

Socrates supplied beachfront drama

Vessel groundings on the Great Lakes aren't particularly unusual and occur more frequently than most people imagine. Despite modern, high-tech aids to navigation like radar, LORAN-C and GPS, ships still run aground, proving true the theory that it isn't as important to know where you are as it is to know how you got there.

Vessel groundings in the Duluth harbor are, however, rather rare occurrences, primarily because the harbor is deep and has a lot of room to maneuver, even for a large

vessel. So, when ships do run aground in the Twin Ports, they get noticed, and scrutinized. Long-time residents have an unspoken knowledge of all things maritime. Out of the corner of an eye, or looking down from the ever-observant hillside, boat-watching is a part of life here.

Historically, groundings outside the local harbor entrances have been more dramatic, such as the fatal mishap of the *Mataafa* off of the Duluth entry in 1905 (see story, Page 4). A half century later, in 1948, the *Robert Hobson* breeched itself across the Superior entry in a blinding November snowstorm without incurring any loss of life.

Groundings within the protected waters of the inner harbor have generally proven to be less newsworthy. When the *Paul R. Tregurtha* grounded several times on the same location in the East Basin several years ago it was widely believed to be the fault of incorrectly marked charts, and, with the Aerial Lift Bridge closed for maintenance, the captain was led astray, having been forced to motor through the harbor.

When the *Joshua Hatfield* landed on the shore at Minnesota Point one evening, blown from its moorings at the scrapyard across the bay, well, we all felt a little sorry for it. Here was a tired old ship trying to make one final run to freedom, but no one noticed and it was towed back to await its fate.

When the oceangoing *Socrates* ran aground in 1985, everyone knew about that, too. This untimely grounding gained so much notoriety that even people from outside the Twin Ports learned about it; the *Socrates* was a special case. Here was a vessel blown in from the lake, a 584-foot piece of metal driftwood beached and marooned for public scrutiny and commentary. This grounding was an event, a spectacle and, to many, an embarrassment. Very few were going to cut this ship, or its captain, much slack.

What do we know of the *Socrates*? She entered the St. Lawrence Seaway System in mid-October, upbound for Duluth to load a cargo of wheat for Italy. Captain Ioannis Kukunaris was a skilled master, having sailed throughout the world.

This charter was to take his ship halfway across the North American continent until the Great Lakes turned to rivers, the rivers to forests and the forests to prairie land with soil rich for agriculture. If the captain extended his protractor a few more inches on the chart he could place *Socrates* directly in the heart of the Red River valley and wheat fields of Minnesota and North Dakota.

On October 17, the west wall of Lock 7 in the Welland Canal collapsed, shutting the Welland down to shipping in either direction. As any vessel master knows, delays caused by such accidents are the unforeseen part of shipping that necessi-

tate calls to the ship's owners and to vessel and cargo agents. Captain Kukunaris and his crew were forced to endure nearly three weeks of riding at anchor while repairs were underway; each passing day wore on the patience of the captain and the crew — 24 men confined to an unmoving ship, a world eerily free of the pulse and vibration of engines and the movement that comforts the restless soul of the mariner.

When the *Socrates* finally arrived at Duluth on November 15, 1985, it was now part of a large flotilla of vessels nearly a month late for their next transcontinental voyage. With the Port's loading berths full, *Socrates* anchored about a mile out in the lake to await its turn. After traveling more than 1,500 miles inland, Captain Kukunaris would soon be wishing he had a few more miles between his ship and the beach at Minnesota Point.

On Monday, November 18, storm warnings went up on Lake Superior. As the winds and waves gradually increased throughout the day, *Socrates* continued to hold its position in the anchorage. Ten-foot waves were nothing to raise a large amount of concern in this seasoned captain. Rather than rely upon marine weather forecasts, Captain Kukunaris reportedly asked his officers to watch the local television to determine if the storm was increasing. Any anxiety the local forecast failed to provide was soon offset by the fading lights of the British vessel *Achilles*, suddenly making a dash for deeper water.

Not only was *Achilles* moving, but *Socrates* was as well, and much to the chagrin of its skipper, in the opposite direction. All along the rain-swept deck high-powered floodlights came on as crew members raced forward to weigh the an-



The Port's Past
By Patrick Lapinski

chor. Below the waterline, the diesel engine throbbed as the ship quickly came to life.

Socrates was now gaining momentum, moving with the flow of the lake, still moving in the wrong direction, and running out of room to maneuver. Within minutes the vessel surged over its anchor and ground to a stop approximately 150 feet offshore.

Local maritime historian and author Al Miller, a reporter for the Duluth News-Tribune at the time, was dispatched to the scene to gather information for the morning edition. By this time local law enforcement and Coast Guard authorities were on the beach and in contact with the vessel. Al huddled behind a large sand dune for protection from the wind and spray coming across the beach. "It reminded me of a scene from *Close Encounters*," recalled Al. "It was that weird."

Uncertain of the stability of the vessel, the Coast Guard initially attempted to remove crew members from *Socrates* by rigging a breeches buoy from the beach to the ship. A cannon was brought down to the beach and a line shot out to *Socrates*, but finding someone with experience in rigging a bosun's chair proved to be a challenge. Several members of the crew were removed via this life-saving method before the decision was made to leave the remaining crew members on board until the morning.

Daylight brought a better assessment of the vessel's nearly parallel position to the beach, and the first of several attempts to pull *Socrates* back into deeper water began. "When you sail around the world, a place like Duluth isn't considered too difficult," said Chuck Hilleren, representing the Duluth firm of Guthrie-Hubner, vessel

agent for the grain cargo. "But, with strong winds, moderate seas, a sandy bottom for an anchorage and only one to two miles of water in front of you, Lake Superior can be unforgiving." Hilleren at the time was cautiously optimistic about how long it would take to free the stranded vessel.

Facing the likelihood of another storm, recovery teams wasted little time in

great spectacle," recalled Miller.

The grounding of the *Socrates* was a made-for-television event. People were brought in by the bus load, with the Duluth Transit Authority providing shuttles to the site. Cars jammed Lake Avenue, while helicopters circling overhead rattled the putty from the windows of older houses on the Point. It would be fair to say

Photo by Chuck Curtis, Duluth News-Tribune & Herald



As the Socrates languished off the beach, Minnesota Point took on a carnival atmosphere.

mounting additional efforts to free *Socrates* by exponentially increasing the number of tugs. *Socrates* stubbornly refused to budge from its perch atop a sandbar, with the suction created between the hull and the sandy lake bottom firmly holding the vessel in place.

Front-end loaders on barges were then brought in to dig around *Socrates* to help loosen the grip on the hull. This time, Captain Kukunaris kept a closer eye on the weather forecast and questioned the notion that Greeks are sailors, not explorers, as he searched within himself for a reasonable explanation of why his ship was stuck on a beach in the middle of the North American continent.

As efforts to free the ship continued to fail, Minnesota Point took on a carnival atmosphere with hordes of people descending on the beach. "Visually it was a

that *Socrates* became the most photographed ship in the history of the harbor.

Six days after running aground, on a crisp, cold Sunday, with temperatures well below freezing, *Socrates* was finally pulled free. In the court of public opinion, the blame for the accident was officially placed on the shoulders of the captain, a man who failed to take seriously the precepts that wind speed, wind direction and wave height could be equally dangerous on Lake Superior as in any ocean of the world. Captain Kukunaris had avoided a tragedy, but in making the best of a bad situation he was ultimately unable to avoid playing out a Greek comedy for the residents of Duluth.

Pat Lapinski, a native of Superior, is a writer and photographer who concentrates on the Great Lakes maritime industry.

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