over to the *Henry Steinbrenner*. He went down with the ship," Dick sadly recalled.

Writing the story gave Dick an opportunity to meet Mr. Henry Steinbrenner, the legendary man in the Great Lakes shipping industry for which the vessel was named. "He was a marvelous man," thought Dick after he met with him in Cleveland. "They always ran things with a tight fist you know," Dick mentioned. "They ran a tight ship, they ran things their way and they never had the good reputation that some of the other fleets had, but when I wrote this story about the demise of the ship Henry was very nice to me. He just put a couple of red

marks and said ‘If I were you I would rather that you wouldn’t say this or something like that." Reputation or not, Henry Steinbrenner was a respected man, and Dick had no problem with adjusting his story on the wreck.

Following ten years in the Cleveland office Dick was offered the position of vessel agent for the Hanna fleet. In late August 1956 Dick took the job and moved with his family to Duluth, Minnesota, to be closer to the mines and the iron ore shipping ports of Lake Superior. Dick explained that the job of the vessel agent was to coordinate the activity between the mines, the ore docks and the ships, to assure that there was something for the boat when it arrived in port. "In other words," explained Dick, "you have a *George M. Humphrey* steaming up the Great Lakes which is gonna need 25,000 tons of ore. When that ship gets up here that cargo has to have been mined, come down in rail cars from the range and been loaded into the ore dock, so that when that ship comes in there’s no delay." It could easily become a complicated task.

Dick Bibby (front, left) poses for group photo of the Duluth vessel agents, circa 1956.
photo: Dick Bibby

"I enjoyed it," said Dick, looking back on his days at the Hanna office in Duluth. "You’re right in the middle. You’re not only handling cargo, but you’re doing everything else. All of the passengers going up; you’re making arrangements for passengers to go ashore, to get aboard, take their liquor orders, setting up passenger trips. Whatever happens to that ship, whatever she needs, like with personnel - someone needed a dentist on the afternoon of July 4th, or if they lose an anchor. Whatever, you are the representative for that ship, and you get into a lot of monkey business."

In the 1950s there was a lot of swapping of hulls and cargoes between the lake fleets, and Hanna did its share of dealing. It was almost as much work keeping track of who was in the fleet as it was in keeping track of where they were on the lakes. Dick recalled with ease some of the early wheeling and dealing that was done with Hanna. "They sold the *John C. Williams* to Midland. We initially sold the old *David Weir*, the *Carl C. Conway* and the *George R. Fink*. We sold them to Browning. Then we came back with the *Emory L. Ford*, the *Fred G. Hartwell* and the *Edward J. Berwind*. The *Albert E. Heekin* became the *Silver Bay*." In addition to the deals made with the older vessels Hanna began a vigorous building campaign, beginning in the early 1950s, in an effort to stay competitive with the other fleets. "The *Joe Thompson* was the first one," recalled Dick. "It came out in the fall of fifty two and then

the *Ernest T. Weir* and the *George M. Humphrey*, the *Leon Falk, Jr.*, the *Paul H. Carnahan* and finally the *George A. Stinson*."

As a vessel, agent keeping in contact with all of the boats when necessary sometimes proved to be a more difficult task than naming all the boats in the fleet. "They had what they called Lorain County Radio, and they had radio stations all over. Duluth, Port Washington, all over. The stations were manned twenty-four hours a day during the shipping season, relaying valuable information between the ships. In the days before ship to shore radio was common these stations were the lifeline of the Great Lakes maritime industry. The stations would provide contact to and from the vessels, their agents and owners. In addition, they served as a way for family members to contact their loved ones in the event of an emergency. Vessel agents like Dick used the information they received from the Lorain operators to provide timely updates to dock operators, repair crews, stevedores, as well as laundry and grocery services, so that when the vessel arrived in port all of the necessary business of operating and supplying the ship could be taken care of without any delays.

Dick personally devised a large, hand written spreadsheet to help him keep track of all the details that went with each load. He could tell you when a ship arrived at the piers, when it made the dock, what grade of ore they were going to load, any delays they may have encountered underway or at the dock, when the ship started to load, when it stopped loading, what their draft was, and most importantly to the bottom line and schedule, when she was to be expected at the lower lake ports. Having this finite tracking system at his fingertips gave Dick the ability to update the office in Cleveland if there were any situations that needed to be dealt with.

One of Dick's spread sheets is particularly covered with notes and drawings for a typical load of National Steel Company taconite pellets scheduled for delivery at the Hanna Furnace at Zug Island in Detroit, the place where Dick caught his first vessel as an eighteen year old lad. The vessel had cleared the Superior entry at 1:55 p.m. If anyone had been standing along the crumbling concrete break wall at the end of Wisconsin Point that Sunday afternoon they would have witnessed the historic departure of the steamer *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Dick ran his finger underneath the vessel name written on the spreadsheet. He ran his finger along the notes. "Here's her draft, here's the delays, and we figured she'd be down at Detroit at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday. Then as this information started to come in..." Dick's voice tails off into silence. The loss of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* is the most talked about event on the Great Lakes in the last quarter of the 20th century. The wreck never fails to bring out an opinion or a belief, or an admission of prayer for the men who sailed aboard her. Many of the people associated with the Great Lakes maritime community have a story to tell about the *Fitzgerald*, if you ask, but many keep quiet about it out of deference to the families and the memories of the crew.

The loss of vessels like the *Steinbrenner* and the *Fitzgerald* are among the memories that stayed with Dick throughout his long career. In looking back, Dick believes that one of the biggest changes he has seen on the lakes is the size of the vessels in today's lakes fleet, and the tremendous loss of jobs as a result of the decreases in the overall number of ships. "At the

end of World War II there were some three hundred eighty, almost four hundred American ore carriers alone. Now I think that there's what, around fifty or sixty? Subtract sixty from three hundred eighty and think of all the captains and officers and crew that are gone."

In 1982 Dick retired from Hanna and the job he held at Duluth for twenty-six years. As a valued member of the Twin Ports maritime community Dick was honored in 1978 as the "Marine Man of the Year." There could be no greater honor for the man who loved tugboats and steamships. In his time at Duluth Dick had firmly established his identity as the vessel representative for Hanna.

Dick Bibby following ceremonies in which he was chosen "Harbor Man of the Year" in Duluth.
photo: Dick Bibby

To those who have are fortunate to make contact with Dick Bibby it doesn't take long to realize that the subject of great boats and Great Lakes is his passion. Dick has garnered the reputation of being a very knowledgeable marine historian, a person who understands what this movement of ships is all about. He is someone who has lived this story since he was just a kid watching the tugs in Conneaut harbor, from the perspective of a youth looking down from a bridge over our nation's busiest inland waterway, from the life of a sailor battening hatches on a thirty year old steamer, and from a logistical standpoint as a vessel agent for a venerable fleet. Dick has nurtured his interest by taking thousands of photographs, and by collecting photos of boats from books, magazines, newspaper articles, postcards, and from fellow photographers.

I learned a lot in my brief conversation with Dick, yet I walked away feeling like I had only made a feeble attempt at unlocking the treasure house of information he holds within. It didn't seem fair. It's hard to get to know someone in a short time, but if you're interested in ships, a person worth getting to know in the Duluth harbor would be Richard Bibby. As Dick would cheerily say, "Fair weather, and all the best."