



# Meet the Crew

## CLARENCE VAUTIER

### Determined to sail

#### Captain Clarence Vautier's dream survives life's storms

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

Almost by tradition and rite, those born and raised along the craggy, lichen-covered shores of Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia take to the sea.

Like gulls shoved from the rookery, boys and girls learn at an early age how to handle a boat. By the time they are in their teens, most young men are employed in some part of the fishery, more often than not, riding the rollercoaster waves of the Atlantic on the cod and crab boats owned by their fathers, uncles, brothers or family friends.

For Captain Clarence Vautier, Jr., this remote part of the world is home. He was born and raised in the windswept town of LaPoile (pronounced, "La-pile"), graduating from high school in 1990. Clarence fished for a short time with his father and his brother, Raymond, but then the bottom dropped out of the Canadian fisheries industry and it was tough making a living from the family-owned fishery.

Determined to make his way into the fishery, Clarence attended the Nautical Institute of Nova Scotia in Port Hawkesbury. In spite of his efforts, he was quite bluntly told, "good luck. There isn't any work." Clarence opted to put off school and go to sea, even if it meant working for nothing. In 1991 he signed aboard the 3,000 ton container ship *Couteau Supplie* (*Canmar Supplie 8*) making a deal to trade his labor for experience, and more importantly, his sea time.

The following year, Clarence moved closer to the Canadian fisheries industry, beginning a two year stint as a fishery observer for Biorex Atlantic, Ltd. In his new role as an independent fishery observer, Clarence monitored the transfer of herring fish between Canadian fishers selling their product to a trawler fleet from Murmansk, Russia. Oftentimes the difference between too much ice and too little fish called for some on-the-spot diplomacy on the high seas where worth of a man's word can dissipate as quickly as the vapor in the air on a frosty evening.

In 1994, Clarence returned to school, enrolling this time in the Marine Institute as St. Johns, Nova Scotia, where he studied navigation. Following his graduation in 1995, he joined the crew of the *Mapleglen* as a Third Mate for P&H Shipping.

"I caught the boat at Lock 1 in the Welland. The First Mate had gone on vacation, and I had never sailed on the Great Lakes," recalled Clarence. "I waited at the lock, sitting at a picnic table for five hours before the boat came. The fog was so thick you could hardly see anything." The first trip on the Lakes was a run to the lower Lake Michigan port of Burns Harbor to deposit a load of Labrador ore before tracking northwest to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the *Mapleglen* loaded grain for Quebec City.

For the first time in his young maritime career, Clarence had found a home, and even more to his liking, he was finally making money.

"When I started, I didn't even have a checking account, so I got paid in cash," said Clarence. "I thought, 'I'll be here for life!'"

In August of that year, he turned 23 aboard the *Mapleglen* on the waters of the Great Lakes. Dick Metz, the seasoned captain, took a liking to his new Third Mate, mentoring Clarence on the nuances of handling the ship and navigating the rivers and Lakes. Captain Metz was hard pressed to watch him leave when Clarence was assigned to a different ship later that fall.

Over the next several seasons Clarence returned to the Lakes, again working for P&H on both the *Mapleglen* and the *Oakglen* and moving up to a full-time Second Mate position before Parish & Heimbecker sold their Lakes shipping interests to a rival fleet.

By now, Clarence had established his credentials as a licensed officer, so it didn't take much time before he caught on with Algoma Central Marine, a much larger and more diverse Canadian Great Lakes bulk fleet. However, as the new hire, it was back down the seniority list as he began the 1997 season as a Third Mate on the *Algolake*. As is



Captain Clarence Vautier, Jr.

typical for newcomers, the first few years with Algoma had Clarence moving throughout the fleet, filling in as Third, Second and First Mate for guys on vacation. He became a familiar face to the master mariners above him. In 1999 he landed a permanent Third Mate's job on the *Algoport*, working under the tutelage of Captain Kraneburg along the East Coast of Canada.

By the time Clarence returned to the Lakes in 2004 he held enough seniority and experience to nail down a spot as the permanent First Mate on Algoma's self-unloading bulk carrier *Agawa Canyon* before moving over to the *Algorail*, another of the fleet's workhorses, in 2006. That year, Clarence also began training aboard the *Algotario* as a relief captain.

While not working on the Lakes, Clarence enjoys researching and writing accounts of the maritime heritage and history of his local Newfoundland area. His two books, "Beneath the Waves: Newfoundland Sea Stories," and "The Coast of Newfoundland: The Southwest Corner," detail the history and drama of the Newfoundland fishery. Clarence's wife, Marina, also hails from LaPoile. He proudly tells the story of Marina's birth at sea aboard the ferry boat *Marine Splinter*, as her mother was en-route to the mainland hospital.

"The baby came first, and as a result, they fittingly named her Marina," he said.

In 2008, Clarence moved closer to the pinnacle of his career when he was appointed a permanent captain's job aboard the *Algorail*. While proud of his accomplishment, Clarence is equally happy about another turn of events that has occurred on the *Algorail* this year. With a smile on his face, Clarence holds up a photograph taken in the pilothouse of himself and his brother Ray. After many years of following divergent paths in life, the brothers, one now a captain and the other a Second Mate, were sailing together again. For Clarence it had all come full circle. The spirit of the Canadian Maritime provinces is alive on the Great Lakes. ■