

It has become apparent recently that the North American steel industry has been having some tough sledding trying to make a profit. Much of the blame has been directed to the importation of cheap foreign steel products, but the recent downturn in the economy has not helped matters at all. In late December, U.S. steel producer LTV filed for protection from bankruptcy. Then, in mid-April, LTV announced that on June 14, it would close one of its two Cleveland mills, namely the Direct Hot Charge Complex and its associated C-1 blast furnace. This plant has been manufacturing low-cost commodity steel products, which have been the products most at risk from competition by foreign imports.

Meanwhile, on April 23rd, Algoma Steel Inc., of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, announced that it had obtained an order for protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act after seeking same from the Ontario Superior Court. This was the initial move in Algoma Steel's restructuring of its financial obligations in an effort to keep the company vital. It would seem that the prospects for Algoma's restructuring are very promising, despite the fact that this is the second time in the space of ten years that Algoma has sought and obtained such protection from the court. The reasons for Algoma's problems were cited as "the impact of unfairly traded off-shore steel in our North American markets, and high debt service costs associated with our recent capital expenditure program".

Last issue, we mentioned the sale of the Algoma Tankers Ltd. tanker ALGOSCOTIA, (a) IMPERIAL ACADIA (98), to McKeil Marine Ltd., which renamed the 1966-built vessel (c) RALPH TUCKER in honour of one of its veteran tug masters. The TUCKER made her first appearance in the St. Lawrence River on April 7th, heading for Quebec City. There she loaded for Sept-Iles. On April 18th, carrying a cargo of urea ammonium nitrate for McAsphalt Industries, the TUCKER arrived at Port Stanley from Trois Rivieres. She not only won the top hat for being the first ship arrival of the 2001 season at Port Stanley, but she was the first major vessel to dock there in two years as a result of the silting up of the harbour. (A dredging project began there late last year.) The TUCKER got hung up momentarily at the entrance, and on her departure the next day, she tried to turn around in the basin rather than backing out as recommended, and she again became stuck, this time for five hours. A fish tug finally pulled her free. The TUCKER reportedly still bears the Algoma hull colours, without insignia, and has a white stack with the blue 'McK' logo.

Much has been said in recent years regarding the decline in the port of Buffalo as a grain centre. At one time, the harbour there, including the City Ship Canal as well as the river, were lined with major elevators, but one by one they have closed down. It recently was announced that, come June, ConAgra will close its Childs Street flour milling plant, which has been supplied with grain via the attached Lake and Rail Elevator. The closure is said to be a result of the fact that the 1925-built flour mill simply cannot compete economically in today's technology. After the closing of Lake and Rail, the ADM Standard and the General Mills Frontier will be the last two operating elevators at Buffalo. (At last Buffalo still will have two grain elevators, unlike Toronto which no longer has any!)

Interestingly, in this environment, the only operating U.S.-flag laker dedicated to the grain trade fitted out during April. The 1952-built KINSMAN INDEPENDENT (III), (a) CHARLES L. HUTCHINSON (II)(62), (b) ERNEST R. BREECH (88), of Great Lakes Associates Inc., successor to the Steinbrenner fleets, got underway for the new season on April 22nd. Early on the 24th, she had to be assisted by the tug MISSOURI to a St. Mary's River anchorage in Lake Nicolet, reportedly as a result of engineroom problems, but she was under way again later in the day. Idle again this year, as she has been since 1995, will be the fleet's 1927-built KINSMAN ENTERPRISE (III), (a) HARRY COULBY (II)(89).