

During one of her early Seaway transits, BENJAMIN F. FAIRLESS managed to get herself into trouble in the Welland Canal. Whilst upbound with ore for South Chicago on Tuesday, June 16, 1964, she collided head-on with the Misenener steamer RALPH S. MISENER (II)(67), (a) MATHEWSTON (54), (c) MATHEWSTON. Fortunately for both vessels, damage was not extensive.

A year earlier, on April 30th, 1963, IRVING S. OLDS was upbound on Lake Huron with a cargo of ore, bound from Port Cartier for South Chicago, when she encountered a wild spring storm. The same storm struck Lake Michigan, where it caught the Hall Corporation self-unloader OREFAX, which suffered severe damage to her forward cabins and was forced to put in to Ludington, Michigan, to seek temporary repairs and to allow three crew members to receive treatment for injuries which they had sustained. The OLDS likewise did not emerge unscathed from the storm, for she received such a pounding that her hull cracked across the deck. Taking every possible precaution, the crew of the steamer managed to get her safely up Lake Huron, and she put in at DeTour, Michigan, for the necessary repairs.

During the late 1960s, it was decided that the "Supers" needed certain modernization in order to enable them to remain efficiently operable. In particular, it was concluded that the ships should have their boilers converted from coal to oil firing, and this work was awarded to three different shipyards. The FRASER was converted over the winter of 1969-1970 by American Ship Building at Lorain. The Defoe Shipbuilding Company did the work on A. H. FERBERT at Bay City, Michigan, over the winter of 1971-1972, and did BENJAMIN F. FAIRLESS during the winter of 1972-1973. The Bay Shipbuilding Corporation handled the conversions of ENDERS M. VOORHEES and IRVING S. OLDS at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, during the winters of 1972-1973 and 1973-1974, respectively.

Despite this modernization work, the "AA" Class steamers were in the twilight of their careers by the mid to late seventies. The big self-unloader ROGER BLOUGH had been commissioned by the U.S. Steel fleet in 1972, and in 1976 the company signed contracts with the Bay Shipbuilding Corporation and the American Ship Building Company for the construction at Lorain and at Sturgeon Bay of two 1,000-foot, self-unloading ore carriers with a capacity of 60,500 tons of cargo. Each of the "Supers" could handle only 19,150 tons of ore and, in fact, one of the new ships could carry in a season as much cargo as all five of the "Supers" combined.

In addition, the older vessels still had to be unloaded by shore-mounted gear, and the cost of converting the "AA" steamers to self-unloaders simply could not be justified. It became evident that the handwriting was on the wall for the five FRASER class steamers as, in fact, it was for all of the U.S. Steel straightdeckers which were smaller than the lengthened CLARKE class (now 767 feet in length). Even the latter class of vessel survived only because of their lengthening in 1974-1975 and their self-unloader conversions which were done in 1982. Until the two new 1,000-footers could be placed in commission, however, it was necessary that the "Supers" soldier along to maintain the fleet's cargo commitments.

This period was not a particularly happy one for IRVING S. OLDS, as she was involved in two unfortunate accidents. Whilst inbound at Lorain, Ohio, on April 29, 1977, the OLDS rammed the bridge over the Black River, causing road traffic over the bridge to be interrupted for several hours. Extensive damage was occasioned to the bow of the steamer, and she was laid up for several months while repairs were put in hand.

Later that same navigation season, on January 4th, 1978, the OLDS was struck from behind by the steamer ARMCO of the Columbia Transportation Division, Oglebay Norton Company. The accident occurred in the Livingstone Channel of the Detroit River, when both vessels were following a U.C. Coast Guard icebreaker through heavy ice. The OLDS hit a pressure ridge in the ice and came to a sudden stop; ARMCO could not stop in time and rammed the OLDS in the stern. ARMCO, holed in the bow, was escorted by the