

# NOR'EASTER

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Journal of the Lake Superior Marine Museum Association



## "ELL: Recollections of a Steamboat Sailor"

by Patrick Lapinski with Ellsworth Barclay

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(Part I of II)

"We were throwing a bow wave, this is back - in fact I don't even remember how far back it was anymore, but anyhow, there was a little girl of about fourteen years old and she was wearing a dress and this little guy was next to her, probably her littler brother, and they were wading on the edge of the shore and they seen this big wave come at 'em. She grabbed the bottom of her dress, pulled it up, and we just waved and hollered when we went by. Like a bunch of knothead." Sailing can be the devils work, but God can it be a lot of fun.

"There's a lot of stories like that - happy memories, bad memories," says Ell Barclay. Ellsworth Fred Barclay was born on November 23, 1920, in the small Wisconsin town of Park Falls.

However, his family would soon return to its ancestral family farm in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Ell was raised on his grandfather's farm near Big Bay, close by to Lake Superior's wooded shores north of Marquette. Until his senior year in high school, he couldn't have told you the difference between a sailing ship and an ore carrier. It wouldn't be until well after he finished school that Ell would begin to sail on the lakes.

Steamboating they used to call it then. It wasn't until the last few years of his career that Ell Barclay ever worked on a boat with a steam turbine engine. He never set foot on a diesel-powered boat. Working as an oiler on the old reciprocating engines during a rolling



Ell's first boat was the straight-deck bulk freighter PAM SCHNEIDER.

LSMMA Photo, K.E. Thro collection

gale was the equivalent of a high wire act in the circus for Ell. It was death defying. It was an act requiring agility and skill every minute of every hour.

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"She was only a 370 foot boat," recalled Ell. It was his first boat. He had taken the bus from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Cleveland to catch her. "I took a cab from the hotel to the dock. It was during the war so you had to have papers to show that you were able to get on the boat." The steamer PAM SCHNEIDER (GEORGE L. CRAIG-1903) was tied up at the Corrigan-McKinney steel plant on the Cuyahoga River. Ell had shipped out of the dock office of the LS&I ore dock in Marquette after

inquiring there about work on the boats. The word was passed to the steamers that a man was looking to find out if a berth was available. In a surprisingly short time the captain from the PAM SCHNEIDER said he would be needing a new coal passer since one of the men from his ship was getting off down below. If Ell was still interested, he could meet the boat in Cleveland.

Ell handed a folded piece of paper to the guard from the back seat of the taxi. The cabby stared vacantly off into the steel mill. "Another man wanting to be a sailor and wind his sorry butt up and down this dirty old river," he thought. "Why the heck doesn't he just drive a cab and go home every night?" The driver could only wonder



why men would go out on these boats.

"I have a slip from the dock office," explained Ell to the guard. While the guard looked the note over, Ell quickly glanced at the area surrounding him. It was a world far away from any other he had ever seen. The guard handed the note back to Ell and waved the cab on. "The skipper had signed it so I got through the steel plant," recalled Ell. As he stepped onto the dock, Ell stood for a moment for a better look at his new home. "I got to the beach and here the boat was setting and I think probably they had two or three rigs... well, they were unloading ore with that kind of a deal and she was down in the water."

Traveling cranes lifted the cargo from the ship's hold and transferred it to piles on shore. The cranes moved back and forth in unison, working non-stop while Ell stood watching. "She was a little boat and they had hoses running out around onto the beach. At that time I just didn't know what they were for. What they were doing was they were getting water from the fireplug there. When you're setting in the dock why they use a lot of water in the boilers. They have to have a certain amount of water for the sanitary pumps for the crew and the boats are so small they don't have much of a reservoir; their tanks don't hold much water, so they run a line ashore all the time."

Ell wondered just what the heck he had gotten himself into. This was nothing like the family farm he had grown up on during the Depression. He was afraid he was soon going to find out, whether he liked it or not. "I crawled aboard and went in and they gave me a quick round of the engine room. I never had seen one before. Never been down in the engine room, so it was scary."

Coal was the fuel used to power the steamers that worked the Great Lakes in the 1940s. The older steamers had relatively small engines compared to today's standards, but they still managed to keep men busy filling their boilers with coal. Ell had signed on the SCHNEIDER as a coal passer, the lowest and arguably the toughest job on the totem pole on a steamboat. "I was a coal passer for about two weeks and at that time during the war they didn't care - if

you could handle a job, you did it, and the marine inspectors weren't that persnickety. You had to get three months coal passing before you go fireman and all that stuff. If you could handle a job they needed you. So I had two weeks coal passing and then I went firing and, after the couple months of firing, I couldn't handle it anymore with the coal that they were getting. If you had good coal, it would be no problem."

In the 1940s the steamers loaded their bunker coal all up and down the lakes. Bunker coal was not the highest grade coal available. It was often heavily mixed with slate and other residue. While the lakers

There was an art to firing a boiler and Ell would learn it like the rest of the men who came before him. "Where the boiler door closed was a cast iron frame and, when you threw coal in there, you bounced that shovel on that frame and it would spread it so that you would have an even fire," explained Ell. "And you'd better learn how to do it quick, otherwise you'd have big mounds in there." The fires had to be pulled at the end of every watch and rebuilt before the next watch took over. It was always an intense time trying to pull the fire, keep the pressure up, and keep it going. It required a tremendous physical effort from everyone.

"What they'd do when they got ready to pull the fire, they'd put this big hoe, and it isn't a hoe." Ell tried to describe the long-handled tool used to pull the fire. "It was spade-like, about that wide and so long, and you'd wing the hot stuff over on one side and then you'd pull all that garbage here and then you'd go in and wing the hot stuff back on the side that you already pulled, and then you'd pull this. Then you went in and spread it so that it covered the whole firing surface and then you'd start throwing your coal in and going for another four hours." While the men pulled the hot burning fire down around their feet, the coal passer stood there with a bucket of water and doused the red hot clinkers and ashes. Clouds of hot steam and the smell of burnt shoe rubber enveloped the fire hole as the men worked on in silence.

"If you were a hot dog, you could do it in twenty minutes," Ell told me. He remembered two men during a later point in his career who worked as firemen on one of the Cleveland Cliffs boats. "They would both work their tails off," Ell recalled. "One would hit the fires, throw fresh coal in while the other pulled the fires for one watch and then the next watch when they were down there they'd reverse and they'd work their hearts out for probably an hour and a half, two hours to pull all of them. There were three boilers. I think there was three fires to a boiler. That's about nine fires they had to pull and then he'd go up on deck, the one guy, and he'd just set there and shake. He had just exhausted himself and to me that was stupid because if they'd both stayed down there and took it easy, they could have done it. But, they wanted that couple hours

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| Issued by<br>The United States Coast Guard                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                  |                     |
| <i>Ellsworth</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                  | <i>Fred Barclay</i> |
| NAME OF SEAMAN, IN FULL                                                                                                                                                                                                    | STATEMENT OF AGE                 |                     |
| <i>Ellsworth Fred Barclay</i>                                                                                                                                                                                              | Date of birth<br><i>11/23/20</i> |                     |
| STATEMENT OF PERSONAL DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                  |                     |
| Ellsworth Barclay's continuous discharge book was issued by the Coast Guard and filled out by the Captain as he signed onto and off from a ship, providing a record of his employment, experience, and vessel assignments. |                                  |                     |
| Lapinski photo, Barclay collection.                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                  |                     |

needed coal for fuel, it wasn't what the ship made money hauling. As long as it could burn fairly well and get the boat to the next port, the ships would load what the fuel dock gave them. The job of the fireman was to shovel it in and clean it out. "I don't remember the tonnage part of it, but you'd shovel coal steady for four hours on your watch. It was very little time in between. You took it easy, you spread your coal and you kept a good fire, but you couldn't pour too much in there and blow the safety valves. The Chief always frowned on that," laughed Ell. "He just wanted that pressure right up just so it wouldn't blow the safety." Most of the steamers of that time needed about a hundred eighty pounds of working pressure to produce the horsepower to propel the ship.

on deck. That chief didn't care as long as the pressure was up."

The chief's were told to not load more bunker coal than they would need to make the trip and the coal companies used the steam boats as a dumping ground for the few slate-filled tons the steamers would load. Most of the time this system of supply and demand worked just fine, except when the ship would be delayed by bad weather and the bunker would begin to run low. "I think it was the PAM when I was coal passing, we used to put boots on and get down into the coal bunker and shovel it up on the deck so the fireman could get it." Ell recalled what a miserable job that could be with the boat rolling. "They had sloped sides on the coal bunker so normally coal would be in the door for the fireman to get, but once you get down below the firing deck, then you had to shovel it up for him and you'd be standing in water. Interesting as all hell," laughed Ell. During storms, Ell would often see the chief check the supply of coal. "Damn," he'd say, "Hope it lasts!"

As the season wore on handling the long rake and hoe-like tools in the fire hole became increasingly difficult for Ell. While he was a teenager, Ell's life had changed dramatically. A hunting accident left him with an impaired right arm. The daily physical toil began to wear on Ell. He became discouraged over not being able to do the job as well as he wanted and worried about letting the other members of the crew down. After a short three months on the SCHNEIDER, Ell left the boat and wouldn't return until the following season.

Ell worked for Allis-Chalmers in Wisconsin on the M-6 tank assembly line for the remainder of that year and during the winter months. Success on the European battlefronts that winter soon cut into domestic wartime production which led to job layoffs and Ell was let go. Despite the setback on the lakes, Ell was determined to come back the following season and was thankful for the brief amount of work he had gotten at the plant. Ell had gained enough shipboard experience that he was able to sign on as an oiler and rejoined the SCHNEIDER in Buffalo the following spring. It was March 1945, Ell was twenty-four years old and confident he could handle the oiling job. It was physically less strenuous and Ell found he had no problem working in and around the moving parts of the SCHNEIDER's triple expansion engine.

The PAM SCHNEIDER was normally operated by the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company for the Schneider Transportation Company. For some reason Schneider decided to run the PAM themselves in 1945. Over the winter, Schneider had the hull painted a different

color. It was the only apparent difference that Ell and the other sailors on the SCHNEIDER could notice. All the other operations went on as they had in the past. While the oiling job appealed to Ell, his second stint on the PAM SCHNEIDER was going to be about as unexpectedly short lived as his first, but for a completely different reason.

"We had go into Port Arthur to load grain," Ell told me. "They tell you, there was no union yet, but they tell you you're guaranteed two and a half hours in port. But, it didn't work out that way. The fireman and I went up town to get a haircut. We figured, well you can get a haircut in two hours easy. Coming back, we seen the boat going down the river already. They left us in Canada!" Ell and his fellow shipmate were stranded in a foreign country by their own ship. The two men weren't left with too many options. "So we went over to the Mounties and checked in," continued Ell. "The Mounty says 'Well you'll have a choice. They haven't called in so we don't know you're here. You've already checked in but you'll have a choice. We can put you in jail and you can wait for the boat to come back, or you can go home.' I said 'I don't go to jail for no damn boat.' That night the skipper called in from the boat, way out on Superior by then, and he said 'Hold them until we come back. We'll be back in about four or five days.' The Mounty says 'The skipper wants you held,' and I said 'I don't want to be held. I don't go to jail for a damn steamboat.' So we had a choice. I had enough money with me to get home, so they put us on a bus. I don't remember the name of their transportation company, but at every stop that bus made, they must have called on ahead, because there was a Mounty by the door to make sure that my fireman and I were on that bus. You really appreciated the Canadians," Ell bitterly reflected.

Ell didn't want anything to do with either the PAM SCHNEIDER or her captain again. "To me that was a personal -- it's an insult -- they want to stick you in jail. Who the hell are they to put me in jail? I wasn't there on purpose. They left me!" A dejected Ell Barclay returned home to Marquette. Ell and his wife Gina were expecting their first child and Ell decided he'd try to find something closer to home for the rest of the year. "I was a good bus driver," Ell proudly told me. "I never had any problems, just go out to the bus garage and you were hired. They knew what you were so I went and finished driving bus, drove bus through the winter." Ell still wanted to sail and continued in his efforts to obtain a job on a different ship for the next season. Over the winter months, Ell

wrote directly to Cleveland Cliffs in search of a better boat than the SCHNEIDER. His direct appeal was successful and that spring he was given orders to report to Buffalo, New York, for fitout.

It was the end of May in 1946 when Ell headed to Buffalo to catch his new boat, the GRAND ISLAND (EUGENE ZIMMERMAN-1905). When he got there he found that the vessel had been moved. A day or so later Ell and several other members of the crew caught up with the steamer GRAND ISLAND down in Lorain, Ohio. The GRAND ISLAND was named for the 13,000-acre island located near Munising, Michigan. Cleveland Cliffs had acquired the island in 1900 to make use of its timber resources to supply their mining interests. William G. Mather was particularly fond of the island's natural beauty and the island remained associated with Cleveland Cliffs for many years.

With a family to support at home the job on the GRAND ISLAND couldn't have come at a more favorable time. Ell remained on the GRAND ISLAND as an oiler for the next two and a half seasons, enjoying a steady job on the lakes for the first time. When he wasn't working, Ell found plenty of time to read during his spare time. He also found the time to get himself in on an evening poker game. "You always got a poker game going on a steamboat," Ell told me. Ell figured it was time he learned how to play. "In fact I was gonna be real smart and initiated myself into it. I played one night," he continued. "I played one night from after I got off watch at midnight and we quit in time to get our breakfast and go back on watch the next morning. I lost ten bucks and that was my spending money for the month. I realized what had happened and I never gambled since."

The GRAND ISLAND was powered by a quadruple expansion engine. "You had to watch what you were doing," Ell told me. "It was a lot of fun when you were out during a gale. You had to make sure when you reached a hand in to catch the bearings that the lurch of the boat wasn't gonna throw you into that cross head 'cause it would kill you." It was a good job for a young hotshot oiler like Ell. "You usually had one hand on the bars, the guardrail, and then you'd reach in and feel the bearings."

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Crew accommodations on the lake boats back then were often less than accommodating. They were usually crowded and dismal. "If there's three coal passers, there's three coal passers to a room. Three oilers to a room. I've seen them on the PONTIAC (1917) back when she was a

coal burner, they had four," Ell remembered. "They had two firemen on a watch. I think there was four firemen in a room." During the 1940s, it was common for men to leave one ship and catch another one as quickly as the next day or the following week. For a single man life on the boats meant free room and board and many worked the boats for that reason alone.

On the old ships the deck crew lived forward and the engine crew lived aft. The only real contact they would have might be at the dinner table. All the men on the boat shared one thing in common, no air conditioning. Scoops were put outside of portholes to draw cool air into the rooms, but these were only most efficient when the ship was underway. Sitting in port on the Lower Lakes usually meant a long hot day. "At one time we used to be so happy to get out in the middle of the lake because the temperature out in the middle of the lake was about a hundred degrees. So you can imagine what it was in the port. Usually the sleeping quarters are right above the boilers - nice and warm. You'd wake up in the morning and you'd be drenched. You just sweat."

The GRAND ISLAND remained a good job for Ell, but midway into his third season on the boat, Ell and one of the ship's other oilers got into a disagreement with the chief and left the boat in Green Bay. Ell's wife Gina was living in Presque Isle at the time, taking care of her ailing father, so Ell returned to Marquette to wait until he could catch another boat. He would again use his Marquette harbor connections to get himself onto another boat. "Just across the street on the corner the ship chandler was there that put groceries on the boats in Marquette and you could ship out through him. Ray Moran was his name, and I asked Ray, 'Can you get me another boat?' and Ray said 'Sure. Damn right. That won't take long.' So that's when I went on the PONTIAC (1917)." On the 1st of July 1948 Ell stood at the ore dock in Escanaba to catch his next boat, the PONTIAC. The PONTIAC was another Cliffs boat and Ell's first 600 footer.

Ell sailed the PONTIAC for the remainder of the 1948 season until it was time to go home, or so he thought. In late December the PONTIAC left Buffalo for lay up at Toledo. Half way across Lake Erie, Ell recalled a late season change of plans. "We were in Buffalo on the PONTIAC and

we took on bunker coal for the lay up dock," recalled Ell. "We were going to Toledo, but as we left Buffalo we got a change of orders. Europe was in bad shape food wise and they were asking, even begging for grain. So Cleveland Cliffs sent the PONTIAC to Superior for a load of grain in December and we had lay up coal to fire the boat all the way up. You couldn't make it burn. We pulled half speed all the way to Superior because you couldn't get enough steam." Ell remembered what a difficult time they had moving through the ice with so little power. The chief wanted Ell to go down to the fire hole and help shovel coal to keep as much steam up as possible. "The chief engineer told me, he says 'You go

returned to the JOLIET. The month following the loss of her father was extremely difficult for Gina and her family, and Ell was concerned about her while he was away from home. At the insistence of his sister-in-law, Ell returned again that month to Marquette to look after his family. When Ell left the boat in South Chicago, he really had no idea whether he would return again that year. "I explained the situation to the chief engineer," Ell told me. "He was a good guy and he said 'You go home, see what happens. I'll hold your job for a month and, if you want to come back, you're welcome back.' So, after the month was up, I realized that she would never make it on her own at that time." Ell reluctantly had to make the choice between his job and staying at home with Gina. When the chief called, Ell could only tell him one thing. "I told the chief I'm sorry I couldn't come back. It was my obligation to take care of her, that's the way I was taught. She was my wife so I stayed home."

Ell had sailed long enough on the lakes to have gained a solid start on his career. On shore it was another thing to be a sailor. In the eyes of many a sailor was a liability in the job market. Ell found that he would have a hard time finding a job to replace the one he had just left. "I think I was home for probably two months before I finally got a job. Nobody wants to hire you once you're on the lakes," explained Ell. "They figured every

time the steam whistle blows you're gone. That was their excuse in Marquette. They ain't gonna hire you. The guy says 'The first time the whistle blows, you'll be gone.'" Welcome home, Ell.



Note about the author: Patrick Lapinski is a frequent contributor to *The Nor'Easter* and a producer of multi-media programs about sailing on the Great Lakes. Part II of this article will appear in the next edition of *The Nor'Easter*.



Cleveland Cliffs Steamship Company's GRAND ISLAND shown here with billboard owner's name boldly painted on her side. University of Detroit Marine Collection, Rev. Edward J. Dowling photo.

out there and give them boys a hand,' and I said 'No sir I won't.' I said 'I'm handicapped, I can't handle the tools and it would be foolish for me to go out there and even try.' So I didn't get invited to come back to the PONTIAC the next spring, but they understood." The PONTIAC made the final run from Superior that year and eventually ended the season in Toledo just one week before Christmas.

Ell returned to Toledo in March of 1949 where he signed on as an oiler, this time aboard the Cliffs steamer JOLIET. The JOLIET was built in 1916 in Lorain, Ohio, as the steamer HERBERT F. BLACK. In 1930 she was sold to the Cleveland Cliffs Steamship Company and renamed the JOLIET. At 524 feet in length she was a slightly smaller boat than the PONTIAC. The JOLIET ran a typical route from Escanaba and Marquette down to the Lower Lakes with cargoes of iron ore.

It was in early August that Ell got word that his father-in-law had died. Ell took a personal leave to attend the funeral. He stayed briefly in Marquette and then

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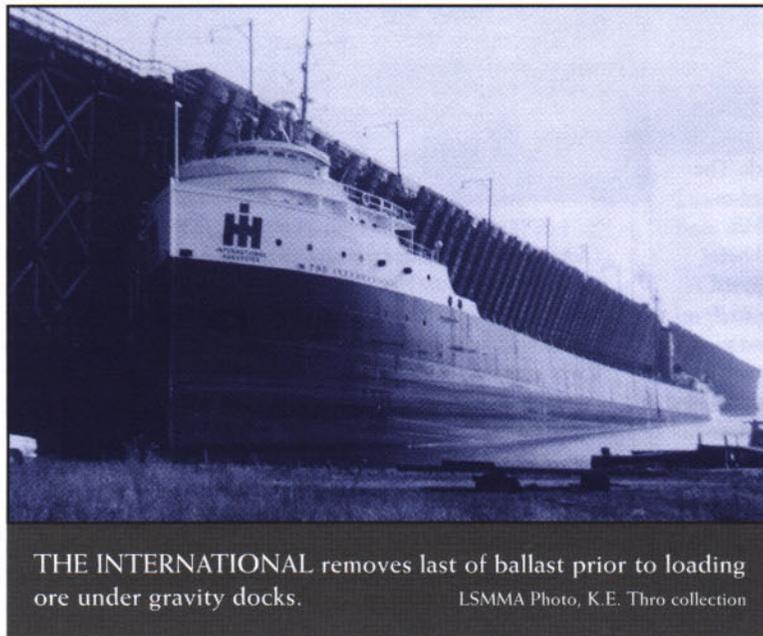
## "ELL: Recollections of a Steamboat Sailor"

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(Conclusion)

"One of the largest strikes in years idled boats all around the Great Lakes in the summer of 1959. There were really no unions on the lakes when Ell left the boats ten years earlier. A loosely run organization called the Lake Sailors Union was organized in 1946, but Ell felt at the time it was really more of a company union than an organization representing the unlicensed crew. Things had changed a lot and the steel strike lasted several months. The International Harvester Company fleet tied up in Marquette for the duration of the strike. Idled at the old material dock were their two steamers, THE HARVESTER (1911) and THE INTERNATIONAL (WILLIAM H. WARNER-1923).



THE INTERNATIONAL removes last of ballast prior to loading ore under gravity docks.

LSMMA Photo, K.E. Thro collection

An early season snowfall that year dumped up to ten inches of heavy wet snow on the Upper Peninsula. It was the first week in November of 1959. Ell's wife Gina raced over the snow-covered road to the Huron Mountain Club where Ell was working part time. Gina had gotten the call from the dock office. They need an oiler on THE INTERNATIONAL. "Oh god, it was just like a big weight lifted off your shoulders," recalled Ell. There were so many things racing through Ell's mind as Gina turned the car around and headed for their home so Ell could pack. "The luck was that the guy that I was replacing had come back to Marquette, put his bags on the deck, and went in and had a cup of coffee and said 'The hell with it. I ain't going out any more.' He picked up his bags and went home, and that left the job open, so I

took it."

Ell had decided that winter that he was going to go back on the boats. A job with the railroad went by the wayside when new management made cutbacks. Ell went to St. Ignace and had his license renewed, gave the word he was looking, and waited for the steel strike to end. "I was scared silly," said Ell. "It's ten years since I had felt an engine and here they were loading already. They had pulled it over to the dock and she was loading. But I made it. When you have to, you do!"

The season was short, but it was a godsend. THE INTERNATIONAL laid up in South Chicago two weeks later, but Ell had earned enough money to at least be able to have a Christmas that year. He

was also assured that he could return to the boat the following spring. THE INTERNATIONAL's main run was to International Harvester's Wisconsin Steel mill in South Chicago. THE INTERNATIONAL and her fleetmate THE HARVESTER would alternately load at Marquette, Escanaba or Superior and make the return. The steel mill located along Torrance Avenue was a place that Ell came to see more times in his life than any other port.

"Wisconsin Steel had three of them rigs that went out and dropped the big clam shell, just like a coal unloader and that's the way they did it." Ell described what was a typical unloading method at docks around the Great Lakes with the giant Hullett unloaders or the travelling bridge cranes. They were surprisingly fast at unloading. "Hell



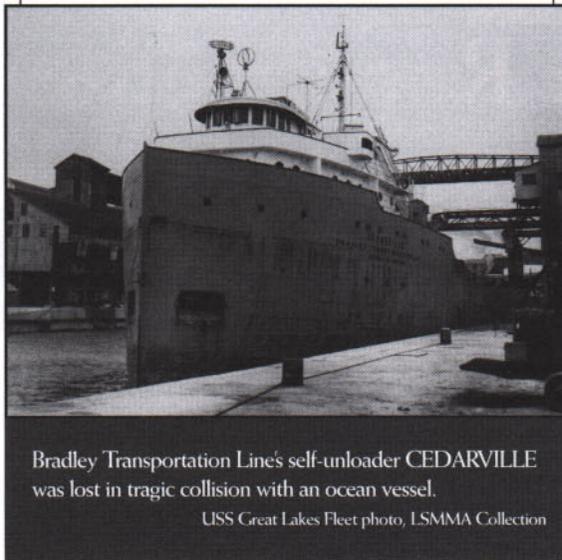
they could do it in eight, nine hours. They had three rigs and right away, as soon as they would start, they'd drop a bulldozer on top of the pile of ore. When they'd get pretty well down, he'd start pushing it where they could get it easier," recalled Ell of the setup in South Chicago.

"There's different things that you see." Ell leaned back in his chair to tell me a gruesome tale he witnessed from the stern of THE INTERNATIONAL one day. "We was laying in the slip one time in South Chicago waiting for a tug and an old salt water boat come up with a couple of tugs on her and, we had another steel plant behind us, across the river, and when they went by there the tugs rolled up a body. So they called the Coast Guard in and they come up there and picked the body out of the water, you know, and put it on the back of the boat." Ell's voice conveyed a sense of horror when THE INTERNATIONAL returned a week later and he learned what had happened to the man. "They found out later that it was a boat that had unloaded there three or four days before - was off of their crew!" They thought they'd just left him in town, but the guy must have come back from town drunk, missed his footing on the ladder, and went down between the boat and the dock and that's where he stayed."

Ell returned to South Chicago each spring for the next five years to work as an oiler aboard THE INTERNATIONAL. He was comfortable with the oiling job and confident in his ability to do the work. The first week of May in 1964, Ell traveled to Superior, Wisconsin, to fit out on THE INTERNATIONAL. The vessel had been dry docked at the Fraser-Nelson Shipyard over the winter and was finally ready to return to service. "They wanted to put a bow thruster in that year," Ell explained. "See, the salt water boats were coming in pretty heavy then. They took two tugs, and the tugs liked them because I guess probably they were a lucrative market, so the locals had to lay in port and wait for tugs. We waited up to six, eight hours for a tug to take us down the river from Wisconsin Steel. So they decided they were gonna put a bow thruster in. We went up to Superior that winter and they put the bow thruster in. The next spring when we fit out we were coming down, we had to load in Marquette first trip, so we came light from Superior to Marquette, but while we were loading in Marquette in May of 1965, this CEDARVILLE (A.F. HARVEY-1927) and that Norwegian TOPDALSJORD (1959) boat collided underneath the Mackinac bridge. So when we went back, as we were passing under the bridge, you could see this diving barge off of the side and the divers were going down trying to find bodies and

that." If you were a superstitious sailor, you had to take that as a bad omen. "Boy, it makes you think," said Ell as they passed the wreck site on that first trip.

There was no way for Ell to remember when he was out on the lakes in his first big storm. He couldn't recount how many times they would be pounded while crossing large stretches of the lakes. It was just part of the job. Sometimes it was a risk to just get out of the harbor. "I told Gina I used to hang on the vise. I didn't want the vice to fall in the main engine." Ell made up funny stories to keep the fear of the vessel sinking out of his wife's mind. "We left Marquette one time," Ell said. "We had



loaded and the dock crew was watching us as we backed out. Never should have went, but we did. The skipper says go, so you go. We backed out beyond the breakwall, 'cause when you back out of the upper harbor the breakwall ain't that darn long when you get ore boats. So he backed out but he wanted to get back out far enough so he could get a running start." Ell described what the ore dock crew witnessed from their bird's-eye vantage point "It was a northeast gale coming in. So the crew watched and as we backed out and as we turned, tried to turn into the storm, from the top of the dock they said the boat laid right on its side. You could see the whole deck, all them hatch covers, they were already tarped since it was fall of the year. And when she rolled the other way, they could see the whole bottom. They said they didn't think we was gonna get out of the harbor." Ell paused and laughed. "Well, we didn't that time. They pulled up on in there again." Ell tried to describe the extreme effort the engineer on duty had to endure to stay on his feet when the boat tried to leave Marquette. Ell recalled he wasn't one hundred percent

successful. "While they were doing that, I was oiling. The engineer that was on watch would hang on this bar that come down - the throttle bar. He hung on that and his feet would be hanging straight out. He's hanging on this so he could hang on to the throttle bar when that boat leaned over like that." Ell still has memories of working with the horizontal engineer.

The skipper on THE INTERNATIONAL had garnered himself a reputation for being a heavy weather captain. Even before Ell stepped aboard the boat, the men had learned to be ready to go into almost anything the lakes could dish up. "They had this deal where they liked the name "Heavy Weather." Like we had one, Baake, Heavy Weather Baake. Baake was a good skipper. I'll have to give it to him because if there was a soft spot on the lake he knew where it was, so I didn't mind riding with Baake, but some of them others they were lulu's." Captain Charles Baake remained master aboard the ship for many of the years that Ell served aboard her.

Ell remembered the stubbornness exhibited by some of the captains on the boats and felt fortunate to be riding with his own daring skipper. "We had one skipper on THE HARVESTER, the other boat of ours. He was laying behind the Manitou's or the Fox Islands, over near Muskegon on that side for protection. He was heading for South Chicago, too, but he figured he'd better stay there because there was a southwest gale coming right at him." Ell leaned forward and spoke in a voice full of conviction and drama. "Well, on the radio he picked us up, that we were coming out of Escanaba going down close to the edge of the shore and it was no problem. We were gonna get to Chicago and he said 'No way! He's going to Chicago and he's going to get ahead of us so he pulled out into that thing.'" All the guys on THE INTERNATIONAL laughed when THE HARVESTER finally reached South Chicago. The tough old captain had done it his way. Did he win? "When he got to Chicago, they had moved the pilot house back about six inches, and they caved that whole front apron in on the pilothouse. He wrecked that thing but he was going plowing in there. He met an Inland boat going up the lake and he called to the Inland boat and he says 'Do you think I should turn around?' The Inland skipper told him 'Sure, if you want to sink her, turn around.' He said 'The least you could do is cut the speed down.'"

Fog is often more of an enemy on a boat than a rolling sea. Thick fog beds have accounted for many fatal collisions and foundering on the Great Lakes, including



the CEDARVILLE in 1959. Vessel traffic in the St. Marys, Detroit, and St. Clair rivers can quickly come to a standstill when beset with fog. Ell told me that even dropping the hook isn't always going to guarantee a safe passage. "I was on the GRAND ISLAND in '46. It must have been October; maybe it was in September. We were getting a lot of fog in the river and we had dropped the hook, somewhere around Marine City in the St. Clair River, waiting because you couldn't see nothing," he told me. "There was a lot of boats in the river and some boat come down - PHILIP MINCH (1905) was the one. She come down and she decided she couldn't go anymore either." Ell explained how the captains would swing their boat around to get their bow pointing up river before dropping the anchor. This is where the captain on the MINCH would encounter a slight change of plans. "So he was turning around and all at once - we were all sleeping - the alarm bells took off. We all run out on deck with our life jackets. That S.O.B. entered us about ten feet behind the port hawse pipe. Right in. He didn't see us. When he backed out away from us, we thought we were gonna sink right there in the river, but the pumps handled it." There wasn't going to be any more sleep that night as the crew worked to keep the ship afloat and secure the damage. "We were loaded with coal for Little Current. We went up to Port Huron pumping our butts off and the Coast Guard came aboard and checked it out and they decided then that they'd build a cribbing and pour that hole full of concrete. We could get up to Little Current and get rid of the cargo, then come back to Ecorse and go in the shipyard."

THE INTERNATIONAL was powered by a steam-driven triple expansion engine. She measured an overall length of six hundred feet and was a sleek looking ship. The distinctive International Harvester logo proudly graced her bow and stack. Ell had a lot of respect for the men he worked with in the ship's engine room. After several seasons, the 2nd Assistant encouraged Ell to write for his license. Ell was reluctant at first, but soon the chief got behind him, too, and he made plans to attend school that winter. "The reason that I just didn't figure I could handle the main engines and the assistant engineer has to maneuver the engines. I was afraid to take a chance," conceded Ell. "I didn't want to get my backsides in a bind either. I could handle the oiling, so I stayed there."

The Lake Carrier's offered a school in Sturgeon Bay that would teach the requirements needed to obtain a Third Assistant Engineer's license. Ell had been around the steamboats a long time. He

knew more than he probably gave himself credit for and the school helped fill in the finer details. He also learned that there were some things you didn't presume to put yourself above when it came time to writing for the license.

"We had a drip from the Ludington car ferry, from Ludington, was over there going to school," remembered Ell. "He was gonna be a hot shot, too, and he was one of them corrosive human beings that - that you can't get along with. He kept telling us about how he was gonna write in Ludington, that they had a good marine inspection bureau in Ludington." Ell shook his head thinking about the entertainment he and another fellow provided for everyone. "Well, we had another clown that decided he was going to Milwaukee to write, but he was going early 'cause he was smart," laughed Ell. "He was a real loser. He went to Milwaukee and they give you arithmetic problems. I think you get five arithmetic problems and sometimes it takes two sheets of paper to work it out. At that time they wouldn't let you use calculators. You did it so they could see that you knew what the heck you were doing. So one of his first problems was the old lever and ball safety valve problem and he had the courage to tell the marine inspection officer that this stuff is obsolete. He said 'You don't have problems like that anymore.' The marine inspection man says 'Just a good arithmetic problem. If you can't do it, you go home, come back in thirty days.'"

In thirty days, Ell told me, you were running out of time. It was almost time to get back on the boats again. "So he come back to Sturgeon Bay," continued Ell, "and was at school there and he's telling the guys, so everybody decided they was going over to Ludington. So this clown from Ludington went back, on weekends he'd go home, told the Marine Inspection Bureau officer over there that the whole gang was coming over! Gonna get permission to write - you had to make an appointment to sit for a license. The inspector says, 'Fine, fine, I'll be ready for them.' We could read the writing between the lines that he was waiting for us. You knew what you was gonna get. Nobody wanted to go to Milwaukee then either because of what the other guy got," laughed Ell. "On the quiet I wrote to St. Ignace and I found out afterwards that my license was the only one that come out of that school that year."

The engineers on THE INTERNATIONAL had suggested that Ell write for his Original Second. They felt he could pass the exam just as well as he could the Original Third. Ell wasn't so sure, but requested the exam from the officer in St. Ignace. "I was scared because my engineers

told me, with all my time, to write for an Original Second. They said there's no reason you shouldn't. So I told the officer I'd like to write for Original Second." Ell remembers the officer being gone for an unusually long period of time. He began to think something had gone wrong. "They probably had a fat chewing contest back there and the guy, the inspector, come out that gives the mates their exams, and he's gabbing with me and he says, 'You know lad.' I wasn't a lad. Then he said, 'Young man,' but I wasn't young either. He says 'Young man, if I was you, I'd write for the original.' I knew then that if I insisted on writing for the Original Second that I'd get an examination I couldn't pass. They'd make sure of that. So I says, 'It don't bother me. I just put on there what the engineer's on my boat said to write for,' but I said 'if Third's all I can have, fine with me.' So he gets a big smile on his face," remembered Ell, "and goes back in the other room and pretty soon out comes the cards." Ell wrote for his Original Third and passed the exam.

On April 7, 1966, Ell signed aboard THE INTERNATIONAL in South Chicago as a Third Assistant engineer. In retrospect he wished he had written for his license earlier. The increase in money was significant to Ell and his family. The next winter Ell wrote for his Original Second. Again he passed, but not without a "friendly" chat with the Coast Guard examination officer. "The next year I went back cold. I didn't go to school. I went back because I'd had my season in for Second's and I'm kind of a hotshot, at the time I was, I ain't gonna say it anymore, on electricity and stuff like that. Second's license is more or less that you're responsible for the boiler room. So I wrote a good exam. I think it was 86 or something that I came through with, but I came through with about 96 or 97 on electricity and on engine room safety," Ell explained. "So the inspector come out there and I think he talked to me for at least two hours. Told me I was a smart ass writing cold and he says 'Just because you think you know electricity...,' he says, 'Do you have them Osborne books on marine engineering?'" The officer quizzed and talked to Ell for a long time. Ell listened intently to the officer, most of the time. "He says 'You make sure you get that and get in there and study boilers because he says 'Second Engineer's is responsible for the boiler room,' but he says 'I'll sign your license.'" Ell laughed again. He didn't want to sign it, but he had to. "I found out you can tell the truth and get yourself into more damn trouble," he concluded. Ell stayed on THE INTERNATIONAL as Third Assistant, working as a relief Second until December of 1969.



PONTIAC with her grateful crew shown arriving through the Duluth Entry as the first boat of the season on April 8, 1941.

LSMMA Photo, K.E. Thro collection

One of the privileges of being a licensed officer on the boat was the perk of having your own room. THE INTERNATIONAL had very limited crew quarters and the Third Assistant and Second Assistant were forced to share quarters. The company continually promised that when they added rooms that the Third Assistant would have his own room. After a time, a couple of rooms were added, but one was given to the Steward and the other was made into a lounge. Ell protested to the union who said they would follow up on it. Ell arrived at the shipyard in Manitowoc a day early for fit-out on THE INTERNATIONAL after the changes were made so he could size up the room situation. That same day Ell ran into a sailor from another ship who was on board visiting with the ship keeper. He told Ell about an opening on the Cliff's steamer CHAMPLAIN (BELLE ISLE-1943). Ell visited with the chief and changed ships the next day when he discovered that he wouldn't be getting his own room on THE INTERNATIONAL.

"The CHAMPLAIN had a Lentz engine. A double compound engine. She had two highs and two lows - I guess that's the way you would describe it. It's a compound engine. Two high cylinders, two low cylinders. You had like two separate engines buckled together with a coupling on the main shaft," described Ell. The CHAMPLAIN also had a big wheel the engineer would have to turn to get the boat into reverse. This was an unusual set up and was new to Ell. It took thirteen turns on this huge wheel, Ell told me, each time you had to change direction. The captain had to plan his maneuvers carefully and try to give the engineer enough notice so he wouldn't have a problem getting the boat into reverse in

tight quarters. "They knew about it in the office so they would try to get us the lake front so we didn't have to go up the Cleveland creek," recalled Ell.

The CHAMPLAIN was a good boat and Ell reported back to her in Cleveland for fitout to start the 1971 season. It would prove to be an unusual season for Ell as he bounced around several vessels that year. Before the boat made its first trip of the season, Ell was sent to Buffalo to help with the fit out on the steamer FRONTENAC (1923). The Second Assistant there became ill and they needed a replacement. Ell had never been on a turbine-powered vessel before. It was a whole new experience.

"Turbines scare the hell out of me," confided Ell. "I went over and finished fit out and made the first trip on the FRONTENAC. Now that was a good boat. It had good engineers. They were right there. 'Ell, if you need anything, holler. I'll show you what to do.' I was learning a lot. Never been on a turbine." As expected the FRONTENAC's regular Second Assistant returned and Ell was now sent over to the steamer WILLIAM G. MATHER (1925). "The main turbines turned about 6,200 RPMs full speed," Ell explained. "You had steam extraction points on the turbine once you got underway. If you had to check



Straight-decker WILLIAM G. MATHER under the spouts at Superior's old Farmer's Union (Cenex Harvest States) grain elevator.

Harold Andresen photo, LSMMA Collection

down, they would call and usually they have to give you a warning, as much as they can. If they don't, you're gonna fight it," he explained, "because you have to close an extraction point from the main turbine and open up steam emission stations. You have to take the place of what you're gonna knock

off of the main turbine. To me it was just too much. I wasn't comfortable, lets put it that way." Ell found that his lack of experience on the turbines made it difficult for him to do his job. "There was this rod there, a handle there that said, if your oil pressure goes out, you pull this rod and you got two or three minutes to shut the turbine down 'cause, if you don't, you're gonna wipe the bearings out and I just couldn't stand that pressure. What the hell! What do I do? On all of the 'recips' you don't got to worry about that because you've got oil dips and stuff. So I quit," said Ell.

The next seven months were agonizing ones for Ell. He struggled with the merits of his career on the boats. He grew increasingly disillusioned with the temperamental engineers he had to work with. Ell and Gina's children had grown and left home and the long seasons away from home had begun to wear on his marriage. But, Ell again returned to what he knew best. A friend offered to help Ell get back on THE INTERNATIONAL. On April 15, 1972, Ell joined the boat in Manitowoc for spring fitout. He sailed that entire season as Third Assistant. THE INTERNATIONAL was scheduled on a steady Escanaba to South Chicago turnaround, so Ell bought a place in Escanaba so he and Gina could be together more often.

Since Ell had begun sailing, things had changed a lot on the boats. The way things used to be was not going to be the way of the future. Mandatory Coast Guard regulations began to impact the day to day operations of the steamboats. THE INTERNATIONAL headed to the shipyard for some modifications. "The Coast Guard got this bright idea that the boats weren't going to dump nothing in the lake anymore," explained Ell. "So they pulled the coolers and bilge pumping apparatus off the boats. Stripped us down." While THE INTERNATIONAL was in the shipyard, Gina and Ell were able to spend some time together in the relaxed confines of Wisconsin's picturesque Door County. They had long talks about what the future would hold for them. "I would look at her and say, 'Gin, what are we doing? You're home alone and I'm out here alone, there's gotta be something, someplace that I can get a slot where we can live like human beings again.'"

The end of Ell's career on the lakes came shortly after the Fourth of July on an outbound run from South Chicago up Lake Michigan to Escanaba, recalled Ell. "I had a oiler - he and the skipper's son in high school were Pam sniffers . . . and the skipper's son died, froze his lungs. He got a load of ether, I guess, and it froze his lungs and he died. The other guy lost some of his marbles so the skipper felt obligated, I guess.



Nestled into Soo waterfront is the VALLEY CAMP museum vessel shown about 25 years ago and still going strong.

A.F. Sagon-King photo, LSMMA Collection

He was gonna make a sailor out of him," said Ell sarcastically. "He wouldn't take him on the forward end where he should have. He put him in the after end. I got stuck with him as a fireman. He was useless there. They made an oiler out of him and that's who I had for an oiler. We started up the lakes and always they pumped out, pumped out, pumped out, leaving South Chicago. Pumped out one, two, three and four tanks and lifted the ass end up till she had about sixteen and a half feet of water that she drew so the propeller would stay under water. Then they'd race like mad and then maybe they'd gain an hour. To me it was useless but what's it to me? So we had the hot bearings and I called the chief. I said I need help down here. He never came down. So when I was relieved at midnight, I knew I was done. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I was so sick of steamboating then, I quit."

On July 15, 1974 Captain Hartman signed Ell's continuous discharge book when THE INTERNATIONAL reached Escanaba. Twenty seasons on the boats had finally come to an end for Ellsworth Barclay.

"I had quit in '74 and the funny part of it was our son was living in the Soo then. He had married in '73 and his wife, Mary, was teaching school in Sault Ste. Marie. The morning that the EDMUND FITZGERALD (1958) went down, we were in the Soo and the color of the sky and everything looked terrible, and I said to Gin, 'Lets get the hell out of here. It looks like there's gonna be a real storm coming.' She says 'Fine, we'll go home.' So we headed home. We must have got home maybe three, four o'clock in the afternoon, and about seven o'clock the FITZGERALD went down. Damn, but I feel sorry for them guys.

What do you do? You say a prayer for them and say, 'Thank God we didn't go down!' That's all you can do."

Ell offered no regrets at having left the boats. "I never miss it," Ell told me. In fact it was several years before Ell felt comfortable about going back on a lake boat. "The first time I appreciated going back on the steamboats is when we went to Sault Ste. Marie and they have that VALLEY CAMP (LOUIS W. HILL-1917) and I took Gina. Gina and I were over there. We had gone to see the museum at Whitefish Point and wanted to see the leftovers of the FITZGERALD, so we went to the VALLEY CAMP, too, and when I went through there I seen so many familiar things that

I got kind of like 'Oh man, I'm home.' So from then on, I could face it — I could watch the boats go by."



Note about the author: Patrick Lapinski is a frequent contributor to The Nor'Easter and an avid producer of multimedia programs about sailing on the Great Lakes. Part I of this article appeared in the previous issue of The Nor'Easter. We also heard from Ell Barclay. He and his wife are still alive and well over in the Marquette/Presque Isle area. He tracked us down through Northern Lights Books & Gifts of Duluth. Ell was pleased with the article and looking forward to the "rest of the story," especially for his children and grandchildren. Thanks Ell, for finding us, and for sharing your story.

## Corps Reaches 225th Anniversary

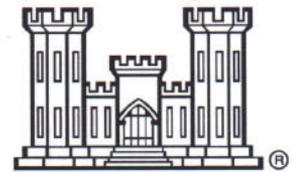
In marking the 225th anniversary of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Chief of Engineers Joe N. Ballard stated, "The United States has never been without Army engineers. We were there at the birth of our nation. From the fortifications at Bunker Hill on June 16, 1775, to the taking of Redoubt Ten at Yorktown on Oct. 14, 1781, Army engineers played a crucial role in the war fought to make the United States a free and independent nation." He added, "Since then, throughout our history, the Corps has earned a reputation for nation-building and national defense."

One of our earliest missions was building and repairing fortifications, and the

Corps continues its involvement in military construction. The Corps of Engineers has always been a scientific organization at the cutting edge of new technology. Its research and development efforts continue thru its outstanding centers and laboratories located strategically throughout the nation.

The Corps has had a flood control mission ever since the 1928 Flood Control Act, which approved dispersing flood waters in the lower Mississippi River through controlled outlets and floodways, and the 1936 Flood Control Act, which declared that flood control is an activity of the federal government and put the Corps in the reservoir construction business. Flood control is an on-going mission of the modern Corps.

### U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



225th Anniversary

1775 - 2000

In times of natural disasters and other catastrophes, the Corps is there working with other agencies. Our first formal disaster relief mission took place during the Mississippi River Flood of 1882 when the Corps supported the Quartermaster Corps in rescuing people and property.

The Corps' role in protecting water resources has continuously evolved since the 1880s and 1890s when Congress directed the Corps to prevent dumping in harbors. Environmental protection efforts continue in partnership with industry other governmental agencies in preventing environmental damage and in restoring fouled areas.

Our support for others dates back to the early 19th century when the Corps built many projects for the Department of Treasury, including three customs houses, several hospitals for merchant seamen, and dozens of lighthouses. When requested, the Corps provides its extraordinary engineering expertise and construction oversight to a variety of government agencies.

The Corps' role in the development and maintenance of our nation's waterways is unparalleled. The ships and barges which navigate in our harbors, on our rivers and on the Great Lakes and coastlines depend on the efforts of the Corps to maintain harbor entries and lock facilities and