

Last of the Old Lakers

Hauling passengers and cargo across the Great lakes for more than a century, few of the classic steamships are left, and the days of those few are numbered. Time is running out for these last survivors of a bygone era. The *J. B. Ford*, for example, launched in 1904 at the American Ship Building Company's yards in Lorain, OH, still sits atop the waters of Lake Michigan, used for concrete storage today, but most of her aged companions have long since disappeared altogether.

Passenger service on classic steamships is virtually nonexistent in the United States today. What's left is only a few sporadically operated Lake Michigan car ferries, the historic sternwheeler *Delta Queen*, and a few excursion boats located here and there over the country. Steam cargo ships are also almost a thing of the past. The only place in North America where a fleet of old-fashioned cargo steamships can still be found in regular commercial service is the Great Lakes area.

Called simply "lakers," these ancient giants still lumber across the waves carrying ore, coal, cement, limestone, salt, grain, potash, and timber. Designed for maximum space, the laker prototype was built by Capt. Eli Peck of Cleveland, and was launched in 1869. The hull of Peck's *R. J. Hackett* was over 200 feet long; it was driven by a single propeller instead of the usual paddle wheel; and it was built to withstand the huge winter storms common on the Great Lakes.

The basic laker design, with a conveyor-belt system added in 1908, remained basically unchanged for almost 100 years. Eventually, the Great Lakes carriers numbered in the hundreds, getting longer all the while. In 1906, the new *J. Pierpont Morgan* measured 600 feet. In 1969, the first 1000-footers appeared. These size increases corresponded to the enlargements made to the canal locks.

Today, most of the hauling is carried on by behemoth carriers built in the 1970s and 1980s and powered by huge diesel engines. Only about 50 steamers remained on the Great Lakes as of 1992, most with turbine engines. Less than a dozen use reciprocating engines, and only half of those were currently being used.

One of the least-changed survivors is the *S. T. Crapo* [that's "Kray-po," in case you were wondering!]. Since she first hit the waters, 67 years ago, she has continued to burn coal; steam is still generated in her original boilers; and she still endeavors to do the same work for which she was built over half a century ago...hauling cement. She's the only working coal-burning freighter left.

So the next time you find yourself paging through your SHIP LINES collection, you might pause when you get to the old Great lakes steamers and give some thought to the history and service those great old ships have behind them.

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