



Story from the International Ore Boat Ore Docks Are Not Alike

Eli Barclay 2003



Though seeming alike, these magnificent edifices that have for so long facilitated the loading of iron ore into lake vessels are now changing. Physical characteristics are being altered or even replaced, like the dock in Escanaba, Michigan. One might say the evolution process is alive and doing well, though it is a bit late in the game. One must realize iron ore reserves are not infinite. Traditionally it was noted that the treated timber construction of earlier pocket docks, though sturdy and efficient, had to be segmented by firewalls. With wood comes the threat of fire, and with this, a means to restrict a possible blaze. Most likely gaining a reduction in Insurance premiums also, metal-faced walls were placed to retard the spread of fire. Then as one dashes down the length of the dock to take advantage of the few hours in port while loading, every 100 feet or so one must push open a two way swinging door to gain access to the next segment. Beware though, someone might be coming your way, and smashing face first into a swinging door has a tendency to adjustment one's outlook on life. Also it could be a bit exhausting when the dock is a bit lengthy, and in my opinion they all were, thus there were many doors. Two and three boats could usually tie up to the face of the dock, in Allouez, near Superior, Wisconsin, there was a sign saying, "These docks are the longest in the world."

I will vouch for this. Early in the spring of 1960, I had been fortunate enough to have been again called to "The International," remember I had just been hired last November. We were now loading in Allouez, here there were three or four docks, memory being a little hazy in old age, but ours on this particular day was the western most one. Off watch and reassured that we had at least 2 ½ hours shore time. My fireman and I ambled off to see what we could see. Returning two hours later, plenty of time we thought, we could hear ship blowing signals to a tug and when the dock watchman saw us, he hollers, "Run, run, that's your boat, we ran our hearts out. For me it would have been a bitter disgrace missing while still being in a probationary period of employment. You better believe we ran. Thank God this was a poured cement dock, so no fire doors. About half way to the boat I could run no more though I tried with my fireman calling out encouragement, and nearing the docks end. I ran out onto the apron just as the tug swung the fantail over so we could jump aboard. A few moments later, when the tug had swung the ship's bow toward the harbor entrance, a ladder was dropped from "The International" and we two very exhausted but thankful crewmembers crawled aboard. (Crawled, was definitely the right word) The ship was already gathering momentum for the long run down the Lakes where we knew a Wisconsin Steel unloading crew was eagerly waiting. As for me, I will forever swear that dock was at least two miles long.



Model of "The International" that Kevin and I own.

In Marquette, Michigan, there were two docks, one in the downtown lower harbor, another in the upper harbor near the city's Presque Isle Park. Both had long approaches, trestles more or less, allowing railroad engines to shove drags (25 cars or more) of loaded ore cars to the tops of the docks, where trapping devices opened the trapdoors dropping the contents into pockets. During the days when "soft ore" was king, the pockets were loaded as to type and weight, and assigned to specific boats as steel plant menus were quite varied, others would just claim "ownership mine" ore. Today with reclamation plants producing enriched pellets, I believe the pockets now would be loaded as to number of cars and total weight only, there would be no reason to designate for a special ship. Pellets are pellets as they say.

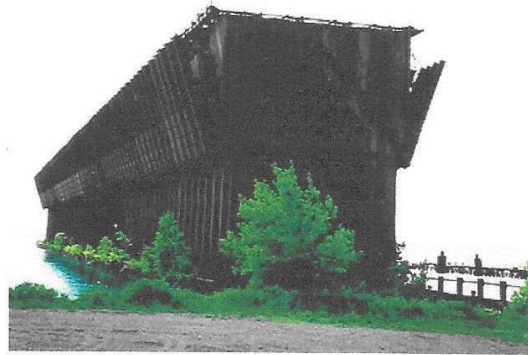
Once a boat was under its designated pockets, electric winches lowered loading chutes and you could see the gatemen opening pocket gates, but the man operating the chute winch governed the ore placement in the cargo hold, (signaled by the Mate in charge of loading) inboard to outboard, by the raising or lowering of the chutes. In loading, the initial drop of pellets makes quite a racket hitting the steel cargo hold decking 40 or so feet below the pocket gates, but soft ore is just a quiet gentle sush.

Once heavy freezing begins, this back in the old soft ore days, locomotives, stand-by steam engines that once were the workhorses of all railroads, were brought up on the dock and used to steam the frozen ore cars. Once unfrozen, the ore would drop through previously opened pocket gates directly into the cargo holds. The harder the frost, the more steam was used to thaw, and the more watery the slop that filled the hold. One season in particular, the freeze-up was terrific, and an Inland Steel boat that had completed a protracted loading at the LS&I Dock, refused to cast off. The Skipper was afraid should storm overtake him and the fluid condition of his cargo would capsize the vessel and all would be lost. His concern for the welfare of the ship and crew brought him no laurels of appreciation from Inland Steel Top Brass though, he was instructed to pack his bag, that another Skipper would soon be there to bring the vessel home. This substitute was driven up from Chicago during the night, and the vessel departed immediately. The weather remained stabilized, the boat arrived at the Inland Steel Plant intact, but Skipper number one had lost his job. The other, who dared to defy the Gales of November, found his bravery rewarded and career greatly advanced by his daring, a true-blue Company Man doing his best to further his own "heavy weather" reputation.

Though the new reclamation plant iron ore pellet was an instant success, the LS&I railroad deemed their pocket dock, built in 1912, could efficiently handle this new ore without any alterations. Their loading system would remain as is. In Allouez, adjacent to Superior, Wisconsin, however, the railroad decided they would maintain the present pocket dock; this being one of poured concrete and open structure, and the one having been billed for many years now as the longest in the world. But the trestle, on which the locomotives had shoved ore cars to the dumping area on the top of the dock, would now be fitted to carry a conveyor belt. Opportunities for the crewmen of boats, to see these loading facilities were nil, private property, no trespassing, you know the drill, so whatever the setup was in the lower yard, it's still a mystery even yet today. As long as ore needed was in dock pockets, there were no reasons for us to ponder possibilities.

In Escanaba however, it was a different story. The dock being constructed of timbers, one of four I believe, built during the early days of World War-2; as a precautionary measure, should saboteurs successfully close the Sault Canal Locks? Only one would be fitted with chutes however, to handle the usual port business, three without, but those could be obtained from other Lake Superior loading docks, should an emergency arise, as Lake Superior docks would be useless without the Canal Locks.

The standby docks were dismantled shortly after the war ended, but now updating demanded alterations that would spell finis to pocket docks in Escanaba, Chicago North Western in keeping up with the latest in loading facilities, decided to install a conveyor system, not only a low profile dock, but with a yard and a storage capacity beyond ones wildest dreams. The old dock would be razed to a few feet above the water level of Little Bay de Noc, and a German Company would install the "Coal Quality" conveyor system imported from Germany. The storage yard was set up with a belt stacker for building stockpiles, and a re-claimer to reclaim the pellets from the stockpiles, placing them on the belt to the ship loader, and last but not least



Taken in 2003, train track approach to dock had long been removed.

a car dumper that could clamp three loaded railroad hoppers to the dumper track and in upending the lot, would dump the pellets into a hopper that fed the belt to the stacker. A marvelous sight yes, but there was a flaw. The rig, designed for coal, was stressed to its limits with the weight of ore pellets. There was more down time than loading time, and German technicians were seemingly continuously airborne, coming over or going home, from emergency repair jobs on the system.

After two years of trial and error, this in the early 1970's, C&NW railroad spent an off season, replacing all the bearings with more robust, made in the USA, bearings. This seemingly solved the down time problem, as the system is working well even today. Amazingly though, all this is built on the flats north of the city proper, and is within eyesight of anyone driving a nearby city street. The actual dock and ship-loader is hard to spot as you drive into Excanaba from Gladstone, a ship being loaded stands as though stranded on the beach. Yes, and this a bit exciting too, as one wonders from whence did the ship come, and to where is it going? The story is yours, to make it what you will.

In leaving the Lakes in 1974, I have lost all contact with the movement of iron ore in today's world. What the situation is up the river in Duluth, Minnesota, I cannot say, what is left in Allouez or Ashland, Wisconsin, I know not, but the DSS&A loading dock in the lower harbor of Marquette, unused since 1971, is now only a ghost from the past. Obviously it is like the handwriting on the wall that learned scholar's mention on occasion, telling us that the other docks too, when reserves run dry, will attain this grand stature of nothingness. Will they be retained as souvenirs? Who will pay this price?

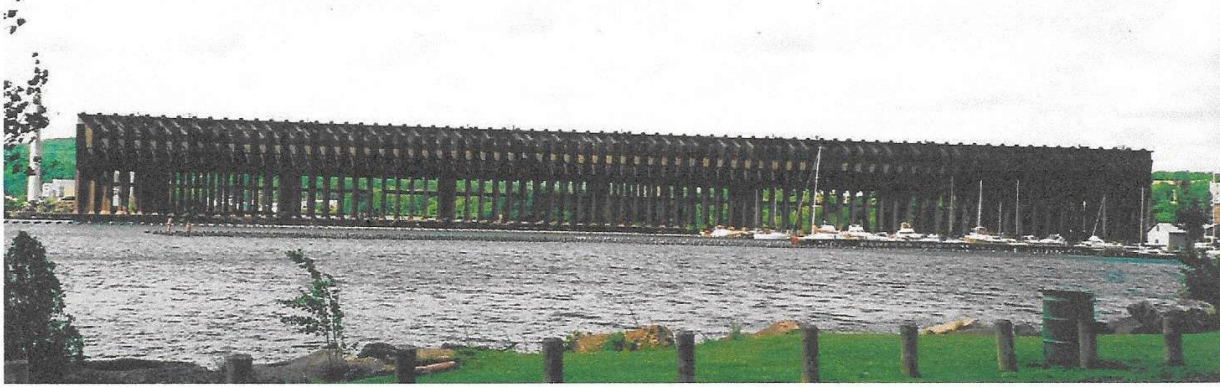
The old DSS&A dock now stands alone, its approaches dismantled as people wouldn't respect the Don't Trespass signs and "now" railroad couldn't afford the liability, so it has been emasculated beyond all reason, retained only as a relic of a once prosperous endeavor, seemingly, only a hulk rising from the waters with a walkway to the shore. A bit frightening though as some years later a human skeleton was found in one of the pockets adding a bit of Gruesomeness to its obvious abandoned features.

With the Wisconsin Central Railroad taking Marquette off the map so to speak, the City Fathers saw fit to dismantle the trestle that once carried the loaded cars to the top of the dock. They also removed the steel bridge over Front Street, the north and south main thoroughfare artery through town, and now to cover these scars, this being the year 2003, they are completing a strip park, supposedly to beautify, but surely it will erase forever a phase of history past.

Having already given you a bird's eye view of some iron ore loading docks, and as we are on the subject of docks, allow me the pleasure of relating a few adventuresome happenings as we one year were snuggled in a lay-up dock in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin's, Bay Shipyard. Shipyard tugs had helped swing us about and backed us into the slip, as then supplies could be more easily brought aboard. The stern always rode deeper in the water with ballast tanks pumped dry, as most of the ships total weight was contained in the engine room and boiler room.



The LS&I railroad docks in Marquette, with the last addition, an unloading hopper for self-unloaders to discharge coal and limestone. The "Kaye E. Barker", above has both a bow and a stern thruster to aid in maneuvering.



Taken in 2001, railroad track approach to dock removed several years earlier.

Three weeks was the average time allotted to prepare the ship for lay-up, and watches were broken during this period, except for the fireman. They would be watch standers, as one boiler remained on line to provide heat for the after end, and on line boilers must be monitored. The 2nd Engineer, the man of the hour in the boiler room, the boilers were his babies (Our boilers were "Scotch", meaning only that the heated gases from the furnaces were inside of boiler tubes covered by the waters of the boilers). The 2nd would supervise the cleaning of the furnaces, and boiler internals, repack valve stems, replace valves and apply the hydrostatic tests necessary to qualify the vessel as sea worthy. The firemen were his handymen, doing what they could while monitoring the boiler on line. (On later ships water tube boilers would rule the roost, they were considered more efficient, but today the diesels are king).

The 1st Assistant, the next higher rating, was responsible for reconditioning whatever needed repairs, in the engine room and crank room while the 3rd, the lowest of the engineer ratings, was his right hand man; sort of a gofer, yet capable of being assigned more important duties, that was me. One of my gofer chores was to check the shipyard office each morning, to pick up supplies, and if there were some to carry the back to the boat, note I said carry, not bring. On this occasion I had brought the handyman along to give me a hand. Returning to the ship we hoisted two heavy cartons to our shoulders, carrying was too tedious with the arms, and as we walked we kept shifting the burden from shoulder to shoulder. When nearly back to the boat I heard him say, "Ell, I don't know why God didn't place our heads on just one side of our shoulders, we could carry so much more and easier." I'm sure I must have made some wise-assed remark, I could never pass up an opportunity like that, but as we closed the distance to the boarding ladder, most likely after much thought and consideration too, he must have seen some futility in his remark, as he then concluded, "No Ell, that wouldn't work, man is so damn dumb he would pile too much on his shoulders, probably enough to break his back." We had a good laugh over that, and were still grinning when we brought the supplies down to the engine room. A little humor makes tough jobs go just a wee bit easier, or haven't you noticed?

Another event took place that was greatly unappreciated that year, we the after end crew thought it was hilarious, on the for's end's final day, their last task was to pump the sanitary holding tank. This that colossal ecological masterpiece that IH had so generously given to us, and enabled them to tour to the world that we were the first ship to be compliant with keeping the Great Lakes clean, or at least we would, the waters we ran in. A septic tank pump truck was brought as near the bow as was possible, but many lengths of three or four inch hose was needed to reach the truck, I'm sure this wasn't a practicality considered when the conversion was made. But it was managed, connections made, valves opened and the pump switch activated.

The ship's pump put enough pressure on the hose line to cause it to hump radically, so two deck crewmen were assigned to stand on the hose eliminating the humping. We can only assuming that the of stifling of the hump or the hose caused a connection to part, and about 40 feet was free to whip back and forth, as hoses loosed under pressure do, with the contents of the holding tank spewing over the entire area, men, ship, and septic truck, until the pump could be stopped, no one was brave enough to grab the end of the hose. Might I mention, it was a sad for'd end crew that began their trip home that afternoon, as once hoses were reconnected and the tank emptied, there was no way for them to clean up and most of them smelled to high heaven, The fragrance of "sweet violets" still permeated the air, when the crew returned in the spring.

Bringing a ship to dock is an adventure in itself, somewhat different than what one sees on TV with ocean going vessels. Seems you only watch tugs go out to meet the vessel and escort it to dock with a push here and a pull there, whenever and wherever the push or shove is needed. With Lake Boats it's an entirely different story. Even before bow and stern thrusters were installed, ships were making ore loading docks in the upper Lakes, and lakefront-unloading docks in the lower Lakes, established for easy access, without tugs. But there is no difference even to lock thru the Sault Canal Locks the boat must tie up, while raising or lowering to the appropriate level.

Tying up at an upper Lakes pocket dock gives one the most thrills, and definitely

is the most dangerous. Once inside the harbor the ship checks forward speed, and upon nearing the dock two deck hands are dropped dockside with a Bos'n's chair while heaving lines attached to the mooring cables are tossed to them. As the ship glides along the apron of the dock, a watchman and a deck watch stand ready at the controls for the for'd and aft deck winches. Giving the orders, usually it's the Box'n up for'd and the 3rd Mate aft, standing at the shipside between the chocks through which the mooring cables have already been led. When the designated chute number is reached, this determined by a ship to shore phone call with dock officials as we neared, the Skipper gives two sharp blasts of the ship's whistle, this saying, "Tie Up", and rings for a full astern of the main engine.



THE INTERNATIONAL

ONE OF THE 2 IRON ORE SHIPS OWNED BY INTERNATIONAL HARVESTER

P.S. Sometime around the year 2000 Kevin and I toured the Sault Ste Marie Canal Locks in the Upper Peninsula Michigan. When took a tour boat and I asked the captain how I could get in contact with old employs of ore boats. He told me about a website that had a chat room and as soon as I got home I went to work. Besides Ell I found another guy from Texas that wrote an article also, these articles were run some 10 to 13 years ago. Ell wrote about 6 short stories for me about his time he worked on the IH ore boat "The International". I will run some more of them down the road, hope you enjoy them. About 3 or 4 years ago I received a phone call from a lady that turned out to be Ell's wife; I had never had contact with her before. Ell had died and while cleaning up some of his stuff she found a copy of these articles with my phone number and just wondered what it was all about because Ell had not said anything go her about them. I explained to her about it and she was very happy that I had published them. — Darrell Darst