

In our "Seasons Greetings" section of the December issue, we spoke a bit too soon, it would seem, in respect of things going well on the lakes during the latter part of the 1989 navigation season. With the St. Lawrence canals due to close on December 19th, and the Welland Canal on the 24th, the elements took a hand in matters. Much below temperatures (it was the coldest December on record at Toronto for over one hundred years), high winds, and premature snowfalls combined to drop water temperatures to the lowest levels in recent memory, and severe ice conditions were experienced in many areas, particularly in the St. Lawrence River below Quebec City. To make things even worse, the crews on Canadian Coast Guard vessels went out on strike during November, thus bringing to a halt icebreaking and buoy maintenance operations. Many winter buoys were not put out on time, and summer markers were swept away by the ice. In fact, the North Traverse section of the St. Lawrence (below Quebec) became completely impassable for a period of time. With the early closing of the canals a distinct possibility, the Coast Guard crews were legislated back to work on December 15th, but by then the damage had been done. The St. Lawrence canals did remain open until the 24th, and the last salty out of the system was the ROSE ISLANDS, which was downbound in the Seaway on December 21st. The Welland Canal closed on schedule on the 24th. The pressure of ice in the upper St. Mary's River forced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to announce that the Soo Locks would close at midnight on December 28th. By that time, however, only the Poe Lock was in operation, the MacArthur Lock having been closed for the season during the evening of December 19th. Many vessels were requiring the assistance of tugs in the heavy ice on the lower St. Mary's River, and the west end of Lake Erie also proved to be a trouble spot, with as many as eight ships trapped in the ice at one time.

Ice was not the only problem in the canals. The St. Lawrence system was closed for two days after an incident which occurred on December 4th, when the ill-starred Enerchem Transport Inc. tanker ENERCHEM ASPHALT rammed the upper gates at the St. Lambert Lock, putting a hole in her bow and causing more than a million dollars in damage to the lock. This was ENERCHEM ASPHALT's second major accident of the 1989 season, the vessel having sustained severe engineroom damage in a fire during the summer.

On November 30, the Bethlehem Steel Corporation's self-unloading steamer SPARROWS POINT, bound from Escanaba to Indiana Harbor with a load of tacco-nite, struck Outer Shoal in the passage between Plum Island and the end of the Door Peninsula on the west side of Lake Michigan. That passage has long been known as Death's Door or, more properly, Porte des Morts, as a result of its reputation as a treacherous stretch of water. Selvick Marine equipment was called to the scene to lighten SPARROWS POINT, and she was released the following day. She proceeded to Indiana Harbor to unload, and then sailed for Sturgeon Bay for drydocking and an assessment of damage. We understand that the 37-year-old steamer sustained severe bottom damage in the incident, enough to force her owners to give serious consideration to the future of the ship, but eventually it was decided that repairs would proceed.

The same storm that caused such severe cold conditions and high winds on the lakes during the first full week of December, also caused havoc on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and on the east coast, where two cargo vessels and a fishing boat were lost with all hands. Caught in the storm was the salt-carrying barge CAPTAIN EDWARD V. SMITH, (a) ADAM E. CORNELIUS (III), which only this year had entered service on the east coast after leaving her old home waters of the lakes. The SMITH broke tow in the storm and was adrift off the Gaspé Peninsula from December 8th until, on the morning of the 13th, her anchors finally caught the bottom when the barge was some ten kilometres off Cheticamp, Nova Scotia. A towline eventually was placed aboard her that day, and during the evening of December 14th, she was towed safely into the harbour at Georgetown, Prince Edward Island. The barge was not loaded at the time of the incident, but her bunker tanks contained 190,000 litres of diesel fuel for the unloading equipment, and there were grave fears for the consequences should the SMITH have been cast up on the rocky Cape Breton coast.