

PIC RIVER and BLACK RIVER

In the October issue, we featured the Quebec and Ontario Transportation Company Limited tug ROCKY RIVER, which served the fleet for but a brief time, from 1949 through 1951, to tow the company's two upper lake pulpwood barges. Having told the story of the tug that towed them, it seems only proper to follow up with the histories of the barges themselves. They enjoyed long and distinguished careers and certainly merit our attention.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, steam rapidly was taking over from sail as the propulsion method of choice for Great Lakes freight carriers. Many of the old wooden-hulled schooners were cut down to barges and were towed by the small wooden steamers of the period. These steamers, often themselves called "steam barges", frequently could be seen towing one, two, or even three barges, particularly when running in the lumber trade. Such tows were painfully slow and, without the power to resist, many fell victim to the elements. More than one wooden steamer had the fantail pulled right out of her whilst straining to handle a multi-barge tow in heavy weather.

During the 1890s, the big, steel-hulled freight steamer came into her own as remarkable progress was made in the fields of marine architecture and construction. However, the concept of the consort barge remained in vogue for another decade or so and, despite the fact that today it seems improbable that money could be made having steamers towing barges that were almost as large, if not even larger, than they were (and the largest lake consort barge ever built was 461 feet in length), there was much to be said for the concept.

The steel-hulled consort barges were just like freight steamers except that they had no motive power of their own (although some of them originally were fitted with auxiliary sail). They did, however, have to carry engineer room crews because they were fitted with boilers which provided steam not only for the mooring and towing winches, but also for the steering engine. It was impossible for a freight steamer to keep on course whilst towing such a large consort barge unless the barge had the power to steer herself.

On the up side of the consort barge concept was the fact that a tow consisting of a steamer and a big barge could carry almost twice the cargo a single ship could handle, and with less crew than two single steamers would need (the barges having considerably smaller crews than the steamers). And because most of them were operated by the big ore-hauling fleets, there never was a shortage of steamers to pick up a barge at a port where she had loaded or unloaded and take her on her way.

On the down side was the cumbersome nature of such tows, the fact that tugs often were required to assist the tow in close quarters (such as at the Soo Locks or when making port), the frequency of collision between steamer and tow barge (often with disastrous results, such as in the events that led up to the infamous "Houghton Blockade" of the St. Mary's River in 1901) and the severe problems that could result when another vessel, failing to recognize that a tow was in progress, ran between steamer and barge and fell foul of the towline. As well, the steamers that towed such big barges loaded with iron ore needed to have a great deal of power and had to be fitted with very large (usually quadruple expansion) engines and also boilers which devoured coal in immense quantities.

It is not, therefore, surprising that the concept soon fell from popularity and that the last big consort barges were built around the turn of the century. Some of the barges were rebuilt as self-propelled freighters, but a good many of them remained in service well into the 1950s.

One of the companies which operated a large number of consort barges was the Bessemer Steamship Company, which was formed by John D. Rockefeller to carry to the mills the iron ore produced by his Lake Superior Consolidated Iron Mines Company (formed in 1893), and also to be one of the carriers, under