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Great Lakes granddad

Oldest ship on inland ocean gets set for season on Lake Michigan

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South Chicago - Six years before the RMS Titanic set sail on its doomed maiden voyage, a Great Lakes steamship was launched, and it's still in operation.

Now called St. Marys Challenger, it is the oldest ship still in service on the Great Lakes. This winter, the 101-year-old Challenger is docked in South Chicago while a maintenance crew from Milwaukee does minor repairs to get it ready for spring sailing.

The Challenger often can be seen just east of the S. Kinnickinnic Ave. bridge, unloading thousands of tons of cement into the St. Marys Cement Co. silos. The ship carries cement from St. Marys' manufacturing plant, in Charlevoix, Mich., to Chicago, Manitowoc, Ferrysburg, Mich., and Milwaukee.

Challenger is one of only two remaining ships still active on the Great Lakes powered by a Skinner Marine Unaflo steam engine. The other vessel is the car ferry Badger, which is powered by two of these engines.

Lately, Great Lakes ship watchers have wondered how much longer Challenger will keep sailing.

"There's a rumor that she might not have many more seasons left. You sure hate to hear that," said George Wharton, a Strathroy, Ontario, retiree who spends his time watching, "chasing" and photographing ships.

The ship's crew has heard such talk for the last 16 years, said Kevin Rogers, the ship's port engineer who oversees winter repairs.

There aren't many ships as rugged as Challenger, which took its maiden voyage in 1906 - two years before Henry Ford introduced the Model T automobile.

"Everything was built strong back then," Rogers said. "This boat has steel plating that's an inch thick."

Challenger was christened as the William P. Snyder when originally launched in Detroit. Over the years, the ship also was known as the Alex D. Chisholm, Medusa Challenger and Southdown Challenger.

Medusa, a Greek mythological figure, was a Gorgon, with snakes for hair and the power to turn men into stone.

Medusa Challenger, owned then by Medusa Portland Cement Co., featured the head of a Gorgon as its emblem.

In the 1970s, parents in Manitowoc were known to threaten rambunctious children with a trip to the boat docks when Medusa came to town, according to an Aug. 19, 1979, article in The Milwaukee Journal.

Challenger has been one of the most-watched ships on the Great Lakes, said Wharton, who belongs to several marine historical groups and has followed ships on the lakes since the 1950s.

"In boat nerd land, the Challenger is a big deal," he said. "It's a bit romantic to see this boat still going after 100 years."

Survived intense storms

Challenger has seen some intense Great Lakes storms, including rogue waves that covered much of the deck of the 551-foot ship. Rogers recalled weather that was so rough, the ship's crew members had to hold onto their plates while having dinner.

The waves were so powerful that one guy got stuck in the bathroom and couldn't get out.

"He was banging on the wall. I went up there . . . and this guy was pinned against the wall next to the toilet," Rogers said.

In 1977, Medusa Challenger's crew was credited with saving two people from their capsized boat in Lake Michigan. They had been in the water for more than 15 hours.

A third person died in the incident.

Challenger still has its original keel, built in 1906, and much of the equipment from the early 1900s. There's an old crank-operated telephone system, still in use, that would work even if the ship's electrical system failed.

Steam spirit

There aren't many steam-powered freighters left on the Great Lakes, but Challenger's engines could last many more years, said David Hollnagel, owner of Becker Boiler, the Milwaukee company that does the boat's winter maintenance.

The steam is created by heating Bunkersea fuel, a substance Rogers said was like "road tar," to 230 degrees. Steam powers just about everything on the ship, including the main engine, steering system, deck winches, generators and heat in the cabins.

Spare parts are hard to find for some of the old equipment. The port and starboard lights, for example, recently had to be rewired because the original double-filament bulbs were no longer available.

"You just try and make things work. That's what engineers do," Rogers said.

In the winter, a handful of Becker Boiler employees live on the ship, docked on the Calumet River. One of the technicians, Bruce Albanese, has done maintenance and repairs on the ship for 30 years.

"There aren't many guys that work on steam engines," Rogers said.

Challenger logs about 6,000 miles per season, all on Lake Michigan. The ship is old, but its wheelhouse boasts modern technology, including a satellite navigation system and weather radar.

Wind is Challenger's enemy, making the ship hard to handle in the open lake. But its pointed bow helps it push through ice early in the shipping season.

The ship's small size, compared with more modern Great Lakes freighters, means it has to make more trips to haul a comparable amount of cargo. But, because of its size, Challenger can access shallower, smaller ports that bigger ships can't touch.

A hull lot of cement

Every year, Challenger delivers 63 loads of cement, valued at \$1 million each.

"You can't get a 1,000-foot freighter, loaded with cement, into some places," said John Polacsek with the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, in Detroit.

Challenger's life span has probably been extended because it has always been in fresh water, rather than corrosive salt water. The ship also has received meticulous maintenance.

St. Marys Cement is probably waiting for an expensive, catastrophic equipment failure before retiring Challenger and converting it into a barge or giant storage bin.

"That's where we come in, to keep a catastrophic problem from happening," Rogers said.

The ship's builders probably never imagined it would still be sailing after 100 years.

"There are boats half the Challenger's age that are already retired," Rogers said.

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