

A TALE OF TWO LOST SISTERS

Last month, as we were preparing our feature article about the steamer WILLIAM H. GRATWICK (II), we were looking through photographs of ships managed by the Elphicke interests of Chicago, and in that section of the album we happened across views of the steamer JOHN MITCHELL (II). She was a vessel of rather distinctive appearance, and seeing her photo reminded us that she had a close sistership, the WILLIAM B. DAVOCK, and so we hunted up our photos of that steamer as well.

As we were comparing the photographs, we realized that not only were these two vessels very similar in appearance, but they also were successive hulls out of the same shipbuilding yard. As well, they shared one other similarity, a most tragic one. The MITCHELL had a very short life, while the DAVOCK lasted somewhat longer, but both met a violent end in which there was loss of life. To the best of our knowledge, nobody ever has written a combined history of the two sisterships, so we felt it appropriate that we fill this void as best we could. We hope that our readers enjoy the result as much as we enjoyed researching the details of the careers of the two freighters.

One of the most famous shipbuilding companies on the Great Lakes during the heyday of the construction of steel-hulled steamers was the Great Lakes Engineering Works. This firm, which was active from around the turn of the century until 1961, when liquidation proceedings were commenced, established shipyards at Ecorse, Michigan, and at St. Clair, Michigan. The Ecorse yard was the location of the company's main activities. The St. Clair yard was on the site of the defunct Columbia Iron Works, taken over by G.L.E.W. in 1903, but it was active only until about 1911, when its operations were moved to Ashtabula, Ohio.

Hull 25 out of the St. Clair yard of G.L.E.W. was the steamer JOHN MITCHELL (II) (U.S.203943), which was launched on Wednesday, November 28th, 1906. The shipyard crews worked through the winter months to complete the MITCHELL and then they began work on Hull 26. This was the vessel which was christened WILLIAM B. DAVOCK (U.S.204121), and she was put into the waters of the St. Clair River on Thursday, April 25th, 1907. Back in those days, when shipbuilding on the lakes was a thriving concern, the launching of a new vessel was a major event, attended by company officials and many invited guests, while throngs of the local populace would also gather to watch the spectacle of a side-launch. As a result, most launches were staged on Saturdays. It is, therefore, rather surprising to note that neither the MITCHELL nor the DAVOCK was put into the water on a Saturday.

As far as we can determine, the MITCHELL and the DAVOCK were of exactly the same hull dimensions, with length of 420.0 feet, beam of 52.0 feet and depth of 23.0 feet. The tonnage of each ship was registered as 4468 Gross and 3246 Net. There were three watertight bulkheads and each ship was fitted with twelve hatches. According to the U.S. government shipping register, both steamers were enrolled at Cleveland, Ohio, but both the American Bureau of Shipping and Lloyd's Register indicated that the DAVOCK was registered at Fairport, Ohio. (In our GRATWICK feature, we commented upon the confusion surrounding the Fairport/Cleveland registry situation.)

Each of the sistership steamers was fitted with a triple expansion engine with cylinders of 21, 34½ and 57 inches diameter, and a stroke of 42 inches. The engines were built for the ships in 1907 by the Great Lakes Engineering Works, and the engines bore the builder's numbers 344 (MITCHELL) and 345 (DAVOCK). The shipyard itself listed the Indicated Horsepower of each engine as 1,350, while the U.S. Merchant Vessels list showed it as 1,400 and the American Bureau of Shipping recorded it as 1,442. Lloyd's preferred to show the Nominal Horsepower, and for the DAVOCK listed it as 211.

Steam at 180 pounds per square inch working pressure was supplied for each ship by two coal-fired, single-ended, Scotch boilers. The boilers of the MITCHELL measured 13'0" by 11'6", while those in the DAVOCK were 13'0" by