

TWO STEAMERS NAMED W. C. RICHARDSON

Over the years, there have emerged a number of Great Lakes shipping entrepreneurs who have been so successful at their work that the lake fleets they founded, or which evolved later as a result of their efforts, remain in existence today. In some cases, it was not until after their passing that the true worth of these giants of their field became known. Too often today, however, we tend just to look at the vessels that these men operated, or the present condition of the fleets they founded (or their successor companies), and forget about the men themselves.

One such mogul of the lake shipping industry, the fruits of whose labours continue to be evident on the lakes to this day, despite the fact that he has been gone from the scene for almost eighty years, was Captain Wesley Cunningham Richardson. He was one of the sons of Captain Henry and Mary (Cunningham) Richardson, and he was born on June 10th, 1840, in Unionville, Ohio, a small town which no longer appears on any major map, but which was not far from Ashtabula, on the shore of Lake Erie. It was in Ashtabula that the young Wesley went to school, but his schoolwork and life on the land did not suit the boy and, at the age of 16, he began his shipping career. He first served in a lake sailing ship, but by 1863 he had his certification as chief mate. He had his master's ticket not long afterward.

It is said that, in 1865, he bought a part interest in the schooner TRANSPORT (U.S.21455), 180.69 tons and registered at Ashtabula, his partner in this enterprise being his older brother Chauncey. (Beers History of the Great Lakes of 1899 spelled his name "Chancey".) Wesley Richardson continued to sail the lakes until 1880, when he came ashore on accepting employment with a firm of wholesale grocers known as Briggs, Hathaway & Garrison.

While Captain Wesley Richardson devoted his talents to shoreside endeavours, the lake shipping industry continue to flourish. One of the gentlemen active in the industry at Cleveland was H. J. Webb, who had a number of associations with the trade. In 1890, a syndicate headed by Harvey D. Goulder and H. J. Webb purchased from the Wilson Transit Company the 1884-built, 246-foot, wooden steamer KASOTA (U.S.14428)(92), (b) A. A. PARKER, but they lost her as a result of a collision on the Detroit River with the D & C passenger sidewheeler CITY OF DETROIT (II) on July 17, 1890. KASOTA sank in three minutes, with the loss of one life, and it was not until 1891 that she was salvaged and rebuilt for other owners.

In 1891, H. J. Webb formed his own firm, H. J. Webb & Company, to act as vessel brokers and managers of a fleet of bulk carriers engaged in the iron ore trade. Captain Wesley Cunningham Richardson joined the Webb firm and obviously rose to a very high position, because upon Mr. Webb's death in 1894, Richardson gained control of the firm and reorganized it as W. C. Richardson & Company. With only one change in name, that coming in 1903 when another reorganization took place and the corporate style was changed to Richardson Transportation Company, the firm operated for 27 years, acting as managing agents for a sizable and very important fleet of lake vessels. The individual ships were registered to an assortment of owners, and Richardson also participated in the formation of a number of the companies which owned some of the ships which he managed.

A few photos of the Richardson ships show them flying a houseflag which was a white swallow-tail with a dark border, probably blue, and the large letters 'W.C.R.' in the centre. And at least one vessel, the 1914-built, 504-foot HOWARD M. HANNA JR. (II), carried a much-embellished portrait of Captain Richardson painted in the centre of the steel dodger around the bridge deck in front of her pilothouse.

Most of the vessels operated by W. C. Richardson, whether of wood, iron or