



# A RIDE ON THE STEWART J. CORT

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**T**HIRTY YEARS AGO IT WAS RELATIVELY EASY TO GO FOR A CRUISE on a Great Lakes freighter, but these days, for a variety of reasons, it is next to impossible. I was especially honored to have been invited aboard the *Stewart J. Cort*, because it is the very first of the thousand-foot freighters built to operate on the Great Lakes; there are 13 of them in service at present. These mighty boats are longer than the Titanic and just a bit shorter than a modern aircraft carrier. The Welland Canal, which is the shipping channel that bypasses Niagara Falls and connects Lakes Ontario and Erie, is too small to accommodate these giants, so they operate only in the upper Great Lakes above the falls. At Sault St. Marie—the site of the Soo Locks connecting Lake Superior to the other Great Lakes—there is only one lock, the Poe, that is large enough to handle the thousand-footers.

Another guest on this trip is fellow ISMA member Jack Frost, a senior staff member of the Detroit District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. We drive together from Detroit to the Arcelor Mittal Steel Plant at Burns Harbor, Indiana, where the *Cort* is unloading its cargo of iron ore in the form of taconite pellets. We are met at the security gate by Captain Tom McMullen who ushers us through and escorts us to the boat and our assigned cabins. It is Monday, August 20th, and we slip out of the harbor at 7:55 p.m., enjoying a beautiful sunset over Chicago's skyline. Our 1,700-mile trip on the *Cort* will take us from the south end of Lake Michigan to the northern top, through the Poe Lock and across Lake Superior to its western end where it will take on a load of iron ore and return by nearly the same route. From the pilothouse we see that the waves on the lake are running three feet and soon there is a darkening sky in the west with flashes of lightning.

The *Cort* is the only thousand-footer to have its pilothouse in the bow of the boat, as most of the older lake freighters are configured. It is powered by four diesel-electric engines, 3,600hp each, powering two 18-foot diameter, controllable-pitch, four-bladed propellers. Our chief engineer, Andrew Leonardi, explains that these are the original engines and are the same type one would find powering a

railroad locomotive. The *Cort* carries a crew of 23; officers include the captain, first, second and third mates, a chief engineer, and four assistant engineers. There is also a chef, an assistant chef, nine able-bodied (ABs) and ordinary seamen, and three oilers. At least three of the ABs are qualified as wheelmen to steer the huge boat.

After a comfortable first night, at sunrise on Tuesday morning, we pass the famous Sleeping Bear Dunes in northern Michigan off to starboard. By mid-afternoon we approach Gray's Reef Passage, a narrow and shallow cut where we must exercise extreme caution to prevent scraping the lake bottom. It is a perfect summer day with blue skies and puffy white clouds as we pass under the mighty Mackinac Bridge with the majestic Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island off to port. The seas are running a comfortable three feet as we pass the downbound Burns Harbor, another thousand-footer.

A few hours later we arrive at the Detour Reef Light, at the mouth of the St. Marys River, about 45 miles from the Soo Locks. The pilothouse is dark now, except for the dim glow of the navigation instruments. It is kept this way so as not to impair the vision of those on the bridge looking out into the night. There is chatter on the VHF radio between river traffic and the U.S. Coast Guard which controls commercial vessel traffic on the St. Marys. Speed limits on the river are strictly enforced; large commercial vessels are limited to about 8-12 mph, and there are a few no-passing zones. When we enter the Poe Lock, the *Cort* fills the space with just over two feet to spare on each side. In just 20 minutes we rise about 20 feet to the level of Lake Superior and proceed on through the remainder of the St. Marys River into Whitefish Bay.

Even though Lake Superior can be a real tiger, on this night she is gently purring and our crossing is uneventful, taking about 28 hours. During daylight hours we pass the legendary Stannard Rock Lighthouse and the Keweenaw Peninsula, the northernmost tip of the UP. Off to port we spot the beautiful Apostle Islands and far in the distance, to starboard, are the forested hills of Isle Royale.





Approaching the harbor in Superior, Wisconsin, we learn that the ore dock where the Cort will be loading is occupied by a Canadian freighter, so Captain McMullen decreases our speed. He has the option of circling or dropping anchor while we wait, but luckily we only make one circle before the dock becomes available. As we ease in, the Cort's 18 hatch covers are quickly opened and conveyor belts are maneuvered into position. With one belt per hatch, the boat is fully loaded in just four hours. At 2:30 p.m. the lines come off and we are back out on Lake Superior, headed east.

Twenty plus hours later, we are back in Whitefish Bay approaching the majestic 1,000-foot high bluffs that seem to be guarding both sides of the entrance to the St. Marys River. Just before sunset, we pass through the locks once again. Jack Frost and I remain on the bridge the entire night in order to observe the navigation skills required for the tricky passage down the river and on through the Straits of Mackinac. The moon is an unusual shade of orange this night, and there is light classical music in the background as we quietly thread our way through the flashing red and green lights of the buoys. It is 2:00 a.m. when we leave the river, and the sun is just rising as we pass under the Mackinac Bridge.

At this point, if we retraced our exact up-bound route, we would shortly be turning south heading for Gray's Reef Passage, but that is not possible with the 55,000 tons of taconite pellets we are carrying. Instead, we head west for deeper water, passing north of Beaver Island, then turn south at the Lansing Shoals Light. Seas are running five to six feet, but on the fully loaded Cort it is smooth sailing.

Late that afternoon the 410-foot car ferry Badger passes us on our stern. She is traveling west to east, from Manitowoc, Wisconsin, to Ludington, Michigan. Then shortly after dark, we spot the 192-foot car ferry Lake Express off our bow, on its way from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Muskegon, Michigan.

About 4:00 a.m. Sunday, the lights of Chicago come into view off our starboard. Now straight ahead we see the strobe lights on the tall chimneys of the steel mill at Burns Harbor, our final destination. As we get closer we see four smaller chimneys emitting blue flames, rising 30 to 40 feet in the air, a dramatic scene indeed.

The lines go out, the Cort is secured and our trip is over. Jack and I say our thanks and goodbyes and descend the ladder to the dock,

where a security car is waiting to drive us, along with Captain McMullen as our escort, to the front gate. We thank Tom profusely once again for a most memorable experience.

On the drive home, we reminisce about our excellent adventure and both agree that if we should be so lucky as to be asked again to cruise on a thousand-footer, our answer would be: Absolutely! ■

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