

THOMAS F. COLE - A Tinstacker's Story

- by Ronald F. Beaupre -

Henry W. Oliver formed the Pittsburgh Steamship Company on November 6, 1899. The fleet consisted of six steel steamers and a barge, with two wooden steamers chartered from another shipping company. The purpose of forming the fleet was to carry ore, coal and stone for the Oliver Iron Mining Company and the Carnegie Steel Company. Two years later, when the United States Steel Corporation was formed by J. Pierpont Morgan and Judge Elbert H. Gary with the merger of several steel manufacturing, railroad and mining companies, and their shipping subsidiaries, the fleet of a new Pittsburgh Steamship Company consisted of 112 ships. Many of them were too small to be efficient carriers for the new corporation.

Soon large orders were being placed with several U.S. shipbuilding yards around the Great Lakes. In 1905, the "GARY" class was launched, consisting of ELBERT H. GARY, WILLIAM E. COREY, GEORGE W. PERKINS and HENRY C. FRICK. The next year came the larger "MORGAN" class of ships now reaching lengths of 600 feet. They were J. PIERPONT MORGAN, NORMAN B. REAM, HENRY H. ROGERS and PETER A. B. WIDENER. The new construction program of the Morgan class continued through into the following year with the launch of four more, GEORGE F. BAKER, THOMAS LYNCH, HENRY PHIPPS and THOMAS F. COLE. From 1906 through to 1913, eighteen ships of the 600-foot class were placed in service. The largest of the class was THOMAS F. COLE as she was 4.5 feet longer than all the rest. During this same period, a total of 29 smaller ships were sold out of the fleet even after four were lost due to accidents and storms, and one being abandoned.

THOMAS F. COLE was yard number 27 of the Great Lakes Engineering Works at Ecorse, Michigan. She was launched on January 26, 1907. This was the first ship built by G.L.E.W. that was over 600 feet in length. Her keel was 580 feet between perpendiculars and she was 605.5 feet overall. The hull was 58.2 feet in the beam and 32 feet deep. She was registered as U.S. No. 203891 with her tonnage listed as 7268 Gross, 5284 Net and 12370 deadweight at mid-summer draft. Her cargo hold was divided into three compartments with access to it through 35 hatches, 9'6" wide on 12-foot centres. When she came out, she had a deckhouse between the first and second hatches in which guests would dine on meals prepared in a specially equipped and manned galley. This deckhouse was removed within a few years, as it interfered with cargo handling and no longer was needed when company guests were placed aboard newer ships.

The after cabins were located on the quarterdeck which was flush with the spar deck. This structure was sheltered by a closed steel taffrail. The steel boilerhouse with the coal bunker in front was forward of the crew accommodations and galley. Below was the engine room equipped with two Scotch marine boilers 16' long and 11'9" wide with a heating surface of 6,285 square feet. The boilers were built by the Marine Boiler Works of Toledo, Ohio, in 1907. The triple expansion steam engine with cylinders 24", 38" and 65" diameter and a 42" stroke was built by the shipyard. This provided 1,880 Indicated Horsepower, which drove the COLE at a service speed of ten knots. Above the after cabin was the boat deck equipped with two lifeboats suspended on radial davits. The very tall and thin after mast was stepped behind the smokestack and both were raked back equally. Several ventilator cowls to bring air into the engine and boiler room spaces were also located on this deck.

She had a fully topgallant forecastle with crew accommodations below. The luxurious guest accommodations and the master's cabin and office were located in the texas cabin on the forecastle head. At its front was an observation room with several large square windows across the front and sides. The forecastle head was protected by a closed steel bulwark. Above the texas was the wheelhouse, rounded at the front with many large windows all around it. A sunvisor ran around the pilothouse along the front and down both sides. The forward mast was stepped right abaft the pilothouse and it stood tall and thin but was well raked.

The ship was painted in what had become the Pittsburgh Steamship colours of the day, with an ore-red hull and white cabins. The trim at the top of the bulwarks as well as masts, ventilators and deck fittings were painted dark green.

While the THOMAS F. COLE was under construction, there was a visitor to the shipyard. This was author James Oliver Curwood, who soon produced his new book The Great Lakes and The Vessels That Plough Them. From this volume we have: "Take the steamer THOMAS F. COLE, for instance, launched early in 1907 by the Great Lakes Engineering Works. This vessel is a giant of the lakes, and is six hundred and five feet and five inches long. She is fifty-eight