



Meet the Crew

RON BREZINSKI & MIKE ROMEL

Manistee attracts experienced seamen

Mike Romel, Ron Brezinski carry on family traditions

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

It is 2 a.m., maybe 3, in Duluth and the *M/V Manistee* is discharging its' cargo of salt at Hallett Dock 5. The air is laden with humidity, portending a typically damp day for the end of September. We're introduced to the *Manistee's* chief engineer, Mike Romel, who extends a hand of welcome, peering beneath his U.S. Merchant Marine ball cap. Guests at this hour are unusual. At six feet, with a slight frame, layered in T-shirt, blue work-shirt and a heavy denim jacket, Romel doesn't look as if he spends much time sitting around.

The chief stands alongside the ship's unloading boom, watching the neon-green salt fall off the end of the conveyor, sometimes in clumps, sometimes smoothly. "They put a chemical on the salt that makes it stick on the roads in the winter. It's great for drivers, but it makes our work a little more challenging," Romel said.

Romel grew up in Posen, Michigan, 30 miles south of Rogers City. Following in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather and uncle, he began sailing in 1972.

"My grandfather worked on the Bradley boats in the 1920s and '30s. My uncle is still on the *Carl D. Bradley*. He was only 21 or 22 when it sank, about the same age I was when I started sailing."

Every November Romel thinks about that day, and as a third generation sailor, he is proud to carry on the family tradition. When he eventually retires, Romel believes he will likely be the last of his family to sail the Great Lakes.

The *Manistee*, built in 1942 at the Great Lakes Engineering Works shipyard in Detroit as the *Adirondack*, was christened as the steamer *Richard J. Reiss*. At 620.6 feet, with a beam of 60.3 feet, the *Manistee* is small in comparison to the dimensions of today's ships. The ship has sailed under the flags of five different fleets, being passed on as a continual victim of attrition.

"The *Manistee* fills a niche. A lot of docks aren't capable of handling 25,000-plus tons of cargo," said Captain Ron Brezinski. With a maximum cargo capacity in the neighborhood of 15,000 tons, the vessel is able



Captain Ron Brezinski



Mike Romel

to call on many ports where the larger ships simply can't fit in.

"Grand River has done a great job of exploiting these smaller markets, and we're gaining a good reputation for our delivery service," he said.

Captain Brezinski, a native of Green Bay, Wisconsin, now makes his home in Elyria, Ohio. Dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, he is calm and relaxed inside the confines of this ship's old pilothouse. Shining brass instruments stand out against the dark-grained wood that frames the windows and doors. The ship's wheel is large enough that a child with arms outstretched would have a hard time touching either end at the same time.

Brezinski is a third generation sailor on his dad's side and a second generation sailor on his mother's side. "My great uncle, on my dad's side of the family, was First Mate on the carferry *Pere Marquette 18* when it sank in 1910."

In spite of this tragic episode in his family's maritime history, Brezinski liked the idea of sailing and shipped out as a deckhand in 1973, catching the steamer *Clarence B. Randall* at fit-out at Inland Steel's Indiana Harbor dock. By the time he left the *Randall* three years later, Brezinski had earned his AB ticket and was working as a wheelsman. For the next four years, he sailed on many of the Inland steamers, including the *E. J. Block*, *L. E. Block*, and the *Wilfred Sykes*. In 1978 Brezinski wrote for his Third Mate's license, first sailing aboard the *M/V Joseph L. Block*.

It took a little longer for Brezinski to earn his Master's license. The early 1980s were challenging times in the steel industry, which translated into many ships being idle on the Lakes. The *Edward L. Ryerson* was Brezinski's home during those difficult years as he kept ship while everyone waited for shipping to get healthy again. When he finally returned to work, many of the old steamers were gone. In the pared-down Inland Steel fleet, Brezinski's choices were limited to the *Ryerson*, *Joe Block*, and the *Sykes*.

In 1993 Brezinski sailed as a relief captain on the *Edward L. Ryerson*, before his appointment the following year as permanent skipper of the *Wilfred Sykes*. For the next 10 years, Captain Brezinski sailed as captain on all three of the remaining Inland ships, the majority of his time spent on the *Sykes* before he officially retired from Inland in April, 2005.

Thirty-two years of service in a fleet with a dedicated cargo and trade routes gave Captain Brezinski a great wealth of experience and knowledge of the steel industry. The downsizing of fleets and the changes in the steel industry in the 1980s also created some interesting options. It only took a year on the beach before Captain Brezinski was ready for something new in an old profession.

"I like the old ships, and the *Manistee* certainly fits into that category. It's a nice handling ship; it's comfortable."

In 2006 Captain Brezinski came back out to work as a relief captain on the *Manistee*. For the first time in his career, Brezinski was hauling new cargoes, loading at different places, unloading at docks he'd only seen on the chart, places like Stoneport, Rogers City, Brevort, St. Joseph, Ludington, Holland, Green Bay, Grand Haven, Fairport, Muskegon, and a "quaint harbor" named *Manistee*.

"This ship trades in the Saginaw River quite a bit," he said. "I think this is only our third trip up onto Lake Superior in the past several years. We don't come up here very much."

The *Manistee* is a real work boat, averaging about 115 cargoes a year, hauling limestone, foundry sand, pet coke, coal, salt, slag, and, when they get up to Duluth, taconite.

It is now 10 a.m. and the boom has been swung back into its saddle. "We're waiting for that *McCarthy* to get into the dock," Brezinski said. "He's going up on the shuttles ahead of us. Once he's in there we'll shift over to load."

The *Walter J. McCarthy* is four times the size of the *Manistee*, and literally dwarfs it in size, but Grand River Navigation has found a way for the *Manistee*, and other ships its age, to survive, and flourish, allowing multi-generational sailors like Mike Romel and Ron Brezinski to carry on their family traditions, at least for a few more years. ■