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## THE *E.M. FORD*

by PATRICK LAPINSKI

**A**s long as there have been ships and sailors there have been bars and restaurants nearby to serve them. The Carrollton Bar is the reference point to finding the *E.M. Ford* along the Saginaw River. On a sleepy August night in 1998, its neon sign fills the corner with an eerie red glow. The streetlight changes from red to yellow, to green and back ... guarding the silent intersection. The fights from the bar — the only signs of life.

A block down, over a set of train tracks and tucked behind a cyclone fence sits the *E.M. Ford* like some well-kept secret. I stepped noiselessly onto the deck looking for any sign of life. I had come to do a story about the centennial of the *Ford*. Mark Fee, the *Ford's* ship keeper, welcomed me inside, and led me back along a narrow hallway to an empty room that I could use while I was on board.

Mark hoisted himself onto some steam pipes just inside the doorway to the engine room and with a couple of twists he installed two fluorescent tubes to illuminate the ladderway that descended to the room below. This is where I would begin to work my way through the vessel, deck by deck, room by room, searching for the essence of the *E.M. Ford*.

### Descent Into the Past

The engine room is one of the few places on the *Ford* that has not changed dramatically over its hundred plus years. When thinking of the *E.M. Ford*, this engine is the prize ... the jewel of Great Lakes steam that is rumored to be sought after by the prestigious Smithsonian Institution — should the vessel be scrapped.

The first flight down puts you one step away from being on top of the massive engine cylinder heads. Nowhere in a vessel does the economy of space come into play more than in an engine room. Yet the first thing noticed was the two-story atrium above the engine that houses a travelling crane with its chains and hoists. How many claustrophobic young engineers thought about turning around when they reached this first landing.

The second flight down takes you onto the throttle deck and face to face with the massive quadruple reciprocating steam engine. Mark tried to describe for me the sound of the engine — air being pushed through the up and down strokes of the cylinders as they developed the 1,500 horsepower needed to propel the *Ford* across the Lakes. He

showed me the narrow catwalks inside the engine where oilers made their rounds, reaching hands into furious noise and motion, pulling them out before they could be ripped from their arms. This steam engine was no place for the timid or faint of heart. Engine No. 93, built in 1897 by the Cleveland Ship Building Company, is the vessel's original engine; placed at the time of its launching in 1898. It is ornately decorated with hand-painted scroll work that shows a dedication by its tenders that went far beyond the toil of day-to-day operation.

The next floor down houses the boilers which feed steam to the engine. Like many others on the Lakes at that time, it was built when the vessel used coal for fuel. A watertight door led me to the small room behind the boilers where the firemen would feed coal into the hungry fires to keep up steam. The furnace doors were not aligned in one long row like on many vessels, but faced each other from opposite sides of the room. On a hot, humid day this small room was probably only a step up from hell — tolerable only when the air temperature outside was well below freezing. In 1975, the coal bunker was removed when the vessel was converted to fuel oil. Despite the modernization, the *Ford* remains less efficient and more expensive to operate than the other vessels in the fleet.

In spite of estimates it would take two to three months' preparation to return the *Ford* to active duty, Fleet Captain Walter R. Watkins of Inland Lakes Management, Inc. insists there are still many men, lured by her charm and age, who would jump at the chance to go to work on her. But "you just can't hire some engineer off the street to go aboard her if you want to run it tomorrow," he told me. "It would take some time for him, if he's a good engineer, to get used to all the little maintenance things that have to be done on her, and adjustments. The biggest thing is knowing how to tune her ... it's not just put a washer here, a washer there. That engine has to be tuned to the *thousandths* to have it run smooth. It takes a good engineer that knows how to do that."

### A Little History

The *E.M. Ford* was built in Cleveland by the Cleveland Ship Building Company and launched in May 1898 — the same year Alexander MacDougall sent his last whaleback down the ways in West Superior. In honor of the company she would sail for, the Presque Isle Transportation Company (a division of the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Mining Company), the vessel was christened the *Presque Isle*. Along with her contemporaries the *Choctaw*, the *Andaste* and the *Centurion*, she went to work hauling iron ore from Michigan and Minnesota mines to Ohio steel mills.

The *Presque Isle* would spend the first five decades of the 20th

century working the Great Lakes ore trade. With each decade, the vessel was gradually surpassed in size and power by newer ships until she became unprofitable to operate. In 1955, the *Presque Isle* was sold to the Huron Cement Company and converted to a self-unloading cement carrier. On July 24, 1956, the *Presque Isle* was rechristened the *E.M. Ford*, beginning its second life in honor of Mr. Emory M. Ford, chairman of Huron Cement.

This conversion to cement carrier was the beginning of a series of physical transformations that would ultimately alter the former ore carrier's looks dramatically. In 1957, passenger quarters and an observation lounge were added to her forward cabins, effectively raising the pilothouse one-and-a-half stories. For a vessel only 428 feet in length, the high superstructure gave the *Ford* an awkward outside appearance.

The pilothouse sits empty today — compasses and radar covered to keep away dust and dirt. A wrought iron fan stands motionless on a windowsill as if it were in a museum display. A cabinet beneath the chart table houses the *Ford's* pilothouse log books. They document activities of the ship — recording times, locations and weather observations noted by captains and mates. Perhaps someday entries will again be made and registered in the pilothouse of the *E.M. Ford*.

The changes made to the forward deckhouse were arguably more favorable to the passengers. To those who sailed her, it made the boat top heavy. Wally Watkins told me how the high pilothouse could work against you in rough weather. "She'd roll. She'd always come back of course, but she would just snap. She was quick, which made it pretty rough for any kind of spring and fall sailing." Captain Watkins found it advisable to be cautious with the *Ford* and avoided heavy seas if possible. He recalled one time getting caught up in a large southwest swell running on Lake Superior. "We were bound for Heron Bay and I checked her down some and she had a slow, easy roll to her going all the way up. I went up behind Slate Island and the swells would go right across the deck. She would just roll nice and easy, back and forth. It would almost put you to sleep."

Captain Watkins used the shelter of Slate Island to protect him from the bigger seas running out on the open lake. The lake is too deep near the island to easily be able to drop anchor and ride out the storm. "Slate Island is only a couple of miles wide so we'd go a mile, turn around and go back a mile ...." The monotony of the steerage was more frustrating than the severity of the weather, "I think it was at half speed or some doggone thing — back and forth all night long. The next morning the wind subsided and the southwest subsided and I came out of there and headed down south until I got an angle where I could put that southwest over the stern and then go up into Heron Bay."

## Today

The *E.M. Ford* hasn't sailed for nearly four years but remains active in a dual role of storage vessel and mooring station for the LaFarge Terminal at Carrollton. A pocket-sized, spiral notebook lying open on the dining table in the officers' mess is her new logbook. Scribbled on the page is the expected arrival date of the next vessel, the *Alpena*, due in two days. The *Alpena* will tie up alongside the *Ford*, discharge her cargo into the LaFarge Terminal, then fill the holds of the *Ford*, before leaving. Since Mark Fee is the only person on the *Ford*, his job changes on any given day from ship keeper to deckhand, to conveyor man, to company representative. It takes a man with many seasons of experience to fill these shoes. Mark lives on board the *Ford* and is available 24 hours a day.

A quick climb up from the engine room to the poop deck brought me over half century forward to the area of the ship where Mark lives. During the 1960-61 winter, the *Ford* arrived at Fraser Nelson Shipyard in Superior where the after cabins were completely removed and new ones built. Private rooms for licensed personnel and new officer and crew dining areas were added on either side of a new galley. On the port side, adjacent to the crew's mess area — a new lounge. State-of-the-art heating and air conditioning were also included in the rebuild. When the *Ford* was ready to sail in June 1961, her transformation from the *Presque Isle* was complete.

The 1998 shipping season was to be a season of celebration for the venerable *E.M. Ford* commemorating her 100th year of service on the Great Lakes. Plans had even included a centennial tour of the Lakes. But, despite strong interest from within Inland Lakes Management, the vessel's operator, by mid-summer the prospects of celebration quietly began to fade.

Wally Watkins, Fleet Captain for ILM, discussed the effort to get the *Ford* out this past summer for the anniversary. "We had a lot of interest, but ... the budget people just couldn't see a return in it. I guess they're not interested in PR work — and that's all it would be ... public relations." He had to agree that it would take more than just sentiment to get the boat ready to sail again.

The *Ford* last sailed in 1996 — the same year that ILM's only customer, the LaFarge Corporation, put its new tug/barge combination *Integrity* into lake service. The *Integrity* is capable of hauling close to 16,000 tons, more than double the *Ford's* maximum capacity. The addition of the *Integrity*, coupled with a stable, predictable demand for cement, forced ILM to relegate the *E.M. Ford* and the steamer *S.L. Crapo* to duty as on-site storage vessels. The *E.M. Ford* has been

placed in extended layup for supplemental storage at the LaFarge Cement terminal in Carrollton, Michigan.

While the owners were disappointed at not being able to get the *Ford* out last season, they look ahead to 1999. Captain Watkins admits that a tour of the Lakes would be a fine way to pay tribute to the *Ford* and maybe get the phone to stop ringing in his office. Beyond that — it is anyone's guess what will finally become of the vessel. "I don't think she'll be scrapped. If anything, they'll use her for storage some place." Captain Watkins half hoped that someday the *E.M. Ford* might begin yet another career as a museum ship at home in Alpena. "I'd like to see it all stay intact and tie up right here in the Thunder Bay River ... use it like the *Valley Camp* up in the Soo ... or the *Irvin* in Duluth."



*E.M.Ford*

Greg McDaniel Photo

As time came for me to leave the *Ford*, I felt I had failed to accomplish my mission. I had come here to Carrollton to document the life of the oldest existing commercial vessel on the Great Lakes. But like the corner bar up the street, there was little life here to speak of. Current plans are to continue to use the *Ford* for storage. 📌