

THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN FIVE
The Story of the Barge BRYN MAWR

Last month, we noted that we chose our Ship of the Month because we had not featured a vessel of her type for quite some time, and hence we selected a U.S. upper lake package freighter. Looking around for other types of lake ships that we might have overlooked when choosing subjects for feature articles, we found that one particular class of vessel has been almost forgotten completely in these pages.

In fact, on only two occasions have we featured a consort barge built for the bulk cargo trades on the upper lakes. Back in the summer of 1973, we featured AGAWA (I), which was better known after she was converted to a steamer, and most people knew her as the Quebec & Ontario Transportation Company's HERON BAY (I). The second upper lake barge that we featured was MALTA, later known as THUNDER BAY (I). She also was best known for her years of service after she was given her own power, and most people will remember her as the Branch Lines tanker PINEBRANCH. We featured her in April of 1978.

Many of today's shipping observers will never have seen a consort barge in service. They have seen all sorts of tug/barge combinations, ranging from the very small to the 1,000-foot PRESQUE ISLE, but unless they were watching ships back in the early 1960s (or earlier), they will not have had the pleasure of seeing a traditional lake freight steamer towing a barge of almost the same size! Indeed, the early 1960s saw the last gasp of such operations on the lakes, and by then only a very few consort barges still were in active service.

What was the purpose of towing such big barges in upper lake bulk trades? Large fleets, such as the Minnesota Steamship Company, whose ships mainly carried iron ore from Lake Superior to Lake Erie ports, thought that ore could be carried more efficiently and economically if each of the big steamers towed a barge. Each steamer would be equipped with a very powerful engine, and her barge would have its own steering apparatus so that it would be reasonably manoeuvrable when out at the end of a towline. The barge could be operated with only a very small crew. At the larger ore docks, both steamer and barge could be loaded or unloaded together, but at smaller facilities, the steamer, once herself unloaded, could pick up a light barge left behind by another steamer, and leave the barge she had brought so the next steamer could pick it up later.

In the latter years of the nineteenth century, the idea of consort barges was quite popular, but the big barges were built for only a few years. The concept fell from favour in the early years of the twentieth century, when more modern construction methods allowed larger steamers to be built, making the use of cumbersome barges unnecessary. Nevertheless, most of the barges that had been built in those few years remained in operation for many years indeed, some of them running for more than half a century.

One of the iron ore transportation fleets that adopted the concept of barge towing was the original Pittsburgh Steamship Company, which was owned by the famous steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, and managed for him by Henry W. Oliver. This fleet was comprised of thirteen vessels. Four of these were the 266-foot sisterships GRIFFIN, JOLIET, LASALLE and WAWATAM, which were acquired in November of 1898 from the Lake Superior Iron Company. Three more ships were purchased in 1899, the steamer CLARENCE A. BLACK from the Northern Lakes Steamship Company, of Detroit, and the steamer WILLIAM R. LINN and consort barge CARRINGTON from C. W. Elphicke & Company, of Chicago.

By far the most famous of the Carnegie and Oliver boats, however, were the six vessels that comprised what came to be known as "The College Line". Of these, five were sistership steamers, approximately 454 x 50 x 28.5 (there were slight variations), and of just over 5000 Gross Tons, while one was a