The passing of the log carrier

By Syd Heal

It seems certain that, even though she has long since been forgotten by most of the local shipping world, a sentimental tear or two might have been shed for the passing of the second of the only two self-propelled, self-dumping log ships to grace our coast. I speak of the *Haida Brave*, the second and smaller of the two memorable vessels that were once the pride of MacMillan Bloedel through their operating company Kingcome Navigation Co. Ltd. *Haida Brave* and its companion log barge *Straits Logger*, a reliable old workhorse and the veteran among the current fleet, ignominiously travelled towards the breaker's yard in China earlier this year as deck cargo aboard a Chinese owned semi-submersible, the *Development Way*. The ship and its deck cargo must have attracted as much attention when seen at sea as it did when at anchor in Vancouver Harbour loading a veritable convoy of the two barges and several tugs.

The log barges have been a part of the B.C. coastal scene since 1925 when a small fleet of 11 U.S. war-built wooden hulls were purchased out of layup in Lake Washington by Washington Tug & Barge. Known as the Ferris hulls (after their designer), they were built as a quick solution to the pressing need for ships as the First World War was approaching its end. Constructed from inadequately seasoned fir lumber, only a very small number went to sea as commercial vessels and usually with a very short life. Fire, a propensity for marine accidents and rot ensured as much. British Pacific Log Transport Company was incorporated in B.C. in 1925. This company was a 50/50 joint venture between prominent Vancouver shipbuilder and ship owner John Coughlin and two officials from Washington Tug & Barge, Edgar Worthington and James Bloomfield. It seems reasonably certain that the vessels were purchased from the U.S. Shipping Board at dirt cheap prices. Wooden freighters had been a commercial failure and the usual way of disposing of them was to burn them on a shore site with the metal fittings and fastenings being the net value for scrap.

Photo courtesy of Seaspan International

The Haida Brave.

In service on the B.C. coast, they were generally towed by big old steam tugs of which there was a good supply in the 1920s. The wooden barges were relatively small with dimensions of 268'x46'x24' and of 2,250 grt. The deadweight they actually loaded with logs is not known, but it was probably not much over 3,000 tons. The first barge to go into service was the *Bingammon* and the last active wooden log barge was the *Biscayne* which sank off Cape Beale lighthouse in 1932 although one,

the *Addison,* lasted as a hulk as part of the Powell River breakwater until it sank at its moorings in 1943.

The transportation of logs in barges was a sound enough concept as losses from adverse weather and marine borers literally ate up logs at an incredible rate. Logs held in seawater for any length of time soon lost value. As the wooden barges' short life unfolded it became obvious to the coastal logging interests of the day that steel hulls were a better answer, but the idea of purpose building would not take hold as long as there was a cheaper alternative. Some deepsea sailing ships were converted to barges before and after WWI usually following accidents where they were written off as constructive total losses and cut down to barges. The best known of these were probably the *Melanope*, a former wool clipper and passenger carrier in the Australian trade which became a coal hulk at Vancouver for the CPR; and the *Drumrock*, owned by Hecate Straits Towing Company which was led by well-known local shipping personality, B.L. "Barney" Johnson. This vessel, a former British four-masted barque, had a capacity of about 4,000 tons of logs and it set a new standard for log barges compared to the smaller wooden barges.

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During WWI, a fleet of high-quality large sailing ships owned by German interests were interned mostly at Santa Rosalia in Mexico. Acquired very cheaply by the Robert Dollar Company in San Francisco after the war, they were put back to sea as sailing vessels, but there were too many problems with them, including the difficulty of manning with experienced officers and crew. Three of the ships were transferred to the Canadian register and became part of the fleet of Pacific Coyle Navigation who cut them down to log barges named *Pacific Carrier*, *Pacific Forester* and *Pacific Gatherer*. Pacific Coyle, once the giant of the B.C. towing industry, was a struggling company that failed to grasp the potential of the diesel engine and the decline of steam in the tugs and was also affected by the depression of the 1930s. In that period, the three barges were acquired by Island Tug & Barge Ltd. of Victoria headed by Harold Elworthy who soon identified himself as the leader in the development of the log barge, a position he more or less retained until Island Tug became part of the merger that formed Seaspan in 1970. Renamed with the "Island" prefix, the *Island Gatherer* was lost in 1936, but the *Island Carrier* and *Island Forester* remained the mainstay of the log carrying fleet on the B.C. coast until after the Second World War.

After WWII, the B.C. coastal forest industry expanded at a prodigious rate. When the war ended, pulp and/or paper mills were operating at Powell River, Port Alberni, Port Alice and at two locations in Howe Sound. Postwar expansion, in addition to changes and improvements made at most of

the existing mills, saw new complexes at Crofton, Nanaimo, Campbell River, New Westminster, Tahsis, Prince Rupert and Kitimat and from the time of the first W.A.C. Bennett government in 1953, a policy of maximum expansion was encouraged although some much-mooted projects like mills on the north coast never came to pass. The need for economically delivered pulp logs became paramount and movement in Davis rafts or flat rafts was neither practical nor economical. The need to expand the log carrier fleet became more urgent as new mills came on stream.

Early postwar efforts were very tentative as if both the forest product companies and the towing industry were sniffing the air looking for direction. The Powell River Company commissioned the first two purpose-built self-dumping log barges in 1954, the *Powell No. 1* and *Powell No. 2*, but Harold Elworthy at Island Tug saw an opportunity and acquired seven discarded Lake Maracaibo shallow draft tankers from Shell and Esso (which his tugs towed to Victoria from Venezuela in two spectacular voyages). Conversion took place between 1954 and 1956 and drastically enlarged the capacity of the available fleet so it was not until 1957 that Straits Towing, Vancouver Tug and Crown Zellerbach plunged heavily and took delivery of a total of five self-dumpers. The last in this group of 12 ships was built in 1965 as the *Rayonier No.4*.

The self-dumpers needed a substantial shore-based loading point or a crane barge to create extra loading capacity. In some instances it could be very cumbersome. By 1960, the forest companies, always on the lookout for faster delivery and quicker turnaround, saw B.C. Forest Products take delivery of the twin-craned *Forest Prince*, the first of 13 self-loading, self-dumping log barges built for both the forest companies and the tugboat operators. She was to be the smallest of the twin-craned log barges. (Two smaller barges fitted with a single crane are included in this group). The last of this group were the *Seaspan Rigger* (renamed *Seaspan Phoenix*) of 1980 and the *Rivtow Hercules* of 1981. These two, along with the *Seaspan Forester* (ex-*Island Forester*), built in 1970 and the largest of all the B.C. log barges at 20,000 tonnes dwt capacity when built, remain as three of the surviving fleet of four active log barges in commission.

Photo credit: Don Rose

Photo credit: Rod Innes

Top: the Straits Logger*; below: the* Haida Monarch.

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There was a long gap of 10 years from the building of the *Island Forester*, *Crown Zellerbach No. 1* and *Swiftsure Prince* which were all commissioned in 1970, to the building of the *Seaspan Rigger* in 1980. Perhaps a reason for this was to enable the industry players to judge the success of MacMillan Bloedel's two self-propelled, self-loading and self-dumping barges which were designated as Log Ships by their owners. The first and largest — the *Haida Monarch* — came out in 1974 with a cargo capacity of 15,000 short tons. As a precaution against being tempted into too radical a new design in untested waters, her hull was that of a conventional log barge. This ship — for realistically she jumped the line between self-propelled ships and towed barges — was designated as a ship rather than a barge by her owners. It also has to be said that barges with engines are a ship-type known in many parts of the world and there is no rigid guideline, but it appears that size also relates to the distinction between a powered barge and a ship.

The concept of the log ships was supportable economically on the basis that there was a large, reliable log supply and a need to get them to the mills in the most economically feasible and shortest time. The model showed that with higher speed and faster turnaround and the certainty of full loads, the log ships could deliver a larger tonnage than comparable tug and barge units at a lower overall cost per unit of logs. In the 1970s there was still a widespread belief that the coastal forests were a virtually inexhaustible resource and the towing companies were under constant pressure to keep up with the

needs of the forest industry, or, as some feared, surrender their toehold to forest product companies that had bigger resources for financing vessels. MacMillan Bloedel, Crown Zellerbach and B.C. Forest Products all made big investments in their own equipment and then, in 1978, M&B built the *Haida Brave*, a smaller more radical design of ship than its larger consort.

The 10,000 short ton *Haida Brave* was an improvement on its predecessor when it came to crew accommodation and heavier capacity cranes. Their speed was about the same, but with the best brains available, a great deal of discussion and thought went into her design. Despite all this effort, the *Haida Brave* was not as successful as her larger consort. With her finer lines, she was more tender and had a distinct tendency to prematurely dump when caught in poor conditions. When this happened with a full load, losses of time, collection costs and unrecoverable logs were probably expensive enough to undermine the economic model even when helped by insurance.

Over the next 20 years, slow deterioration in the forest industry due to economic, trade, managerial and political issues saw MacMillan Bloedel suffer more 'downs' than 'ups' and in an effort to dispose of what it termed non-core assets it sold its own tug and barge operator, Kingcome Navigation to Seaspan and with it the two log ships changed owners. Seaspan, which probably had never been enthralled by the log ships, soon laid them up.

In 2005, Seaspan took a leap of faith and rebuilt the *Haida Monarch* as a towed barge at a considerable cost. With engines removed, capacity was increased to about 17,000 short tons when she re-emerged as the *Seaspan Survivor*. The accommodation was stripped out and the more modern, heavier capacity cranes of the *Haida Brave* were substituted. Once the *Haida Brave* sacrificed her cranes, she had no further purpose and she never sailed again. Between carrying her last load of logs and going to China she was in layout for close to 10 years.

The history of the B.C. log barges now spans 86 years. Will it make the century? Probably, but only just, as by then the rebuilt *Seaspan Survivor* will be 55 years old (of which her last 20 years will have been spent as a barge). Even with first class maintenance she is more likely to become economically obsolescent before her materials get so old that she no longer becomes worth the upkeep. She was renamed the *Seaspan Survivor* because it is anticipated that she will be the last of the breed. A new cycle has already started with small, relatively cheap flat-deck barges lacking any onboard loading or unloading arrangements now increasingly carrying logs. The four log barges now in commission, the last of an estimated 64, will gradually reduce in number until we reach the final survivor.

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