

WHEN AUTOS TOOK FLIGHT

Over the years, we have asked members to submit suggestions for Ship of the Month features. Some of the members have responded (although we wish more would do so), and we do have an "outstanding list" of possible feature articles. Some of the requests are for ships about which we have so little information that we despair of ever being able to write about them. Others are for vessels which were well known, but which never did anything interesting in their entire careers, and whose stories would not take up more than a page each no matter how hard we might work to fluff them out.

But going back over a list of suggestions that was sent to us a great many years ago, we came upon a suggestion which for some reason we had overlooked completely. The request was for a feature about any of the "flight-decked" automobile carriers which ran on the lakes for a number of years. The last of these specialty carriers disappeared from the lakes more than thirty years ago, but many of our members, particularly those in the Detroit River area, remember these boats with fondness. So, instead of writing about only one of these unusual ships, we give our members two-for-one this time around as we feature two almost exact sisterships, which stayed together for most of their 65-year-careers, and which both became flight-decked auto carriers. They even wound up side-by-side in the same scrapyard when their lives were over.

C. W. Elphicke and Company was a firm of vessel brokers which was based at Chicago, Illinois. The company also placed marine insurance, and was a ship operator for many years beginning in the late 1880s. The Elphicke vessel operations are extremely enigmatic for today's historians, in that very little is known about their business. We have mentioned the Elphicke name in "Scanner" on a number of occasions, and yet we have very little concrete information about the firm's history.

In any event, we know that in 1900, the Federal Steamship Company, of Chicago, which was managed by Elphicke, placed with the Chicago Shipbuilding Company an order for the construction of two sistership bulk carriers. They were completed in 1901 as the shipyard's Hulls 47 and 48, and they were of exactly the same dimensions and machinery specifications. Hull 47 was launched on Tuesday, April 2nd, 1901 (one unsubstantiated report gives the date as March 27th), and was christened WILLIAM L. BROWN. Hull 48 was launched on Thursday, June 6th, and was christened MARY C. ELPHICKE. The two ships were enrolled at Cleveland, Ohio, under U.S. official numbers 81747 and 93151, respectively. The BROWN was delivered to her owners on May 2nd, 1901, while Elphicke formally accepted her sistership on June 29th.

Each of the steamers was 430.0 feet in length between perpendiculars (452.0 feet overall), 50.2 feet in the beam, and 24.4 feet in depth, and each had tonnage of 4998 Gross and 3967 Net. Their hulls were built on the channel system, with a double bottom all fore and aft, but they were not built with arches under deck. There were three watertight bulkheads and six cargo compartments. Each ship had 13 hatches set on 24-foot centres. (This information comes from various editions of the U.S. government shipping register, the 1908 Great Lakes Register [Bureau Veritas], and the 1910 Mitchell & Co. "Hand Book of the Great Lakes".)

Each of the ships was powered by a triple expansion engine built in 1901 by the Chicago Shipbuilding Company. Each engine had cylinders of 23, 38 and 64 inches diameter, and a stroke of 40 inches. (The stroke of the ELPHICKE's engine was erroneously reported by several sources for a number of years as 42 inches, but the two engines truly were identical.) Each of these engines produced 1,700 (sometimes shown as 1,600) Indicated Horsepower. Steam at 180 pounds per square inch was produced by three single-ended, coal-fired Scotch boilers which were built in 1901 by John Mohr & Sons, Chicago. (For a number of years, the American Bureau of Shipping erroneously showed that the MARY