



Meet the Crew

BOB STARK

From new kid onboard, to seasoned veteran

Bob Stark serves up some memories

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

In the galley of the steamer *John J. Boland*, upbound on Lake Huron, Chief Steward Bob Stark talks about his youthful beginning on the Lakes.

When Bob started in 1965 on the Wilson Marine Transit steamer *C. L. Austin*, the mentality was: "Stay as long as you want, make some money and get the hell off," said the Cleveland native.

In those days, sailing on the Great Lakes appealed to the more transient, carefree nature of man than a factory job did. Bob's father and grandfather, as well as one of his uncles, sailed from the 1930s to the '50s, alternating between the Lakes and work onshore. Sailing seemed like a natural fit to Bob.

"I used to see the boats going up the Cleveland Creek (Cuyahoga River)," he said. "They looked like they'd be alright. So I got my seaman's card. I was about 19 when I shipped out of Lake Carriers'."

Bob moves about the galley with quickness and ease, his medium-sized frame trim and fit inside his starched, white work clothes. After 30 years of sailing, Bob's hair has grayed and thinned, but his voice still resonates with the timber and confidence of a young man.

"I was the youngest guy on the boat when I first started," he recalls. We had guys on that boat that started sailing in 1919-1920."

First day on the job. Bob's career began by applying for work at the local Lake Carriers' hall in Cleveland. Art Kurtz, the agent who ran the local hiring hall, had been

around a long time and remembered Bob's grandfather when he used to sail, so he tried to help Bob out. Kurtz shipped Bob out as a porter on the *C. L. Austin*.

• "Art said, 'You get on there and look for a guy in white. He'll be the cook.'"

Bob carried his suitcase up the ladder and, not knowing a mate from a cook or an engineer, the first person he saw standing on deck was a man dressed in crumpled white coveralls and holding a radio in one hand.

"I asked him if he was the cook," Bob said. "He knew I was a greenhorn right then."

The *Austin* departed Cleveland later that day for Silver Bay. To help Bob commemorate his first trip on the Great Lakes, the crew told him he had to be awake at the Soo to make sure that he got his "key to the locks" on the way up to Lake Superior. Despite the joking, Bob did stay up half the night to see the locks.

By the time the *Austin* was back on Lake Erie, Bob couldn't wait to get back to Cleveland. Around 11:30 p.m., Bob finally made it home on the city's west side and, much to the ire of his grandfather, woke up the entire household with exciting tales of his first week on the ship.

It didn't take long for the initial excitement to wear off once Bob fell into the routine of sailing. The cook on the *Austin*, Howland Johnson, was an older man from Conneaut, Ohio. He tried to teach Bob the fine points of being a porter, cleaning beds, washing dishes and sweeping floors, but for a wet-behind-the-ears and a-little-on-the-wild-side beginner, it didn't stick well.

At the end of August, the acrimonious relationship between the cook and porter came to an end when Bob quit the boat due to the death of his mother. At home, he worked construction and other odd jobs, making enough to get by, but not enough to keep him tied to life onshore.

In the spring, Bob returned to the Lake Carriers' hall to ship out again. He was up against a winter's worth of men waiting to get back to work and ended up working a number of relief jobs, making short trips on the *Ernest T. Weir*, *Crispin Oglebay*, *J. E. Upson*, and finally, the *A. E. Nettleton* until lay-up in early November, 1965. Although working seven days a week, having the winters off made life on the Lakes more appealing.

Bob recalls his wages for one week of work during the 1966 sailing season: "I



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shipped on the old *J. E. Upson*, a Republic Steel boat, for one week—seven days exactly. I got on that boat Sunday night in Cleveland at the Upper Dock and started work Monday morning as a porter. I might've made an hour or two overtime doing a little wheeling or whatever. I got off that next Sunday night; my check was \$99.99."

Lessons learned. One lesson Bob did learn early in his career was to get off before he reached the point of being miserable. The U. S. Steel steamer *William A. McGonagle* was fitting out in Lorain the following spring. Bob was assigned as one of two porters to work on the ship. Bob didn't like the cook.

"Maybe he was grumpy... he was always yelling at us," Bob recalls. He quit after a week, before the boat ever sailed.

Fortunately for Bob, there was a porter's job available on the *Nettleton*. It turned out to be a good choice. Bob found a place to call home.

"I think I stayed on that boat from 1966 through 1968," he said. "It was a good job."

Ten years to the day that Bob started sailing, he was reunited with Howland Johnson on the *C. L. Austin*. Now a Second Cook, Bob was more willing to listen, and to this day appreciates the skills he learned from the veteran cook. The two cooks developed a friendship that lasted long after Howland retired. Whenever a ship would take him to Conneaut, Bob would visit Howland until his old friend passed away.

Chief Steward Bob Stark is now one of the veteran cooks with American Steamship Company. His face and his laughter and banter in the galley are as familiar as spring to the men stopping in to say hello or returning to work on the boat. Over the years, Bob has shipped on just about every boat the fleet has sailed, riding many of the long-gone steamers to the scrap yard. One of these years, Bob knows, he will pack his bags for the last time, too, but until then, he continues to serve in the finest tradition of Great Lakes cooks.

"I'm one of the old timers now," he laughs. "How about that!" ■

