

# NOR'EASTER

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## THE FINAL SEASON

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**I**n spring, dense fog brings the fuel tanker REISS MARINE to nearly a complete standstill. The captain and crew listen intently for the sound of a bell buoy, or of water lapping against a dock. Sailing by instinct and radar, hoping to God that whoever else is out there is doing the same, the tanker heads up the St. Louis River cross-channel.

In the North country, spring gives way to summer with surprising suddenness. Turgid waters spread out behind the vessel in concentric patterns, with the REISS MARINE continuing onward. On a hot, steamy day even the cold waters of Lake Superior can't cool enough air for easy breathing.

Fall brings a crispness to the air, a reminiscence of the warmer days of summer, and a dread for the ice and cold soon to come. Surrounded by the deceptive beauty of the colors, the REISS MARINE pulls up alongside a hurried freighter. Fall becomes the harbinger season for the sailor, and renews the pulse slowed by summer's warmth.

When winter comes, the REISS MARINE pushes through ice often several feet thick. It takes twice as long to do anything. Each day pits the integrity of the ship's hull against the integrity of a man's career should a shard of ice pierce the vessel below the water line. Winter's short days make it seem like a time of eternal night.

In August, 1995 Dick McLean retired as captain of the REISS MARINE, ending a quarter century career on the Great Lakes. In the year that saw Cal Ripkin, Jr. celebrated nationwide for consecutive games played in baseball, Captain McLean also reached a milestone, modestly observing that he had never missed a day of work in over thirty years because



Popular shipmaster Dick McLean poses with crewmen on WM. H. BENNETT about 20 years ago.

Harold Andresen photo, Museum collection

of illness. The captain is a real throwback to the days of iron men and wooden ships.

Dick McLean was born in Duluth. His father was a steamboat man and the family made homes in many of the port towns along the lower lakes. Life aboard Great Lakes steamers for Dick began before he was even old enough to remember. "We kept ship behind the breakwall in Buffalo when I was a kid. I was about three or four years old then," recalls Dick. "I don't remember that, but we had pictures."

As the young McLean grew up, the family eventually returned to Duluth while his father moved up the career ladder, at the tender age of 28, becoming the youngest captain on the lakes and working for the old Buckeye Steamship Company. Dick's interest in the lakes continued to grow. He recalled the unusual but congenial schedule his father sometimes kept on the steamers.

"When my dad used to come in, he was on the SIMON J. MURPHY. They used to carry salt in here. They'd be in four or five days unloading salt, then they'd load grain. He was on there several years, and every year he spent more time in port than he did on the lake. Then they'd go to Buffalo and spend three days down there unloading grain, and then four, five, six, seven days up here. So he had a lot of port time."

It was an opportune time for Dick to see his father, and a good lark for he and his friends from school. "I'd take some of my friends down and we'd go aboard the boat and visit," explained Dick. The young McLean quickly made friends with many of his father's crew on these visits. "I got to know all the guys. They kept a pretty steady crew on there." For a sailing family accustomed to the vagaries of schedules and the completeness of a season on the Great Lakes, it was the







*Dick McLean reminisced about his time on the old J. S. ASHLEY.*

*University of Detroit Marine collection*

best of both worlds for the McLeans.

By the time Dick reached high school he was old enough to have already taken several trips aboard the steamers with his father. "I used to look forward to school vacations in the summertime because I could make trips with him." These trips were the precursor of a life on the lakes for the young lad.

Just out of high school in 1947, Dick shipped out as seaman aboard the steamer A.A. AUGUSTUS. A shortage of manpower, similar to that which had placed his father in a captain's position at an early age, quickly moved Dick up to a wheelsman's spot on the steamer. While the stint aboard the AUGUSTUS whetted his appetite, it would be the next eight years aboard the steamer J.S. ASHLEY that would become the formative years for the young sailor.

"I remember when I was Third Mate on the ASHLEY, going through the Straits of Mackinac. The first time, the skipper was up there. After that he wouldn't come up. I'm sure he was

looking out of the deadlight down below in his room. In fact, I could look down on the forecastle and see a shadow walking back and forth," he remembered. "So I know he wasn't sleeping, but it gives you confidence when you have a skipper like that."

Many in the fleet thought of an assignment on the ASHLEY as a trip to the graveyard. For the young McLean, however, it would be a period of learning and growth. "She was a self-unloader. It was the only self-unloader John T. Hutchinson had out of thirty-some boats. She just ran Lake Michigan ninety percent of the time" explained Dick. "Once a year we'd come up to Munising and Marquette with a split load, and about three times a year we'd go down to Detroit; other than that we ran Green Bay, Muskegon, Indiana Harbor, Chicago," recalled Dick of the steamer's routine schedule.

In the early 1950s the self-unloader was an anomaly, not just to the Buckeye fleet, but to nearly every other fleet on the lakes. The J.S. ASHLEY was built at the American Ship Building

Co. yard in 1909 at Lorain, Ohio. She measured 524 feet long. The steamer was converted to a self-unloader in 1937.

For John T. Hutchinson's fleet the ASHLEY was consigned to haul stone. "I don't think we ever had a pound of iron ore in her. I was on there eight years." Dick liked sailing on the ASHLEY and worked his way up from deckhand to Second Mate. "We used to haul all the open hearth (ore) to Indiana Harbor, which only self-unloaders could haul then. They didn't have any unloading rigs at Indiana Harbor," Dick recalled. "It would take us six to eight hours to unload."

After paying his dues on the ASHLEY, Dick moved on to other vessels in the Buckeye fleet. Inevitably he ended up on ships which his father had once skippered, working with men who had sailed for many years with the senior McLean. Still, at the dawning of the 1960s, it became harder to hold a job on shipboard. The Buckeye Steamship fleet grew smaller as it began to dispose of its oldest and smallest vessels. Many licensed crewmen were working at positions beneath their rank to stay aboard, including Dick, who had been bumped down to Third Mate.

As each season became more tenuous than the last, Dick jumped at a chance to sign on with Cleveland's Marine Fueling Company when a captain's position opened up. Even though he would be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, he would be home with his family instead of being away for the nine months out of the year between fit-out and lay-up. After the Buckeye fleet folded, Dick would look back on his days aboard the ASHLEY with fondness. For now, his future would be at home in Duluth.

Dick began his career with Marine Fueling at Duluth on Aug. 1, 1961, aboard the steel hulled tanker WILLIAM H. BENNETT. The BENNETT had been built in 1950 by Captain Luther Blount at Warren, R. I., to service the bunker fuel business of Louis LaDuca in Buffalo, New York. She was brought up to Lake Superior by Marine Fueling Company in 1958. The outward profile of the BENNETT was not particularly attractive. She was powered by twin outboard motors which gave her an unusual appearance. For the fledgling Marine Fueling Co., she was just the ticket to fill a great need in the remote Duluth-Superior harbor.

The BENNETT arrived in the Twin Ports at an opportune time. Many of the lakers were undergoing conversions from coal to oil fuel. The mainstay of the business for the BENNETT was providing "bunker C," or No. 6 oil, to the vessels arriving in port. Rather than stopping at a dockside fuel station, the vessels were now able, by the use of the BENNETT, to fuel while





**WM. H. BENNETT was Blount Marine's first shipbuilding contract.**

*Harold Andresen photo, Museum collection*

they loaded cargo. Business boomed for the BENNETT and her owners.

The 1960s were busy years for McLean on the little ship. Many vessels relied upon the bunker C fuel, taking an average of 40,000 gallon per load. The BENNETT could pump from 900 to 1,000 gallons a minute, so that putting a full load on a laker would take an average of an hour and fifteen minutes. On some occasions the capacity of the BENNETT was stretched to the limit. "The WHITE, PATTON and GIRDLER used to come up here. They were the fastest ships on the lakes. They used to take 60,000." Dick knew the necessity of arriving on time to fuel many of the vessels due to their short turn-around time in the port. "They'd go into

Burlington Northern (Great Northern ore docks), take two-thirds of a load and they're on their way. They'd be there an hour, hour and a half, maybe two hours, and they're on their way to

Marquette," recalled Dick. "With the partial loads split between Superior and Marquette the vessels could pump ballast while loading. We had to be there on arrival," he said. "They took so many cars here at BN, then they're on their way to Marquette, so they could pump out the rest of their ballast on the way down the lake."

The increased demand for diesel fuel in the seventies began to make working with the BENNETT more difficult and, more importantly for Marine Fueling, uneconomical. Captain McLean recalled one particular incident that really brought home the growing inadequacy of the BENNETT. "We got the CANADOC in here, which was a Paterson Steamship Co. boat. Never been in here before; well, if she had, she hadn't ordered fuel before. He wanted 60,000 gallons of No. 2 diesel," remembered Dick. "Now, we carry 17,000. We have an inch and a half pipe to load, an inch and a half pipe to pump off, and it took us four hours to load at our dock. It took us about four hours to pump off on him. We had to make four of these trips!"

In addition to the CANADOC, the BENNETT also had to continue to fuel her regular customers. Despite working nearly around the clock, Captain McLean felt they got off pretty easy with the Canadian. "Luckily," laughed Dick, "he had to make about three elevators here, so he was in for about three days."

The arrival of thousand-foot vessels on the Great Lakes meant the end for many of the older, smaller lake carriers. The rippling effect brought



**Unique BENNETT was driven by a pair of Murray & Tregurtha outboards.**

*Harold Andresen photo, Museum collection*



about by the sheer size of these new carriers also directly impacted the fate of the WILLIAM H. BENNETT. The 1,000-foot STEWART J. CORT made its debut at Superior in 1972, and became the first in her class fueled by Marine Fueling. Captain McLean vividly remembered the arrival of the CORT. "That's when Marine Fueling knew the boat we had was obsolete."

Fueling the CORT and the larger vessels that came out of the seventies construction boom became a chore that required the improvised efforts of the Marine Fueling crew. A small barge was purchased from Fraser Shipyard to supplement the BENNETT. The barge had previously been used by the shipyard to fuel galley stoves aboard the steamers, and it added about 13,000 gallons of new capacity for Marine Fueling. The CORT's capacity of 70,000 gallons of diesel fuel still far exceeded the capability of the little tanker to

complete the job. An additional boat was brought up from Toledo to further help reduce the valuable time needed to fuel the CORT.

Captain McLean remembered that it was, at best, a short term solution to a long term problem. "We used to bring three pieces of equipment over there

just to fuel one boat. They knew this wasn't practical. If they wanted to stay in business and keep up with the times, they were going have to come up with a better piece of equipment."

The Blount Marine Industries shipyard in Warren, R. I. was given the contract for the new tanker. In its

infancy Blount had built the BENNETT, their first major shipbuilding contract. The design of the new tanker for Marine Fueling would be much more sophisticated, showing just how far the technical capabilities of the company had advanced. Captain McLean and his engineer were given the chance to add their input to the vessel design, and made several trips to the shipyard during the construction.

The overall capacity of the REISS MARINE was five times that of the BENNETT. The REISS MARINE was also capable of blending fuels together as they were pumped onto a laker. This became



*REISS MARINE was "state of the art" when she entered service, a far cry from predecessor WM. H. BENNETT.*

*Corps of Engineers photo*



*REISS MARINE and her master earned a reputation for their reliability.*

*Author's photo*



more important as vessels on the lakes began using a mixture of diesel and oil, sometimes called an "intermediate" fuel. Pumping these intermediate fuels was another example of how versatile the REISS MARINE was. There was no comparison between the sleek new vessel and the older BENNETT. "When I first went on that BENNETT we didn't have radar. The boats we fuel come straight in the break wall over there," explained Dick. "That's when they used the old docks, before BN 5 was there. They'd come straight in, tie up,

Straining to see and hear from inside of the ship's small pilot house, McLean described the tortuous process of counting the minutes in the obsessive fog. "Another seven minutes. You hoped that you could see it. I'm up in the pilot house trying to steer with the magnetic compass." Dick shook his head when recalling how basic the navigation system was on the BENNETT. "We didn't have a gyro. You're off ten degrees sometimes before you even notice."

The business operated by Marine Fueling expanded its service over the

occasion it would also involve a port that McLean had not sailed into since his days with the Hutchinson fleet, and then only as a ship's mate.

The adventure began for the REISS MARINE's crew the day after Thanksgiving, 1979. The Cleveland Cliffs steamer FRONTENAC had run hard aground at the entrance to Silver Bay's Reserve Mining Company dock when a snow squall blinded their approach to the harbor. One of the first priorities of the Coast Guard was to remove the fuel in case the vessel broke up. The REISS MARINE, on its way to fuel a third boat that day, Bethlehem Steel's ARTHUR B. HOMER, responded to the Coast Guard request for their assistance to aid the stranded steamer, and headed up the north shore.

"The wind had died down considerably. There was hardly any to speak of. But it takes a long time for those northeast swells to go down. This was 24 hours later that we went up," recalled Dick. "I'd sailed on the lakes 14 years, and I think I'd only been in Silver Bay twice, and, of course, I was a mate, not the guy in the front window. They had a buoy burned out in the harbor there too. Of course, I had the chart and everything, but nobody mentioned the fact that there was a buoy burned out. I could see it once we got in. You know when you see the harbor at a distance you look for a lot of things. Once you get closer," Dick explained, "you hope that you're seeing things that you're supposed to see."

November's short days had long since brought darkness to the north shore by the time the REISS MARINE arrived on the scene. "We got up there around seven, eight o'clock at night. The Coast Guard was sitting up there, the strike team was up there. He was hard aground on the port side." Directed into place by the Coast Guard, McLean pulled his vessel alongside of the FRONTENAC and employed his usual method of tying up for fueling. "We put one line out aft," he explained, "and then we'd spot her, and put the forward line out. Then I'd keep one engine ahead ... working ahead. I wouldn't rev up the rpm's, I'd just idle it ahead." Dick explained that when a boat would shift at the dock this method would keep the REISS MARINE tight against the vessel they were fueling.

The REISS MARINE's crew worked with the engineers from the FRONTENAC to begin pumping the fuel off the stricken vessel. "Just by keeping that one engine working ahead we started to move her (the FRONTENAC) after we got 30,000 gallons off of her."

Various company officials, as well as Coast Guard and shipyard personnel,



*Captain McLean muses about retirement plans and the industry he leaves behind.*

*Author's photo*

whether it was foggy or not, and they expected us to be there."

Getting the 104-foot BENNETT up the channel to the ore docks wasn't always an easy task, especially in the vagaries of a fog-filled night. Dick admits that sometimes it was very tense. "I put in some hairy, hairy nights leaving our dock and going over there and counting the minutes between the buoys, and hopefully when we were abreast of a lighted buoy we were able to see it! It took us seven minutes ... it's still in my mind ... it took us seven minutes to run from lighted buoy to lighted buoy. If you didn't see that lighted buoy then you hoped that you saw the next one, because then you started timing it again. Another seven minutes."

years to include the taconite ports along Minnesota's north shore. Storage tanks, located at Taconite Harbor, Silver Bay and Two Harbors, were supplied by truck and pipeline. Delivery at Two Harbors occasionally was made by visits from the REISS MARINE. The runs made by the REISS MARINE were eventually eliminated due to the liability associated with possible oil spills and the need for a viable plan required by the Coast Guard to clean up a "worst case scenario" spill.

Interestingly enough, it would be one of these runs up Superior's north shore and the threat of an oil spill which would prove to be one of the highlights of Dick McLean's years as skipper of the REISS MARINE. On this



were all over the FRONTENAC. Dick remembered the decision was made at that point to let the FRONTENAC try to back off on her own power. Buoyed by the success the REISS MARINE had in lightening the load, the crippled ship backed off under her own power and shifted to the dock at Silver Bay for further examination.

The REISS MARINE had removed a little over 35,000 gallons of oil from the FRONTENAC before she was able to move to the dock. After unloading the fuel into storage tanks at Silver Bay and working for nearly thirty hours, the crew of the REISS MARINE headed back to the Twin Ports, where another boat waited for fuel.

In his career with Marine Fueling, Dick McLean was witness to many changes at the Head of the Lakes. There were probably very few vessels sailing the Great Lakes over that thirty-four year stretch that Marine Fueling did not have some contact with. On the twentieth anniversary of the foundering of the steamer EDMUND FITZGERALD, McLean recalled several incidents related to that ill-fated vessel. "We put the first oil aboard that boat," he remembered, "She was

a coal burner and they converted her to oil in Superior, and we put the first oil on her." With a sense of history and the irony that often accompanies it, Dick also remembered clearly his last encounter with the FITZGERALD.

"She ran out of Silver Bay probably, I'm guessing, 80 to 90 percent of the time. The trip before she went down she loaded over at Burlington Northern (in Superior), and we put the last oil aboard."

In chilling detail, Captain McLean recalled part of a conversation he'd had that Sunday afternoon with the relief cook aboard the FITZGERALD before they left the dock. Dick causally mentioned that he had an uncle, Joe McLean, from Toledo who used to sail. The FITZ' cook responded that he had known of him, remarking to Dick that he heard McLean had died. Upon receiving confirmation, the cook told Dick, "Well, he's a lot better off than you and I are!" qualifying his response by declaring that "There must be something better after this life than what we got here."

A little over 24 hours later Dick was in the pilot house of the REISS

MARINE, along with the skipper from the Steinbrenner vessel MERLE McCURDY, when the Coast Guard report came over the radio about the FITZGERALD. Neither man could believe what he had just heard. Dick later got to thinking about that relief cook when he saw an article in a local paper about the ship's regular cook who had been unable to go back on the FITZGERALD. "So this cook, wondering if there's something better than what we have here . . . little did he know that he was gonna find out the next night."

Like his old days in the Hutchinson fleet, the changes were often bittersweet for the captain. Thirty-four years from the day he began to work for Marine Fueling, Captain Dick McLean retired. "It got to be an endurance test sometimes," reflected Dick. "Time went so fast. You didn't look forward to a weekend because it was just another day. So one day just ran into the next."

Captain McLean still lives in Duluth with his wife in the house they built during his days on the Hutchinson boats. ♦



*Tanker REISS MARINE is still an important part of Twin Ports maritime scene.*

*Author's photo*