

HENRY CORT

When recently we reviewed our list of the vessels which have been featured in these pages over the past two decades, we noted something very peculiar. Although we often have mentioned the whalebacks of Captain Alexander McDougall, we have only featured one of those unusual vessels as a Ship of the Month, and that was METEOR, our Ship of the Month No. 2 back in the issue of October 1969. We are not certain why we have not featured any other whalebacks in the interim, but right now would seem to be a good time to rectify our oversight.

Over the years, much has been said in print about the fact that the whaleback design never became popular for bulk carriers on the lakes (or anywhere else). There were a number of reasons for this, among them being the awkwardness of cargo handling with small, curved hatches and with supporting beams and stringers in the holds. Their very design limited the maximum size to which whalebacks readily could be built, especially if they were to operate in the ore trade. As well, they were unpleasant ships in which to work, for their below-deck spaces were unbearably hot in the summer. The shape of their bows caused them to pound mercilessly when running light in any kind of a sea, and their decks were very frequently wet, making it difficult for the crew to pass forward or aft down the deck except in the very best of weather.

A number of uncomplimentary terms were used to describe the whalebacks at various times, and men who sailed in them sometimes referred to them as "iron coffins". In fact, a great number of the whalebacks eventually were lost at sea. Many of the whaleback steamers and barges were sent to salt water, and fifteen of them were lost there. Considering that only forty whalebacks (including both steamers and barges) were built on the lakes, the number lost was alarming, to say the least! In addition, all four of the whalebacks which were built off-lakes were also lost at sea, one of them (SAGAMORE) as a result of enemy action.

As if the salt-water losses were not bad enough, eight more whalebacks were lost as a result of accidents which occurred within the confines of the Great Lakes, four of these being steamers and four barges. As a result, the final tally is that 27 out of the 44 whaleback-type vessels were lost. Some of these bowed out early in their careers, while others succumbed after many years of service. The steamer which we have chosen to feature in this issue was unusual in several respects, and as well she was one of the eight whalebacks which came to grief on the lakes. She did so, however, after a relatively long life and, what is more, the accident in which she was lost was only one in a series of major mishaps which befell her.

Before we deal with the specific history of the HENRY CORT, we should review briefly the story of the coming of the whalebacks to the lakes, just in case some of our newer members are not familiar with it. The designer of the whalebacks was one Captain Alexander McDougall, who was born at Port Ellen on the Isle of Islay, off the west coast of Scotland, on March 16th, 1845. His family emigrated to Canada in 1854, and McDougall went sailing on the lakes at the age of sixteen, preferring that to the blacksmith trade to which he earlier had been apprenticed. McDougall sailed in a number of famous lake vessels, including IRONSIDES, ILLINOIS, THOMAS A. SCOTT, HIAWATHA, CITY OF DULUTH, and the famous Anchor Line steamet JAPAN. Interestingly, Alexander McDougall was first mate aboard the steamer PEWABIC when, on August 9, 1865, she was sunk on Lake Huron as a result of a collision with her fleetmate, the steamer METEOR. The latter steamer was commanded by Captain Thomas Wilson, with whom McDougall later served in METEOR. These two men, each of whom would earn an important niche in the annals of lake shipping, became the closest of friends.

While McDougall was sailing the lakes, he tinkered with some design work, in his mind being the idea of a towbarge shaped somewhat like the eventual