

**THE LAST NEW PRE-WAR TINSTACKERS**

**- by Brian Bernard with the Editor -**

Since its founding in 1901, the details of which have been recounted in the pages of several recent issues of "Scanner", the United States Steel Corporation has remained one of the largest integrated steel producers in the United States of America. Its lake shipping affiliate, known variously over the years as the Pittsburgh Steamship Company, the Pittsburgh Steamship Division, United States Steel Corporation Great Lakes Fleet and, finally, the USS Great Lakes Fleet Inc., has been a leader in the Great Lakes shipping industry, and for many years operated the largest fleet of vessels ever seen on either side of the lakes.

Indeed, up until the early 1980s, the corporation still operated the largest U.S.-flag fleet on the lakes, but that situation changed very rapidly during the mid-to-late 1970s and the decade of the 1980s, as demand for steel products declined dramatically and many American lake ship operators were forced to scrap boats that were still in relative infancy. Nowhere was this "rationalization" more apparent than in the ranks of the U.S. Steel fleet, where steamers that had reached their golden years, such as the once-flagship JAMES A. FARRELL of 1913, together with many of her contemporaries, were sent to the breakers along with such relative youngsters as the GOVERNOR MILLER, JOHN HULST and RALPH H. WATSON. This was, to be certain, a very sad period for observers of the shipping scene, but no matter how gloomy the 1980s were for the lake shipping business, they were pale in comparison with the devastating years of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In fact, relatively little iron ore moved on the Great Lakes from 1930 through 1936. The low point came in 1932, when only 3,996,143 net tons of ore were floated. The 1937 season showed a marked improvement, however, when 70,110,696 net tons of ore were carried down the lakes, although this still was short of the 73,029,152 net tons carried in the 1929 season, the year in which the "troubles" began.

The strong demand for tonnage during the 1937 navigation season saw the Pittsburgh Steamship Company place in service 69 steamers and six consort barges, for a total fleet capacity per trip of 692,900 gross tons. As well, between 25 and 45 additional ships were under charter each week from various other lake operators. With better economic times on the way, or so it then seemed, the Pittsburgh Steamship Company began to plan the building of additional vessels to create increased fleet cargo capacity, the last new vessels built for the fleet having been the A. F. HARVEY class of 1927 and the HORACE JOHNSON class of 1929-1930. The result was four new steamers, two each of two similar sistership groupings. We would know them as the WILLIAM A. IRVIN, GOVERNOR MILLER, JOHN HULST and RALPH H. WATSON.

The basic design for the new boats was done by a U.S. Steel subsidiary - the Federal Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, of Kearney, New Jersey, and by the engineering staff of the Pittsburgh Steamship Company. The ships incorporated the latest in shipbuilding technology, the most important of which was the use of electric arc welding in their construction. Side tanks, tank tops, coal bunkers and cabins were welded, while other areas of the hulls were riveted in the usual fashion. The use of welding in ship construction was still in its infancy, and there still were many lessons to be learned.

During the initial design phase, it was decided to put back into place the cross-braces in the side tanks. The purpose of these braces was to increase the structural strength of the hull sides and to transfer the shock of docking the ship to the side tank. During the construction of the HORACE JOHNSON class of steamers built in 1929 and 1930, the cross-braces had been removed in order to save weight and increase cargo capacity. It was found, however, that with the cross-braces removed, the sides of the ships' hulls were structurally weaker and, accordingly, the vessels were suffering damage