



“THERE GOES THE BOAT THAT DADDY BUILT!”- H. David Vuckson

The Collingwood Shipyard went through a frenzied period of shipbuilding during the Second World War years constructing Corvettes (19), Trawlers (5), Tankers (3), Minesweepers (2), and Coastal Freighters (4). With the end of the war, peacetime shipbuilding in the late 1940's turned to Ferries (3), Imperial Oil Tankers (3), Hopper Barges (3), and, the pride of them all, the mighty *Hochelaga*, just six inches short of 640 feet long, a bulk carrier for Canada Steamship Lines that heralded the rebuilding of the Great Lakes fleet following sixteen years of deprivation and shortages caused by depression and war. The *Hochelaga* was the largest ship ever built in Canada up to that time. Ten years later the Collingwood Shipyard would launch yet another “largest ship”, but I digress.

Following all the above activity in the second half of the 1940's, the Collingwood Shipyard entered the 1950's with orders from Imperial Oil and the British American Oil Company to build a total of five large oil tankers for use on the Great Lakes. The Interprovincial Pipeline from western Canada (Edmonton, via Regina to its terminal at Superior, Wisconsin at the extreme western end of Lake Superior) brought western oil to the shore of the Great Lakes and the huge tankers were built to transport that oil to southern Ontario refineries. Four of these ships were to be built in Collingwood and one at Port Arthur (Shipyards in Collingwood, Port Arthur, Midland and Kingston were all under the same ownership at that time).

These attractive ships, 620 feet long, were constructed on the traditional “Three Island Principle” that was the standard oil tanker style for over six decades and featured a raised Forecastle, then about a third of the length of the ship back from the bow were the bridge and officers’ quarters, and at the stern above the engine room were the crew quarters and the funnel. When these ships were heavily loaded and seen from a distance, the three raised portions of their superstructure looked like three islands in the water.

The Imperial Oil tankers were all given names of significant locations in the Alberta oil fields. The first ship of this class, Hull #146, the ***Imperial Leduc***, was named after the town of Leduc, Alberta, south of Edmonton where the Leduc # 1 well came in on February 13, 1947, inaugurating the modern era in Alberta’s energy sector. The new ship was another “first” for the Collingwood Shipyard: the largest fresh water tanker in the world. It was launched in November 1950 and entered service the following April. The second ship, Hull #147, the ***Imperial Woodbend***, named for the Leduc-Woodbend oil field, was launched in December 1951 and entered service in April 1952.

The third similar ship was the ***B. A. Peerless***, Hull #148, built for the British-American Oil Company Ltd. to transport oil from the pipeline terminal in Superior, Wisconsin to the British-American refinery in Clarkson, Ontario (now part of Mississauga). The *Peerless* was launched in July 1952 and left Collingwood on her maiden voyage to Superior, Wisconsin on November 3, 1952. The day the ship left Collingwood, I rode with my parents “down to the dock” [this was the standard way we described a trip to the harbour down the road to the Terminals] in the 1951 Studebaker. As we watched the *Peerless* going out through the channel beyond the grain elevator, I, a few weeks short of my 5th birthday, exclaimed, “There goes the boat that Daddy built!” Now, in my 70’s, I can still see it in my mind’s eye.

For years my father had a copy of the British-American Oil Co. magazine *B/A Commentator* that contained an article about the building of the ship. One of the photos showed one of the cranes (either #1 or #4 as they came to be numbered in later years) lifting a portion of the hull with the caption, “At the Collingwood

Shipyards giant [sic] cranes lift prefabricated panels weighing as much as five tons!" Impressive as it was at the time, it was all relative to the technology and crane capacity then in use.

When the 1910 gantry (i. e. overhead) crane from the west building berth was taken down in 1951 from its tracks above the building berth and repurposed to work at ground level in the Steel Stockyard at the foot of Pine St., the two traveling cranes remaining alongside the building berth were the then steam-powered Clyde Whirley (#4) and a similar-sized electric crane which, a few years later, was moved to the opposite side of the launch basin (as #1) when the crane from the closed Midland Shipyard was brought to Collingwood and placed alongside the building berth (as #2). Cranes #2 and #4 on the building berth had a 25 ton lifting capacity. Years later, crane lifting capacity increased immensely. When I worked in the Yard as an Office Boy/Messenger in the 1960's, the Colby Crane (#3) could lift prefabricated panels weighing 40 tons.

Meanwhile, a third Imperial Oil tanker had been built at the Port Arthur Shipyard and launched in November 1950. The ***Imperial Redwater*** (Port Arthur Hull #106) was named for the oil field that was discovered in September 1948 at the small farming community of Redwater, Alberta.

Hull #149 at Collingwood was to be the fourth large tanker for Imperial Oil but, while it was already under construction on the building berth at the foot of Hurontario St., Imperial Oil cancelled the order, the reason being that the oil pipeline had been extended to Sarnia. The three Imperial Oil tankers, the oldest of them in service for only a little more than two years, became redundant overnight. The drawing office at the Collingwood Shipyard scrambled to change hull #149, already taking shape as a tanker, into a bulk carrier for Canada Steamship Lines and it was launched in December 1953 under the name ***Georgian Bay***.

The Collingwood Shipyard had built five canal-size tankers for Imperial Oil during the First World War years. Following World War II, Collingwood built three more tankers of similar size for Imperial Oil in the 1947-48 period. These tankers delivered petroleum products from the Imperial refinery in Sarnia to harbours like

Collingwood where the Imperial Oil Dock was on the west side of the harbour opposite the Collingwood Terminals. In sufficiently deep water where the harbour was dredged, a small Imperial Oil tanker would tie up at the oil dock and then pump petroleum products through long pipelines to the Esso tank farm on Balsam St. (Highway 26) situated between Georgian China and Black Ash Creek. At the tank farm, managed by Harold Nixon, there were three enormous storage tanks for gasoline, diesel, and heating oil and a number of smaller ones. From this location, petroleum products were distributed by railway tank cars and by trucks. In the 1950's during a drive to the harbour, my mother and I watched a heavily loaded tanker coming in behind the grain elevator and heading for the oil dock.

There is somewhat of a parallel that emerges when studying the transport of prairie oil to eastern Canada similar to the way that prairie grain was transported to eastern Canada in the years before the St. Lawrence Seaway. Prairie grain travelled by rail to the lakehead at Port Arthur and Fort William (now Thunder Bay) where it was transferred to Great Lakes freighters to carry the grain to elevators at various ports on Georgian Bay (Owen Sound, Meaford, Collingwood, Midland, Port McNicoll, Depot Harbour) where it was transferred back to rail for the rest of its journey to Montreal for export. In a somewhat similar fashion, prairie oil travelled in the pipeline to the head of Lake Superior where it was transferred to Great Lakes oil tankers for the journey to the refineries of southern Ontario.

The 1959 advent of the St. Lawrence Seaway gradually ended the need for the trans-shipment of prairie grain at Georgian Bay because the seaway-size ships could now load at Thunder Bay and proceed all the way to the east coast of Canada. Similarly, the extension of the pipeline from Superior, Wisconsin to Sarnia, Ontario immediately eliminated the need for the recently-constructed Imperial Oil tankers to carry the oil across Lakes Superior and Huron to the refinery. In the mid-20th Century the Great Lakes typically froze over in the winter and ships "tied up" for the winter, usually in December, and did not move again until spring. The demand for energy was growing fast in the post-war era (modern highways, the growth of suburbs, increasing sales of cars and trucks) and the solution to keep the oil moving year-round was to extend the pipeline.

Construction of the extension began in May 1953 crossing northern Wisconsin into northern Michigan, then crossing under the Straits of Mackinac where Lakes Michigan and Huron meet, then down through Michigan and under the St. Clair River to Sarnia, Ontario.

So, what was Imperial Oil to do with three tankers that were no longer needed? The ships were relatively new and could be sold and converted to other uses. The **Imperial Leduc** was sold to Canada Steamship Lines in 1955 and renamed **Nipigon Bay**, although still functioning as a tanker until 1957, transporting oil from Superior, Wisconsin to a refinery on the shore of Lake Ontario. During the winter of 1957-58, the ship was lengthened by 72 feet and converted to a bulk carrier. The reconstruction was given a Collingwood Hull Number (#162), but because neither of the two drydocks in Collingwood could accommodate a ship of this size, the work was done at the Port Arthur Shipyard where the drydock was, and is, capable of docking a St. Lawrence Seaway-size ship. This was Port Arthur's Conversion # 1. Once rebuilt, the ship transported bulk cargoes of grain, iron ore and coal for 24 more years, its capacity being increased in 1981 by the addition of a "trunk deck". This work was also done at the Port Arthur Shipyard as Conversion #16. The **Nipigon Bay** ended its career when it was towed to Turkey for scrapping in 1989.

The second Collingwood-produced large tanker, the **Imperial Woodbend**, was sold to Mohawk Navigation and was rebuilt in 1954 by E. B. Magee Ltd. of Port Colborne to emerge as a bulk carrier named **Golden Hind**. The ship passed to new owners at least twice after the Mohawk years and was eventually scrapped in Colombia in 1986.

The **Imperial Redwater** was sold to Upper Lakes and St. Lawrence Transportation Co. and rebuilt at Collingwood with a Collingwood Hull Number (#151) into a bulk carrier named **R. Bruce Angus**. This ship was scrapped in Portugal in 1985.

The fourth Imperial Oil tanker that never was and emerged instead as a bulk carrier, the **Georgian Bay**, worked for Canada Steamship Lines for nearly three decades and was scrapped in Turkey in 1989.

This leaves us with the ***B. A. Peerless***. This ship remained a tanker all of her life. After some years of transporting oil from Superior, Wisconsin through Lakes Superior and Huron, the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River, Lake Erie, the Welland Canal and on to the shore of Lake Ontario, in late 1958 as the shipping season was winding down before winter freeze-up, she went into drydock at the Port Arthur Shipyard as their Conversion #2. The ship was to be shortened—some accounts say by 80 feet, others by 72 feet—and to receive a new bow in order to be able to leave the Great Lakes and to trade on salt water when the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in the spring of 1959. When I asked Ralph Christie of the Collingwood Shipyard Expediting Office, why the ship had to be shortened he replied that the reason was “so she won’t break her back on the ocean waves”. The new intended career for the *B. A. Peerless* was trading up and down the Atlantic coast as far south as Venezuela. The ship could not have been lengthened beyond what the Welland Canal could accommodate and because waves on the ocean have a different “period” she had to be shortened so that the hull, especially when heavily loaded, would be fully supported on salt water. Sold and renamed twice in later years, “the boat that Daddy built” was towed to India in 1990 and scrapped.

So ended the careers of the large Great Lakes oil tankers built in the early 1950s. The four 620-foot ships, three of them born in Collingwood, the fourth designed in Collingwood but built in Port Arthur, plus one more that almost became a tanker but turned into a bulk carrier before it was launched in Collingwood, served their various owners for close to four decades until they went for scrap. These five ships had an average life span of 36.6 years.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.