

CRESCENT CITY

It has been a while since we featured in these pages an upper lakes bulk carrier. Accordingly, we have chosen this month to highlight the career of one of the earlier steel-hulled "ore boats", and one which enjoyed a relatively long life but was involved in two very major accidents. As well, her story has been requested by one of our members, and we are pleased to accommodate that request. (Yes, we do keep lists of requested ships, and try to write them up if and when possible.)

For a great many years, the Pittsburgh Steamship Company operated the largest fleet of vessels on the Great Lakes and, for many more years, it had the largest American-flag lake fleet. In fact, at the time of its formation, the Pittsburgh Steamship Company's fleet was the largest group of ships of one ownership flying the flag of the United States of America on any of the world's waters.

The Pittsburgh Steamship Company was formed in 1901 as the lake shipping arm of the United States Steel Corporation. The "masterful manoeuvrings" of steel magnates such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller set the stage for the eventual formation of United States Steel in 1901 by J. Pierpont Morgan, assisted by Judge Elbert H. Gary. Such huge multi-corporation mergers seem to have become common-place in today's world, but considering the stage of economic development achieved by the industrial world by the first year of the twentieth century, what they accomplished ranks as a corporate miracle. In view of its size and the extent of its operations, it is not at all surprising that United States Steel soon earned the nickname of "The Steel Trust".

In order for Morgan to achieve supremacy in the American steel industry, it was necessary that he ensure an unimpeded supply of raw materials to the Corporation's mills, and that meant that he had to control enough of the lake shipping industry so that no "independent" operator's actions could interrupt the flow of iron ore to his port city mills or to the ports from which ore was dispatched by rail to inland mills. Accordingly, a large number of fleets, comprising the best vessels that could be gathered together, were acquired and became part of the Pittsburgh Steamship Company. The name of the new fleet was taken from one of the smaller, antecedent fleets, the Pittsburgh Steamship Company which had been formed by Andrew Carnegie in 1898-1899, to a large extent with the assistance of another of the "steel barons", Henry W. Oliver.

From the time of its formation in 1901 and until 1904, vice-president and manager of the new Pittsburgh Steamship Company was Augustus Benjamin Wolvin a Duluth resident who had been born in Cleveland. He brought with him into the new fleet two shipping companies which were divisions of the American Steel and Wire Company, of Chicago. This latter concern had been formed back in 1892 (reports vary on the date) with the merger (facilitated by Elbert Gary, then a lawyer in Warrensville, Illinois) of a number of competing wire and nail manufacturing firms controlled by men such as William Edenborn, Isaac L. Ellwood, John W. ("Bet-a-Million") Gates, James A. Farrell and Eugene J. Buffington. The two shipping firms which Wolvin managed, and which he brought with him into the new Pittsburgh Steamship Company when American Steel and Wire was merged into United States Steel, were the Zenith Transit Company and the American Steamship Company (the latter being no relation to today's American Steamship Company).

The pre-1901 fleet with which we are concerned here is the Zenith Transit Company, which appears to have been formed some three years subsequent to the merger that created the American Steel and Wire Company. Zenith Transit only ever owned five ships, but they were good, strong, steel-hulled bulk carriers, and most of them enjoyed good lives. ZENITH CITY was built for the fleet in 1895, QUEEN CITY in 1896, EMPIRE CITY and CRESCENT CITY in 1897, and SUPERIOR CITY in 1898. None of them were sisterships and each was a little larger than the one that came before her.