Captain Kid

My interest in boats came from my dad, who was a sailor of the Great Lakes at the time when my family lived close to Lake Michigan in Wisconsin.

Imagine my excitement when, upon my graduation from Manitowoc High School, in 1930, at the age of 16, I was invited by the captain of the motor ship Daniel McCool to spend the summer aboard his ship.

My father, as wheelsman on the Daniel McCool, was part of the forward crew along with the captain and mate. The cook and four men in the engine room completed the crew. As a result of the stock market crash in late 1929, the Manitowoc Portland Cement Co., operators of the boat, had reduced the crew by half.

As a passenger, I helped the cook, acted as deckhand and helped with unloading the bulk cement we carried to Milwaukee and Chicago.

The first of two memories that left lasting impressions was the time a storm came up suddenly. The captain was teaching me to steer the ship as the waves got higher and higher.

Finally, the captain said, “George, I’d better take her now. Stay here in the pilothouse; you’d be washed overboard if you went out on deck.”

It was then, on the night of July 6, that I realized this was not an ordinary storm. By that time, waves were rising above the top of the pilothouse.

By contrast, the second experience came on a sunny afternoon as we headed out of Milwaukee and were bound for our home port in

Manitowoc. The captain said he was feeling very ill and turned the boat over to the ship's mate.

A few minutes later, my father said he also felt ill. This left the mate and me alone in the pilothouse.

Uh-Oh...Another Down!

At about 2 p.m., the mate complained of feeling very bad. He left me in complete charge, telling me to hold the same course and adding that in the event of an emergency, I should give a few honks on the horn.

For the next 4 hours, I made up the entire forward crew of the Daniel McCool going north up Lake Michigan. Around 6 o'clock, my father returned to the pilothouse and was surprised to see a 16-year-old alone at the helm.

The captain and mate soon returned, and the captain checked with each crewman about the dinner menu. He came to set the blame for the illnesses on contaminated clam chowder. Only one engine room man and I had not eaten the chowder.

The captain asked me what I would have done had the illness been more serious and the crew had died. My response was that I had learned Morse code as a Boy Scout and would have used the searchlight to signal an SOS to the Coast Guard.

"Good thinking," the captain commended. "We'll make a sailor out of you yet."

My ambition was to be a sea captain, but the trials of the Great Depression changed that. I am now retired from a grocery business my wife and I founded 56 years ago.

I've traveled the St. Mary River system many times in a small cruiser and have several hundred snapshots of ships and boats.

I’ve made several trips across Lake Michigan, including one from Marquette to Detroit, Michigan on the ore carrier Elton Hoight 2, but none as a true sailor.

However, I can truthfully say I was a Great Lakes ship captain for 4 adventure-filled hours.

—George T., Oconto, Wisconsin