

On March 23rd, the Interlake Steamship Company's 1,000-foot MESABI MINER cleared the Sturgeon Bay shipyard where she had spent the winter. The ship only got as far as the Straits of Mackinac, however, where in the ice she suffered a crack five feet long and one inch wide in her bow. The MINER was headed back to Sturgeon Bay, where she arrived during the evening of March 24th. Repairs were expected to take several days.

While the Rochester - Toronto fast catamaran ferry SPIRIT OF ONTARIO 1 (for which the nickname "The Breeze" was chosen in a public contest) makes her way toward the lakes, there has been news on the home front. In mid-March, work began on the construction of a terminal building at Toronto's Pier 52 where the ferry will dock, but it is painfully obvious that the building will not be completed before the ship's inaugural run scheduled for May 1. Then, in late March, legislation was introduced in New York State to permit the installation of video gambling machines on the ferry. What nobody bothered to check out is the fact that video gambling is prohibited in Ontario. The Ontario Alcohol and Gaming Commission has indicated no desire to bend the rules for the ferry, so it will be interesting to see how this situation will be resolved.

Meanwhile, there have been developments in respect of the fast catamaran ferry, the LAKE EXPRESS, which Lake Express LLC is intending to put on a service between Muskegon, Michigan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The 192-foot ship is being built by Austal USA at Mobile, Alabama. On March 20, she was hauled from the shed in which she was built and taken aboard a barge. She then was transported to a drydock at the nearby Bender Shipyard, where she was launched. The ferry is scheduled to run sea trials during April and to be delivered to Milwaukee during May. It is hoped that the vessel will be in service by the beginning of June. Plans are for the ferry to make three round trips per day during the summer season, and two trips per day in the spring and fall. Fares will be higher than those charged in 2003 for Lake Michigan crossings between Ludington and Manitowoc on Lake Michigan Carferry Service Inc.'s steam powered carferry BADGER.

It has been announced that the official decommissioning of the 1944-built U.S.C.G. SUNDEW will take place at Duluth's Bayfront Park on May 27. SUNDEW will be replaced by ALDER, currently being completed by Marinette Marine, but ALDER is not scheduled to be delivered to the Coast Guard until September 2. It is likely that SUNDEW will be preserved as a museum vessel in the Duluth area following her retirement.

With help from a Pennsylvania state grant, Metro Machine has been able to instal a new watertight gate on its drydock at Erie. This will enable the firm to drydock vessels once again, which is important because the Erie shipyard is one of only two on the lakes (Sturgeon Bay being the other) capable of drydocking 1,000-foot ships. Metro Machine now is pitching its services to lake shipping companies and hopes to be able to drum up some drydocking business. The Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority also is seeking further grant funds to enable Metro Machine to install a further gate (to permit drydocking and shipbuilding to take place at the same time) and also to extend the range of the yard's overhead crane.

Shipping activity for the new season began at Toronto on March 15, when the Essroc cement carrier STEPHEN B. ROMAN cleared port to load at Picton. She took that cargo to Rochester and then returned to Picton to load for Toronto. Meanwhile, lying along the south side of the Essroc pier at Toronto's Villiers Street, the barge METIS still holds her winter storage of cement. Lafarge's cement carrier ENGLISH RIVER did not get off to as early a start as did the ROMAN, but she was in service by the end of March.