



Meet the Crew

ROGER KUHLMHEY

As Chief Engineer aboard the *Edward L. Ryerson*, Roger Kuhlmeier fulfills his career on the Lakes

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

It is late in the shipping season, as Roger Kuhlmeier sits down in his office on the *Edward L. Ryerson* to revisit his sailing career. Dressed in blue overalls, with the tops of pens and gauges protruding from the stitched pockets, Roger blends into his environment.

Roger was born in Duluth, Minnesota, at the end of the 1940s. His family soon moved to nearby Two Harbors, where he grew up as the eldest of seven boys. In 1968, he caught his first boat at the Great Northern ore docks, in Superior, and aside from a brief period of time ashore, he has sailed continuously on the Great Lakes since.

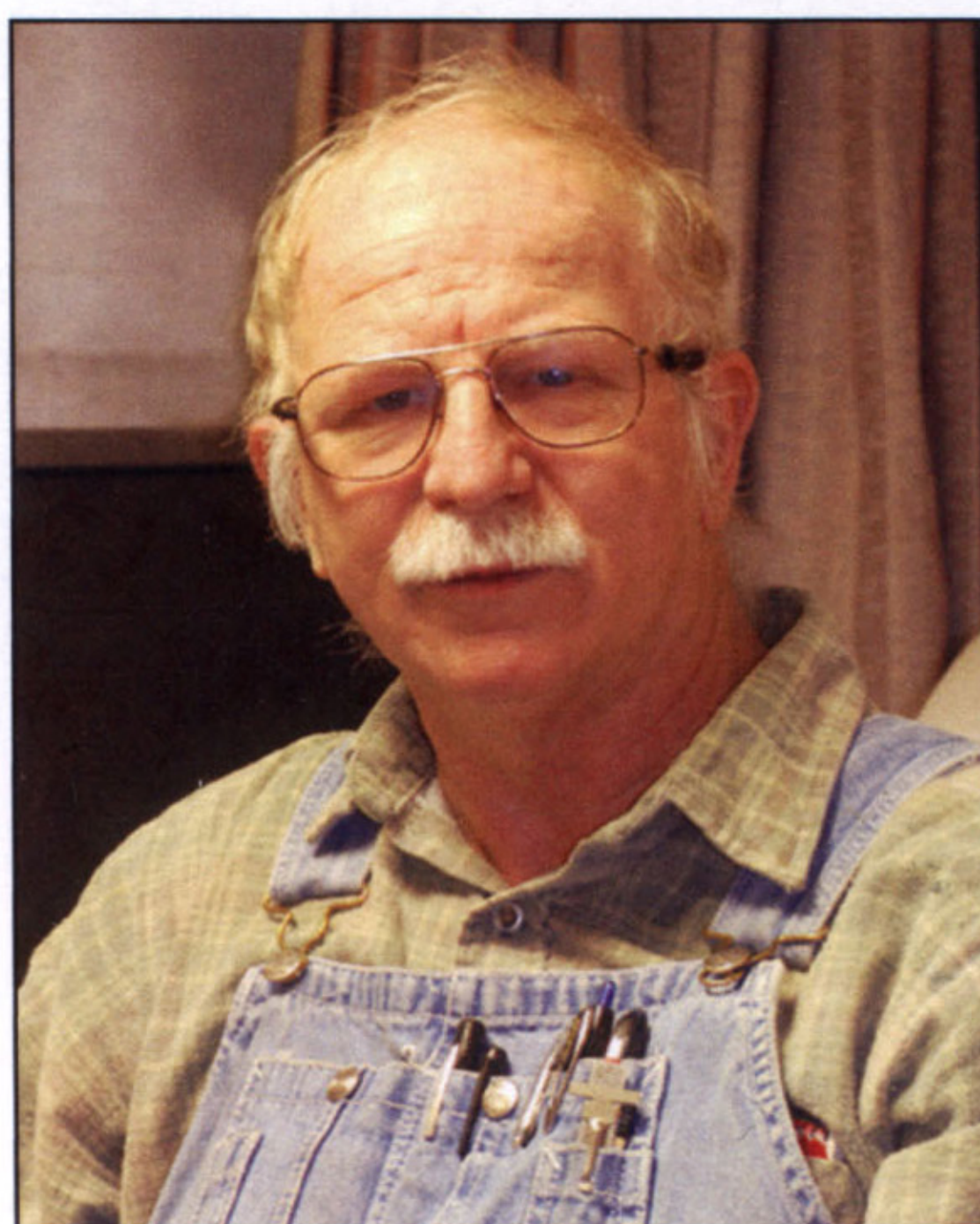
Roger is at the pinnacle of his career as the Chief Engineer aboard the *Ryerson*. By the time he graduated from high school in the late 1960s, the taconite industry was ramping up production. At 20, Roger put in applications at the local taconite plants and married his high school sweetheart. He worked the graveyard shift at a local gas station, biding his time until an opening at one of the plants would set him up with a job he expected to last a lifetime. However, the call never came.

Roger took a "summertime" job on one of the steamboats. He told the agent at the union hall that he would do anything except work in the galley. As a result, he turned down his first two ships and nearly lost any chance of sailing.

"I'd washed enough dishes in my lifetime. I didn't want any part of it," said Roger.

Plus, he would never live it down if his friends found out he was cleaning tables and washing dishes instead of working on deck or in the engine room. "Everybody I chummed with, all my high school buddies and their dads were either captains or engineers," explained Roger. "They sailed for U.S. Steel. I wanted no part of being the junior guy in the galley."

In early May, 1968, Roger started alongside three or four other fellows on the *Clarence B. Randall* as a coal passer. It was a dirty, albeit agreeable position to begin with. Yet, with every trip north, Roger anxiously checked with his wife about a call



Roger Kuhlmeier

from one of the taconite plants.

"Nope, no one called for you," was all she said. After two years Roger stopped asking.

It wasn't until many years later, that Roger found out that the mines had called, but his wife always told them he wasn't interested. Eventually they, too, stopped calling.

"She didn't want me at home, working in the plant and running around with all of my buddies," he laughed. "She figured she could keep better track of me if I was out on the boats."

Roger worked his way up the ranks of the engine department to become an engineer. In 1974, he made Third Assistant on the *Clarence B. Randall*. At the time, the *Randall* was the oldest boat in the fleet and had a reputation of being an old clunker, but for Roger, it was a great ship.

"For four years we had the same crew. That was supposed to be a 'punishment' boat," stated Roger. If someone didn't get along on another ship, they were sent over to the *Randall* for a little bit of attitude adjustment. "It was old, it didn't have air conditioning and it was sooty," grimaced Roger, "but everybody got along well. It was a good old job."

Roger stayed on the *Randall* until Inland Steel ceased operating the vessel. He was assigned to the *Wilfred Sykes* in 1975, joining the ship following its conversion to a self-unloading vessel. Later that year, he experienced one of the most gut-wrenching days of his sailing career. It has since become a day from which anyone sailing at the time will always remember where

they were and what they were doing at that time.

It was early November and Roger was due back to work. The personnel director wanted him to catch his ship the next day in Superior, Wisconsin, so his relief engineer could get off "up above." The call came too late for him to catch a flight, so his only alternative was to drive. Roger knew the distance from his home in Manitowoc, Wisconsin to the Great Northern ore docks on the eastern edge of Superior. He decided to catch the ship "down below" and avoid the tight driving time north.

That evening, as he made his final preparations to leave, the weather turned nasty. The next morning, after he took his girls to school, he was stopped dead in his tracks by a local television news report. A ship was missing on Lake Superior, somewhere near Whitefish Point; a new ship, not an old one.

"Doggone, my heart went 'thump,'" said Roger, pounding his fist to his chest.

His wife came in the kitchen as he was reaching for the phone. "Roger, what's wrong?" she asked.

"An ore boat sank last night," he answered. "The *Sykes* would have been right there, somewhere in that area. I need to call the office."

The crew of the *Sykes* was in the area between Whitefish Point and the Caribou Islands, but checked down and still afloat, searching for any sign of life from the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, the ship that didn't make it through the storm.

In 2001, Roger made Chief while sailing on the *Sykes*. In 2005, he suffered an injury that nearly ended his sailing career. In 2006, when the *Edward L. Ryerson* was coaxed from long-term lay up, he came over as Chief Engineer.

For Roger, working on the boat that many feel is the real Queen of the Great Lakes is just part of the job. Aside from the prestige of sailing on the *Ryerson*, Roger has really enjoyed the four trips the *Ryerson* has made up the St. Lawrence Seaway system.

"This boat was designed to go out the Seaway at one time, but it never ever did." When the *Ryerson* was built, its length, beam, draft and cargo capacity were designed for runs up the Seaway. Seeing the ship fulfill her potential, is the real "coup de grace." ■