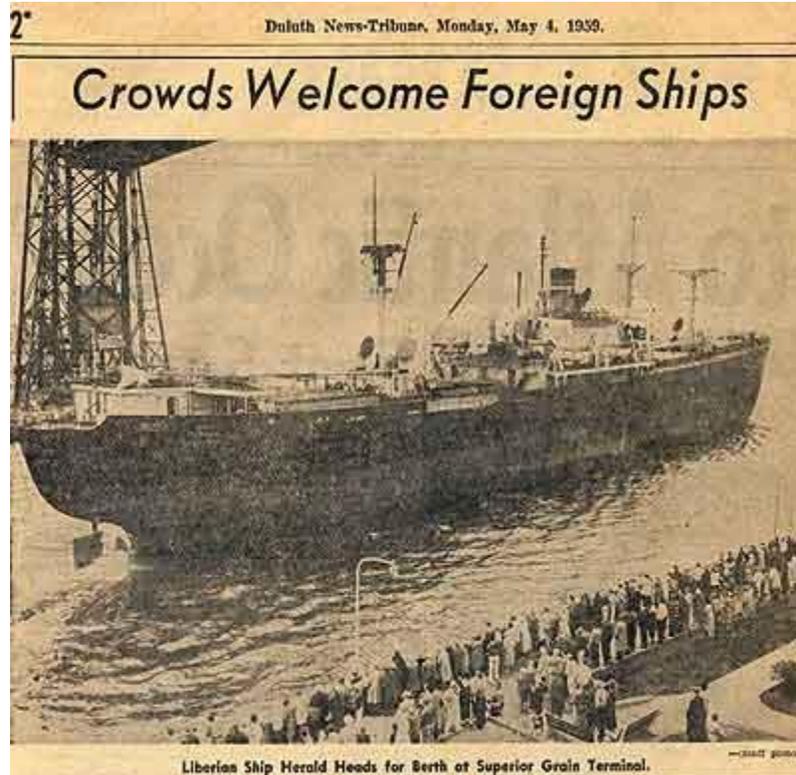


Superior's First Seaway Ship

Davis Helberg was an 18-year-old ship runner and waterfront clerk for Duluth vessel agent Alastair Guthrie that May morning in 1959 when the *Ramon de Larrinaga* slipped beneath the Aerial Bridge to open the St. Lawrence Seaway era in Great Lakes shipping at the Head of the Lakes. "My job was to be on hand when our agency's ships arrived," Helberg recalled more than 40 years later, "to work with Customs and Immigration; get information from the stevedore and dock operator; get things officially entered and documented; to be the ship runner; to be the liaison between the ship and the agency during its stay in Port."¹



The first ship to load on the Superior side of the harbor was the Herald, which arrived just minutes after the Ramon de Larrinaga. The ship's captain was less than impressed by the inexperience of local authorities. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Center at University of Wisconsin-Superior, Duluth News-Tribune)

Helberg, an Esko native, had gone down the Lakes aboard the freighter *LaBelle* of the Steinbrenner fleet in 1958, just weeks after graduating from high school. When the season was over, Helberg enrolled in business school at Duluth. His tuition was paid for by Guthrie, who had helped Helberg get aboard the *LaBelle* earlier in the summer. Guthrie had lined up a great deal of business in anticipation of the opening of the Seaway, and he felt he needed a young apprentice at the brokerage.²

Helberg went to work for Guthrie on April Fool's Day, 1959, and a little over a month later, he was in position to greet the first ship to arrive at the Head of the Lakes through the Seaway. Unfortunately, Helberg had the distinction of greeting the second ship.

"The first ship we had arrived five minutes after the *Ramon DeLarrinaga*, which was the first Seaway vessel," Helberg said. "And we had the *Herald*, the first ship into the Superior side. The operator was Admanthos Shipping in New York. They brought a lot of ships up here in those days. Captain John Tentés was captain of the *Herald*. The *Herald* docked at Globe Elevator on that rainy, windy, miserable May 3, Sunday at 1:30 in the afternoon, the day the first two ships came in."³ The two ships had raced to the Twin Ports from the Soo. The *DeLarrinaga* had won the race by the equivalent of a maritime nose.

"On Monday I had to go to the Duluth Customs office with Captain Tentés, who suffered mightily from the gout and was cranky and a little bit unnerved by all the attention being lavished upon him and his ship," Helberg recalled. "There was a veteran customs inspector named Laverne Bermel, and he had been around for a long, long time. Customs here handled the odd canaler, pre-Seaway ship two or three times a year, but this was a whole new ball game. They wanted to be sure that they got it right. I don't know what kind of weather it was outside, but I remember it was hot and stuffy inside that Customs office. Captain Tentés and I kept standing at that counter. I didn't know what kind of papers were necessary, so we brought a big briefcase full of ship's documents and papers. I think it took two hours poring over the regulations page by page, line by line to make sure we answered the right questions, got the right signatures, got the right forms filled out."⁴

The captain's tolerance for American bureaucracy was wearing thin. "Poor Captain Tentés was fit to be tied by the time we left there," Helberg said. "He was perspiring. He had been wearing a necktie, and that was hanging down loose around his opened collar. He had his jacket off. He was fuming.

"He said he was never going to come back here again, and this was a ridiculous place to try to bring a ship. Well, he was in four times that year. That was when I began to realize that the captains don't make the decisions on where their ships go. I have a tremendous amount of respect for ship captains, but they still are employees of companies who make all the big decisions."⁵ Those companies made the decision to visit the Twin Ports time and time again in the years to come.

¹ Tape Recorded Oral History Interview, Davis Helberg, Duluth, Minnesota, May 25, 2000, p.8

² Ibid., p.4. Contributing to Helberg's decision to go ashore might have been the fact that the *LaBelle* wallowed across Lake Superior during the November 1958 storm that claimed the *Carl D. Bradley* in the northern reaches of Lake Michigan.

³ Ibid., p.35

⁴ Ibid., pp.35-36

⁵ Ibid., pp.35-36

Copyright © 2004 Duluth Seaway Port Authority