

# Going back a century to solve ...

## *The Cattle Boat Mystery*

By Patrick Lapinski

Some time between 1907 and 1910, brother and sister Conrad and Mary Theis arrived in Minnesota from Luxembourg, Belgium. Like many immigrants, they knew virtually nothing about this new land aside from what they had heard from relatives and friends or learned from strangers along the way.

A century later, the saga of Conrad and Mary's journey to America is shrouded in mystery. "Stories from relatives say he came on a cattle boat," said Conrad's granddaughter Betty Flood, from rural Kenyon, Minn.

Like the descendants of many immigrant families, Betty

is still fitting the smaller pieces of the puzzle into the larger picture, examining and re-examining the information in an effort to come up with a fit. The work often takes a leap of faith in following the meager clues and threads.

The notion of a "cattle boat" led Betty directly to the Port of Duluth-Superior, which in 1910 was Minnesota's waterborne conduit to the world. Her simple inquiry brought about a lively discussion in pursuit of an answer.

The harbor was wholly dependent upon waterborne commerce in its seminal years. "Every nail,

hammer, axe, saw, even food for the crew had to be brought in," wrote Richard Armour about the 1855 development of the city of Superior.\* The period of time spent waiting for replenishment from "the boat" that occurred between the close of navigation on Lake Superior and its spring opening was literally a

most economical mode of shipping (as it is today). Road and rail were secondary means for the distribution of the products brought in by ship. Aside from the "big three" — coal, grain and ore — the makeup of the cargo differed considerably a century ago from the commodities we see today.

While the bulk cargoes went out, the packaged goods that came in were what sustained and fortified the local populations. Packaged cargo arrived in all sizes and shapes, from boxes, crates and barrels of all size and proportion stowed below decks to boards, pipes and machinery stacked and stored from the keel to the deck itself.

Sugar, oil, paraffin and coal came alongside rail and mining supplies; equipment for sawmills; building materials in the form of tar paper, shingles, nails and roofing felt. Plate glass, crystal glass and plain old window glass were sandwiched between plumbing and electrical supplies.

In those days the waterfront was a fortress of brick warehouses piled high and deep with hardware, clothing, fabrics of all type, sewing and washing machines, tables, chairs, fencing, rope, wire and even fancy furniture for those who could afford specially milled pieces.

And there was food. Hand

**ALLAN-LINIEN.**  
Kungligt Postingskeppsbolag.  
Etablerat 1858.

Bolagets flotta består af trettio två ångare med tillsammans 144,545 tons dräktighet.

Regulära färdtider mellan

**MONTREAL**  
och  
**LIVERPOOL**  
(Från Portland och Halifax under vintersäsongen)  
Och mellan

**NEW YORK**  
via  
**MOVILLE**  
och  
**GLASGOW**

Såra färdtider med ångare till och från Skandinaviska hamnar.

FUNKEN, 5,275 ton, ångdriftig. BERGÉN, 5,275 ton, ångdriftig. CHRISTIANIA, 6,200 ton. HELSINGFORS, 6,200 ton. STAVANGER, 7,500 ton.

Lågsta Priser. Ypperliga besvärlighetsveter.

En Särskild avdelning för 1,000 och kortare vägar till och från New York och andra amerikanska havs städer med ångare som är utrustade med alla bekvämligheter för passagerare och besättning. De äro utrustade med alla nödvändiga apparater för nöd och räddning. De äro utrustade med alla nödvändiga apparater för nöd och räddning. De äro utrustade med alla nödvändiga apparater för nöd och räddning.

**ALLAN & CO., General Western Agents,**  
178 Jackson Street, CHICAGO, ILL.

**C. H. BOTHERMAN & CO.,**  
100 West Washington, MINNEAPOLIS AND ST. PAUL.

**A. CHILBERG, General Pacific Coast Agent,**  
SEATTLE, WASH.

This advertisement, from the author's collection, offered the trans-Atlantic transport services of the Allan Line.

struggle for life and death in those early years.

By the early 1900s, the Port of Duluth-Superior had grown both in population and in transportation infrastructure. The development of a sustainable system of roads and the addition of rail service made the area less dependent upon the vagaries that water transportation presented. Shipwrecks, groundings, weather and seasonal closings at the time made ships a bit unreliable.

But the volume of cargo that ships could carry made them indispensable. Water was by far the

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trucks wore the splinters out of the wooden floors moving vegetables, cereals, coffees and teas to horse-drawn carts or rail cars. The supermarkets of the time were the numerous neighborhood corner stores, independently owned and proudly operated by immigrants. These stores were supplied by the warehouses along the waterfront, which were supplied by the fleets of package freighters plying the Great Lakes.

Many of the package freighters were in fact owned by the very same railroads that serviced the harbor. Some of the largest and fastest vessels on the lakes were operated by the Great Lakes Transit Company. In addition to freight, the ships often carried passengers, the newly arrived nucleus of labor and industry that solidified locally growing communities. Figures for the early 1900s indicate that package freighters accounted for over 50,000 immigrants annually into the Twin Ports.

We can see that the package freight business brought nearly everything durable and disposable and human into the port, but to the heart of Betty's inquiry, what of cattle? Is this an "urban myth" of a century ago? Yes and no. In the larger picture of the national transportation of livestock, yes, cattle boats did exist and were used frequently to send cattle from the Eastern Seaboard to the United Kingdom. The cost per head of cattle was worth more financially than any single immigrant. Great

Britain's famed White Star Line was one of the leading companies operating in the trans Atlantic livestock trade.

On return trips the same vessels were frequently used to ferry passengers to America. Depending upon the owner, the conditions were rather untenable, but "families had no choice but to travel

schedule of vessels from Europe to Canada.

Closer to home, evidence of the movement of livestock on Lake Superior is scarce, but it was more common in the days of early development, before railroads reached the area. It was reported that 33 vessels called on Superior in 1855, "bringing numerous guests, a variety of supplies, even cattle and horses."

Pioneer tales also tell of cattle being shipped on the decks of ships to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where "the captains would bring the ship as close to shore as possible and the cattle were pushed off the deck and forced to swim for shore." Evidence also supports the arrival of cattle and livestock on the Mississippi River.

So, yes, cattle were shipped on the Great Lakes, but not in the wholesale quantity that constituted the business actions of the trans-Atlantic cattle trade. The likelihood of Conrad and Mary arriving at Duluth on a cattle boat

in the early 1900s is rather remote. If they had reached the east coast of North America on a cattle boat, they would probably have decided that that was enough and that a train ride across the country was a far more dignified way to arrive in their new homeland.

\* From *Superior, Wisconsin: A Planned City*. Superior native Patrick Lapinski is a student of Great Lakes maritime industry and history. [www.inlandmariners.com](http://www.inlandmariners.com)



Young Mary and Conrad with their parents, Henri (or Heinrich) and Anna, in Luxembourg.

Courtesy Betty Flood

in unsanitary and overcrowded cattle liners." On the good ships, livestock areas were simply swept clean for families. Many of these vessels bound for North America landed in Canada, where immigrants were encouraged to settle in the largely undeveloped reaches of Upper Canada, the vast reserve of land west of Ottawa and Montreal. The Dominion Line and the Allan Line both operated a regular