

Great Lakes Steamboaters: Proud Rebels

Hate Conformity of Shore Routine,
but Observe Discipline on Board;
Carry on Ancient Traditions

By GEORGE VUKELICH

SAILING on the Great Lakes is never merely an occupation. It is a way of life. From the first winter blasting whistles of March to the last layup dock in December, thousands of mariners sail hundreds of ore boats and move more tonnage than they ever dreamed of out on the salt water.

Steamboating is 600 foot carriers and 33 man crews and the big raw cargoes: Coal, limestone, oil, grain and iron ore. Mostly iron ore.

For the great steel companies, the shortest economic distance between the mines and the mills is a Great Lakes shipping lane and as any deckhand will tell you, the great companies are not in business for their health, and so they own entire fleets of boats. It is with a sharp weather eye for realities that the men of United States Steel's Pittsburgh steamship division refer to themselves as "Potts' Navy." (Mr. Potts is United States

Steel's chairman of the board.)

The table of organization for an ore boat breaks down into three distinct departments, stewards, engine and deck.

The steward's department is

a seagoing kitchen, responsible for food and bedding the crew. The cooks and porters aren't particularly concerned with "sailing" per se and so are readily identified all season long by their starched white pants and T shirts. They, like engineers, are the last to don long johns come cold weather.

Now, Sailors

The engine department, the storied "black gang" of literature, chews more tobacco than the National league, bellows in normal conversation like deaf boilermakers and keeps its machinery clean and proud as a Swiss movement.

And the deck department provides the "sailors."

Like United States mailmen, deckhands are topside in all kinds of weather. Opening hatches, securing hatches, mooring, casting off, hosing down, cleaning up, the first ones sun burned or chilled or wet. They chip and scrape, they work with lines and clove hitches, head wires and sternlines, steel brooms and shovels and sewing needles.

They have a heritage, these deckhands, and it goes back beyond the steward's steel kitchen or the engineer's steam plant. Their heritage stretches back to the times sailing men first squinted at the far-off horizons and felt the sway and sweep of sea beneath them and the eternal gull filled skies above. Steam tables and steam engines do not make a sailor man. He is made by wind and water and a poet's soul for nature.

The Great Lakes crews will tell you readily that they sail for top United States mariner's salary or overtime or double time or bonus checks in mid-winter and that they don't go "decking" for their health.

But in the camaraderie of the 4 a.m. coffee cups and in the deserted shipshape galley and in the startling star washed runs to the lakehead, you shall know them as a breed apart. You shall know them as Joseph Conrad and Jack London and Richard Henry Dana knew sailors. They sail because there's a little bit of the rebel in them. They hate white collar work and the conformity of

the beach. And yet they take to shipboard discipline like fish to water and are perfectly willing to acknowledge the captain as god.

They say they hate routine ashore and yet life aboard ship is clockwork from chow call to fire drill and life boat drill to paydays and back again. They say a lot of things. You have to know what's serious and what's for the scuppers. I remember the boatswain of a Pittsburgh boat. He was in his thirties, a navy veteran of World War II who sailed on the aircraft carriers of task force 58 against the Japanese. He had married his high school sweetheart, had two kids and was making a career of the Great Lakes ore boats.

On the Beach

"I work nine straight months," he said, "from fitout to layup. And then I'm with mama for three. I hunt with the old man and ice fish with my kids. I see the family during the season, too. I call them when we're gonna hit Superior or Duluth and they drive up."

He didn't drink too much and hardly spent any money at all except for haircuts or cigarets and he was studying navigation in his spare time because he intended to write his exam for third mate's papers during the coming off-season.

I remember, too, the deck-watch of the same boat. He had 30 years of sailing in and was ageless. He was from Ashland and he had been a lumberjack in the old days and in a sense he always would be a lumberjack. He was the kind of man who was happy only with a peavy in his great hands or a double bitted axe or a bucksaw or a marlin spike or a heaving line or anything that took a man to handle. He was six foot two and he walked like a young man and there was life in his eyes and it surprised you to find out that he was kind and playful as a bear cub.

Proud Lot

The lakes sailors are proud. They do a hard, dirty job and that's part of it. They don't wear white collars and that's part of it. Their chow doesn't



Fishing has gone to the head of Bob Eaton, Des Moines, Iowa, a television cameraman who covers many game fishing tournaments. The decorations are the pins he has received from various hunting and fishing clubs and events. —United Press

cost them anything and their rent comes free and they pull down high wages to boot. That's part of it, too. But there's more. There's the knowledge that the Soo locks handle more tonnage than the Suez and Panama canals put together and you're part of that. The knowledge that you've just about carted away the Mesabi range to Gary, South Chicago, Sandusky, Lorain and Conneaut, Ohio. The knowledge that you're the lifeblood of the great middlewest which in turn is the heartland of the whole shooting match, and that's what this St. Lawrence seaway is all about. They're getting at the heart of the matter now and whether those coming fabulous deep water ports Chicago and Milwaukee remember you or not, you were a part of them, too.

Aye. They will build the supercarriers bigger and faster. They will deepen and widen and beef up the dock facilities. And they will deepen canals and dredge out the channels. But even when the ships are all atomic powered and there is color TV wall hung over every deckhand's Hollywood bunk, I do not believe they will be able to build the men any bigger at all.

