

# Dredging the past,

If you play with semantics, the word *dredge*, when used as a verb, carries the connotation of bringing up bad things from the past. A lot of people view harbor dredging that way, but in reality, our modern Port of Duluth-Superior was built and shaped by dredging.

In a brief span of time, beginning in 1872, amid the smell of burning wood smoke, a constant din of hammering, and the ceaseless movement of schooners, the outline of today's harbor began taking shape.

Historically, the early development of industry along both sides of the lower St. Louis River was the impetus for dredging. Lumber mills, merchandising docks, rock quarries, the introduction of the railroad and the burgeoning grain trade were all factors leading to the rapid transformation of a natural river estuary of marshes, shallows, ravines and wooded shorelines into a deep-water harbor.

On March 2, 1867, the River and Harbor Act provided federally appropriated money to improve the Superior Harbor. At that time, all vessel traffic was obliged to use the Superior entry, the natural mouth of the St. Louis River, a condition that hindered the development of Duluth as a port.

In 1871, the excavation of a second harbor entrance, this one in close proximity to Duluth, produced a dramatic and irreversible change to the river. Like children at play, teams of workers dug a line across the sand barrier, severing the Minnesota Point sand bar until river and lake merged again, creating the new outlet for the Lake Superior's largest tributary. The Duluth Ship Canal was later widened and dredged to allow vessels of virtually any draft to enter the harbor.

That same year (March 1871), a modified Rivers and Harbor Act, legislation similar to that in effect on the Superior side of the harbor, was enacted for the Duluth side, clearing the way to increase channel depths within the harbor to 13 feet. Additional federal money was appropriated in 1881, when the act was amended to deepen existing channels to 16 feet.

The deeper water depths through the channels and along docks made allowance for the growth of vessel dimensions, leading to mammoth shoreside facilities. Near the harbor entrance, tall, cylindrical grain silos towered over men shuttling tons of coal in traveling bridge cranes across expansive fields of black anthracite lying alongside frenetic merchandise docks and noisy saw mills.

The opening of iron ranges in the wilds of northern Minnesota and Michigan spurred the construction of ore loading docks. These giant

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*Pretty it isn't. But a program of responsible continuing dredging is vital to the success in the Twin Ports — and around the world.*



## The Port's Past

By Patrick Lapinski



# creating the future

dusty cadence, covering everything with a fine layer of red silt.

Under the auspices of the Secre-



tary of War, both of the harbor acts were combined in 1896. The United States Congress appropriated \$3 million to rebuild Duluth's ship canal, and make infrastructure improvements in the harbor, beginning in 1898. By 1902, the harbor boasted of 17 miles of shipping channels excavated to a standard depth of 20 feet. In a little more than 20 years, the lower river was teeming with activity.

While the federal government appropriated the money necessary to pay for the harbor improvements, the work itself was often carried out by private contractors, under government supervision. Among the most colorful was Captain Charles S. Barker. In 1885, Barker was recruited by business interests in Superior to dredge one of the harbor's main arteries, the 2.5-mile stretch of water linking the Superior entry with the main harbor.

Barker had solidified his reputation as a contractor with major improvement projects on the Erie Canal and the canal at Sault Ste. Marie. In spite of the auspicious nature of these projects, it was his work on the Superior Front Channel and the creation of a small island with a big legend for which Captain Barker remains known in the Twin Ports.

Sand and muck removed during the dredging were deposited on the periphery of the channel, directly in the sightline of the Martin Pattison mansion. Rumors abounded that

Barker intentionally deposited the spoils to spite Pattison, a local lumber baron, for raising the price of the lumber when Barker began building his own slightly less than palatial home in West Superior. Each corresponding price increase for lumber resulted in an equal share of dredge spoils being deposited.

By keeping a discerning eye on the growth of a small island in the Superior Bay, anyone in Superior could easily tell that the price of lumber must have reached a record level that year.

Is the legend true? You decide, but the fact remains that the old Pattison mansion continues looking out over a lush and popular Barker's Island to this day.

Dredging will always remain necessary for the Twin Ports, as well as areas throughout the Great Lakes and ports all over the world.

With near-record-low water levels being registered across all of the Lakes, harbor maintenance and dredging have again become topics of concern for shipping companies and dock operators.

We can at least be assured that in the Twin Ports, the past hundred years of history and commerce have left no more room within the harbor to create another island. ➤

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