

SUPERIOR CITY

A Tragic Loss That Never Should Have Happened

Many times in these pages we have mentioned the steps that led up to the formation of the Pittsburgh Steamship Company, as the lake shipping arm of the United States Steel Corporation, by J. Pierpont Morgan, Judge Elbert H. Gary and associates in 1901. But only once before, we believe, have we mentioned the Zenith Transit Company and its involvement in the grand scheme of this huge corporate merger.

The Zenith Transit Company, managed by Augustus B. Wolvin and Roy M. Wolvin, was formed in the mid-1890s and hauled ore mainly for the American Steel and Wire Company, Chicago, which had been formed in 1892 by Isaac L. Ellwood, John W. ("Bet-a-Million") Gates, Eugene J. Buffington and associates. The Zenith fleet had built for it five large bulk freighters, commencing with the ZENITH CITY, 387 feet in length, in 1895. The 401-foot QUEEN CITY followed in 1896, and the 405-foot EMPIRE CITY and 406-foot CRESCENT CITY in 1897. The final and largest vessel of the series, named SUPERIOR CITY, was built in 1898 as Hull 29 of the Cleveland Shipbuilding Company at Lorain, Ohio. She was launched on Wednesday, April 13, 1898, and was enrolled at Duluth, Minnesota, under U.S. official number 116820. Her name referred to the city of Superior, Wisconsin, where many of her cargoes were to be loaded, but also, no doubt, referred to the fact that she was the largest vessel in the Zenith Transit Company fleet. In fact, until the July 31, 1898, launch of the Bessemer Steamship Company's SAMUEL F. B. MORSE, the SUPERIOR CITY was the largest ship on the Great Lakes.

SUPERIOR CITY was 430.0 feet in length between perpendiculars (450.0 feet overall), 50.0 feet in the beam, and 28.6 feet in depth, and her tonnage was calculated as 4795 Gross and 3653 Net. Her steel hull had three watertight bulkheads. As with many of the big lake steamers of her day, she was given a great deal of power. She was equipped with a quadruple expansion engine which had cylinders of 17, 25½, 39 and 60 inches diameter, and a stroke of 40 inches, which developed Indicated Horsepower of 1,900. The engine was built for her by the Cleveland Shipbuilding Company in 1898. Steam was produced by two coal-fired watertube boilers, each of which measured 13'10" in diameter by 9'3" in length, which were manufactured in 1898 by the Babcock & Wilcox Company.

The SUPERIOR CITY was an extremely fine-looking vessel. She had a straight stem and a long and graceful counter stern, and her hull was given a sweeping sheer. Her anchors were hung from hawseholes and were located close to the stem at the loaded waterline. The hull sported no fender strakes to protect the steel plating whilst docking or canalling.

Forward there was a half-topgallant forecastle, with a closed steel bulwark running down almost the entire length of its head. Positioned on the forecastle head was a turret-style pilothouse with five large windows in its face. Aft the pilothouse was located the texas cabin which contained the master's quarters and his office. The tall pole foremast rose through the texas. Atop the pilothouse, on the monkey's island, was an open navigation bridge, it then being considered appropriate for a ship's navigation officers to stand watch in the open air, protected only by a solid waist-high dodger and weathercloth in front of them, and an awning hung overhead in the heat of the summer.

Aft there was a half-topgallant quarterdeck with an open rail around it. The bunker hatch was located in its forward end, although photos show that the ship often carried a large pile of additional bunker coal on the spar deck near the break of the poop. There was only a small cabin on the poop, but a lifeboat was carried on either side, worked with radial steel davits. The smokestack was tall and quite heavy, with a number of ventilator cowls positioned around its base. The tall pole mainmast was set close abaft the stack, and both carried considerably more rake than did the foremast, no doubt because the latter could not be allowed to interfere with shore-mounted loading chutes or unloading hoists.

SUPERIOR CITY, like other ships of the Zenith Transit Company fleet, had a dark green hull, white cabins, and an all-black smokestack. But perhaps all of them were best known for the very large, triple-chime steam whistles that they carried. They were known as some of the most melodious steamboat whistles that ever were heard around the Great Lakes. The last of them to be heard was that of EMPIRE CITY, which still was blowing aboard that ship when she finished out her lake service in 1967 as the self-unloader (c) DOLOMITE.