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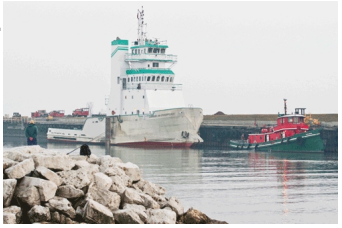
Unexpected arrival of tug-barge has Port residents recalling coal dock vessels

An unexpected visit from a 142-foot tugboat last week attracted a fair bit of attention from Port Washington residents who remember fondly the days when the city was a frequent port of call for Great Lakes freighters.

Crippled by an engine room fire, the Samuel de Champlain was towed into the harbor Tuesday, Nov. 20, and spent Thanksgiving moored to what used to be the We Energies coal dock. That dock, which for decades brought a steady stream of coal-carrying freighters to the city, has not been used regularly since the power plant was converted to a natural-gas burning facility and is now being converted into a park.



The tug is usually paired with the 460-foot cement barge Innovation and was pushing her early last week when the fire broke out, according to Stan Andrie, president of the Muskegon, Mich., based Andrie Inc., which manages the vessels.

The integrated tug-barge was towed to Milwaukee, where the barge was disconnected and the Samuel de Champlain began its trip to Bay Shipbuilding Co. in Sturgeon Bay.

Being towed by the tug Wisconsin, the Samuel de Champlain made it as far as Port, where it waited for a break in the weather to continue its trip north.

It left early Saturday morning under tow from the tug Missouri.

“It’s at Bay Ship, where they’re assessing the damage,” Andrie said Monday. “The important thing is no one was hurt in the fire.”

The Samuel de Champlain’s stay in Port gave residents a good look at half of an integrated tug-barge.

Its classification as a tug is a bit of a misnomer since the Samuel de Champlain, like other vessels of its kind, fits into a notch in the stern of a barge and pushes rather than pulls or tows. The tug’s towering pilot house allows the helmsman to see over the barge.

Together, the Samuel de Champlain and Innovation, which when “integrated” essentially form one ship, are 544 feet long.

The longest and first integrated tug-barge to operate on the Great Lakes is the 1,000-foot

Presque Isle.

The use of integrated tug-barges has been increasing on the Great Lakes because they are less expensive to operate in terms of both crew and fuel costs than traditional self-powered freighters.

The two-part ship concept has also proven to be an effective form of recycling, giving old, inefficient freighters new life as barges.

While the Innovation was built for its current use in 2006, other barges have long histories on the lakes.

Last month, the 579-foot integrated tug-barge McKee Sons, a former freighter with a storied history, found a lee off Port Washington during a fall gale.

The McKee Sons was built in 1945 as a fast troop transport vessel and christened the Marine Angel.

In 1953, it was lengthened, retrofitted as a freighter and brought to the Great Lakes, becoming the first saltwater vessel to operate as a self-unloader on the Great Lakes.

It was renamed the McKee Sons for the 11 sons of the three McKee brothers who were principals of Sand Products Corp. of Detroit.

The McKee Sons sailed as a steamer until 1979, when its engines were removed and its hull retrofitted to make it a barge. It is currently paired with the tug Invincible.

Image Information: CRIPPLED BY AN engine room fire, the 142-foot tug Samuel de Champlain was towed into Port Washington last week and remained moored to the former We Energies coal dock until Saturday, when it continued its journey to Sturgeon Bay, where it is undergoing repairs. The ship is part of an integrated tug-barge that carries cement on the Great Lakes. Photos by Bill Schanen IV and Sam Arendt