

The summer in the Great Lakes area was a peculiar one. The weather was "variable" (a nice word for it) and we weren't bothered here in Toronto by many hot days. In fact, it was one of the coolest and dampest summers on record. At least we were lucky that we avoided the extreme weather that plagued the Caribbean and much of the southeastern United States and brought tragedy to so many people.

September was, without doubt, the most pleasant month of the year, and then the autumn became cool and very windy. The winds have not caused any marine accidents, unlike in some other autumns we can recall, but they have, on several occasions, sent the lake ships to sheltered anchorages to wait for better conditions. Some areas of Canada (Nova Scotia in particular) already have had nasty dumps of snow, and this has put us in mind that it is time for us to review the 2004 shipping season and to pass along to our members our best wishes for the upcoming holiday season.

The 2004 navigation season was a strange one, with business generally decent but with the economic environment continuing to cause major changes for taconite plants and steel producers, as well as concerns in the shipping industry. The Oglebay Norton Company has continued under bankruptcy protection from which it soon will emerge. Its COURTNEY BURTON remained idle all season, for the second year in a row, although the similarly idle BUCKEYE fitted out and returned to service during the autumn. Oglebay Norton's oldest vessel, the JOSEPH H. FRANTZ, continued to operate under charter to Great Lakes Associates (the "Kinsman" fleet). And Oglebay's RICHARD REISS returned to service under Grand River Navigation ownership but, as yet, with no name change. Interlake Steamship's JOHN SHERWIN continued her more than twenty years of idleness at Superior, while Central Marine Logistics' EDWARD L. RYERSON remained idle at Sturgeon Bay. The grain carrier KINSMAN INDEPENDENT, retired from the grain trade at the end of the 2002 season, was sold to McKeil Marine and was towed to Hamilton in 2004, reportedly for use as a storage barge. GEMINI remained the only major self-propelled tanker sailing the lakes under the U.S. flag, but it is said that she soon may be brought into Canadian ownership by Algoma Tankers.

There was better movement of Canadian grain this year, although backhauls of ore up the Seaway were reduced by a strike at the ore mines in Labrador. The good news was that several Canadian ships were brought back to service during the year. Algoma Central's ALGOISLE and ALGONTARIO each saw service for the first time since 1999, the latter after major hull repairs at Thunder Bay. Even Upper Lakes Shipping's CANADIAN RANGER, idle since 2000 except for one trip last year, was brought back to service, primarily for the sugar trade) during the autumn after a refit.

There continued to be a parade of Canadian vessels to the breakers, and three gearless bulkers are gone forever. ALGOSOUND, CANADIAN VENTURE and CANADIAN TRADER, as well as the long idle M.A.C. GAGNE (the former SAGUENAY), were towed away to scrapyards at Alang, India, and the tanker CAPT. RALPH TUCKER also was sold for scrapping and sailed away to Asian waters under her own power. ALGOCATALYST was to have done the same but we have no report of her leaving Canadian waters yet. ALGOFAX was sold, supposedly for scrapping but perhaps for limited use, after the delivery from China of Algoma Tankers' new ALGOSCOTIA.

The prospects of any new commercial ships being built on the lakes for lake trade continue to be poor, although the few remaining active shipyards continue to do repair work. Port Weller recently won a contract for the construction of a new fore and midbody for the C.S.L. self-unloader JEAN PARI-SIEN, and this work currently is underway. Earlier, Port Weller completed a major refit of CANADIAN RANGER preparatory to her return to service. Marinette Marine delivered the first of three big double-ended ferries for the Staten Island service at New York, and already is working on the replacement for U.S.C.G. MACKINAW, due to be commissioned in 2006.