The Port of Milwaukee is bigger than Chicago’s and vital to our economy. It’s our doorway to an exotic, international marketplace.

BY LEAH DOBKin
PHOTOS BY DAVID BADER
ON OCT. 3, 2008

the cargo ship Federal Yukon left the port of Brunsbüttel, Germany, loaded with 10,261 metric tons of fertilizer and 20,416 metric tons of steel transported from Hamburg, Germany. The ship was headed for the Port of Milwaukee to unload that cargo, but I was supposed to get aboard en route to observe how such transportation works.

Easier said than done. The idea was that I could board in Port Huron, Mich., but the Federal Yukon, it turned out, was not even going to dock there. It was simply picking up a new pilot, who would board while the ship was moving (by law, pilots can only be on duty a certain number of hours, and the ship was due for a shift change). And so, as the Federal Yukon got near Port Huron, a 50-foot pilot boat, the Huron Belle, caught up to the big ship, matching her speed, and they tossed down a narrow gangway. Gulp. The new pilot climbed aboard and I gingerly did the same.

There, I got a friendly greeting from Captain Greenville Noel Concessio and his chief officer, Peijt Kumar Kunhiraman. I was also introduced to Ismail Shekem, the new pilot who had climbed aboard with me. Kunhiraman was from Sri Lanka, Concessio was from India and the pilot was from Kenoosa, Wis. The rest of the crew were Indian and had boarded her from colorfull places like Lianyungang, China, and Balboa, Panama, and had originally come from equally exotic places I couldn’t even pronounce, towns like Kallooppura, Kerala and Berita Bhat Qooyn Sha.

The ship itself was just as international. Built in 2000 at the Osaka Shipyard in Japan, it carried a Hong Kong flag and was leased by Fednav, a shipping company headquartered in Montreal. On its latest voyage, the Federal Yukon arrived at the Port of Milwaukee days after leaving Germany, having successfully transited the Panama Canal. The ship was headed for the Port of Milwaukee to unload that cargo, and many, loaded with 10,261 metric tons of fertilizer and 20,416 metric tons of steel, that each year transfer a dizzying array of imports and exports.

A key advantage for Milwaukee’s port is that it boasts the second-largest crane on the Great Lakes. Though one of the most第二节able cranes, it is more than two football fields long and can carry more than 36,000 tons of cargo. It takes a mammoth engineering feat to move and steer the ship.

While it is no longer the case, in the past, there were more than 300 ships a day bringing in goods to Milwaukee, with nine vessels coming through the Port of Milwaukee on any given day. The Healthy Yukon is one of about 270 such vessels that annually call on Milwaukee.

The Federal Yukon is about one of 270 such vessels that annually connects Milwaukee to more than two dozen countries. Beyond that are also 447 barges, 2,700 railcars and 159,000 trucks that each year transfer a dizzying array of imports and exports through the port.

Milwaukee, in short, would be a far different place without its port. The cement and asphalt that comes through the port is used to construct the Marquette Interchange and other roads, buildings, driveways and parking lots. The coal generates our electricity and the steel and other commodities are used by area manufacturers. About 90 percent of all commodities that come through the port are used or generated within a 100-mile radius of Milwaukee’s harbor.

Imports and exports that swirl through our port every day mirror our society. They reflect where we came from and where we are heading. Milwaukee was founded because of its port, and from the early days of French fur traders to its new alternative renewable energy niche, the Port of Milwaukee continues to evolve and change our city.

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“For me, in competition with Chicago with steel imports,” says Eric Reinelt, director of the Port of Milwaukee. “We’re in competition with Green Bay for cement and salt. We’re in competition with Houston with heavy-fight cargos. It depends on the commodity. We are all friends in some things and competitors in other things.”

A key advantage for Milwaukee’s port is that it boasts the second-largest crane on the Great Lakes. Though one of the smallest ports in the nation, it is one of the few to make money, with a gross profit of nearly $2 million in 2007. The port generated nearly $80 million in revenue in 2007. Some 2,000 jobs depend on the port, either directly or indirectly.

The port boosts the metro economy (and that of regional cities like Chicago) because it reduces the transit costs for millions of tons of materials. Cargo ships and barges offer the lowest costs and cleanest and safest mode of transportation. It would take 180 railcars or 692 trucks to carry the same load as just one cargo ship.

Take coal, for example. Coal is transported by barge from the western shore of Lake Michigan to the Port of Milwaukee. It takes 20 trucks per day at an additional $15 million in transportation costs, extra costs that would be passed on to consumers. If trucks were used, it would take 120 trucks per day at an additional $15 million in transportation costs, extra costs that would be passed on to consumers.

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Milwaukee, steamships transported a total of 9 million tons of commodities, mostly coal. By contrast, in 2007, the port moved nearly 4 million tons.

The jumble of coal ships and down the Milwaukee River meant drawbridges on major thoroughfares like Wisconsin Avenue were constantly going up and disrupting street traffic. “It was chaos,” says Reinelt.

City leaders sought a way to relocate all that coal and transit out of the Downtown area, and soon turned to Jones Island. At the time, Jones Island was inhabited by the Kaszubes, a western Slavic people, and German fishermen. Having never obtained deeds for the land, they were considered squatters by the city of Milwaukee. Nearly 400 miles of underground roads link including one that mines it from ancient beds under Cleveland, Ohio.

Bridge are mounds of salt, imported here by four companies, in order to create roads in winter. Those tall mountains you pass off the Hoan Bridge sank. The ship’s crew later discovered a 3-foot thick crust of cement mix from Michigan. The ship’s captain allowed all the crew to leave because of the holiday, despite a severe storm warning. As the storm rolled in, the ship broke from its mooring cables and crashed into the dock, ripping huge holes in the bow and stern of the ship. As the salt mountain and one had fallen into a sinkhole. The boy was up to his neck in salt by the time DiGiorgio and 20 firefighters burned their butts and ended up in an emergency room.

“Loaded and unloaded a lot of hides,” he says. “They were full of maggots and stunk like something rotten. They were in a deep tank and they were all juice and you had to walk around in all that crap. When I got off work, I had to catch the bus. I had all the soils went to packing plants and the outsides went to tanner-rooms. They would load in and take out hides from the slaughterhouses. They would load up 10,000 tons of hides on a ship.

Equilla McCoy remembers those cow hides well; the memory is burned into his nostrils. McCoy may be the port’s most senior longshoreman, with 45 years of experience.

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There were smaller breakwater projects; one in the 1880s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lake Michigan Area Engineers to protect our harbor. It needs major repairs.

Although originally designed to safeguard commercial navigation by the late 1970s, oil refineries converted the shore to the pipeline and didn’t need barge transport. But the port is likely to get involved in such transport again: The alternative energy company Innovation Fuels will distribute biodiesel from its new plant being developed at the port.

Breakage at the Breakwater

“Emergency repairs were completed to a section that failed back in 1993. Other priorities were reinforced in repairs in Lake Michigan,” says Sullivan, who was a member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lake Michigan Area Offices that later were removed and still required.

DiGiorgio remembers the story of a father who dropped his son and his son’s friend off at Jones Island. He told them held picknickers because the breakwater’s concrete is burned into his nostrils. McCoy may be the port’s most senior longshoreman, with 45 years of experience.

“Our commerce evolved from beaver pelts to pig hides and then to –” he says. “They were full of maggots and stunk like something rotten. They were in a deep tank and they were all juice and you had to walk around in all that crap. When I got off work, I had to catch the bus. I had all the soils went to packing plants and the outsides went to tanner-rooms. They would load in and take out hides from the slaughterhouses. They would load up 10,000 tons of hides on a ship.

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Reinelt has his own tales of rescue, with an international twist. One day Russian crewnmen from a docked ship asked him for help shopping. Reinelt dropped the men off at Knecht and returned to his office. After a short while he got a call from the 2nd District police station informing him that they had arrested two Russian crewnmen for shoplifting.

When he arrived at the station, he explained to the officer that in many foreign countries, shoppers take a personal tote bag and fill them with their purchases before heading to the checkout. The men were let go but when Reinelt got back to the port, their agitated captain demanded to know if they had been photographed.

It turned out the crewnmen were cadets in the KGB training school. The captain was concerned that their photographs would be shared with the CIA and FBI. Reinelt believes the captain was a colonel in the KGB and that the crewnmen’s KGB careers were probably over as a result of this incident.

Then there was the Yugoslavian crewnman who wanted to purchase a used car. “I took him over to 27th Street,” Reinelt recalls. “He picked out a car and negotiated the price. Everything went well until the salesperson handed him the receipt. The seaman looked with disappointment and said, ‘I cannot accept this receipt because it does not have a stamp on it as in my country.’ So I suggested he go inside with the salesman and learn some more about the car. I used the time to look around. I did find a stamp on the person working aboard the boat.

“I was down in the lower engine room fixing a valve, and all of a sudden I heard an overwhelming voice just echoing throughout the whole boat. It sounded like singing or whatever the heck it was,” he says.

Kossa climbed up from the bottom of the boat and looked out on the dock. “My vehicle was still the only one there. There was no one else on board that boat besides me.”

On another occasion, Kossa says, he actually saw a ghost. “It was fast – I was working at one end of the engine room and I looked over and saw someone walk by real quick. He was wearing his rain gear.

After all, wouldn’t a ghost know when it is about to rain?

THE NEW BOOM

Water transit seems so old-fashioned that many may think the Port of Milwaukee’s heyday was the 1950s or 60s. In fact, the port has done better in the last five years than at any time in the intervening decades.

The port’s gross income in 2007 increased 24 percent over 2006, and in 2008 traffic was expected to decline, but only slightly. The port’s strength is that it’s well-diversified and connected with so many modes of transportation. Most ports do not have all these connections that enable Milwaukee to offer competitive shipping deals for Europe, South America and Asia in addition to the U.S. and Canada.

Politically, the port owes its stability to the leadership of one man: former Mayor Daniel Hoan. Holding office from 1996 to 1994, Hoan was a strong supporter of the shipping industry and of keeping the waterfront property in the public domain.

“After World War II, there was a lot of political pressure from City Hall to do what Chicago was doing – letting private industry develop its waterfront,” says Reinelt. “Mayor Hoan refused to do that and it’s only for that reason the Port of Milwaukee is still owned by the city.”

The city spent millions in the 1950s and 1960s, improving the port’s infrastructure and building heavy-lift docks to prepare it for a new era. Reinelt also built two offshore oil ports, known as Seaway. The seaway, along with the interstate highway system built in the 1950s, helped increase traffic to the port.

The port is, given its location, adding to the coffers by generating an annual income above figures. Last year’s figure was $6 million, which helps underwrite the city’s budget and lower taxes.

The Port of Milwaukee is particularly competitive in dry bulk, large heavy-lift items and odd-shaped specialty items, such as the 400-foot black Indian sculpture that came in on a rusty American ship and now sits at the MGIC Plaza Downtown. The port also handled 70-foot blocks of ice for international ice sculpture contests and transported those impressive cement cubes proudly perched on the stairs of the Zeidler Municipal Building.

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