

The Incan Superior

The Twin Ports maritime community said farewell to an old friend in the early 1990s. The motorship *Incan Superior* made its last run between Thunder Bay and Superior in the fall of 1992. After making more than 2,400 round trips between 1974 and 1992, the *Incan Superior* slipped her moorings, sailed down the St. Lawrence Seaway to the Atlantic Ocean, south to the Panama Canal and then north to her new home port of North Vancouver, British Columbia. [1]



During her 18 years of service between Superior and Thunder Bay, the Incan Superior was frequently the port's first and last ship of the navigation season. She's shown here arriving in the ice-clogged Duluth Ship Canal on March 24, 1983. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Center at University of Wisconsin-Superior, Duluth News-Tribune Photo by Charles Curtis)

Built by the Burrard Drydock Company at Vancouver, the *Incan Superior* and a sister ship were destined for service on Lake Superior and the St. Lawrence River. Innovative roll on/roll off (RoRo) vessels, the *Incan Superior* and *Incan St. Laurent* were launched in the spring of 1974. The two vessels were built for Incan Ships Ltd., a subsidiary of the Canadian Pacific Railway. [2] Built at a cost of \$5.2 million apiece, the two ships were designed to carry rail cars of paper products, including paper and pulpwood.

At just over 385 feet in length, the *Incan Superior* had a rakish look to her. Up to 32 40-foot rail cars could be carried on her deck, and the pilothouse and bridge straddled her car deck. Her twin 12-cylinder diesel engines allowed the *Incan Superior* to cruise at 14 knots on the open waters of Lake Superior, and she could make the 200-mile trip between the two ports in 13 hours. [3]

Capt. Robert Lloyd brought the *Incan Superior* into the converted C. Reiss Coal Dock at the foot of Superior's Winter Street for the first time in the summer of 1974. [4] From then on, she was regular as clockwork, making the round trip between Thunder Bay and Superior more than 100

times a year between 1974 and 1992. And for each voyage, the freight forwarding and vessel agency work was handled by the same person, Robert A Buchanan, Jr., president of the Svensson Shipping Agency and the port's only locally-based Custom's Broker. [5] For much of her Lake Superior career, the Incan Superior was the first visitor to the Twin Ports in the spring and the last to leave in the fall.

Economic conditions finally caught up with the Incan Superior. In 1992, the Canadian National Railway reduced its rates between Thunder Bay and the Twin Ports, and the Incan Superior suffered a 45 percent drop in business and revenues. [6] Coupled with a jump in the U.S. Harbor Maintenance Tax from \$68,000 per year to \$220,000 per year, the competition forced the Incan Superior's owners into the painful decision to withdraw her from her 18-year route. [7]

The vessel was far from done with her useful life, however. She packed up and left her dock on the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay Thanksgiving week of 1992, crossed the Great Lakes and retraced her voyage of 18 years before. When she arrived at the shipyard on Vancouver Island, the Incan Superior was extensively renovated, including the reconfiguration of her bow to allow bow loading of semi-trailer trucks. Re-christened the Princess Superior, she was placed in service as a truck and rail ferry between Vancouver and Vancouver Island. [8] She is still out there sailing the waters of the Straits of Georgia. And Twin Ports boatwatchers still miss her.

[1] "The Incan takes leave of Superior," Minnesota's World Port, Fall/Winter 1992, p.3

[2] E.B. "Skip" Gilham, "Incan Superior is Alive and Well," The Nor'Easter, November-December 1987, p.6. The Incan St. Laurent was destined for Baie Comeau, Quebec on the Lower St. Lawrence River.

[3] "Most Admired Boat in Port," The Nor'Easter, November-December 1976, p.1. Because of the complex rail network in northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Ontario, railcars from Thunder Bay had to go west more than 100 miles to Ft. Frances, Ontario to cross the border and then move southeast to Duluth-Superior. The trip typically took three days or more.

[4] Mike Savage, "Incan's Master is Tying Up," Superior Evening Telegram, August 10, 1990. Capt. Lloyd would command the Incan Superior on more than 1,000 voyages. His most memorable trip came in November 1977 when he was forced to seek shelter in the Keweenaw's Pensinsula's Lily Pond for four days to ride out a fierce Lake Superior storm.

[5] Robert A. Buchanan, Jr., was trained in the arcane art of Customs brokerage by Theodore W. Svensson in the 1970s and, after becoming a licensed broker, purchased the Svensson Shipping Agency when the company's namesake retired. Today, Buchanan provides local service as A.N. Deringer, Inc., d/b/a Buchanan Customs Broker & Agency.

[6] Gillham, "Incan Superior is Alive and Well," p.6

[7] Davis Helberg, "The Harbor Line," Minnesota's World Port, Summer 1992, p.2. The U.S. Harbor Maintenance Tax was the last straw for the Incan's owners. Congress imposed the tax to transfer the costs of harbor maintenance dredging from the federal government to the "beneficiaries." Duluth-Superior's harbor is maintained at a 27-foot depth; the Incan Superior's loaded draft was only 17 feet. The Seaway Port Authority and U.S. Representative David W. Obey (D-Wis.) made several attempts to get a federal exemption, but neither Congress nor U.S. Customs was willing to consider the matter because hundreds of other companies would immediately have sought exemptions based on similar grounds.

[8] Gillham, "Incan Superior is Alive and Well," p.6