

# Ports and Portholes

March, April 2026



## Captain John Paul Perkins, Birdman of the Great Lakes

John Paul Perkins, Second Mate on the Benjamin Fairless, had maritime connections forged in steel, made from the iron ore that the ships of his Pittsburgh Steamship Company, later to become part of the U.S. Steel fleet, transported from Lake Superior ports to Lake Erie ports. Conneaut served as home port for him and his family and Conneaut harbor the place he watched disappear over the horizon every shipping season.

The water route of the ships, both up and down bound, took them west to east across Lake Superior, through the Locks at Soo Ste. Marie. The next leg of the journey traversed the length of Lake Huron, through the St. Clair River, and Lake St. Clair. The final leg of the journey took the ships down the Detroit River, across Lake Erie for approximately eighty miles and to the ports of northeastern Ohio,

including Ashtabula and Conneaut where Second Mate Perkins, who his fellow mariners nicknamed, “Perk” lived.

Perk created his personal scientific methods of on deck birdwatching. He purchased balled trees and other habitat equipment like branches and perches from friends in various ports along Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie. He set them up on deck along with bird seed and water stations and then placed a park bench in a strategic yet non-threatening location to sit on while he birdwatched, photographed them, and took movies of them. He created a film called “Birds Ahoy!” that he used in his speaking programs about birds and that garnered respect in the scientific world as well.



“Perk’s National Forest” aboard the ore carrier, “Benjamin F. Fairless.” Second Mate J. P. (Perk) Perkins sits on bench, movie camera in hand, waiting for feathered visitors.

## *Birds Ahoy’*

*By J. P. Perkins*  
Second Mate, Benjamin F. Fairless

Besides for his personal enjoyment, Perk observed birds for their own sake – their plumage, their habits, their personalities, their grace, their freedom of movement, and yes, their predatory skills, especially those of gulls and hawks, revealing the cruel side of nature. Perk spent years taking meticulous, detailed notes of bird life and behavior. His notes and the articles he wrote, including one published in Audubon Magazine, changed traditional ideas about migratory patterns of birds, including those over the St. Clair River and the Great Lakes.

Perk explained his methods in one of his articles: “Over several years I have kept detailed notes on the migration waves and single birds sighted during the sailing season. Each year a little more data is added until at present the notes include observations, location of ship, weather at ship’s position, barometric and temperature graphs plus the weather synopsis of the location of atmospheric pressures each day for the Great Lakes region.”

Every trip he took up and down the Lakes, Perk observed birds and took notes about their behavior. He described how flocks of birds would rest aboard ship in his National Forests and on suitable places all over the ship. He described their flight patterns and their habits. He elaborated: “The trees were arranged daily according to the position of the sun and a chair or park bench was placed the correct distance away for the focus wanted. With a bottle of coffee and a few doughnuts handy on the hatch, I was ready.”



*PERKINS poses in National Forest which he had "planted" on shipboard to attract migrating birds. Photo by author.*

His bird watching did not escape the notice of his shipmates. They christened his tree arrangements "Perk's National Forest," and they gave him nicknames like "Ranger" and "Nature Boy." Some enterprising sailors placed an artificial nest complete with four plump grapes in one of his trees and at Christmas, ornaments appeared hanging from the branches. The teasing was good natured, and Perk described encountering shipmates searching his bird books to identify their ship's passengers. He also recalled a captain or two calling from the pilothouse that his trees were full of

birds. His ornithological or bird loving connection, existed from his boyhood when Perk roamed the hills of Belmont County, Ohio, seeking, finding, and photographing interesting birds. During his teen and adult years living in Conneaut, Ohio, he examined and explored the local bird populations, discovering that birds had much the same free spirits and migratory lives as sailors. And from the 1930s to the early 1970s when he combined his maritime livelihood with his birding passion, he made significant scientific contributions to the ornithological world from his shipboard perches.

By the time he became first mate on the J.P. Morgan Jr., with several berths in between, Perk could describe the times, places, and participants of flocks of birds traveling over the Great Lakes and their connecting rivers.

His observations included eagles and their nests in the lower St Mary's River, large heron rookery on Stony Island and Grosse Isle in the lower Detroit River. Thousand of gulls and terns on the stone dike below Bois Blanc Island in the lower Detroit River. Flights of black crowned night herons around the western Lake Erie islands. Large flocks of ducks at St. Clair Flats and at Bar Point in the St. Clair and Detroit River.

By the 1960s-1970s last stages of his career, Perk had earned the position of captain on several Pittsburgh Fleet ships, including the Thomas F. Cole, the John Gates and the Richard V. Lindabury his last ship before his 1972 retirement. As his maritime career advanced, so did his Floating Forests and bird watching and recording skill and contributions to ornithological knowledge.

Throughout 31 years of impeccable note taking, photos, and films, John Paul Perkins made impressive contributions to ornithological knowledge. He identified and named seven migration corridors over Lake Superior and many more over Lakes Michigan, Erie, and Huron and revealed how the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways overlap with the Great Lakes Flyways. He described previously unidentified flight patterns, flocks of different bird species migrating together, and sighted rare birds where they were not supposed to be sighted. He described birds at play.

As he advanced through the ranks from deckhand to third, second, and first mate to captain, John Paul Perkins also continued his at home bird watching, recording, countless birds in the marsh and sandbar area of Conneaut Harbor, a location lush with grasses, saplings, and other green plants and a break wall and lighthouse framing spacious water meadows.

Captain Perkins observed and identified several species of birds at Conneaut Harbor, including songbirds, shorebirds, and of course, the standard species of sea gulls. The Ohio State Department of Natural Resources noted that Conneaut Harbor consistently shelters a number of rare bird species. The site contains a plaque honoring the contributions of Captain John Paul Perkins, Conneaut resident and consummate bird watcher.



Summing up his maritime ornithological philosophy, Captain Perkins noted that “A complete check list of birds seen on and from the ship (just one ship, the Benjamin Fairless) totals 190

species...not much compared to lists compiled ashore, but each year we add a few more species to the total. It is the constant expectation of seeing something more that makes bird watching so fascinating.”

# John Paul Perkins Begins His Career on the Lakes

## As Told by Captain John Paul Perkins

It all began back in March 1928, when after a hard day at work I decided that I was not cut out to spend my life in the heat and smoke of a steel mill. Consequently, I signed to go aboard the steamer James McNaughton as coal passer. This American ship was at that time in her winter berth in Midland, Ontario. I was not really sure that I wanted to “Go Sailing” as it was called in those days. I had refused jobs on the ships for several years.

Those days, if you were big enough, you were old enough. No labor laws or regulations existed. My affinity for water was practically nil. Even the customary Saturday evening bath was an ordeal in my younger days. My mother was the only person I know of that could place a washcloth on her index finger and push it clear through my head in her efforts to keep us clean.

Early knowledge of waterways was obtained through living on the banks of the Conoquenessing Creek at Ellwood City, Pa. Then the Beaver and Ohio Rivers were familiar also. My first venture out on the water was in a rowboat when my cousins coerced me into the craft and rowed out onto the lake behind Frisco Dam at Ellwood. This was not bad until my cousins rocked the boat and scared the hell out of me.

I came to the shores of Lake Erie when my parents moved to a farm south of Conneaut, Ohio. This event occurred on July 2, 1920. Even then, I never saw Lake Erie close up until the advent of the Sunday School Picnic in August of that year. This picnic was held at Eagley’s Grove in nearby Pennsylvania. My first view of the lake was rather awesome. It was quite some time before I would even go wade in te water.

The long-awaited day came when my friend and I boarded a Nickle Plate train enroute to Buffalo, New York, then a change to a Canadian road for Midland. The train ride to the ship was one of the many many such rides that occurred throughout the years. Going to the ship, sad; coming home, glad. These train rides were stories in themselves.

## A Few Train Tales

One incident I recall was in 1951 after a long and successful year, a group of sailors left Superior, Wisconsin on a Chicago bound train. After laying-up the club car, all retired to their respective roomettes. These roomettes were really something. On this train, the upper bunks folded down and the lower bunk pulled

out like a drawer. Well, to make a long story short, Captain Harbottle was safely asleep in a lower bunk or so he thought. It seems that the bouncing of the car (the roadbed was terrible) unlatched the Captain's drawer type bunk and it started closing into the wall. Such screaming hollering you never heard. After the Captain was rescued, someone found a jug, and no one got any sleep the balance of that night.

On another occasion, the same type of a group left Milwaukee for home. In Chicago, several other ship officers boarded the train for Ohio. Again, the club car was the meeting place until the bar closed at the Indiana state line. Everyone stayed in the car and the chef agreed to serve us food. I do not believe I ever had a better tasting ham sandwich. Of course, those little miniature items so popular on trains seemed to come out of the walls. Our train chugged on through Indiana and into Ohio. One captain was so occupied that he failed to get off at Toledo, Ohio, and journeyed on to Conneaut. His wife put him on the next train bound for Toledo as said captain had to put on of his company's ships in drydock there.

Maybe one more story before we go on This one took place as I was leaving home. It is always hectic when a sailor leaves home to board a ship. This time I had been home for a weekend and had to leave on Sunday afternoon via New York Central. It was near train time and my wife Ruth, and I were scurrying around getting set to go. Meanwhile, our youngest daughter Jan (just a baby) had grabbed a leaf from the geranium plant and devoured it. Just as Ruth went out the door to the car, the baby upchucked down the front of her mother's dress.

Oh my! A quick wash and a change and we were off for the train. Of course, we had to wait for a long Nickle Plate freight. As we pulled up to the depot, the train was just pulling out. I made one of those "Dagwood Dashes" and swung aboard and was on my way. That is the way it was, hectic. The popularity of traveling by plane really took away all the excitement of going to the ship and coming home again.

### Back on the Boat

Let us see, where were we? Oh yes, still in Georgia Bay aboard the McNaughton We left there on the morning of May 3, 1928. Spring was late and bay waters choked with ice. The ships course for Lake Huron passed through many islands among whose names Flowerpot and Bear's Rump appeared. Look it up! After seeing the brilliant spring sun shining on such beautiful scenery, we were hooked. On we went up the St. Mary's River and through the heavy ice in Whitefish Bay into Lake Superior. Our destination, Fort William, Ontario, to load a cargo of grain for Buffalo.

In the parlance of lake jargon, a ship is never sent to a port, it is named in there. A cargo is never loaded from a dock, it is always loaded over a dock. Why is it that a commodity loaded into a ship is called a cargo and that loaded into a rail car is called a shipment? There is never a stairway, it is a companionway, never a ceiling, it is an overhead, never a wall, it is a bulkhead, and never a basement, but below.

These are some of the expressions that probably a landlubber never hears. Time is told by bells and these bells strike every half hour. 0030 hours (12:30 a.m.) is one bell, then so on for each and every half hour until eight bells is reached; four-eight-twelve, and then the sequence begins again This goes on and on and on. I think we made twenty-two trips that year of 1928 and eighteen of them were into Conneaut.

### Stormy Weather

Other years and other ships came, and the years rolled on. After a season and a half of passing coal and firing, we decided that the fire hold on a ship was not much better than a steel mill. Especially was this so after we encountered our first big storm. This took place on Lake Superior. We departed a coal unloading dock in the Portage Canal and entered Lake Superior where a storm was raging. We only had to cross the lake to Fort William, but this put us into the trough of the seas.

Probably that storm was not as bad as I thought. It was then that I had a violent attack of mal de mar (seasickness) and man that was something. Down in that smokey hot fire hold with decks heaving and tossing, even yet I shiver to think of it. At first, I thought I would die, then after an hour or so I was afraid I would not die! But eventually the watch was over, and I made it to bed. Never again did I become as sick as this first time.

We became used to the movement of the ship and over the years we weathered some "Jim Dandy" storms. Such terms as taking blue water across the deck or rolling the rails under became very familiar. Most of the violent storms on the lakes occur in spring and fall and the worst of these have been well documented. I remember two or three that are momentous and stand out in my memory.

In August of the year 1940 as a wheelsman aboard the McGilvray Shiras on the mate's watch (two 'til six) on a course for Detour, Michigan, at the mouth of the St. Mary's River we encountered a storm that I will never forget. The weather had been fine after coming on watch at 0200 hours. Skies cleared and the ship pumped out high and dry (no water ballast).

Just a few minutes after daybreak, I looked toward the northwest and immediately called the mate's attention to a wind squall approaching. The wind was whipping the waters of Lake Huron to a froth. The mate gave me the order to put the wheel

hard left, which I did. The ship started to come around into the wind, but never had a chance. Not having any water ballast, she “blew around,” that is, she was out of control and lay at the mercy of the wind and waves. Roll! I will say she rolled! By this time, the captain had made it to the pilot house and the mate had made it aft to inspect the steering gear.

Captain and I hung on for dear life. I swear that the ship rolled so far over that if I had let go of the wheel, I would have plunged out through the pilot house window into the blue water below. Of course, water ballast was immediately started into the tanks at the onset of the storm. On such a ship as the Shiras it took ages to run water in. After about an hour enough water had entered the tanks so that the bow of the ship commenced to come back up into the wind and soon, we set course again for Detour.

I was soon relieved at the wheel and made my way aft for breakfast. I did not expect much, but in fact did not get anything. You see, the sideboard (buffet) in the dining room had come adrift and thrashed around smashing the dining table and chairs and spilling its contents of flour and sugar among the debris of broken dishes and wood. In the ice box, things were worse. It was just one great big salad in there. Meat, vegetables, baked goods along with the milk, was churned into one hell of a mess. So much for this one.

Shore people have read or heard of the blow of 1940. Referred to now as the “Armistice Day Blow,” this storm was a bitch as storms go. It struck the entire chain of lakes without warning on a weekend when the Weather Bureau was closed. In this blow, ships were wrecked, and many lives were lost. Winds of hurricane force swept over the lakes accompanied by freezing weather and blinding snow. As for the Shiras, she spent most of that day in the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers downbound with orders for Conneaut. The worst of the storm struck as we were transiting the Livingston Channel in the lower Detroit River. I was relieved at the wheel at 1800 hours and headed back to eat supper. I never made it for some time, as the captain on reaching Bar Point Light set a course for SE Shoal on the way to Conneaut.

Wow! The ship took the full force of the storm broadside and water commenced coming aboard in hug waves. I grabbed the ladder on the lee side of the deckhouse and hung on for ages. Every movable object was swept from the deck and cabins, that is, all except the lifeboats and these would have been useless any way. The Shipper soon saw the error of his decision and turned the ship back toward the western shore of Lake Erie, finally reaching shelter of the land in the vicinity of Monroe, Michigan, where we lay with both anchors down and the engine running full speed ahead in order to hold our anchorage.

Mind you, the ship was loaded, but still she tossed and rolled the whole night long. The storm abated by next morning and we weighed anchor for Conneaut, twenty-four hours into late arriving. In those days, none except a very few ships had ship-to-shore radio telephones. What made this storm special in my memory was the fact that we locked down through the Soo Locks with the Canadian vessel, Anna C. Minch. The Minch was lost with all hands on Lake Michigan where the storm hit the hardest. I often wonder what if our orders would have read, "Go to Lake Michigan." Would the old Shiras with her wooden hatches and small size have weathered the blow? We will never know.

Of course, there were other storms and many of them. In later years after I became captain, I realized just what a skipper had to contend with. Briefly, one in particular as we entered Conneaut break wall during a strong blow from the northeast. As every good captain knows the prevailing currents along the south shore of Lake Erie are from the southwest. This is often true, even in a view from the east so care must be taken. This time it was dark, pitch dark and wind-swept spray and water obscured the break wall. I could see the line of the wall showing on the radar screen and just before we entered the gap, I saw the flashing green of the dinkey little light on the end of the east break wall under our port bow.

A similar incident occurred on Lake Michigan during a violent fall storm. This time we had to take our ship into Calumet Harbor (South Chicago) at the southern tip of the lake. This time the wind was out of the WNW and with a velocity of over seventy-five miles per hour. Again, it was night. Waves so violent and water spume blowing so that the break wall was not visible, and the radar was so full of storm clutter as to be useless. I called the mate to the pilot house to watch for any sign of the lighthouse or break wall and headed in via bearings on landmarks. We saw the light just as we passed it, but that was all. After getting under the wall, we were headed into the wind and as we approached the Calumet River, we picked up shelter and lost all of the sea. What a grand feeling it was as the two tugs hooked on to us and we headed up the river for U.S. Steel south dock.

### Foggy Days

When dense fog covers the rivers and further navigation becomes dangerous and impractical, many ships anchor and await a clearing. Fog is bad enough out in the open waters of the lakes, but once zero visibility sets in and a few ships are at anchor, it is then that the entire river traffic comes to a halt. Especially is this true in the St. Mary's River when the Army Corps of Engineers declares the locks closed. Once we had barely entered the St. Clair River when dense fog made it necessary for me to anchor my ship. We waited several hours for the fog to clear which it did about 0700 hours.

As luck would have it, we had chosen a spot in the river just off a large apartment complex. As usual, all the apartments facing the river had huge picture windows to afford a good view of the river. Well, by the same token these windows afford the sailors a pretty good view of what went on in the apartments. This particular morning was really something. The timing was perfect. Everyone was getting up or getting ready to go to work. After a few minutes, the wheelsman got excited and called my attention to one window through which we could see a beautiful golden nymph prancing around the room in the nude. She was in and out of the room several times before she finally emerged fully dressed. At that time, we hove anchor and got underway. Needless to say, when the occasion to anchor came thereafter, we always chose a spot off an apartment or hotel whenever possible!

Maybe it was not exactly cricket to peek, but a sailor welcomes any incident that will break the monotony of his life aboard ship. In later years after retiring, my wife and I visited one of her old school friends living along the St. Clair River. During the course of the conversation, I said to the woman, "You know that this is the first time that I ever saw you fully dressed. You have always been wearing a nighty or a robe."

Her husband then remarked, "See, I told you those guys out there had powerful binoculars."

### Living Aboard a Lake Freighter

What is life aboard a lake freighter like? Well, mainly it is routine. In the spring you receive your orders as to what ship you will have and an approximate date to report. Reporting dates may be early or late in the spring depending on ice conditions and the state of the national economy. The time to report comes and you leave by train or bus in the years past, but now most of the crew takes a plane or drives to the fit-out port.

After arriving aboard, you move into your quarters and get settled. Fitting out a ship is just getting everything in readiness to start the season. The entire ship has to be ready for U.S. Coast Guard inspection and has to pass said inspection before she can sail. In the olden days, the ship had to be scrubbed and the hull painted, but now shipping companies in order to cut costs do not do any work other than getting the ship ready to leave the dock.

Once the ship is under way with watches set, everything soon falls into place. Setting watches means that the crew is assigned their hours of work which is four hours on and eight hours off twice daily. It is rather amazing how few men it takes to actually run a ship, providing everything goes right. Forward, there is one mate one wheelsman, one watchman on watch day or night. On the after-end things are

much the same with an assistant engineer, one oiler and a fireman plus a maintenance man. Of course, there is always the captain and chief engineer ready for emergencies or to take the ship in or out of port and through the locks and narrow channels.

The captain must be in the pilot house whenever there is poor visibility. The pilot house must always be dark at night so the men's vision is not impaired. There is a dim light in the compass binnacle and over the chart table, the latter to be used to refer to chart when necessary. There are deckhands to handle the ship's mooring lines at the docks. Deckhands are also supposed to do ship maintenance work, but in later years little of this work is done because of various union rules which necessitates paying overtime for all but routine work.

There are many sounds aboard ship to get used to. It was once said that a ship "Talks to herself." While underway there is the constant throb of the engines or rumble of diesels or whine of turbines depending how modern the ship is. One welcome sound of bygone years was the ringing of the "hash hammer," that is the ringing of a hand bell to call the crew to eat. Some porters became so proficient at ringing the HH that their style became individualistic and recognized by crew on the ships. Then there is the ship's bell and that strikes out the hours and half hours when the ship is not at the dock.

There is always the hooting and blowing of the whistle. There is a complete list of whistle signals that every captain, mate, and pilot is required by law to know. The list is too long and varied to write about here. I might say that with the coming of the modern radio telephone the ship's whistle is not used as much as it should be.

Then there are the sounds of the loading and unloading machinery while at the dock. The Hulett unloaders are especially noisy and when they are cleaning up the cargo deck it is really something. The sound of steel scraping on steel certainly sets your teeth on edge. Then there is the whine of electric motors as the load is brought from the hold and placed on the dock. An inexperienced operator while reaching for the cargo will often push the ship away from the dock and when she comes back with a bang the whole ship shivers and shakes.

Loading limestone is another noisy operation as the tons of rock come tumbling off the endless belt and falls into the hold. There is not much noise connected with loading coal or grain just the sound of the deck machinery as the ship is moved up or down the dock.

Never are ship noises more noticeable than during a storm. First there is the screaming of the wind through the ship's rigging, and this really can be something. As captain I could lay in my bed below and tell the approximate velocity and

direction of the wind just by sound. Then there is the sound of waves crashing against the ship, then a pause and then a roar as tons of water come down on the decks or goes flying over the cabins.

On most of the ore freighters, there are two watertight tanks in the very forward section of the ship. These are called the forepeak and blind hold. They can be used for holding water ballast if necessary; however, most of the time they are empty when the ship is light and always so when the ship is loaded. When a light ship rises up on top of a wave and then crashes down into the crest of the next one, the sound effect forward is terrific. Just like some giant struck the ship with a club.

I remember one time when we were beating our way up Lake Huron in a sizable storm, we had just enough water ballast in the tanks to barely keep us going. The mate pleaded with the captain to allow him to order more water ballast, but Cap said, "Oh, we are all right. She is going along like an old shoe."

Well, it was not long before the old ship reared up on a wave and smashed down into the next one and shivered and shook like a dog shaking water from his wet fur. I was at the wheel and after things settled down a mite, I informed the captain that the gyro compass was haywire. The card was spinning like a top. The mate rushed to the master compass stationed in the captain's room, but soon was back in the pilot house informing the captain with some tone of satisfaction in his voice that the gyro was in a heap. What had happened was that seventeen of the suspension wires that held the gyro had broken, allowing the spinning compass to lay over on its side. This heavy part of the compass spins at over 6,000 revolutions per minute. I have often wondered just what would happen should this piece of machinery ever escape from its metal covering. I certainly would not like to be in the room if such a thing should take place.

Damage to the compass was not all that happened either. The big search light atop the pilot house was a mess. The protective glass, the bulb and the reflecting lens were all smashed. After all this, the captain said to the mate, "You had better start the water going in," just like nothing had ever happened.

Earlier I mentioned a ship talking to herself. No ore freighter is ever completely rigid. A ship as long as these must be flexible, or they would never last a storm. A trip back to the deck, if a trip is possible, during a storm reveals a regular symphony of sound. Plates squeak as they rub together, girders rub against struts and groan during the process and hatch covers squeak and squeal as they move around. Most of the old ships were finished in oak paneling and/or oak wainscoting. The movement of the wood sounded about like a woods full of crickets. I think this noise of the woodwork must have driven some of the room

inhabitants to distraction. This I judge by the number of wooden wedges driven here and there into the woodwork.

Each ship has its own personality. At no time is this more apparent than when you have one to command. You have to learn how each ship handles when in storms and when making docks. Some are like unruly horses you just have to keep a tight rein on them all the time.

### **Cruising with the Crews**

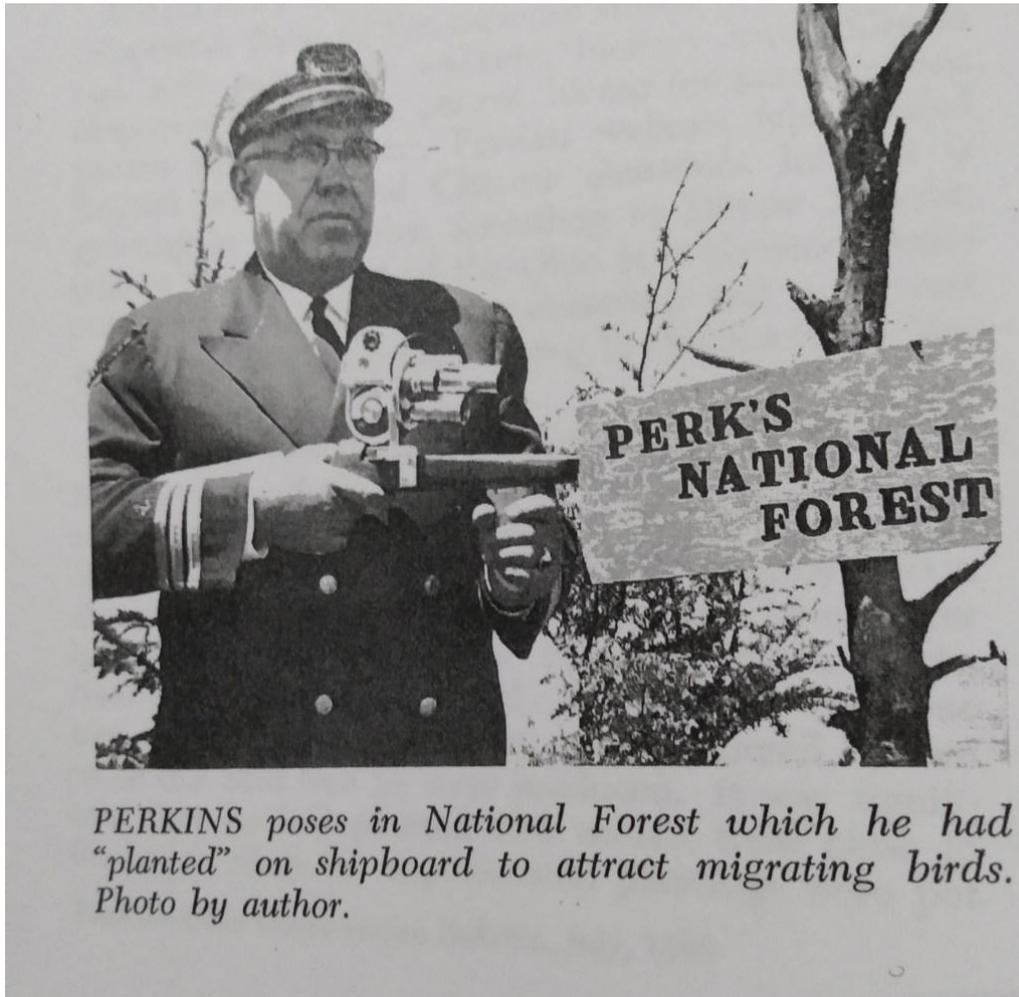
The crews that man the ships are a motley group. Under modern conditions, they have lost their identity. Such characters as: Milwaukee Dutch; Pittsburgh Brownie; Fairport Riley; Slice Bar Pete; Jumbo Lynch; Corned Beef Jim; Pork Chop George; and Kid Glove Gardner have disappeared from the annals of Great Lakes shipping. As you may have gathered, I left the smoke and grime of the fire hold and shipped in the deck department early on in my sailing career. The ways men entertained themselves while on board are many are varied. In my early days of sailing such instruments as guitars, banjos, mandolins and even violins comprised most of the entertainment. Some were played very well, and some would have been better left unplayed. Accordions were quite common as were portable phonographs, first battery operated radios, then plug in radios, and finally T.V Now days most of watch time afloat is with eyes glued to the boob tube. Mouth organs, of which I had several, were also a common type of instrument played by crew members.

One enterprising cook went as far as to organize a complete orchestra aboard ship. If you did not play an instrument, he taught you to do so. Not only for fun did this group play, but furnished entertainment for tourists and workers alike as the ship passed through the Soo Locks. He called his group, "The Royal Seagulls."

So much for the music. There were also artists, wood carvers, model builders, macrame workers (macrame originated aboard ship), photographic experts and last but not least, some very accomplished cooks. Then there were singers, teachers, and dance experts. One watchman taught a dancing glass down in the blind hold. He was really good at it.

I was among the slingshot experts, being able to hit a milk can tossed into the air more often than not. Many college students shipped board to make money to further their education. Others saved their money and went ashore and started businesses of their own. There were coin collectors, stamp collectors and just plain collectors. We even had a baseball announcer from one of the Cleveland radio stations as a crew member. One of the wheelmen I knew went on to become a well-known photographer for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. And so it goes. I myself furthered my study of birds and learned to photograph them as the many hundreds

of birds came aboard or passed over during the massive spring and fall migrations. No more need be written here about my being “For The Birds.”



### A Sailor and His Wife

A sailor’s wife can make or break his career at sea. A good woman at home is worth her weight in gold. Besides running the old homestead, raising the children and a multitude of other things without any or very little help from her husband, she has to on many occasions visit the boat in whatever port it enters. This necessitates transiting some very dangerous territory. In later years, no way can a woman safely meet the ship, especially in the larger cities. Usually, they get a motel or hotel room in the better part of town and wait until someone comes after them. Also, whenever possible wives board the ship at the Sault. That is if they are wives of officers and are going to make a trip with their husbands. A number of years ago our ship docked in South Chicago. At that time wives and friends were allowed to come to where the ship was moored.

I remember this occasion because of the following incident: After we were safely tied up at the dock a bevy of women came down the dock. Among them was this Amazonian type of blond. No way was she fat, just stacked in large proportions. Many a time I have seen husbands pick their wives off their feet in the exuberance of their meetings. Not this time. Blondie picked up her husband until his feet were a good six inches off the ground and Gene was not a small man by anyone's standard.

At another time and at a later date I docked the ship in Lorain. After seeing that everything was in order, another officer and I started out to the main gate to get our wives. The gateman on this occasion had allowed them to start down to meet us. Even though it was pitch dark, the girls knew the way. After leaving the car, there is a path to the dock that has huge piles of ore and stone stacked on either side, making the darkness darker. We met our wives in this narrow pathway. Now hear this. I thought I recognized my wife and gave her a very good hug and kiss. I said, "Gee, it is good to have you, Ruth."



Ruth Perkins

Ruth Christman Perkins

Shortly, a quiet voice said, "I am not Ruth. My name is Carolyn."

How about that?

Well, as it always does, time passed. Forty-one years at sea as we look back does not seem so long. Probably we traveled two million miles or more over the waters of the Great Lakes during this time.

In 1971, I commenced to think seriously of retiring. Quite a decision, to stop doing something that you have done for the greater part of your life. In 1973, my wife, Ruth, informed me that although we had been married thirty-four years, we had actually lived together but twelve and a half of them. Our two daughters had

grown up, one was married and the other in her final years at college, so why not call it quits, take down my licenses from their frames and go home?

So one fine day in September of that year we brought our ship, the Str. Richard V Lindabury, into Conneaut Harbor, tied her up and departed bag and baggage. Ruth made the final trip with me which was fitting and proper although I often kid her that she made the trip just to be sure that I came home.

How are the retirement years? They could not be better. Never have I been so busy. Earlier I thought about going back to work just to get some rest. I had the chance to return last August, (1970) when the President of the Master Mates and Pilots Association called and asked if I would go back out for a month to help out with a shortage of officers. I told him "Not interested," As a further inducement, I was told that Ruth could go along for a month. No way, all my necessary licenses had expired which fact has stranded me ashore forever.

By

Capt. J.P. Perkins, retired

Bibliography

Great Lakes Pilot – U.S. Government Printing Office

American Lake Series – Bobbs-Merrill

## Captain John Paul Perkins

The June-July Sidelights 1960 mentions that he received his 25 year pin for his service. This would put the date around 1935 for him joining the Pittsburgh fleet.

Third Mate on the H.C. Strom

Third Mate on the Henry H. Rogers

Third Mate on the George G. Crawford in 1943

Third Mate on the John Hulst in 1944

Third Mate on the John Hulst

Second Mate on the Steamer John Hulst- 1953- Lists in Rendrick Collection

Coal passer on the Charles M. Schwab- Sept. 1956

Second Mate on the Cornell

Second Mate on the Cornell

Second Mate on the Henry H. Rogers

Second Mate on the William J. Olcott

Second Mate on the William J. Olcott

Second Mate on the William J. Filbert

Second Mate on the John Hulst

Second Mate on the John Hulst  
Second Mate on the Joshua Hatfield  
Second Mate on the Sewell Avery  
Second Mate on the Eugene W. Pargny- 1956- Lists in Rendrick Col.  
Second Mate on the George A. Sloan  
Fist Mate on the John W. Gates- 1957 Lists in Rendrick Collection  
Second Mate on the Richard V. Lindabury  
First Mate on the J.P. Morgan, Jr.  
First Mate-----  
Second Mate----  
First Mate William J. Filbert---- 1963  
First Mate on the Eugene J. Buffington.....1965  
First Mate on the Horace Johnson....1966  
Captain of the Thomas F. Cole.....1968  
Captain of the William J. Filbert..1969 Red Book  
Captain of the Percival Roberts, Jr...1970 Red Book  
Captain of the Percival Roberts, Jr.....1971 Red Book  
Captain of the Richard V. Lindabury  
Captain of the John W. Gates



## Sidelights

July 1975

### Hobby Category.

A recent newspaper article in the Conneaut Ohio News Herald publicized the work retired Captain John Paul Perkins has been doing in ornithology (study of birds) in the Conneaut area. Captain Perkins performs a regular survey of 68 bluebird boxes he has stationed throughout the Conneaut area covering roughly a 40 miles area.

Captain Perkins is an experienced lecturer and has appeared on a TV documentary discussing various birds and their habitat. He retired from the Great Lakes fleet as skipper of the Steamer Richard V. Lindabury in 1972 with 37 years of continuous service with U.S. Steel. I suppose you could say that since Captain Perkins; retirement his future is” for the birds.”



Photo by Cynthia Danals

**WILMA KITSON**, cataloguing advisor for Marine Museum, and retired Captain J. Paul Perkins show off new artifacts received Nov. 21 by the museum. Pictured here are (from left) a United States Steel corporate flag, a gyro compass repeater, a captain's chair and an outside compass binnacle.



Captain Perkins lectures about his birds at schools, community organizations, and Conneaut and Ashtabula.



TOP ROW:—Paavo Plosila, Earl Oehlenschlaeger, Herald Taylor, Waino Maukonen, Mauno Jarvi, Arnold Rajala, Murray Tyger, Toivo Manniko, Fred Kallstrom, Walter Whitehead.  
 SECOND ROW:—Wendell Ring, Wellington Crews, Uro Aho, Judd Miller, Clyde Rodgers, Stewart Chapman, Paul Rist, Kenneth Munson, Hubert Smith, Donald Quinn, Newall Randall, Kenneth Watson, Elmer Woodworth, Edgar Speer, Paul Perkins.  
 THIRD ROW:—Leland Smith, Carl Sheehan, John Paull, Roland Marcy, Paul Prescott, John Mowry, Howard Bacon, Richard Humble, Alphonso Demarco, Howard Tyger, Reginald Smith.

The Senior Tattler, Conneaut High School 1926. John Park Perkins.

John Paul Perkins died on February 20,1990 and he is buried in Greenlawn Cemetery, in North Kingsville.



Conneaut Sand Spit where Perk spent hours birding, spotting and identifying birds.