

Recollections of the River

by Captain James C. Acheson

I was born and raised on the South Side. But, then, so was everyone else in those days. All there was “at the beach”—the north end of town—were summer cottages that locals and Detroiters would occupy in July and August. Pine Grove Avenue was a two-lane street; 24th Avenue bisected cow pastures.

I guess that's why I'm so fond of the South End: That was Port Huron.

I lived on the river—the *big* river—just north of Tenth Street, where as a child I became infatuated with the big ships that ply the Great Lakes. Back then there was rarely a time when a ship wasn't in sight. I was born a little too late to remember the *J. T. Wing* or the *Tashmoo*, but I remember the cigar-shaped “whalebacks”, the little Imperial Oil tankers with their harbour decks nearly awash, and freighters towing other freighters on a regular basis.

And then there were those passenger boats. The D&C fleet was the most remarkable, with their sleek side-wheel vessels. They threw a tremendous wake—frequently over our break-wall—but, back then it was a curiosity, not a calamity. Then, too, there were the stately *North-* and *South American*, so pure in their white hulls. They usually stopped at Imperial Oil in Sarnia to fuel, which led me to think for years that they were Canadian ships. (They weren't.)

There were the occasional yachts, too. We denizens of the water all knew the big ones. They belonged to Seeley Mosher, Dar Kimball, Chuck Fead. To me they all seemed enormous, but one day not so long ago I asked George Mosher how big his dad's boat was. “Thirty-six feet,” he replied. Hardly a megayacht by today's standards!

Up the street from our house was the “coal dock”. Operated by Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, it was a bunkering station for their expansive fleet. Back then ships burned coal; the only diesel-fired boats were Ford Motor Company's. I knew they were coming long before I saw them just by the sound: *UM-pa-day-dee, UM-pa-day-dee, UM-pa-day-dee.*

As a ship approached the coal dock, she'd be scarcely a hundred feet off our breakwall when she'd blow three long blasts on her steam whistle to alert the dock crew that she was coming.

About that time, I'd get on my bike and peddle the half-mile or so up to the coal dock to watch the boat come in. Ever so carefully she's alight against the wharf. Then the loading would begin.

There was coal everywhere, including, I'm certain, inside the surrounding houses. The big loading structure consisted of a continuous chain of buckets what would carry the coal to the top of the framework, where it would be dropped into a chute and directed into the ship's bunker. What a racket it made! We could hear it even at our house and I often wondered how the people who lived in the vicinity got any sleep when they loaded at night. And the coal dust: It choked you when you stood there and watched.

When ships converted to diesel there was no longer any need for the coal dock and it sat idle for a number of years. In the mid-'50s the St. Lawrence Seaway had opened the Great Lakes up to much larger ocean-going ships than had been able to enter before. About the only salt-water ships that had ever called at Port Huron up to then were freighters bringing pulp to Port Huron Sulfite & Paper (now E. B. Eddy), up Black River. How they ever got up there is a mystery to me today, especially when it's remembered that Seventh and Tenth Street bridges were *swing* bridges, pivoting in the middle of the river. Twice these small Swedish ships

brought a rather unlikely additional deck cargo: a new 30-square-meter sloop for Cap Keefer, renowned yachtsman and owner of the paper company (and, incidentally, my next-door neighbor).

With the Seaway in place, Port Huron saw a new future for the only deep-water wharf in the city. So the city bought the abandoned coal dock and leased it to a newly formed Seaway Terminal Company.

Over the ensuing years the wharf was used mostly to load farm commodities into salt-water ships—"salties" we call them, as distinguished from "lakers". The biggest product was soy beans and, for that reason, the facility became known in maritime circles (and still is) as the "bean dock".

Occasionally, something would *arrive* at the wharf, like a big transformer for Detroit Edison or a paper mill for the Sulfite, all stuff too big for overland transport. Those times were events for the neighborhood, especially us kids. We'd watch the unloading—a curiosity in itself—then marvel as the big highway equipment struggled to transport the machine to its local destination. Trees were trimmed back, stop lights were taken down, traffic was diverted. Quite a show!

But, the Port Huron Seaway Terminal, as it was officially called, never really measured up to expectations. Primarily, there wasn't enough interest among local industry in shipping into or out of Port Huron. It just wasn't economical for a ship to stop in Port Huron and pay additional dockage and stevedoring fees when it was going to stop in Detroit anyway. In its latter years of operation, only a couple of ships would call.

When fire destroyed the upper level of the terminal's storage shed and crippled the facility for storing beans, I seized the opportunity to add it to my redevelopment project already underway just to the north. In my opinion, Port Huron needs no more waterfront consumed by municipal activities and utilities—sewage plants, city office buildings, power distribution units, waterworks, *railroads*.

I bought the foundering terminal company with a view to hosting "tall ships" and cruise ships on a regular basis as well as visits by historic vessels, naval ships and other watercraft of interest to our citizens. It should be a natural supplement to the development planned for the rest of the Desmond Wharf area.

And I'll feel like a kid again.