

MAJOR

Anyone who has been reading our feature ship histories in this publication over the years is quite familiar with the fact that there were certain shipping entrepreneurs on both sides of the international border who tended to dominate the Great Lakes scene for a number of years. We are not speaking of people like the iron ore barons, whose main interest was in controlling enough of the shipping business that they could service the needs of their own steel-producing plants. Rather, we are referring to the so-called "independent" operators, who were able to assemble the backing of those interests that could provide the funds necessary for the construction or purchase of such vessels that could not only serve the needs of any of those backers who required them, but also would be available to carry cargoes for anyone else who had some commodity that needed moving on the lakes.

On the Canadian side of the lakes, there was one pre-eminent independent entrepreneur (although in reality his shipping empire depended upon the support of certain "big business" interests at various times), and that was James Playfair, of whom we have spoken many times in these pages. On the U.S. side of the border, there were several such operators, perhaps the best known of them being Joseph C. Gilchrist and Captain John Mitchell. The Gilchrist fleet was at its height around the turn of the past century, but it foundered in a sea of red ink early in the second decade of the twentieth century. Not so large in scope, but far more successful, in a very conservative manner, were the shipping operations of Captain Mitchell.

The ship that we have chosen to feature this month was quite remarkable in that she served only two fleets during her many years of active service, and they just happened to be the fleets of John Mitchell and James Playfair. No other lake steamer ever was able to claim that honour. Even more interesting and perhaps less known, is the fact that both John Mitchell and James Playfair were Canadian by birth.

John Mitchell was the eldest of two sons born to Daniel and Calista Mitchell who, at the time, resided in Franklin County, Lower Canada. John Mitchell was born on October 8, 1850, while his brother Alfred first saw the light of day two years later. The family relocated in 1854 to the small town of Fair Haven, Michigan, situated on the shore of Lake St. Clair. When not yet fourteen years of age, John Mitchell went sailing on the lakes in the sailing barge EVERGREEN, and it was not long before his brother, Alfred, also went on the lakes. Both were avid lake mariners who earned their Captain's papers.

Captain John Mitchell moved to Cleveland, Ohio, which was rapidly becoming the "centre" of the U.S. lake shipping industry, in 1890. In January of that year, he formed the vessel management firm of Mitchell & Company, in which he was in partnership with John F. Wedow, of Marine City, Michigan, and John C. Fitzpatrick. The latter soon retired and was replaced by Capt. Alfred Mitchell. Another member of the family, H. W. Mitchell, joined the firm in 1897. (John Mitchell, who married Mary Rouvel, had nine children, while Alfred Mitchell, married to Zoe Furtaw, had eight offspring.)

John Mitchell formed a number of very auspicious business affiliations over the years, and enjoyed close associations with such eminent shipping men as William H. Gratwick, William F. Sauber, James Corrigan, C. W. Elphicke and Frank W. Wheeler, to name but a few. He participated in the founding and/or the management of such firms as the Mitchell Steamship Company, the Hopkins Steamship Company, the Gratwick Steamship Company, the Etna Steamship Company, the Cleveland Steamship Company and the Buffalo Steamship Company. As well, during the 1890s, he was president of the Marine City Salt & Brick Works, the Lake View Land Company, and the Lancashire Syndicate, in addition to holding a major interest in the Shaker Heights Land Company, and serving as a director of the Cuyahoga Building and Loan Association. John Mitchell was a very active but also highly respected businessman.