

The *Socrates*

One of the more recent apocryphal legends of the Twin Ports involves the saga of the Liberian-flagged *Socrates*, a saltwater vessel whose November 1985 grounding off Minnesota Point placed Duluth-Superior in the national media spotlight for more than a week.



Winds reportedly gusting to 70 miles per hour drove the Socrates hard aground just off Park Point in November 1985. Six days and, eventually, six tugboats were required to get the ship afloat. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior)

The saga unfolded routinely enough. The 584-foot *Socrates* arrived at the harbor on Friday, November 15 and quickly cleared Customs, but because of the late-season grain rush, the vessel was instructed to proceed back out into the Lake and anchor until she could secure a slip at the loading elevator. The *Socrates* spent Saturday, Sunday and Monday anchored in the Lake off Duluth.

On Monday afternoon, November 18, the National Weather Service issued gale warnings for the western end of Lake Superior for that evening. The apocryphal part of the story says that the ship's pilot, who had guided the *Socrates* upbound from Sault Ste. Marie, had warned the captain that Friday afternoon to put out both a stern and bow anchor in case the weather turned nasty. The Greek captain, a first-time visitor to the Twin Ports, was reportedly incredulous at the suggestion.

"Iss not ocean," he is reputed to have replied. "Iss big lake."

Later that Monday evening, winds of nearly 70 miles per hour were recorded at Duluth. The *Socrates'* anchor started dragging, and although the captain started the engines to reverse the drift, the big ship was pushed ashore. About 7 p.m., a member of the Coast Guard Group Duluth contingent reported that one of his people "saw out the window what looked like a ship barreling into Park Point."¹

The captain reported to the Coast Guard at 7:45 p.m. that his ship was

aground off 16th Street South on Park Point. The Coast Guard advised that the wind was likely to blow the remainder of the night and suggested that the captain should ballast his vessel to prevent being driven any closer to shore. The *Socrates* was aground in 5 to 13 feet of water, less than 100 feet from shore. Her bow was swinging back and forth as waves of 15 feet lashed her starboard side with icy spray. A crowd began gathering at the end of Lake Avenue to watch the excitement.²

During the night, the vessel began to list, and the captain feared for the structural integrity of his ship. Early the next morning, a tugboat tried to reach the ship to take off the crew, but the Lake was still rolling too much to allow a successful rescue effort. Finally, in mid-morning, some of the crew was taken off the vessel with Coast Guard inflatable Zodiac boats. The Great Lakes Towing Company tugboats *Sioux* and *Dakota* arrived on the scene to attempt to wrest the vessel from the sandbar it was stuck on, but the depth of the water was too shallow to allow the tugs to work effectively. Finally, at 3:30 on Tuesday afternoon, most of the remainder of the crew abandoned ship.³

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, concerned about the ship breaking up and fouling the Minnesota Point beaches with fuel, alerted its Atlantic Strike Force in Elizabethtown, North Carolina, to be ready for a major salvage and containment operation. The ship's Liberian owners had in the meantime hired Durocher Dock and Dredge Company of Cheboygan, Michigan to handle salvage operations. The firm already had a tug and a crane barge at the Twin Ports. By early Thursday morning, the firm's dredging equipment was working alongside the grounded vessel to begin the process of helping to free it.⁴

All of the activity was visible from shore. Thousands of people kept a 24-hour vigil during the first several days of the drama, although the Duluth Police Department restricted access to Park Point beginning on Tuesday, November 19.⁵ Salvage efforts began in earnest on Friday morning, November 22. Crew members came back aboard to get the generators operating and begin pumping ballast water out of the ship. That afternoon, 6 tugboats from Great Lakes Towing began the long process of inching the stranded vessel off the sandbar.⁶

The tugboats pulled and strained for the next 48 hours. Finally, in the early afternoon on Sunday, November 24, six days after she went aground, the *Socrates* slipped free.⁷ The salvage operation cost an estimated \$500,000, but the ship was remarkably free of damage. "If you look at the rest of the shore of Lake Superior," one of the salvage engineers pointed out, "there aren't a whole lot of better places to put a ship."⁸

The *Socrates* finally took on her cargo of 17,000 tons of grain and left the Twin Ports bound for Ancona, Italy on December 6.⁹ Unlike the *Mataafa* tragedy of 80 years before, the saga of the *Socrates* had a happy ending.

¹ Thom Holden, "Socrates: Getting Noticed the Hard Way," *The Nor'Easter*, November-December 1985, p.1

² Ibid., p.2

³ Ibid., p.2. The crew rescue operations that Tuesday were extensively covered by Twin Ports and Twin Cities media, and the video footage dominated the evening newscasts in the Upper Midwest.

⁴ Ibid., p.3

⁵ Bob Aschenmacher, "Grounding launched big beach party," *News-Tribune & Herald*, November 20, 1985

⁶ Holden, "Socrates: Getting Noticed the Hard Way," p.3

⁷ Tom Dennis, "Tugs free stranded *Socrates*," *News-Tribune & Herald*, November 25, 1985. It took an estimated 30,000 horsepower from the six tugboats and the stranded ship's anchor winches to free the *Socrates*.

⁸ Holden, "Socrates: Getting Noticed the Hard Way," p.4

⁹ Ibid., p.5