

CHARLES W. WETMORE - REVISITED

In the November issue, we featured "Whalebacks in the Rapids", being a description of the unusual passages down through the St. Lawrence Rapids which the whaleback steamers JOSEPH L. COLBY and CHARLES W. WETMORE, along with the barge 110, made in 1891. All three had been built at the Superior shipyard of the American Steel Barge Company, and were outward bound for deep-sea service. They would have had to be cut apart to pass down through most of the small locks of the old St. Lawrence canals (the Lachine Canal excepted), and so their designer and builder, Captain Alexander McDougall, determined to take them down through the rapids. All three made it safely, the COLBY and WETMORE under their own power and the barge 110 under tow of the big salvage tug CHIEFTAIN (II).

Our story also dealt with the the later histories of the three ships. The COLBY and 110 returned to the lakes and then went back to salt water, where the 110 eventually met her demise. The COLBY, then known as (b) BAY STATE, came back to the lakes yet again and finished her life there. The WETMORE remained on salt water and was lost on the West Coast in 1892.

Our feature provoked much reader comment and, as a result, we now know much more about the history of the WETMORE. In fact, we have so much additional material that we thought we should devote space in "Scanner" to present this further information for the edification and enjoyment of our members.

In our earlier feature, we commented upon a few of the reasons why Alexander McDougall would choose to send some of his newly-built whalebacks to salt water, one of the principal causes being the low freight rates then prevalent on the lakes. The "Superior Daily Call" of May 23, 1891, commented that the CHARLES W. WETMORE had been launched that afternoon "in glorious weather", and that the large crowd in attendance had "cheered wildly as the big steamer plunged into the water".

Perhaps more importantly, however, the article went on to note that the shipping rate on wheat to Buffalo from Duluth was lower than at any time since 1884 and 1888, and that shippers were offering to carry for 1½ cents per bushel. The nominal rate on iron ore (red hematite, of course, back then) shipped out of Ashland and Two Harbors was only \$1.00 per ton, "with a decidedly downward tendency", and coal was being hauled from Buffalo to Milwaukee for only 60 cents per ton! Small wonder, then, that with his shipyard turning out so many new vessels in an already glutted market, that McDougall was seeking other trades for his novel ships.

The "Superior Daily Leader" of May 24th commented that "the launching of the whaleback steamer CHARLES W. WETMORE yesterday afternoon was accomplished with neatness and dispatch. A crowd of people estimated at 5,000 was on hand to see the new steamer strike the water.

"As all the machinery is in position in the WETMORE, special precautions were taken to prevent any excessive rolling or plunging. Lines were attached to bow and stern and served their purpose admirably, as the steamer did not roll with more violence than the smaller vessels formerly launched. The vessel, as she was launched, contained in hull and machinery a weight of about 1,200 tons....

"E. H. Dwight, who is to accompany the steamer WETMORE, as a representative of the "Daily Leader", on her trip to the Pacific coast, was one of the party on board when she took her first plunge into the water."

In its issue of May 31, 1891, the "Daily Leader" made further comment about the WETMORE, including details of her measurements and machinery. An interesting remark was that "some day she will be cut in two and have 70 feet added to her length". That lengthening, of course, never occurred, and would in any event have been a difficult job in view of the peculiar nature of the way in which whaleback hulls were framed.

The "Leader" went on to say that "This new craft has been christened the