

FORT HENRY

- by Ronald F. Beaupre -

with the Editor

Fort Henry . . . The Last Word

In the Mid-Summer issue we began the history of a most significant lake vessel, the Canada Steamship Lines package freighter FORT HENRY, which was put into service in June of 1955. She revolutionized the package freight trade, and was the first of a whole series of modern ships C.S.L. would have built for this service. Unfortunately, trade patterns would soon change, and but a quarter of a century later, there was no work for FORT HENRY.

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When we left FORT HENRY last issue, it was the spring of 1956, and the package freighter was the first ship of the season upbound through the Canadian Lock at the Soo. She had no trouble making her way through the foot of ice in the river above the locks.

When Captain Anderson radioed that FORT HENRY was clear of the lock and upbound, the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker MACKINAW replied that FORT HENRY should stay where she was, as she did not have enough power to come up the river. Anderson was advised that the ice was too heavy, and that there already were two American freighters stuck in the ice near Big Point. MACKINAW advised the HENRY to stay where she was until the icebreaker could come back to escort her up to Whitefish Bay.

The HENRY's chief engineer just happened to be standing in the wheelhouse and listening to the radio exchange. "Sliver" Anderson looked at him, and the Chief remarked "Oh, we've got enough power", and then headed aft to his engineroom. Harry Moore recalled seeing the ice flying fifty feet off either side of the bow as they steamed past the MACKINAW! FORT HENRY cut a path between the two freighters stuck in the ice, and then continued through the ice pack right out into Lake Superior, passing Ile Parisienne ten minutes ahead of schedule.

We will return to Capt. Moore's narrative, but here we must relate more information that has come to light regarding FORT HENRY's capability of breaking ice. Capt. "Bud" Playford, of Owen Sound, was second mate under Capt. Anderson in the FORT HENRY, and he later became her commander. He recounted to this writer that he once was breaking his way up to a grain elevator at the Canadian Lakehead, and received a call from that elevator. The HENRY was requested to cease breaking ice as the shockwaves running through the elevator were scaring the workers! Evidence of the strength built into the ship's bows is seen in photographs of the steamer. She never showed the typical hull damage that most ships suffered from butting through ice fields.

Harry Moore recalled that a five-ton towmotor, used to handle freight, was kept on the 'tween deck while the ship was underway. It was backed up against a bulkhead and then the wheels were blocked to hold the machine in place. On a certain occasion, out on Lake Superior, they encountered a Nor'easter which caused the ship to roll severely. The towmotor jumped out of its blocks and proceeded to crush a brand new Chrysler station wagon. Altogether, 65 autos were damaged, and FORT HENRY came into the Lakehead with one car hanging over the side of the spar deck and the lifelines holding it there. The steamer was sent to the old "Casco" dock to unload and then ran back light to Sarnia. The rest of the season was normal sailing and they didn't carry cars again until the autumn.