

NATIRONCO

Much has been said in recent years concerning the decline in commercial marine activity on Toronto Bay, and the various reasons for it. The port once was one of the busiest on the lower lakes, but now all of the grain elevators are closed, most of the petroleum product terminals have moved away, all of the old package freight docks are gone, only two of the terminals serving salt water ships carrying general cargo or material in containers are still used, and the only passenger vessels we see regularly are the ferries, as well as the hordes of party and excursion boats that live on the Bay.

Indeed, if it were not for the two bulk cement elevators, the Redpath Sugar plant, the Akzo salt dock, the McAsphalt plant, the stone dock in the Turning Basin, and a few specialty oil operations, we would see almost no commercial marine activity at Toronto at all. True, there are those who think that the harbour should have nothing but residential, park and marina facilities, but a few of us still feel that this, one of the best natural harbours on the Great Lakes, should contain a mix of commercial and recreational activities.

With the exception of the Redpath Sugar factory at the foot of Jarvis Street, which receives raw sugar in bulk by water, what little commercial marine activity Toronto still retains is centred at the eastern end of the port. Even there, many of the old plant sites are standing vacant, filled with weeds and strewn with litter, and much of the land is so polluted that it may never be suitable for redevelopment without major clean-up operations. (A pilot soil-cleaning facility has been set up by the Toronto Harbour Commission near the south Cherry Street Bridge to see whether it is possible to reclaim some of those lands.)

One of the old factory sites which today stands vacant is that of the old National Iron Company Ltd., which for years produced sewer and other sorts of pipe from pig iron. The National Iron plant stood at the southwest corner of Lakeshore Boulevard East and Cherry Street, on the north side of the Keating Channel and just outside the northernmost Cherry Street Bridge. The plant was built during the years before the First World War, on land which hitherto had been undeveloped and bordered on marshes. However, the National Iron factory has been gone for several years now, and although it was suggested that this area might form part of the proposed Ataratiri, an immense subsidized housing development, that whole project has been stalled and the site of the old pipe plant now contains nothing but weeds and semi-levelled rubble.

When it was functioning, however, the National Iron plant was the focus of much marine activity. For years, a wide variety of ships, mostly canallers, brought pig iron into the plant and took out loads of finished pipe destined for all sorts of uses, both domestic and foreign. In its last few years of operation, the factory did most of its shipping by rail, but even through the 1950s and into the 1960s, the craneships MANCOX and MANZZUTTI could still frequently be seen unloading pig iron at the National Iron wharf.

What few people today realize is that, at one point in time, albeit for only a few years, the National Iron Company owned its own steamer. She was notable because she was one of the first craneships ever built for lake service. (National Iron did not build her but rather bought her second-hand.) She was a most unusual ship, not really what one would ever describe as handsome and, indeed, most would even consider her rather ugly. She bore the rather unusual but unimaginative name NATIRONCO, taken from the company's own name. And she only ran under National Iron ownership for three years and part of one other, so it would not be surprising if some of our readers never have heard of NATIRONCO. Most will never have seen a photograph of the ship under that name, because only one is known to exist, and