



Meet the Crew

ERIC WIESE

Earning respect

Eric Wiese began, may end his career on the *Roger Blough*

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Since it was launched in 1972, the *Roger Blough* has been a steady presence on the upper Great Lakes, shuttling iron-laden taconite pellets for use in blast furnaces from Minnesota to Indiana and Ohio.

In charge of the *Blough's* massive power plant is Chief Engineer Eric Wiese. Dressed in blue coveralls, his hair and beard gray, commensurate with his 30-plus years of sailing on the Lakes, Eric is soft spoken about his career on the boats. Like many, Eric's career began with no real plan of action. In 1970, following the footsteps of a cousin, Eric set off from his home in Cohoes, New York for the State University of New York (SUNY) to study marine engineering.

"It sounded like a pretty interesting lifestyle and the money was excellent," Eric explained. "I've always been more interested in the engineering aspect of things, machinery and technology, and the adventure of sailing appealed to my age."

Four years later, with a Third Assistant Engineer's license in his hand, Eric climbed aboard his first ship on the Great Lakes, the two-year-old *Roger Blough*.

"I got on the ship in Two Harbors; I believe it was in early September, 1974."

Eric still easily recalls his first impression of the *Blough*. "It's just a little bit shorter than a 1,000-footer. When you walk down the

dock in Two Harbors, you see more of the width of the vessel at first. It struck me as being much bigger than I anticipated."

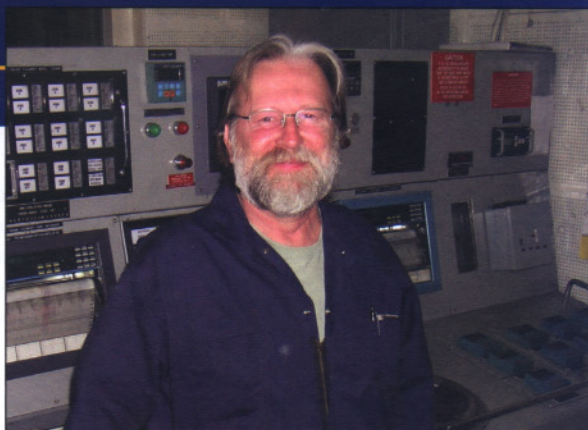
Holding a license and sailing on a license are two different things, and Eric is quick to admit that school began in earnest on the *Blough*.

"They were sailing year 'round. The navigation season ran the full year, and it was either late January or early February that we went into Milwaukee, where they used to lay the boat up, and they started the overall program on the engines," Eric recalled. "I went home for about two weeks and then went back to Milwaukee."

While the Great Lakes weren't exactly close to his home in upstate New York, they were closer than a job sailing deep sea, and Eric found the pace and the scenery to his liking. For the next four years, he continued to sail with the Great Lakes fleet, working on vessels such as the *Callaway*, *Anderson*, and *Clarke*. In October, 1978, he went to work for rival Interlake Steamship Company, as a permanent Second Assistant on the newly-built *Mesabi Miner*.

Eric would spend the majority of his career with Interlake, most of it working on their three diesel-powered vessels. During that time he worked his way up the ranks, earning his First Assistant license in the early 1980s, and nearly a decade later, his Chief's license.

In 2003, following an unexpected change



Engineer Eric Wiese heads into his 32nd year aboard *Roger Blough*.

in Interlake's affiliation with its engineering union, Eric left the fleet he had sailed with for 25 years and headed back to the AMO union hall to look for a new home. It was a difficult decision. He left behind many friends, his company seniority and his permanent Chief's job.

Taking the change in stride and not letting a small bump in the road derail his career, Eric soon found his steps leading him back to a familiar place, down a long dusty dock to the aft boarding ladder of the *Roger Blough*.

"It was amazing," laughs Eric, vividly remembering the first time he had been aboard the ship. "I hadn't been there in almost 30 some odd years and, of course, certain things on the ship had changed quite a bit, but the general overall look of the place hadn't changed in the whole time."

Eric is back with Great Lakes Fleet and working as a relief Chief on the *Blough* where he began his career. A lot has changed for Eric since he first stepped into an engine room. The early years of handling tools to complete a job has grown into handling the overall responsibility for the ship's entire power plant. While it involves more paperwork than he sometimes enjoys, Eric's engineering knowledge and people skills are put to good use keeping the *Blough* running around the clock.

One thing hasn't changed and that is Eric's personal philosophy and attitude about running his engine room and working with his crew.

"As with everything else," Eric said, "respect is something that's earned."

Eric has more years behind him than ahead, but isn't ready to call it quits. Even though he said he's looking at "the back side of it," this spring, without looking back too much, Eric will begin his 32nd season on the Lakes. ■



Roger Blough is the last traditionally-built laker, with cabins fore and aft. (Photo by Patrick Lapinski).