



# Meet the Crew

## STEVE MEYER

### More than three decades of changing with the industry

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

It was the early 1970s when Steve Meyer, a young red-headed kid just out of high school, took a job on one of the many steamers that ran in and out of Cleveland. Meyer's pervasive curiosity about life led him to the boats, and to his first job on the Great Lakes as a coal passer.

Those who have worked with Meyer any length of time, know nothing is as simple as it appears on the surface. He is a critical thinker and has always been able to define what he sees and experiences at a deep level. His thoughts about his career and the industry he serves are insightful.

Meyer's first job was on the 420-foot bulk freighter *Joe S. Morrow*, a ship entering its seventh decade on the Great Lakes. In Lakes' parlance, the *Morrow* was known as a "hand-bomber," a ship where coal was hand shoveled into the furnaces, a scene you'd expect to encounter only in the bowels of the *Titanic*. By the start of his career, coal passers were becoming an anomaly, the position having been eliminated on most ships; the laborer's function replaced by automated stoker systems.

"Every morning on my way down to the engine room, I would see the Chief Engineer, a somewhat old guy from West Virginia," Meyer said. "He would say, 'Hey Red, you gonna give me some steam today Red? Are you going to give me some steam?' Every day he would say that."

In the hierarchy of the ship's engine room, the coal passer was at the bottom of a list of unskilled positions. "I was one of the last of the hand-bombers in the early '70s," Meyer said. "Nobody really wanted that job."

Because of the difficulty in finding men willing to fill jobs in the "black hole," Meyer was soon working as a temporary fireman on his coal passer ticket. It was an equally dirty and arduous job, but one that demanded a bit more skill in banking the fires in the furnace to keep the steam pressure up.

Meyer lasted about 100 days before he quit the *Morrow*. He doesn't regret leaving the ship, but is thankful for the experience, looking at it today as a piece of history he

was part of.

"I was right on the cusp of that historical change," he said, "so I was in touch with early industrialism so to speak."

With no real ties to the land, Meyer continued sailing on the Lakes, working for short spells on a number of ships in the somewhat whimsical world of the unlicensed mariner. In addition to his experience on the Lakes, Meyer also sailed deep-sea for a time, sampling the cultures of North Africa, East Africa and South America from the decks of tramp steamers.

Following a hiatus away from the maritime industry during the 1980s, he returned to the Great Lakes in 1990, rededicating his life to sailing. Meyer quickly noticed the changes that had taken place during his absence, much of it resultant from the recession of the steel industry in the early 1980s.

The contraction of the industry and upgrading of the ships had led to reductions in crew and a narrowing of the availability of work on the Lakes, he said. The days when transient, unskilled laborers could easily find work on the boats was over. The steamship companies began focusing on the management of employees as highly-skilled resources, with an emphasis on building cooperative, team-based environments aboard the ships. An important factor in changing this paradigm meant the removal of alcohol and drug use from the ships.

Modern shipping requires a huge investment in technology. The transition from a relatively unskilled sailor to a licensed officer is a more difficult path to pursue today than it was a generation ago for someone coming through the hawse pipe, as Meyer has done.

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to perform your job competently is quite broad. You are required to be able to do a lot of things and because it is a special kind of environment, you acquire quite a few skills that are specific to the ship."

With his return to the Lakes, Meyer concentrated on moving up from his non-licensed status to a higher level within the Interlake family of ships. He now works as either a Third or Second Mate, depending upon the availability of positions open during any given season. Additionally, he holds a Second Mate Ocean license, a rank that requires a lot of training.

"I'm taking courses in every aspect of the marine environment, whether it is meteorology or stability, a lot of cargo handling and

management courses about how to interact with the crew," Meyer said about the rigorous curriculum.

One of the paradoxes he finds interesting in his career is the juxtaposition between the technology-laden modern ship, the technically advanced steel milling industry and the relatively unchanged handling of bulk materials needed to support the steel industry.

"Sometimes it is awesome in its darkness," said Meyer, describing his encounters with many steel mill destinations, places that have "the feel and the smell of these huge metal looming surfaces and shooting flames and burning off vapors. It is awesome in its un-loveliness."

Since 1990, Meyer has been "having lunch" as an employee of the Interlake Steamship Company. This year, as a Third Mate low on the seniority list in a shipping season slowed by the low demand for steel, he has only worked for about a month. Like many others, he looks ahead to better days. ■