

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

**T**his past summer, Jim Van Dongen, captain of the 1,000-footer *Indiana Harbor*, announced plans to retire, signing off on a career that began officially in 1967 but truly started long before.

Van Dongen's father was a captain on the Grand Trunk carriers, shuttling people, railcars and goods across Lake Michigan between Muskegon and Milwaukee. "I was wheeling the *Milwaukee Clipper* when I was five years old," recalls Jim. "Of course, I had to stand on a couple of books to see over the wheel, but I've been sailing all my life."

As an adult, Van Dongen returned to the Grand Trunk Carriers in 1967, following a three-year tour in the Navy. Unable to find steady work on shore, he bounced around between the three Grand Trunk vessels as well as the tanker *Mercury* and the steamer *William Clay Ford*, working AB jobs like deck watch, watchman and wheelman. Two years later, at the invitation of a family friend, Capt. Wilbur "Buzz" Buswell, Van Dongen took a fill-in wheeling job on the steamer *John J. Boland*. "I caught the *Boland* at seven in the morning in Grand Haven, and I've been with American Steamship ever since."

**Early experiences.** In the beginning of his career, he worked aboard nearly all of the old Boland & Cornelius steamers, taking his first licensed job in 1970 as Third Mate on the 504-foot *Harris N. Snyder*. At the time, Boland & Cornelius/American Steamship was primarily invested in the stone trade, working cargoes out of Stoneport, Calkite, Cedarville and Port Inland to build power plants, outer harbors and breakwalls along the Lower Lakes. Van Dongen steadily worked his way up the hawsepipe, and in 1984, under the tutelage of veteran American Steamship Company (ASC) skippers like Harold Sommes, Van Dongen attained the rank of Captain. He remembers taking command of the *Buffalo* and being a bit unnerved with the responsibility. "When a guy hands you \$65 million worth of ship, you definitely don't want to bend it—talk about stress!"

The modernization of the ASC in the 1970s gradually did away with all but a few of the old steamers, and by the 1990s, the *John J. Boland*, in long-term lay-up at Duluth-Superior, was all that remained. Partly because it was his first ship with ASC, Van Dongen remained partial to the *Boland*, so when the opportunity came to return the vessel to service in 1992, he gladly accepted the job of sailing her. "It was back to basics," he recalls of the *Boland*. "You had to rely on your skills and not on technology. That was the best job I ever had with this company."

**Moving on.** In 1996, coupled with the sale of the *Boland* and the retirement of Captain H. Peter Gronwall, Van Dongen took command of the *Indiana Harbor*. For the past eight years, he has enjoyed the role of Captain of one of the largest ships on the Great Lakes, relishing the opportunity to do what he loves best, sailing. "The best part of the job is the ship handling. I'm off in my own world when I'm doing that." As the summer of 2004 came to an end, so did Van Dongen's long career. In mid-September, he made his last trip before passing the reins of command to Captain William Yowell.

As he prepared to leave the *Indiana Harbor*, the job, and his career, Van Dongen took with him many cherished memories, as well as one small piece of memorabilia dating back to his first job with ASC, the original wooden stool from the wheel stand of the *John J. Boland*. "The Captain and the 2nd Mate used to make Martin houses in the pilothouse, and they used the stool for a sawhorse," ex-



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## Destined to sail

Capt. Jim Van Dongen retires from ASC

plained Jim. The saw cut marks, like vivid memories of a lengthy career, are still evident today as he pulls the stool from its place in the front window of the *Indiana Harbor*. For this captain, from the beginning to the end, the circle has been completed.

Van Dongen and his wife Linda plan to travel the country in their Winnebago, with Jim as captain, of course, and they both look forward to spending the winter as far away from snow and cold as they can get. In looking back over a career spanning 37 years, Van Dongen admits to no regrets. "I guess I was destined to sail, and I've enjoyed every minute of it." ■