

Mv. Indiana Harbor,

by Patrick Lapinski

The *Indiana Harbor* is one of three 1000-foot class vessels owned and operated by the American Steamship Co., Williamsville, N.Y., a wholly-owned subsidiary of GATX. The "Indy," as it is affectionately known by crew and friends, arrived at Superior's Midwest Energy Resources dock on August 31 to load coal for the B.C. Cobb Generating Plant in Muskegon, Mich., nearly twenty-five years to the day after its maiden voyage on the lakes.

As a bulk carrier on the Great Lakes, the *Indiana Harbor* is second to none. Over the course of its career, the *Indy* has held, or still holds, numerous Great Lakes and Lake Superior tonnage records for cargoes of limestone, coal, and taconite. The *Indiana Harbor* has even loaded grain, an extremely rare commodity for a vessel of its size class. The vessel was built at the Bay Shipbuilding Co., in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., and christened on July 11, 1979. The vessel is 1000-feet long, 105-feet wide, and has a depth of 56-feet. The overall cargo capacity of the *Indiana Harbor* for coal or taconite is about 66,000 tons.

Jim Van Dongen, ASC's veteran captain, is in command of the *Indiana Harbor*. This past summer Jim formally announced his plans to retire, concluding a career that began officially in 1967, but according to Jim started long before, somewhere around the age of five, he estimates. Jim's father was a captain on the Grand Trunk Carferries, shuttling people, railcars, and goods across Lake Michigan between Muskegon and Milwaukee. "I was wheeling the *Milwaukee Clipper* when I was five years old," recalls Jim. "Of course I had to stand on a couple of books to see over the wheel, but I've been sailing all my life."

As an adult, Jim returned to the Grand Trunk Carferries in 1967, following a three-year tour in the Navy. Unable to find steady work on shore, he bounced around between the three Grand Trunk vessels, as well as the tanker *Mercury* and the steamer *William Clay Ford*, working AB jobs like deck watch, watchman, and wheelsman. Two years later, at the invitation of a family friend, Captain Wilbur "Buzz" Buswell, Jim took a fill-in wheeling job on the steamer *John J. Boland*. "I caught the *Boland* at seven in the morning in Grand Haven, and I've been with American Steamship ever since."

In the early years of his career, Jim worked aboard nearly all of the old *Boland* & *Cornelius* steamers, taking his first licensed job in 1970 as Third Mate on the 504-foot *Harris N. Snyder*. At the time, *Boland* & *Cornelius*/American Steamship was primarily invested in the stone trade, working cargoes out of Stoneport, Calcite, Cedarville, and Port Inland to build power plants, outer harbors, and break walls along the lower lakes. Jim steadily worked his way up the hawse pipe, and in 1984, under the tutelage of veteran ASC skippers like Harold Sommes, Jim attained the rank of captain. He remembers taking command of the *Buffalo* and being a bit unnerved with the responsibility. "When a guy hands you \$65 million dollars worth of ship, you definitely don't want to bend it. So you talk about stress!"

The modernization of the American Steamship Co. in the 1970s gradually did away with all but a few of the old steamers, and by the 1990s, the *John J. Boland*, in long-term lay-up at Duluth-Superior, was all that remained. Partly because it was his first ship with ASC, Jim remained partial to the *Boland*, so when the opportunity came to return the vessel to service in 1992, he gladly accepted

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the job of sailing the vessel. "It was back to basics," recalls Jim of the *Boland*. "You had to rely on your skills and not on technology. Frankly, that was the best job I ever had in this company."

In 1996, coupled with the sale of the *Boland* and the retirement of Captain H. Peter Gronwall, Jim took command of the *Indiana Harbor*. For the past eight years, Jim has enjoyed the role of captain of one of the largest ships on the Great Lakes, relishing the opportunity to do what he loves best, sailing. "The most fun part of the job is the ship handling. I'm off in my own world when I'm doing that." As the summer of 2004 winds to an end, so does Jim's long career. In mid-September, Jim will make his last trip before passing the reins of command to Captain William Yowell.

As he prepares to leave the *Indiana Harbor*, the job, and his career, he will take along many cherished memories, as well as one small piece of memorabilia dating back to his first job with ASC, the original wooden stool from the wheel stand of the *John J. Boland*. "The captain and the 2nd Mate used to make Martin houses in the pilothouse, and they used the stool for a sawhorse," explained Jim. The saw cut marks, like vivid memories of a lengthy career, are still evident

today as Jim pulls the stool from its place in the front window of the *Indiana Harbor*. For

this captain, from the beginning to the end, the circle has been completed. 



Photos, clockwise from top: the deck of American Steamship Co.'s *Indiana Harbor*; Captain Jim Van Dogen; full view of the 1,000-foot long *Indiana Harbor*.

Pat Lapinsky

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