McDougall’s Dream

By Ric Mixter

The whaleback’s profile was considered “grotesque” by some lakemen, but its designer declared that such a ship “can’t be drowned. They’ll ride out any storm because the seas will simply wash over them.” Despite his confident promise, a number of whalebacks met their demise in the Great Lakes long before they outlived their usefulness.
Shipbuilder Alexander McDougall had a long history as a seaman and ship’s master on the Great Lakes. He had sailed through several storms, including a gale as a 16-year-old deckhand on the passenger steamer Edith. Twenty-some years later, he envisioned what he thought would be the perfect seaworthy craft: a ship with a cylindrical hull that tapered at the ends, looking something like a whale cresting. The “whaleback” would ride low in the water, minimizing resistance from wind and waves and increasing its speed.

McDougall believed his whalebacks would be the best way to move ore from the iron ports of western Lake Superior. He built the first of his boats—dubbed “McDougall’s Dream”—in Duluth, Minnesota in 1888. A great land opportunity led to a new dry dock in nearby Superior, Wisconsin soon after.

Contrary to McDougall’s expectations, the whalebacks’ ore-carrying days would be limited. Small, awkwardly designed hatches made loading and unloading the boats a slow and tedious process. To compensate for this, at least two whalebacks were converted to self-unloaders. Others became fuel tankers and sand dredges. Some even carried grain.

McDougall’s prediction of the freighters being storm-proof also proved incorrect. In 1899, Barge 115 broke away from the steamer towing it in a December gale on Lake Superior. The crew ended up on Pic Island (Ontario), where they managed to fashion a makeshift raft from an old cabin and sail it three miles to the mainland. The barge was a total loss. Today, only pieces of the whaleback remain in water that ranges up to 60 feet deep.

The Black Friday Storm of 1916 took the whaleback James B. Colgate to the bottom of Lake Erie. Captain Walter Grashaw, who spent 34 hours on a life raft, was the sole survivor of a crew of 22. He reported that the whaleback plummeted bow first, and that two other crewmen initially joined him on a life raft. The crewmen slipped off into the water only hours before Grashaw was picked up near Shrewsbury, Ontario.

Modifying the low-riding whalebacks for easier loading may have sealed the fate of the Clifton. Cranes were added to the deck of the former Samuel Mather, and the ship sailed the season hauling gravel from Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. On its way to Detroit in September 1924, the Clifton found heavy weather as it cleared the Straits of Mackinac; newspapers reported nearly 60-mph winds at Rogers City. The whaleback was observed by the captain on the tug Favorite off 40 Mile Point, who reported that the Clifton was awash “but making good weather of it.” When the whaleback was overdue more than 50 hours, the Coast Guard was pressed into service and searched everywhere from Oscoda to Port Huron. A passing freighter found part of the whaleback’s pilothouse, which contained a clock frozen at 4 o’clock. The Clifton and all 30 souls had vanished somewhere in northern Lake Huron. Many experts theorized that the cranes made the ship top-heavy, causing it to roll over in the waves. The bodies of five crew members were eventually recovered after washing ashore in Ontario. Divers continue to search today for what remains one of the lake’s biggest mysteries.

By the 1930s, “McDougall’s Dream” boats were barely a memory; only a handful of the 43 whalebacks built were still in active service. One such ship was the Henry Cort, then considered to be one of the finest ice-breaking freighters on the lakes. Built with strong engines and a sharply raised bow, the Cort could open up ice-bound lakes and get the first cargoes through. This venerable whaleback had its share of incidents, too, sinking at least three times.

The first occurred in 1917, when the Cort collided with another ship on Lake Erie.
Moving ice floes then pushed the 300-foot freighter several miles from the site of the encounter. A reward was offered to anyone who could find the whaleback, which was eventually discovered with more than seven feet of water over its decks. The Cort was raised and repaired at a cost of more than a quarter of a million dollars. It then sank again after running into rocks at Ballard’s Reef in the Livingston Channel of the Detroit River. Eight plates were torn out in the accident, and First Mate Peter Pulcer noted that the pumps barely enabled the ship to make it to the community of River Rouge. There, the Cort settled on the bottom of the river. Another $100,000 was invested to manufacture and install cranes on its deck to load scrap metal.

The Cort’s final run was attempted from Holland, Michigan to Chicago. On November 30, 1934, 60-mph winds spun the freighter around just 30 miles from its destination. Captain Charles Cox, one of the youngest skippers on the Great Lakes, opted to sail back toward the Michigan shoreline for protection. Near Muskegon, he attempted to put the Cort between the breakwalls. The captain later told newsreel reporters, “As we were coming through the piers, the sea caught us on our starboard side and landed us over onto the north breakwater, smashing a hole in our side. We backed her and landed alongside the breakwater, where she filled with water and sank in five minutes.” Luckily for the crew, the main deck and cabins were still above the water line.

Coast guardsmen at Muskegon were immediately dispatched to the scene; tragically, their lifeboat overturned in the waves, drowning Surfman John “Jack” Dipert. Newspapers mistakenly reported that the Cort crew was dead after the first rescue attempt. The headlines changed late that day to “All Aboard Safe,” when rescuers managed to shoot a line to the ship and utilize a breeches buoy to carry each crew member to safety. The 25 men were then tied together and escorted along the 3,000-foot rock structure to the shore.

It was estimated that more than 50,000 people swarmed the wreck site to get a look at the half-sunken Cort. Automobile accidents put four people in the hospital, and traffic was lined up for nearly three miles leading to the Coast Guard station. Overzealous photographers also put themselves at risk, with a photographer from the Chicago Tribune requiring rescue after going out onto the breakwall.

Interestingly, the Cort was already well known in Muskegon, having visited at least four times prior with pig iron for the Campbell, Wyant, and Cannon Foundry. On one of those visits, the whaleback had rammed into a fishing boat; two fishermen drowned in the process. Government inspectors later cleared the command crew of any wrongdoing.

Now a permanent resident of Muskegon, the Cort lies in pieces on the bottom of Lake Michigan near the shore. The bow of the ship remains but sections of the hull have been salvaged, leaving only a few plates and a large gear that presumably turned the crane. Large carp and other fish swim in and out of the wreckage, which is usually clouded from wave action near the breakwall.

In addition to storms, collisions with other ships have added to the Great Lakes’ underwater collection of whalebacks. The barge Sagamore was lost near Sault Ste. Marie in 1901, and the steamer Thomas Wilson sank near Duluth the next year. The Wilson was dynamited as a navigation hazard, but the Sagamore remains largely intact.
in the St. Marys River.

Sagamore’s sinking was so sudden that it took the lives of Captain Ernest Joiner and the cook. It occurred when the steamer Northern Queen plowed into the starboard side of the barge as it lay anchored just off Iroquois Point with its consort, the Pathfinder, waiting for a thick fog to clear. Court documents later blamed the Northern Queen for excessive speed, the captain disregarding the possibility that ships might have stopped in the river due to decreased visibility.

The Northern Queen managed to make it to the Sault for repairs. The Sagamore and its cargo of iron sank in 60 feet of water.

Salvage efforts in the late 1960s included explosives to make penetration of the hull easier. Today, the entire after-end of the ship is collapsed, and much of the wreck has been salvaged. (Many of its artifacts now reside at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point.) The bow section is largely intact, and divers can often see sections of the wreck, thanks to the clear waters cascading down from Lake Superior.

The last of the whalebacks to sail on the Great Lakes, the Frank Rockefeller, was launched from McDougall’s shipyard in Superior, Wisconsin in 1896. Built for the American Steel Barge Company fleet, it joined their other ships in the movement of iron ore down to the steel mills of Lake Erie and coal back up the lakes. It also carried the odd loads of
Whalebacks, like the Sagamore, were originally intended to transport iron ore. From the Great Lakes Maritime Collection, Alpena County Library.

As a steamer, the *Frank Rockefeller* would often tow one or more of the company’s consort barges to augment its carrying capacity. It grounded off Isle Royale on November 2, 1905 after getting lost in a snowstorm. Most of the damage from the grounding came from the barge in tow; when the whaleback hit the rocks, the barge continued ahead until it crashed into the *Rockefeller*’s stern.

Eventually repaired and put back into service, the *Rockefeller* sailed for the Pittsburgh Steamship Company until 1927. That year, it was sold for use as a sand dredge and renamed the *South Park*. As a dredge, it carried fill for the site of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933. In 1936, the *South Park* changed hands again and—with the addition of a special deck—became an auto carrier. It hauled new autos from Detroit, Milwaukee, and Kewaunee until 1942.

The *South Park* was wrecked off Manistique that year. Had it not been for the great demand for tonnage in World War II, it likely would have been scrapped. Instead, it was sold to the Cleveland Tanker Company, which converted it to a tanker. Renamed the *Meteor*, the ship hauled gasoline and other liquids for more than 25 years.

In 1969, the *Meteor* ran aground on Lake Superior’s Gull Island Shoal near Marquette. Its owners chose not to repair the 73-year-old steamer because of severe damage to the hull. Two years later, the tanker company donated the *Meteor* to the city of Superior, Wisconsin for use as a museum ship.

It can be visited there to this day, the only whaleback still above the waves.

Ric Mixter is a documentarian who was honored in 2009 for producing over 20 years of maritime history videos.

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**THE MOST FAMOUS WHALEBACK OF THEM ALL**

Built as a shuttle for the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, McDougall’s only passenger whaleback, the 362-foot *Christopher Columbus*, holds the distinction of having transported more passengers than any other vessel on the Great Lakes.

With a graceful hull, two decks of cabins, electric lights, and a massive smokestack, the excursion vessel was McDougall’s crowning glory. During its first year of operation, the *Columbus* shuttled more than 2 million people from downtown Chicago to the fair site without a single casualty. With two reciprocating triple-expansion engines, the boat steamed along at a 20-mph clip, making the seven-mile round trip to the fairgrounds in just half an hour.

After the fair ended, the *Columbus* went on to dominate the Chicago-Milwaukee excursion market for more than 30 years. Voyages were festive events, as the boat carried a dance band and boasted conveniences including a barbershop, two restaurants, an indoor bicycle track, and motion picture shows. Fares averaged $1 per person.

The ship suffered a serious accident in 1917, when, caught in a current, it struck a Milwaukee water tower and toppled the tank onto the pilothouse, killing 16.

The Great Depression ended the *Columbus*’ career; it was scrapped for its metal in 1936. McDougall proudly called his vessel “probably the most wonderful ship contracted for and constructed up to that time.”