

FRENCH RIVER

- by Skip Gillham and The Editor -

The former Canada Steamship Lines package freight carrier FRENCH RIVER (C.188397) arrived at the scrapyards at Aliaga, Turkey, as NOVA on May 15, 2006. The voyage ended the 45-year career of a ship once very familiar on our inland waterways. She carried eight different names and explored a variety of trades but never quite found a successful niche.

The vessel was constructed as Hull 170 of the Collingwood Shipyards Division of Canadian Shipbuilding & Engineering Limited, and originally was to be known as "Montreal", although never registered as such. Her name was changed to FRENCH RIVER by the time of her launching on Thursday, June 29, 1961, and she sailed on her maiden voyage on Friday, August 25, 1961. There are those who would suggest that she might have enjoyed a more successful career had her maiden voyage not begun on a Friday, traditionally considered to be an unlucky omen.

FRENCH RIVER, registered at Collingwood, was the first of two sisterships designed for shuttle package freight service through the newly-opened St. Lawrence Seaway. ENGLISH RIVER, Collingwood's Hull 171, followed FRENCH RIVER into the water on September 8, 1961, and she began trading on October 20 of that year. The two made up what C.S.L. called its "River Class" of package freighters. Markedly different from any other package freighters in the fleet, these two were built with hulls that most closely resembled the lake carferries designed by Robert Logan, giving them a broader beam at the main deck and thus increased cargo capacity. They were not, however, considered good boats in heavy weather, and no further ships of their class ever were built.

Both ships were owned by the Canadian General Electric Company Limited, which financed their construction. They were painted up as members of the Canada Steamship Lines fleet, however, and were operated by the latter on charter until both ships were fully acquired by C.S.L. in 1973. Actual ownership passed in 1976 to the Power Corporation of Canada, which was the "parent" of C.S.L. for a period of time. They carried the traditional C.S.L. colours of red hull with white "billboards", white cabins and an orange-red stack with white band and black smokeband at the top. They were flush-deckers, but their closed steel bulwarks fore and aft were painted white.

FRENCH RIVER was 387.6 feet long (404 feet, 3 inches overall) by 60.0 feet at the beam and 36.8 feet in depth of hull. She was registered at 6637 Gross and 3658 Net Tons, and could carry 5,200 tons deadweight. The 8-cylinder diesel engine of 1850 braking horsepower was built by N.V. Werkspoor of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and was delivered to the Collingwood shipyard in 1961 by the Oranje Line deep-sea freighter PRINS ALEXANDER, a regular visitor to the Great Lakes. FRENCH RIVER was fitted with a single controllable-pitch propeller.

Designed basically to replace the old steam canal-sized C.S.L. package freighters, most of which were retired around the time when the new Seaway opened, FRENCH RIVER and ENGLISH RIVER usually operated between Toronto, Hamilton and Montreal carrying general cargo and connecting with the "Fort Class" package freighters as well as the veteran steamers RENVOYLE, MARTIAN and COLLINGWOOD that maintained the upper lakes package trade for C.S.L. On occasion, the two sisterships ventured above the Welland Canal but usually maintained their shuttle work from the Bay Street docks in Toronto to the Hamilton freight sheds and then east to Montreal.

Your Editor well remembers the first time he saw FRENCH RIVER enter the Eastern Gap at Toronto. Not only was she odd-looking with her carferry-type hull and boxy superstructure aft, but she was rolling despite a relatively calm lake and, as well, her diesel machinery sounded strange. We were used to the quiet older steam package freighters and the turbine-powered newcomers FORT HENRY and FORT YORK, and the sound of FRENCH RIVER's machinery made us think of the sound of a big bucket of loose nuts and bolts being shaken!

FRENCH RIVER usually got an early start to the navigation season. She was the first vessel through the St. Lambert Lock at Montreal on April 8, 1964, and on April 1, 1966. Both openings were, at the time, the earliest on record for the Seaway. About the only change in the motorship's route came with the abandonment of Toronto as a C.S.L. package freight terminus and the transfer of general cargo handling to a new facility located westward along the north shore of Lake Ontario at Port Credit.

Despite the busyness of the service, however, it was not proving to be successful, and the concept of a lower lake package freight service connecting with the upper lake boats was