



# Meet the Crew

## TIM BURKE

### A life spent on the Lakes with companies big and small

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

It is Christmas Eve. The 1,000-footer *Indiana Harbor* is tied to its loading berth in Superior, Wisconsin as another cargo of pellets rolls off the conveyors into the ship's cavernous cargo holds. Throughout the city, holiday lights twinkle and shine, its avenues busy with traffic, while in Duluth, the distant hillside sparkles like a jeweled necklace in the clear winter air. For sailors, holidays away from home and family are part of the job. Each person finds ways to adapt. However, if you ever believed that miracles might happen, now could be the time.

High atop the chimney stack of the vessel, a lone, stocky figure stands silhouetted against the December sky. The deep stillness of the night is broken by a mirthful laugh. For that brief moment, all belief is suspended and the illusion is complete. Christmas has come to the crew of the *Indiana Harbor* in the visage of Santa Claus, a.k.a. ship's costumed bosun, Tim Burke.

Tim, who lives near Ogdensburg in upstate New York, began sailing just out of high school. Tim's father was as a merchant mariner, working around the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway on tugs and dredges. It was a natural transition for Tim to join the SIU (Seafarer's International Union) and take to the water.

"It was just what I was supposed to do," he said.

The maritime school was just getting started at Piney Point, so the union sent Tim to the lifeboat school in Brooklyn to get his training and his merchant documents. Before he knew it, he was on his way to Bahrain as an OS (Ordinary Seaman) aboard the 625-foot baby supertanker *Jasmina*. After his first month, he was made acting AB, a position he held for the next 11 months as the ship made the rounds of southeast Asia. Tim returned to Brooklyn for a short assignment aboard the *Wayne Victory*, sailing it to a lay-up berth in New Jersey. All told, Tim estimates that he made about \$12,000 his first year, including overtime. Not bad money at the time for a kid still wet behind the ears.

Tim's first work experience on the Great Lakes came in 1970 when he sailed on the

steamer *George D. Goble*. Over the next several years, he stayed closer to home; working like his father did on tugs and barges along the St. Lawrence Seaway. During the winter, Tim began a tradition of migrating to the west coast for deep-sea assignments and warmer weather.

After a few years Tim found work closer to home with Erie Sand and Gravel, headquartered in Erie, Pennsylvania. In September, 1974, aboard the *Lakewood* (Charles M. Warner), Tim began a professional relationship with the company that treated its employees "just like family."

For the entirety of the 1975 season, Tim worked on the cement carrier *Loc Bay* (*Lake Charles*, *Atlas Traveler*). The *Loc Bay* made only two ports, hauling cement from Picton, Ontario to Rochester, New York. Rather than finding the run boring, Tim made lasting friendships.

On his next ship, the *Day Peckinpaugh*, Tim built the same kind of friendships with people along the Erie Canal.

"We would go through all these towns, like Oswego, Phoenix and Fulton, New York and people would come down to the ship at the locks," he said. "I'd see the same people all the time."

Not only did Tim see the same people all the time, but after 19 consecutive years on the *Peckinpaugh*, he also saw their children grow up as well. In fact, this past winter Tim attended an Eagle Scout ceremony of one of those kids along the canal.

In the summer, during his time off, Tim would often ride his bike along the canal, ahead of the ship. One time, Tim came upon some men fishing just as one accidentally fell into the canal. Along with one of the other fishermen, he went into the water to rescue the injured man. By the time it was over, Tim had pulled both of the fishermen to the wall until paramedics arrived. Compared to the normal pace of life along the canal, it was an exciting day.

Like the *Loc Bay*, the *Peckinpaugh* was a cement carrier. At a little less than 260 feet in length, the canaller pattered along at a steady eight miles per hour, shuttling its cargo from Picton, Ontario to Rome, New York. In later years, they would load



Tim Burke, a.k.a. Santa Claus.



at Oswego directly from the *Stephen B. Roman*. The *Peckinpaugh* was the last commercial vessel to operate on the Erie Canal. When Tim first began working on the vessel they carried a crew of 15. In its later years, only eight men worked on the boat.

In 2002, Erie Sand and Gravel, itself a few years shy of going out of business, quit running the *Peckinpaugh*. Because of its historical significance, the vessel was saved from the scrap yard. Tim recalls the end of his 19 years on the *Peckinpaugh*. Sid Smith, the vessel's owner, rode along on the final trip up the canal.

Following a brief ceremony on the boat and a dinner at Admiral Woolsey's in Oswego, the crew all returned to Erie. "There was no more work," Tim said. Many of the old crew retired. Tim can still see Sid Smith's face on that final day, the tears coming out of his eyes. It was a bittersweet moment and the end of an historic era that few experience first-hand.

Tim went next to the bulk carrier *Richard Reiss*, where he stayed until 2005 when Erie Sand and Gravel was sold to Oglebay Norton. He worked with Cleveland Tankers, until they too were sold. Now he believes he has found a new home with the American Steamship Company. While the company is much larger than any he has ever worked for, and he doesn't know as many people yet, Tim is looking forward to the future, bringing a bit of his past with him, as Santa Claus.

"Everything is what you make it," he said, smiling. "When you work for somebody, you don't mind doing the job and you don't mind getting everything done, as long as you know you are appreciated." ■