

## THE CANADIAN AMBASSADOR CAPTAIN GERRY GREIG

by PATRICK LAPINSKI

The pilothouse of the *Canadian Miner* is quiet while the ship takes on a cargo of spring wheat. The *Miner* is berthed in the Hughitt Avenue slip, a narrow lane of water that faces the eastern side of Superior's sprawling Cenex-Harvest States elevator facility. Getting a ship the size of the *Miner* into the Hughitt slip is a piece of work that requires a 90-degree turn to get around Connor's Point from the main shipping channel, and then another 90-degree turn, in the opposite direction, to line the vessel up to enter the slip. The 730-foot *Canadian Miner* arrived in the early morning hours, just before dawn, guided beneath the dusty loading spouts by spotlights and tugboats. Speed is out of the question when you make this dock. It takes time, patience, and an experienced captain on the bridge.

It's an overcast day in Superior, typical for late October, although the outside air temperature is moderate for this time of year. A pair of Canada geese glides past the window as Captain Gerry Greig pours himself a cup of coffee before settling into the sturdy wooden chair reserved for the master of the ship. Gerry strongly believes that part of

his job as a captain is to also be an ambassador for his industry, and he graciously agrees to talk about his 40-year career on the Great Lakes. "The only job I ever asked for was a deckhand's job," says the captain in his light Scottish brogue. "After that," he laughs, "they kept promoting me." There is often a hint of mischief in his voice, so you have to listen closely to what he says. This carefree wisp of humor is characteristic of the captain, a man who enjoys a good story as much as he enjoys his job.

From his chair in the pilothouse, Gerry recalled how his first job on the Great Lakes was only going to be a temporary one. The search for work on the boats led Gerry from his home along scenic Georgian Bay to the



Captain at work.



bustling city of Toronto, where a job interview was arranged aboard the steamer *Victorious*, unloading grain at a local elevator. Gerry warily eyed the aging, riveted hull as he slowly walked along the wharf toward the gangway ladder, secretly hoping that, if his quest were successful, he would soon be on a similar ship. The interview went well and Gerry returned home, anxious to hear back from the steamship company.

Long before he ever set foot on the *Victorious*, sailing on the Lakes had always been a part of Gerry's life. Four of Gerry's uncles, from his mother's side of the family, were engineers on the Lakes, and his father had sailed off and on as well. For many families, sailing on the Great Lakes is a way of life, often spanning several generations. During the off season, from December to March, the experiences on the Lakes are recounted at dinner tables throughout the Canadian provinces, filling homes with talk of spring ice jams, impenetrable fog banks, night skies alive with stars, meteors or northern lights, and of demonically-driven seas threatening to chase all but the hardiest back to shore. Yet, by spring, the talk has died down, and the meals are quiet, as those who sail prepare for another season.

For older generations, like Gerry's father and his uncles, sailing the Great Lakes meant being gone from mid-March until late December. Gerry remembers the difficult farewells that came with the spring season, in particular, one spring fit-out at Midland, Ontario. "We had a picnic in the park," recalls Gerry. "It was Easter Sunday, I think, and we were sitting in a park near the ship with our winter clothes on." For sailing families, holidays are often poignant reminders of the harsh reality of long periods of separation. There were no vacations, and only occasional, rare days at home. "My one uncle said that he never saw green grass for years because when they left for fit-out there was snow on the ground, and when he got home at the end of the season there was snow on the ground. He couldn't win," chuckles Gerry.

A week after his trip to Toronto, Gerry was given his first job on the Lakes, hiring out as a relief deckhand. On August 13, 1964, he reported aboard the steamer *Maunaloa II* as it unloaded grain at the Collingwood Terminals, an imposing structure with concrete silos towering upwards of a hundred feet. Two weeks later, Gerry was deposited back in Collingwood when the ship, and its regular deckhand, were reunited. Despite the brevity of the job, being on a ship was nothing like the odd construction jobs, or work on the family farm, that Gerry had previously done. He liked the experience, and looked forward to his next ship.

With barely time to unpack his bags, Gerry soon had another chance to sail, reporting a scant five days later aboard the *Douglass Houghton* as the ship's porter, with the understanding that when a deck job became available, he would have first crack at it. It wasn't long



before one of the deckhands quit, leaving the deck crew one man short of its regular complement. That night, as the ship unloaded at Port Colborne, Gerry became a permanent deckhand. During the first season, Gerry occasionally thought about his initial impressions of the aging *Victorious* back in Toronto, and realized that he had to be careful what he wished for. While his own career was just beginning, the *Houghton*'s was on the downward side, and in many respects — at least to Gerry's mind — mirrored the life of the *Victorious*.

### The Ways of Old Ships

The *Victorious* was built in Chicago in 1895, preceding the *Douglass Houghton*, built in 1899, by the Globe Iron Works of Cleveland, by four years. Each vessel, when launched, was esteemed to be a "Queen of the Lakes," the designation given to the largest ship on the Great Lakes. Additionally, each ship had a twin, or "sister" ship, built at the same time. Outwardly, however, the appearance of the *Douglass Houghton* deviated from the standard look of its peers in several interesting ways. The placement of its pilothouse was offset from the bow more than usual due to the inclusion of a small cargo hold and hatch located between the fo'castle and the pilothouse. On the after end, the *Houghton* sported two smokestacks, a look more closely akin to passenger steamers than bulk freighters. The placement of the two large exhaust funnels above the after cabins contributed to the *Houghton*'s unique, easily recognizable, exterior profile.

The *Houghton* was a tremendously powerful ship for its day, built to haul its own cargo while towing a consort barge. As a result, the ship was built with four boilers, twice the norm for a laker. Stoking the ship's boilers required extra fireboxes, and extra manpower. As a result, the *Houghton* was more expensive to operate, both in terms of fuel consumption, and labor.

In the early 1900s, both the *Victorious* and the *Houghton* were rebuilt, with the *Houghton* having two boilers and one smokestack removed. The ships were sold from the American side of the Lakes in the 1940s to Upper Lakes & St. Lawrence Transportation Co., Ltd., a Canadian shipping company, and predecessor to today's ULS Corp. In 1964, although the *Houghton* was four years younger than the *Victorious*, by anyone's standards they were considered very old, underpowered, and nearing the end of their useful service.

While each vessel led an interesting career, it is the *Houghton* that many remember from its grounding in the Middle Neebish Channel of the St. Marys River, just two months after being commissioned. In that incident, the *Houghton*'s steering chains parted, and — unable to hold its course — the vessel grounded on the American side of the channel.



In tow behind the *Houghton* was its barge consort, the *John Fritz*. Despite dropping its stern anchors, the *Fritz*'s momentum carried it directly into the exposed midship of the *Houghton*, opening a seven-foot gash in the steamer. The *Houghton* quickly flooded and settled to the bottom, effectively blocking river navigation in either direction. The ensuing traffic jam lasted five days, stranded hundreds of ships, and made its mark on Great Lakes history as the "Houghton Blockade." Largely as a result of the accident, the West Neebish Channel bypass, known as the Rock Cut, was constructed some years later. It isn't surprising that the *Houghton* was not invited to commemorate the opening of the new channel.

### Downhill with a Tail Wind

The *Douglass Houghton* became Gerry's home for the next two and a half years. Because of the *Houghton*'s age, it was a labor-intensive ship. Unlike today, where solid, one-piece hatch covers, each weighing several tons, are lifted and moved with a hatch crane, the *Houghton*'s cargo holds were covered with multiple wooden hatches, removed and replaced the old fashioned way — with brute-force manual labor. One of Gerry's duties as a deckhand was to help move these heavy hatch covers each time the ship loaded or unloaded. Each hatch cover was about three feet wide, plus the width of the hatch opening, and required a man on both sides to lift it into place. "It kept you physically fit," recalled Gerry. In addition, with grain cargos, canvas tarpaulins were always placed over the entire hatch for additional protection against water leakage. For the deck crew, it meant more time placing an assortment of batten bars, corner bars, and windy bars around and on top of each hatch to secure the tarps. In the late fall, working with the cold, stiff canvas was often tedious, excruciating work.

The principal grain loading ports for the *Houghton* were Port Arthur and Fort William, Ontario, with cargos for the Georgian Bay ports of Collingwood or Midland; the port of Sarnia, on the St. Clair River; Port Colborne, in the Welland Canal; or as far away as Toronto, on the western end of Lake Ontario. For Gerry, the ports were places he'd only heard about from his father and his uncles, sailors from a previous generation. It was all new and exciting. As the *Houghton* steamed up the St. Marys River that first trip, the expectation built in Gerry as they locked through at the Soo before heading across Lake Superior toward the Canadian Lakehead of Port Arthur and Fort William. Gerry's excitement soon waned. "I remember going up to Thunder Bay" and ending up at the Cargill Elevator," said Gerry, referring to the elevator

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\* Fort William and Port Arthur were merged in 1970 to form the city of Thunder Bay.



located at the southern extreme of the harbor basin; an area isolated from the city, more frequented by deer and geese than people. "Wow! This is Thunder Bay," exclaimed a disappointed Gerry. "Wow! Out in the middle of nowhere!"

As Gerry recalls, during his first half-season on the ship, they made 13 mostly-death-defying trips across Lake Superior, from September to lay-up that December. In a slow-moving ship like the *Houghton*, avoiding storms was nearly impossible. In the fall of the year, the *Houghton* would frequently find itself trapped between the tail end of one storm, and the start of another one; usually all of them producing an adventure of some kind. The *Houghton* employed six firemen to keep the boilers going, the men frantically stoking coal into the fireboxes, desperate to keep up. "We'd be tearing along about eight mile an hour on a good day, downhill, with a tail wind!" Even on a good day it was barely enough to keep the ship moving, chuckled Gerry.

To make the time pass more quickly, the crew would gather in the mess room back aft, playing cards or cribbage. It was rare for the men to spend a lot of time in their rooms, except when sleeping. When Gerry began sailing, very few ships, especially the older ones, were equipped with the "luxuries" that are found in crew quarters today. Amenities like the televisions, VCRs, DVDs, and cell phones that keep the men voluntarily confined to their rooms today, were rare or non-existent 40 years ago. Crew quarters were not air conditioned, and in summer, after a long, hot day on deck, there was little relief to be found in the stifling confines of a room barely wider than a pair of outstretched arms. As a result, turnover in crew was often high on Great Lakes ships in the 1960s.

Gerry shared a room with one other deckhand — a Spartan room equipped with a sink, a closet, and a double bunk. The entrance to the room was from an outside passageway. For the most part, inside passageways to the crew quarters only became part of vessel design on the Lakes after the 1940s. Gerry remembers having to exit his room and use the outside passageway to enter the washroom, sometimes requiring feats of bravery in the cold winter months, or during a storm. By all accounts, explained Gerry, once inside the washroom, the adventure didn't always end. He remembers that something as simple as taking a shower was a risky proposition on the *Houghton*. "She had outside water tanks, so in the fall of the year they had to crack steam on to keep them from freezing," explained Gerry. "The cold water was hot, and the hot was boiling. The only time it was safe to take a shower was shortly after they filled the water tank, as it was still a little on the cool side."



## The Way to the Pilothouse

The physical hazards associated with sailing can easily be imagined. Steel surfaces are unyielding, and a bump on the head, or a bark along the shin, will be felt for days. The most common injuries are those to the back; the daily constants of bending and climbing, along with the lifting and pulling of heavy objects, can exacerbate even a slight injury, especially for someone working on deck. There are other aspects of the occupation that are not as obvious to the casual observer. On a grain ship, for instance, a dusty load, saturated with a high concentration of pesticide, can make the cargo itself an irritant to the skin, the eyes, and the lungs. During the loading process, any spillage or windblown grain and dust that accumulated along the ledges of the cargo hold had to be swept free before the hatch covers were replaced. On a windy day, the grain dust was often choking and coated everyone on deck with a fine golden hue. "I was down there wading through grain dust, and I looked up, and there's the wheelsman up there in his shirtsleeves looking back at me, and I said, there's got to be a better job than this." In retrospect, Gerry never believed that using a broom would be the best motivation he could have to moving off the deck and up to a wheeling job in the pilothouse. "Shortly after that I was up at the wheel."

The large wooden wheel on the *Houghton* rotated just under Gerry's chin, somewhere near six feet, its oak surface worn to a museum-quality luster. Unlike ship wheels today, which are smaller than an automobile steering wheel and can literally be moved with one finger, it took two hands to turn the wheel on the *Houghton*, applying what Gerry called Norwegian steam, or "arm strong" steering. Gerry did his best to explain the engineering aspects of the old steering system. "It was cable driven to a steam engine back aft," he explained, "and as you pulled on the one lever, it applied steam on the ram." The cable ran on pulleys through the cargo hold, and in the fall of the year, when the temperatures dropped, the grease got sticky, making it harder to move the cable across the pulleys, and turn the wheel. On a cold, stormy day, even a big guy like Gerry could really get a workout.

## Riding the Old Man's Ticket

In 1967, Gerry left the *Houghton* to wheel on the *Seaway Queen* for two years. In the pilothouse, he fine-tuned his skills as a wheelsman, soaking in the daily aspects of vessel operation, while learning the nuances of the lakes, rivers, and harbors. The *Queen* was a much newer vessel and the change, as Gerry recalls, was quite literally, "a cultural shock to the system." There were crew amenities like air conditioning,



inside passageways, and AC power. Built in 1959, the *Seaway Queen* was nearly 300 feet longer than the *Houghton*, proportionally more powerful, and equipped with a bow thruster.

With the encouragement of his captain, Gerry began attending winter school in Owen Sound, in preparation to become a licensed officer. Studying modern navigation and ship handling from seasoned professionals became a near full-time occupation away from the ship, but it soon paid off. In early 1970, Gerry wrote for, and passed, the exam for his Second Mate's license. That July he began the decade as a new Third Mate on the steamer *Red Wing*, under the tutelage of Captain Joe Mattice. "I was riding on the old man's ticket that first summer," said Gerry, explaining that, if a captain agreed to take a new Third Mate, he would also take responsibility for training and mentoring that Mate. "I learned quite a bit from him, just watching how he handled the ship. He was a great guy."

As Third Mate, Gerry was now in charge of the deck crew on the 8 to 12 watch, manning the winches to shift the vessel up and down the dock while the ship was loading, and working with the dock foreman and the First Mate to make sure the cargo itself was properly loaded. Much to Gerry's relief, the *Red Wing* hauled not only grain, but iron ore and coal, giving him a chance to work with different cargos and to see new ports. In 1972, Gerry was assigned to his first self-unloading vessel, the *Canadian Century*. The *Century* was dedicated to the hydro-coal trade, working the Lower Lakes trade routes from Conneaut and Ashtabula, to Toronto, Nanticoke, and Sarnia. On the *Canadian Century*, Gerry was not only working his job, but also progressing towards his master's license. "By the time you got your Second Mate's ticket, you had pretty near enough time to do your Mate's ticket," and consequently, explained Jerry, "by the time you got your Mate's ticket, you had enough time to do the Master's." The ascent was gradual, but steady.

In 1975, in the parlance of mariners, Gerry "went up" First Mate on the *Thornhill*, a former Cleveland-Cliffs bulk carrier turned Canadian, equipped with about 30 finger-pinching, shin-barking, old-style, telescoping hatch covers. The *Thornhill* was a labor-intensive piece of work. Being a new First Mate on the *Thornhill* was similar to Gerry's seminal start on the *Douglass Houghton* — it was a new beginning. Over the next four years, Gerry moved to several ships, gaining in experience by working with different captains, chief engineers, mates, and crews. Ships like the *Thornhill*, *Meaford*, *Point Noire*, *R. Bruce Angus*, and the *Wheat King* were the final training ground for Gerry in preparation for the day when he would command his own vessel.



## Captain Gerry Greig

Four years later, Gerry began the final steps toward a command of his own when he was appointed spare skipper on the steamer *Goderich*. The appointment came as an unexpected surprise to Gerry, who was given the news just before going on vacation in late September. "‘Oh yeah’ the office told me, ‘When you come back from the holidays we’re moving you up to skipper.’" On Halloween night, 1979, a little over 15 years after his fateful interview aboard the *Victorious*, Gerry went aboard the *Goderich* at the Maple Leaf Mills in Toronto as spare skipper.

The term "spare skipper" is a designation given to a master working in relief of a ship's permanent skipper. It is common on the Lakes for a spare skipper, also known as a relief captain, to rotate between two or three ships throughout the regular season. In Gerry's case, while he had already obtained his Master's License and was familiar with much of the job, there were still many new things to learn. The remainder of that year, coupled with the start of the 1980 season, entailed additional training with other captains aboard several vessels, culminating in Gerry's first assignment as a bonafide captain.

While it is true that being awarded the command of a vessel comes with a lot of hard work, it also comes with a sprinkle of luck, and, as is true in any organization, a certain degree of attrition. Holding a Master's License is no guarantee of being given a command. Gerry is the first to admit that fortune has smiled upon him, and has never taken that privilege for granted. On June 7, 1980, Gerry took command of his first ship, the *Gordon C. Leitch (1)*, in Quebec City. When his turn came, there were no big ceremonies, no pomp and circumstance. In fact, the change of command was surprisingly simple. "The other guy got off, and I took over as skipper." It was that simple, recalls Gerry. However, having Gerry describe what went through his mind that day brings out a totally different response, as the captain waves his arms wildly in the air, uttering a loud "Aaagggghhhh!" that breaks the quiet of the pilot-house. It was an unforgettable day.

For the first time in his career there was no longer anyone he could turn to for advice. The analogy of taking flight seems a bit out of place on a ship, but for Gerry, as with everyone who holds the rank of captain, it was his time to fly. Interestingly, Gerry likens flying an airplane as a good metaphor to navigating a ship...where he believes speed and the angle of approach are critical to making a dock. To this day, 'Take it slow, and do it once,' and 'Do it right the first time,' are tenets that Gerry steers his ship by.

As a new captain, similar to his experience as a spare skipper, Gerry rotated among a number of ships in his early years, never quite



able to unpack his bags for any length of time, before finally receiving a relatively permanent command. And, like any veteran captain sailing today, many of Gerry's early commands have found their way to the scrapper's torch. For Gerry, vessels like the *Leitch*, the *R. Bruce Angus*, *Wheat King*, *Red Wing*, *Hilda Marianne*, and the *Frank A. Sherman* are but distant memories. In fact, Gerry was the last skipper on the *Sherman*, never knowing, as he left the vessel in Toronto at the end of the 1981 season, that he had witnessed its last breaths of steam as an active Great Lakes vessel.

A lot has changed in the industry since he first began sailing, most notably, reductions in crew size. Looking after his ship is one part of his job as the captain; looking after his job, says Gerry, is the other part. In 1986, Gerry joined the International Ship Masters' Association, an organization whose broad goal is to "work with government agencies and the marine industry toward the creation of a safer and more efficient maritime commerce." Innocently claiming to have "stuck up my hand at the wrong time," Gerry served as president of the Georgian Bay - Huronia Lodge 15 from 1987 until 2003. The shipmasters are esteemed to be the voices for their industry, and in 1995, Gerry was given a bigger voice, being elected Grand President of the ISMA. Gerry continues serving as an active member of the Ship Masters' Association, and, on March 12, 2000, he was honored for his service with the



Captain Gerry Greig.

ISMA, receiving the organization's prestigious Captain Lewis Ludington Award. In addition to his work with the ISMA, Gerry is actively in-



volved at home in his local Rotary Club, an international association providing humanitarian service throughout the world.

This summer marks Gerry's 29<sup>th</sup> season as a captain on the Great Lakes, and his 44<sup>th</sup> as a sailor. "When I received my forty year service award from Mr. Leitch, he remarked that I had served 'forty years of undetected crime.'" For the past 11 seasons, the *Canadian Miner* has been "home" for Gerry. Until he decides to turn in the keys, Gerry still believes he has the greatest job. "It's a great way to make a dollar; 99% boredom, and 1% pure hell." 🍷

**About the Author:** Noted Great Lakes historian and photographer, Patrick Lapinski, has been a frequent contributor to *Inland Seas*®. This article stems from his Inland Mariners Portrait Series. Pat states that since beginning work on this series in earnest several years ago, it has become one of his most energizing projects! "Long after cargos have been loaded and ships have left, my best memories have been the people I've met; the short conversations, the hospitality, and the knowledge shared on ships over the past three decades." To see more of Lapinski's Great Lakes scrapbook of memories, visit his website [www.inlandmariners.com](http://www.inlandmariners.com).



*Canadian Miner*