

# MEETING IN THE FOG

BEFORE THE ADVENT OF RADAR, THE MASSIVE ORE FREIGHTERS THAT PLYED THE GREAT LAKES HAD TO TAKE EVERY PRECAUTION WHEN ENTERING THE THICK FOG BANKS THAT COULD PLAGUE THE AREA

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Painting of the *John B. Cowle* moving a load of iron ore on Lake Superior.



On 12 July 1909, SS *John B. Cowle* slipped out of Two Harbors with 7023 tons of iron ore aboard. She was downbound for Cleveland. At the same time, the SS *Isaac M. Scott* was upbound for Duluth, Minnesota, on her maiden voyage. What would shortly happen would make history on the Great Lakes.

Built in 1902 by the Jenks Shipbuilding Company for the new Cowle Transit Company, SS *John B. Cowle* was one of two ships named for the prominent Cleveland

businessman. At 420 feet in length and weighing in at 4731 tons, the bulk freighter was powered by a three-cylinder triple expansion engine and normally carried a crew of 24.

By 1909, the freighter was fully employed hauling the rich iron ore to smelters and was still owned by Cowle but for tax reasons she was sailing under the name of the United States Transportation Company. John Beswick Cowle was also part owner of the Globe Iron Works and that company built the first iron and steel

Great Lakes bulk freighters. Not the most attractive of vessels, they were nonetheless efficient money makers but were given the somewhat derisive nickname of “tin pans.”

Sailors are a superstitious lot, and the sailing father of one young deckhand talked his son out of going aboard *John B. Cowle* at Detroit. He would later state, “Something just did not feel right.” This caused some concern among rest of the crew and at the iron ore dock in Two Harbors, Minnesota, a trio of deckhands

decided to sit this trip out and went dockside. All four young men were quickly replaced since there were lots of people looking for work.

The just-completed *Isaac M. Scott* was built at the American Shipbuilding Company in Lorain, Ohio, and was launched on 12 June 1909 and completed on 2 July of that year. She was named for the president of the La Belle Iron Works. She with 504 feet in length and assessed at 6372 gross register tons. She was fitted with a triple-expansion steam engine driving a single screw and the *Toledo Blade* newspaper called her “one of the handsomest of the large freighters



A postcard of the *John B. Cowle* loading iron ore. The ore docks dwarf the ship.

The *John B. Cowle* was of a new generation of ore haulers and the ship would faithfully ply the Great Lakes until the tragic collision.