

In our last issue, we made brief mention of the late-November grounding of the Columbia Transportation steamer MIDDLETOWN in the Upper St. Mary's River. Contrary to our earlier report, the incident actually occurred at 4:52 a.m. on November 26, when MIDDLETOWN apparently swung wide out of the channel, downbound on the Birch Point turn. Numerous tugs attended the scene, and originally it was thought that the ship could be pulled free of the muddy bottom. Such was not to be, however, with the water level in the river some nine inches low, and it was necessary to lighten some of her taconite cargo into the barge P.M.L. SALVAGER. The MIDDLETOWN was released, apparently without damage, early on November 27th, but could not get under way immediately because the St. Mary's River was closed to vessel traffic as a result of fog.

We previously mentioned some of the problems which beset the tug TORRENT and the "Ontonagon Barge" on their way out of the lakes in late autumn. The story would seem to be an ongoing saga of woe! First of all, there was a dispute between the Marine Specialty Company, of Texas, owner of the barge, and the United States Coast Guard concerning safety precautions which supposedly were agreed but not followed when the barge was launched on October 24th, and those problems proved difficult to resolve. The tug, also owned by Marine Specialty, arrived at Ontonagon on November 23 after a rough passage up the lakes, and four local forest workers had to be hired to replace crewmen who walked off TORRENT on her arrival. (In addition to sailing conditions, the crewmen expressed concern over engine problems and the lack of a usable back-up electrical generator.) The tug and barge sailed from Ontonagon on the evening of November 27 but difficulties were encountered with the tow and damage was occasioned to TORRENT's towing winch. When the tow reached Whitefish Bay, an attempt was made to shorten the towline but, with the winch acting up, the cable was allowed to go slack and it fouled what apparently was the wreck of the whaleback barge SAGAMORE (which was sunk in collision with the steamer NORTHERN QUEEN off Point Iroquois on July 29, 1901). The "Ontonagon Barge" then broke loose and finally was anchored below Gros Cap on November 30.

Unfortunately, when it was time to get under way again, the anchor windlass on the barge would not operate and the tender SOO RIVER BELLE had to bring out barrels of hydraulic oil for the windlass before the "hook" could be lifted. The tow proceeded down toward the Soo Locks but lost almost twelve hours taking on water ballast before locking down. (At first, the Coast Guard had tried to prevent the Soo passage of the barge as a result of the launch dispute, but relented when settlement was reached.) A new master boarded the tug at the Soo and the tow was moored at the Carbide Dock for repairs to the barge and to the tug's towing winch.

The tow was still there on December 3rd, waiting for weather, and did not get moving until the morning of the 7th. In the lower river, the barge managed to go aground on Moon Island, below the Neebish Rock Cut, and the G-tug MISSOURI had to assist. The tow was secured at the Lime Island dock for inspection, and was not under way again until 1:00 p.m. on December 8th. Much to the relief of all, the tow finally cleared DeTour some two and a half hours later. By the way, we should note that one Soo press report referred to the barge as the "LIGHTNING". We are not certain whether this really is the barge's name (Marine Specialty owns a tug named THUNDER, which was in the lakes in 1989 to collect the "Ontonagon Tug") or whether it was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the speed of the carferry-barge's completion and departure from the lakes (a ten-year process)...

As usual, the Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority has engaged the services of a tug to stand by during the winter to break ice in the event of threats of flooding in low-lying areas along the river. Spending the winter at Lighthouse Cove will be the McKeil tug LAC MANITOBA. If additional assistance should be required, the small McKeil tug FLO-MAC will be trucked to the scene and launched there.