

Death of a lumber hooker

Wooden steamer M.C. Neff fell victim to an overnight fire

It was mid-September 1909 as workers drove pilings for the new double-decker rail and automobile bridge being built to cross the St. Louis River between Oliver, Wis., and Fond du Lac, Minn.

Several hundred feet up the river, Captain Will Thompson eased the steamer *M.C. Neff* alongside a dock extending from the Wisconsin side of the channel, the *Neff's* oak timbers screeching along the hull until the vessel was stopped.

Within hours the *Neff* began discharging a heavy load of wooden pilings consigned for the bridge project.

The *Neff* was relatively new to the area, having been acquired in 1905 by Capt. Thompson and lumberman J.C. Lavaque. Once the ship was tied up, Capt. Thompson thought he might have time to visit his brother Horace, a hard-hat diver working on the bridge. Perhaps Horace could come aboard for dinner and enjoy a brief respite from the construction camp.

Will and Horace Thompson had been working on the waterfront nearly their entire lives. Their father, John Manton Upton Thompson, hadn't known much about ships but

was well acquainted with life on the ocean; he had left his native England to settle in Australia only to relocate again, this time deep within the forests of northern Minnesota. Mr. Thompson liked the potential of the Duluth area, and he helped his sons get into business with the purchase of several tug boats. By the early 1900s John P. Thompson owned and operated the tug *Fred Hall*. R.M. Thompson was owner and operator of the tug *Spirit*. Horace H. and Charles E. Thompson were licensed pilots, and William Freer Thompson, a captain, was co-owner of the lumber barge *M.C. Neff*.

The *Neff* was built in 1888 by the Ryan Brothers shipyard of Oshkosh, Wis., for Samuel Neff. The 210-ton vessel was 137 feet long with a 29 foot beam and a shallow draft of 11 feet. The *Neff* was powered with a high-pressure steam engine built by the H. C. Doman Company. The 250-horsepower non-condenser engine was fed by a single Johnston Brothers boiler with 125 pounds of pressure. The vessel was rated to carry approximately 375,000 board feet of lumber per trip.

There was nothing in its shape or demeanor to suggest that the lumber hooker *M.C. Neff* was anything other than ordinary. Vessels matching its size and appearance were common on the Great Lakes at the beginning of the 20th century. If anything, the *Neff* was rather small, its overall dimensions constrained

by the locks along the Fox River.

The lumber trade was big business in that day, and on its periphery many small-time independent ship owners saw to the delivery of raw and processed lumber. Wisconsin's Fox River valley was home to many prominent ship owners, including Samuel and William Neff. The Neff brothers became legendary for their navigation abilities, and their daring. Will took the stern-wheeler *Henrietta* (1879) from Oshkosh across Lake Superior to Fond du Lac, an imaginative crossing for a boat with little freeboard. But her captain was a man with nerves of steel. So was one of his brothers. Samuel Neff, for his part, once lashed himself to the pilothouse of the steam-barge *Mary Graw* during a November gale on Lake Michigan and successfully piloted the vessel into Milwaukee.

In 1889, the Neffs moved their base of operations to Milwaukee. The family by then included Samuel's two sons, Charles, a captain, and Sidney, the fleet's business manager. Jan Richard Heier, in a study of the accounting practices of ship owners in the 1800s, notes that the Neffs operated two barges and "three wooden-hulled steamships — the *Adella Shores*, the *Minnie Kelton* and the *Edwin Tice*." The vessels were heavily employed in transporting salt from "central Michigan to the port of Chicago for the National Salt Company, the forerunner of the Morton Salt



The Port's Past
Patrick Lapinski



Company." Company records indicated that at the turn of the century the ships were making as many as 10 trips per month along Lake Michigan.

Surprisingly, the *M.C. Neff*, named in honor Samuel's wife, Marcelia, never really sailed for the Neff brothers. In 1897, C.R. Jones of Cleveland was listed as the ship's owner, but within two years the vessel sailed under the flag of the S.K. Martin Lumber Company of Chicago. In 1902, the vessel changed hands again, this time sailing under the auspices of the Milwaukee and Lake Michigan Transportation Company of Milwaukee.

A year after buying the *Neff*, Messrs. Thompson and Lavaque had the vessel converted into a crane barge at the Superior shipbuilding yard. Over its career, the vessel's decking had been battered, crushed and splintered in the lum-

ber trade. The new hoisting equipment would speed up the unloading of cargo and save wear and tear on the deck and hull.

■ ■ ■

The unloading of the bridge pilings on the banks of the St. Louis River was completed on September 19, 1909, and the crew of the *Neff* turned in for the night. Sometime early in the morning they were awakened by the smell of smoke. Deep within the ship, fire crackled and spat, sucking up the oxygen as the blaze climbed its way toward the bulwarks. Wood chips and sawdust led it along like an unending fuse, pushing the mariners into retreat. Within minutes it became obvious that the fire could not be contained. The mooring lines were cut and the *Neff* set adrift.

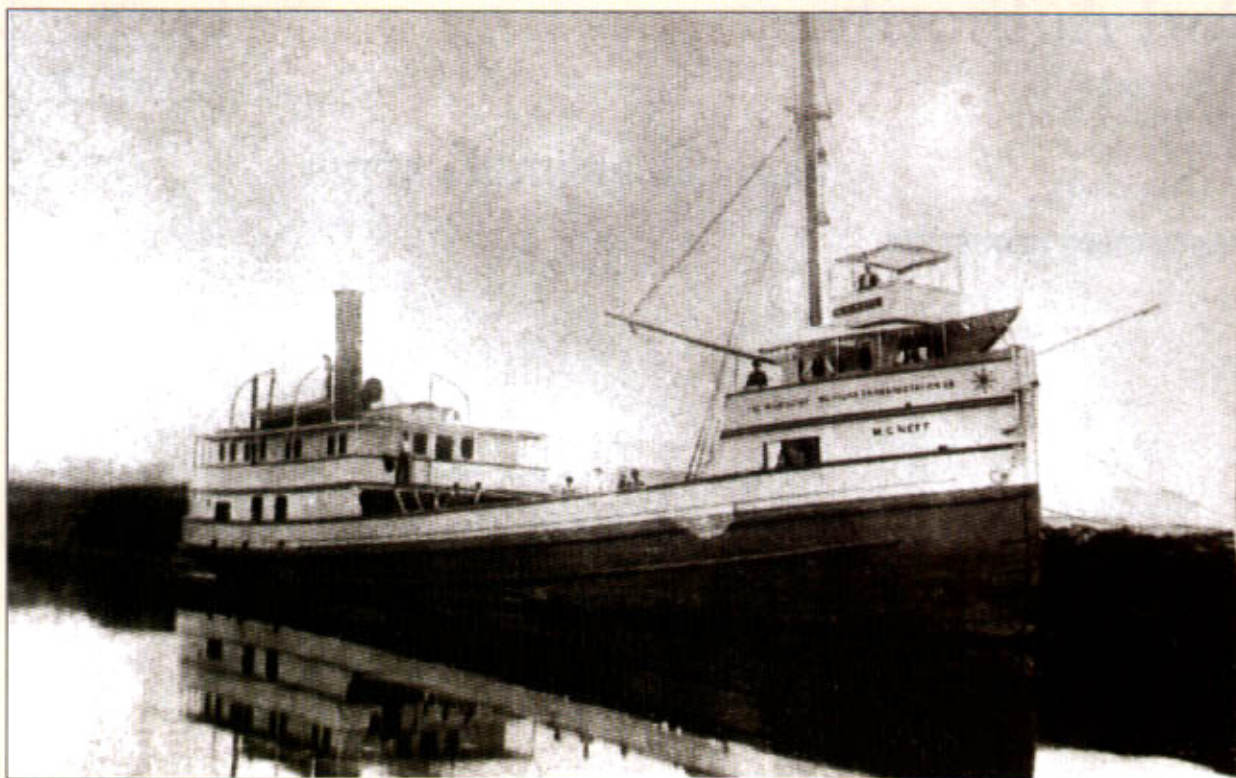
By daybreak the *Neff* had burned to the waterline, its hull settling several feet beneath the surface of the

river. The *M.C. Neff* was appraised at \$25,000 when it entered service for Samuel Neff in 1888. In 1909, it was declared a total loss at a value of \$18,000.

Today, all that remains of the *M.C. Neff*, is a portion of the ship's hull.

Marie Thompson Norick, the grand-daughter of Horace Thompson, recalls a certain amount of mystery within the family about the loss of the *Neff*. "When I used to bring that up, my dad would always go, 'Sshhh. Don't say anything. They'll make us go pull it out of there.' I almost got the feeling it was scuttled."

Whatever the cause of the *Neff's* demise, its obscure wreck today is one of the few, if not the only one, to be found within the vast Duluth-Superior harbor.



The *M.C. Neff*, built in 1888 in Oshkosh, Wis., destroyed by fire in 1909 in Duluth.

Pat Lapinski, a native of Superior, is a researcher, writer and photographer who concentrates on the Great Lakes maritime industry. Visit: www.inland-mariners.com.