

The Whiting Express

For nearly a century, oil arrived in the Twin Ports by water

Scattered among the 14 oil tanks that once comprised the Standard Oil storage site in Superior, where Winter Street curves south away from the harbor, several three-story metal houses stood like awkward, boxy sentinels. Riveted tin sheets made up their walls—gray, windowless expanses of metal that creaked and groaned in the wind, expanding and contracting in the seasonal heat and cold.



The Port's Past
Patrick Lapinski



No one lived in these houses. Yet every day the buildings breathed, as if alive, fed by pipes running from the surrounding tanks. These buildings, known as “balloon” houses, held large rubber bladders designed to breathe in and expand with the vapors that were emitted from the fuel stored in the tanks.

Whether the day was so cold you couldn't touch your fingers to their metal sides, or hot enough to blister the paint off the walls, the balloon houses silently collected the invisible vapors, later returning the condensed liquid back to their respective tanks in the daily cycle of thermal change. The collection of the vapors was not done as an environmental protective measure but as a way to stop their contents from evaporating into thin air.

By the early 1900s the Superior tank farm had become Standard Oil's vital link to the upper Great Lakes, serving the consumer market with home heating and lighting fuel as well as a rapidly growing commercial market. The tanks, 120 feet in diameter and several stories tall, ranged in capacity from 33,000 to 78,000 barrels of fuel, giving the farm a capacity of nearly 2.5 million gallons.

The products stored at Superior originated at Standard Oil's refinery at Whiting, Ind., along the dunes of Lake Michigan. When the Whiting refinery came on line, the Standard Oil Company of Indiana became one of the nation's largest producers of kerosene and other petroleum-based products. In November 1890, the first shipment of kerosene, 125 tank cars, left the Whiting refinery.

Kerosene, a cheaply made liquid derivative of asphalt, alternately known as “coal oil,” was discovered in 1853 and by the 1890s was widely used for home heating and lighting. A century later, kerosene continues to demonstrate its versatility, being used today in a wide array of products, from pesticides to jet fuel.

With the Whiting refinery as the production hub, depots to receive the refinery's products began taking shape, principally along local and regional rail lines. From these rail spurs the baton was passed to horse-drawn wagons to further reach the rural outposts of the

growing nation. Far to the north of Whiting, in an area so distant that it was universally perceived as a “remote wilderness,” the town of West Superior was looked upon as an ideal location for a tank farm.

To ship kerosene to Superior, Standard Oil took advantage of the long, sweeping expanses of Lakes Superior and Michigan as a super highway. The shipment of commodities by water had already been established as a superior method of moving products such as coal and grain in bulk. Compared to rail, shipping by water was considerably cheaper and faster, and Superior provided a readily accessible deep-water port with a protected harbor, as well as a large area for staging a tank farm.

In 1896, the first shipment from Whiting arrived at Superior, coming by barge. Locally, Standard Oil agents were masters of supply chain distribution, moving products along by horse teams, even reaching remote areas of Minnesota's north shore by loading their 200-gallon tankers onto barges before they were transferred back to dry land by local drayage firms.

Just as Henry Ford's automobiles began revolutionizing transportation, scientists at Standard Oil were nearing the breakthrough process of thermal cracking, which increased the yield of gasoline from oil. Soon, the combination of mass-produced vehicles and a plentiful supply of gasoline spurred the development of the Twin Ports as a major destination for Standard Oil.

To more efficiently supply this

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trade, Standard built its first tanker, *Renown*, in 1912, eventually leading to a fleet of five steam-powered tankers. By 1940 the receipt of crude and refined oil products at Duluth-Superior exceeded all but one port on the Great Lakes.

Unloading a ship at Superior typically took 20 to 30 hours, giving most of the ship's crew a nice respite following the 64-hour trip from Whiting. Two six-inch pipes, one for gas and one for oil, led from the Standard Oil dock to the Winter Street tank farm. During the farm's last 20 years of operation, Ed Heytens and Jim Haworth of Superior worked a daunting 24/7 schedule, unloading up to 35 ships each shipping season.

"There were times when we'd

work up to 50 hours straight," recalls Haworth. Opening valves and flushing lines while shuttling between the dock and the tank farm across five sets of active railroad tracks required unusual stamina, luck and efficiency. Then of course, there was always the paperwork, which when Jim started was done by tickertape.

In the book *Pride of the Inland Seas*, author William O. Beck wrote that the Standard Oil terminal handled "an astonishing 720,000 barrels in 1912, double the total of just two years before. In 1913, shipments topped 1 million barrels ... Shipments doubled again to 2 million barrels in 1920 and climbed gradually during the 1920s."

Beck added that, "By 1939, Standard Oil was shipping nearly

5 million barrels — 194 million gallons of gas — to the Superior terminal ..."

Although a pipeline reached the Twin Ports in the 1950s, moving oil and gas by water was still cheaper and continued unabated through the 1980s, until the grounding of the *Exxon Valdez* in Alaska changed the climate of liability in the industry. Standard retired its fleet of aging, single-hulled tankers, switching to more economical tug-barge combinations, but the potential for federal fines and bad press from even a gallon of spilled oil soon ended the operation. The last tug-barge was unloaded in 1992, bringing to an end nearly a hundred years of the Whiting Express.

For more on Superior native Pat Lapinski:
www.inlandmariners.com



Below: Standard Oil's *Red Crown* loads 60,865 barrels of North Dakota crude in Superior on April 25, 1954. Photo: Wes Harkins

Inset: An undated aerial view of the Standard Oil terminal. Photo: Douglas County Historical Society

