COLLINGWOOD SHIPYARD DID NOT ALWAYS HAVE CRANES

By H. David Vuckson

Question: "What sort of object dominated the skyline of the Collingwood Shipyard for most of the first half of the 20th Century?" If you said the cranes, you would be wrong. It was actually the Shipyard water tower that was the tallest object at the time. Yes, the sheer leg crane on the road to the grain elevator was quite tall but it wasn't in the Shipyard; situated as it was on the site of the old wooden Grand Trunk elevator (demolished in 1938), the sheer leg did not appear until about 1939-40, just in time for the boom in wartime shipbuilding. Cranes with tall booms as we understand them were a relatively late addition to the skyline.

The water tower being the tallest vantage point, my mother's brother Reg Hewson, a 24 year-old draughtsman in the Yard, ambitiously climbed up it in 1932 to take photos of the launching into Drydock No. 1 of the *Wm. J. Stewart* (see pg. 14 in the book "Sidelaunch".)

The first 27 steel hulls were all built in the original east yard in a north/south direction, most of them launched into Drydock No. 1 although a few were built facing in an east/west direction and launched

out into the open harbour. (The west building berth at the foot of Hurontario St. did not exist until 1910 following completion of Drydock No. 2 in late 1909.)   Of those first 27 hulls (14 scows, 4 tugs, 3 passenger, 1 barge, and 5 bulk freighters) more than half of them were built before the shipyard had a crane; instead they used a number of homemade hoists made of poles, pulleys and cables.

The first steel hull (*Huronic*) was launched from the east building berth in September 1901 but the overhead or gantry crane of 15 ton capacity did not appear until 1907. Photos taken in the early months of that year (ice in the harbour) show the main crossbeam of the crane resting on temporary wooden supports while it was being erected. Because one set of its elevated tracks ran along the edge of the drydock, these had to be dismantled for each side launch, taking about 10 hours. As the crane worked its way to one or the other end of its travel it would hoist away its tracks and their A-frame supports as workers unbolted them high above the ground. Following the launch, after all the debris was cleared away, the crane tracks had to be reassembled for the start of another hull. When you factor in the drag chains and drag boxes in addition to taking down and putting back up the crane tracks, it illustrates how labour-intensive a launch in Collingwood in those years was. [Ship launchings were much simpler at the Midland Shipyard where the 12-ton capacity gantry crane ran entirely on the inboard side of a ship on ground-level tracks. The Midland harbour being very wide, no drag chains were needed. Photos of launchings at Midland show just a steel cable connected to a winch at each end of a ship to pull it back in to shore after it hit the water.]

The gantry crane was in use on the east building berth into the late 1950's. In my memory I can still hear the distinctive sound of its hook

motor, a sound that carried far uptown in the dead of a still summer night when people slept with their windows open. Several elderly ladies who lived on 4th St. East told my father that the sound kept them awake at night and "why did the Shipyard have to do that?" His reply was that if there were no night shift a lot of people would lay awake at night. A similar situation happened here in B.C. many years ago when someone complained to Premier W.A.C. Bennett about the smell of a pulp mill. Bennett replied, "My friend, that's the smell of money!" (i.e. jobs, prosperity).

After shipbuilding came to an end in the east yard in the late 1950's (the final hull was the *Tyee Shell*), the gantry crane was eventually taken down and transferred to rails at ground level in the steel stockyard which, at the time, was at the foot of Pine and Maple Streets. There it joined its 1910 twin that had been taken down in 1951 from above the west building berth. A big windstorm one night years later caused one of them to take off down the tracks and crash into its twin—an unusual event for two identical cranes to collide and a rather bizarre example of "friendly fire".

With the largest and longest ships being built on the west building berth, by the late 1940's a time came when the ships became taller than the gantry crane so that it couldn't pass over them, rendering it redundant. By that time there were also two cranes of the more familiar boom-type which travelled alongside the building berth. One of them was electric, the other, a steam-powered Clyde-Whirley; still burning coal in 1961 it was converted to electric power shortly thereafter. Another coal-burning crane on the opposite side of the launch basin came to the end of its usefulness and was scrapped. It was used for fitting out a new ship after it was launched. The electric

crane from the building berth replaced it. A Caterpillar crane with a clamshell bucket was used to load the coal hopper for the Boiler House and to retrieve coal from the bottom of the harbour after each launching washed some of the coal pile into the water.

To illustrate the lifting demands on these travelling cranes in the 1950's I refer to the building of the *B.A. Peerless*, a 620 ft. long oil tanker built for the British-American Oil Co. in 1952. An oil company magazine of the time had an article about the building of the ship. One photo carried a caption that read, "At the Collingwood Shipyards giant [sic] cranes lift prefabricated hull panels weighing as much as 5 tons!" In the 1960's, prefabricated hull panels weighed up to 40 tons. Compare this to the early days when the gantry cranes would lift an innumerable host of small pieces of steel from the punch shed with multiple holes in them for riveting to other pieces. The book "The Building of a Ship" illustrating the building of the *Hamonic* in 1908 has excellent shots of this method—a giant version of a child's Meccano Set. The sound of riveting at night must have carried even farther than the sound of the crane.

When the Midland Shipyard closed in 1954 its one boom-type crane was brought to Collingwood. We always referred to it as "The Midland Crane". Then around 1960 an enormous crane was acquired; some said it had been used in the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway. This crane increased the lifting power greatly. One day in the summer of 1965 while doing a heavy lift, this crane toppled. Pieces of the counterweight buried themselves in the ground while the operator's cab was torn off from the main housing and was left hanging precariously on the side of the ship with the operator Charlie McPherson inside it. I was an Office Boy in the Yard when this incident

happened. I didn't see the crane go down but I remember the look of shock on the face of the Main Gate guard Al Partridge as he telephoned for doctors to come to the Shipyard.

A replacement crane was ordered but when the flimsy-looking tower for it started to be assembled someone realized it was the wrong one. I heard that "heads rolled" at the crane manufacturer for this mistake which set back the production schedule even further. Finally, a Colby Crane with a 40-ton lifting capacity was installed and it became the workhorse of the shipyard until an even larger crane with a 120-ton capacity was installed just a few years before the shipyard closed.

The massive sheer leg crane on the spit, mentioned above, was used to lower engines and boilers into new ships after they were launched and also for replacing boilers on existing ships. An earlier, smaller, wooden version of this crane stood beside Drydock No. 2 and can be seen in the photo on pg. 200 in *Butchers, Bakers & Building the Lakers*.

The Shipyard built its earliest steel ships using home-made wooden hoists, riveting small parts together, progressing to gantry cranes that kept people awake at night, then to ever larger boom cranes lifting enormous all-welded prefabricated panels weighing many tons. That's a lot of steel lifted over 85 years.

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