

G. R. GRAY (II)

Almost all Great Lakes marine historians will recall having seen paintings or photographs of big, wooden-hulled, steam tugs pulling long strings of schooners or participating in the salvage of wrecked sailing ships or steam barges. There was a time when there were many such double-decked tugs on the upper lakes, but their era mainly consisted of the three decades prior to the turn of the century, for thereafter their place was taken by smaller, steel-hulled tugs, which mostly attended to harbour duties once the age of sail was nearly finished.

The big wooden tugs were an extremely hardy lot, and they were worked hard. Not only did they have to withstand the strain of the towline, but they also were called upon to be out on the open lakes in all sorts of nasty weather and, in addition, fire was an ever-present hazard waiting to strike. By the early 1900s, most of the big wooden tugs had been scrapped or abandoned, or perhaps cut down for other uses. Several of them, however, survived and enjoyed extremely long lives.

One of the longest-lived of the big wooden tugs was the one which was best known as the rafting tug G. R. GRAY (II), which still was operating on Lake Superior in her sixty-sixth year, and which remained in existence, albeit inoperative, until she was 88 years of age. With the help of several other T.M.H.S. members, we have been able to piece together the history of this famous tug, and we are pleased to share the story with our readers.

This big tug traced her history back to the year 1871, when she was built at Sheboygan, Wisconsin, by Alfred Stokes. Measuring 147.0 feet in length, 24.0 feet in the beam, and 12.0 feet in depth, she was 285 Gross and 153 Net Tons. She was christened BISMARCK and was enrolled at Grand Haven, Michigan, under Official Number U.S.2767. As built, she was a single-deck tug, or so it is reported, but we cannot describe her appearance at this stage because we never have seen any photographic or artistic likeness of the BISMARCK.

BISMARCK was powered by a steeple compound steam engine, with cylinders of 24 and 42 inches diameter and a stroke of 36 inches. This engine previously had seen service in the passenger and freight propeller EQUATOR, which had been built in 1857 by F. N. Jones at Buffalo, New York, for the New York Central Railroad. A vessel of 620 Gross Tons, EQUATOR was wrecked on November 18, 1869, on North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan. The engine subsequently was salvaged from the remains of EQUATOR.

It is known that, by the latter years of the century, the tug was fitted with one Scotch boiler, measuring 13 by 12 feet, but we are not certain whether this was her original boiler. We rather suspect that it was not, for it would seem unlikely that a boiler used so hard in a big lake tugs would have lasted more than a quarter of a century. We are unable, however, to find any confirmation of the original boiler equipment fitted in BISMARCK. Undoubtedly, whatever it was, it would have been fired with wood.

The original owners of BISMARCK were Tyson and Robertson, lumber dealers, of Manistee, Michigan, and they retained an interest in the tug right through until 1884. Nevertheless, in October of 1872, the registry of the tug was changed from Grand Haven to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and she was placed under the management of Henry Witbeck. This gentleman was one of the principals of the Vessel Owners Towing Association, which had been formed in 1871 at Chicago, Illinois. Various managers succeeded Witbeck in the operation of BISMARCK until her ownership finally changed hands thirteen years after she entered service.

On April 16th of 1884, the ownership of BISMARCK was transferred to Captain H. G. Blanchard and the Blanchard Navigation Company, of Detroit, Michigan. The port of registry of the tug was moved from Milwaukee to Detroit and, on August 14th, 1884, Blanchard had the tug officially re-registered under the name (b) JUSTICE FIELD.

At this stage of her career, JUSTICE FIELD was a very good-looking tug. She