Ship of the Month No. 297

CHACORNAC

In recent years, much attention has been focussed on the shrinking number of "Maritime Class" lakers remaining on the Great Lakes. These were 16 steamers, of two slightly different designs, built for the United States Maritime Commission during World War Two and offered to U.S. lake fleets in exchange for 36 older and smaller vessels. Part of the deal was that the fleets were permitted to continue operating the older ships under bareboat charter for the duration of the war, as well as running the new ships that were turned over to them. This dramatically increased the amount of tonnage available to haul cargoes of iron ore and coal to assist in the production of steel for the war effort. But now there are only four and a half of these Maritime Class ships left on the lakes. Three of them, CUYAHOGA, MISSISSAGI and MANISTEE, are in the Lower Lakes Towing / Grand River Navigation fleet, while another, C.T.C. NO. 1, is idle and serving as a cement storage barge at South Chicago. The remaining half of a Maritimer is Upper Lakes Shipping's CANADIAN TRANSFER, whose forward end is that of a Maritime Commission wartime-built laker.

Little thought is given today to the many old and mostly obsolete ships that were traded in on these new steamers. Most of them were retired just before or soon after the end of the war and were sent to the Steel Company of Canada for scrapping at Hamilton. A few continued operating for a few years after the war. Five of them, however, all in the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet, remained under charter to their former owners and survived until the mid-1950s. This is the story of one of them, perhaps the most interesting of the five.

In the years following the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the major U.S. fleets on the Great Lakes was that of the Gilchrist Transportation Company. This was an independent fleet, meaning that it was not owned or controlled by any of the major iron ore or coal producers or users. The company was operated by Joseph C. Gilchrist, a highly respected shipowner who had been born at Port Huron, Michigan, in 1850, and who was raised at Marine City where his father had shipping and shipbuilding interests. J. C. Gilchrist later went into the lumber business at Alpena and then in Vermilion, Ohio, and it was a natural step for him to move into the area of transporting lumber by ship. By the 1880s, Gilchrist was actively engaged in accumulating and operating a large fleet of steamers and schooner-barges.

Over the years, Joseph Gilchrist had numerous partners, including his cousin, Frank W. Gilchrist, of Alpena, and also John W. Moore and J. H. Bartow, of Cleveland. It was, however, J. C. Gilchrist who was the power behind the Gilchrist Transportation Company, the firm which eventually was formed to consolidate his various shipping concerns. When the company added new ships to its fleet, the cost of their construction usually was financed by syndicates organized by Joseph C. Gilchrist.

At the turn of the century, Gilchrist began a very rapid expansion of his fleet through the construction of numerous steel-hulled bulk carriers. Most of them were built in "classes", each of which comprised several sisterships. The first of these classes consisted of six 346-foot, 5,500-ton capacity "Planets", steamers which were named JUPITER, MARS, NEPTUNE, SATURN, URANUS and VENUS. The second class had only two vessels, the 356-foot, 6,000-ton capacity GILCHRIST and LAKE SHORE. The third class consisted of five steamers, the 380-foot, 6,500-ton capacity FRANK W. HART, C. W. WATSON, F. M. OSBORNE (i), E. N. SAUNDERS and STEEL KING (i), which were built in 1901-1902.

The last of the five ships of Gilchrist's "third class", STEEL KING was built at Lorain, Ohio, as Hull 316 of the American Ship Building Company, and she was launched on Saturday, April 5th, 1902. She was christened by Miss Agnes Gilchrist, and was handed over to the Gilchrist fleet on May 6th. Registered at Cleveland (Fairport), Ohio, she was given U.S. official number 117134. She was 380.0 feet in length between perpendiculars, 50.0 feet in the beam and 28.0 feet in depth. Her hull had three watertight bulkheads and four holds, and there were eleven hatches spaced on 24-foot centres. Her tonnage was calculated as 4308 Gross and 3366 Net.

The steamer was powered by a triple expansion engine which had cylinders of 22, 35 and 58 inches diameter and a stroke of 40 inches, which developed Indicated Horsepower of 1,480. Steam with a working pressure of 170 p.s.i. was produced by two coal-fired, single-ended Scotch boilers equipped with forced draft. Each boiler was 13'2" in diameter and 11'6" in length. There were four furnaces with a total of 88 square feet of grate surface and 4,292