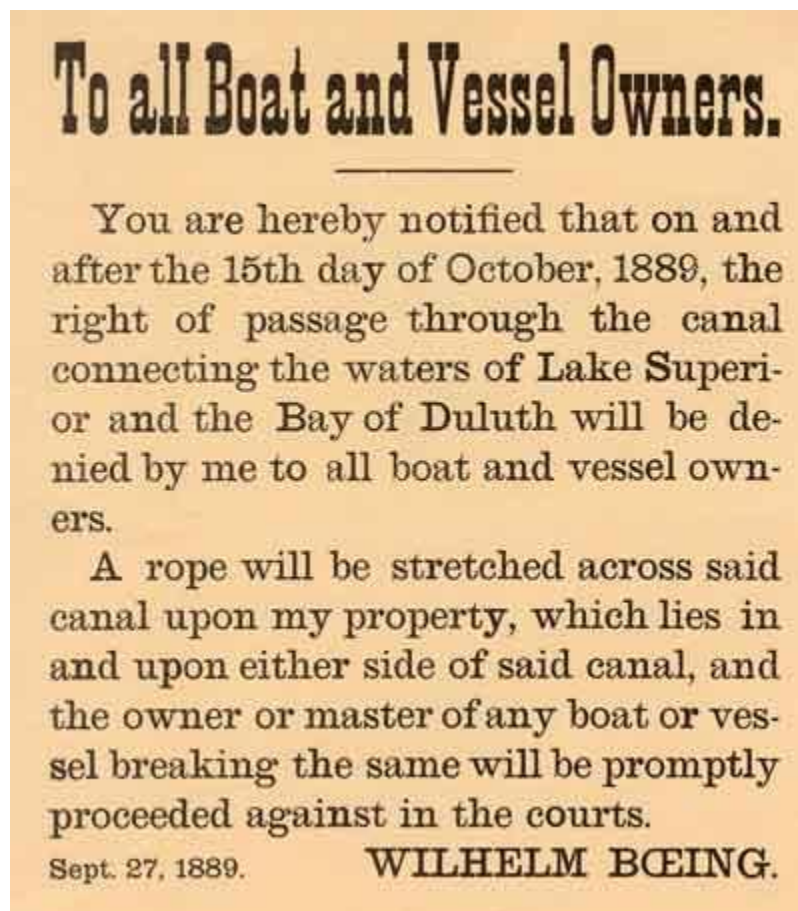


Mr. Boeing's Canal

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1877 decision in favor of the building of the Duluth Ship Canal would seem to have been the final word on the litigation surrounding the new entry to the Duluth-Superior harbor. It wasn't. Ten years following the Supreme Court's decision, an out-of-town landowner attempted to claim the canal as his own and enact a toll on vessels using the passage. Wilhelm Boeing was a German immigrant who had made a fortune in the lumber business in the pinelands along Michigan's Saginaw Bay. Sometime around the Panic of 1873, Boeing had purchased 14 lots on Minnesota Point on either side of the canal. Boeing was also an active investor in timber lands north and west of Duluth. In 1882, Boeing, who lived in Detroit at the time, purchased more than 7,500 acres of timber near what would later become the town of Chisholm, Minnesota.¹



The text of a flier ordered by Detroit-based land speculator Wilhelm Boeing who owned property on both sides of the Duluth Ship Canal and apparently sought to collect tolls from passing vessels. (Duluth Seaway Port Authority Collection)

When Congress passed the River and Harbor Act of 1881, it put into place plans to enlarge the Duluth harbor basin, which then was in the beginning stages of a 10-year grain elevator construction boom. It also gave the Corps of Engineers the authority to deepen the channels from both the Duluth Ship Canal and the Superior Entry to 16 feet. In 1886, the Corps established a

district engineer's office in Duluth.² The next year, the federal government officially took over responsibility for maintaining the Duluth Ship Canal.³ At the time, the first great grain boom in the Duluth-Superior harbor was well underway. During the 1887 and 1888 navigation seasons, an average of nearly 1,500 vessels called upon the Twin Ports each year, up from an average of 500 vessel visits a year at the beginning of the decade. Boeing evidently saw his chance to cash in on the increased traffic.

In the summer of 1888, Marshall H. Alworth, a prominent Duluth attorney who had represented Boeing in land sales since the early 1880s, passed a heavy string across the entrance to the Duluth Ship Canal to establish Boeing's claim to the right to charge a toll to vessels using the canal. Nothing came of the 1888 action, but in early October 1889, fliers started showing up in vessel offices around the Twin Ports. "You are hereby notified," the flier, signed by Boeing, informed the maritime community, "that on and after the 15th day of October, 1889, the right of passage through the canal connecting the waters of Lake Superior and the Bay of Duluth will be denied by me to all boat and vessel owners."⁴

It is not clear what Boeing was attempting to accomplish with the threat. But he went on to say in his broadside that "a rope will be stretched across said canal upon my property, which lies in and upon either side of said canal, and the owner or master of any boat or vessel breaking the same will be promptly proceeded against in the courts."⁵ Equally unclear is whether the rope was ever stretched across the canal, but the whole issue became moot a month later when Wilhelm Boeing died in Detroit.⁶ Boeing left a sizable estate to his widow, which was used to educate eight-year-old William Boeing at expensive private schools in Switzerland and the United States. In 1903, young Bill Boeing left Yale after his junior year of engineering studies and headed for the Pacific Northwest to follow his father's footsteps as a timber baron. Twelve years later, Bill Boeing built his first airplane, and in the summer of 1916, he incorporated the Pacific Aero Products Company to build airplanes full time.⁷ Today, the company that bears Bill Boeing's name is one of the world's largest aircraft manufacturers.

¹ Van Brunt, Duluth and St. Louis County, p.496

² Walker and Hall, "Duluth-Superior Harbor Cultural Resources Study," p.43. A committee of the Duluth Chamber of Commerce had met with the Corps commander in St. Paul to petition for creation of a separate engineer's district in Duluth. They told the commander that on any given day, 32 vessels were shoehorned into the inadequately dredged harbor.

³ Van Brunt, Duluth and St. Louis County, v.1, p.267

⁴ Wilhelm Boeing, "To all Boat and Vessel Owners," September 27, 1889

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert J. Serling, Legend & Legacy: The Story of Boeing and Its People (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p.1

⁷ Ibid., p.2. Boeing's timber holdings in Washington and Oregon came into play with the new airplane manufacturing firm. A rather significant portion of airplanes in the World War I era were made of spruce from the mountain forests of the Pacific Northwest.

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