



The crew of B. B. Inman's tugboat Buffalo in the Duluth harbor, about 1890; figureheads of an eagle and a coachman grace the pilothouse.

B. B. INMAN

THE COMMODORE OF DULUTH

Al Miller

The nighttime lights of Duluth dappled Lake Superior's shore as the steamship *Kasota*, with three schooners in tow, approached the narrow canal leading into the city's harbor. Captain Byron B. Inman watched with concern as he slowed his vessel to a halt. Strong currents in the canal and a fresh wind on the lake made conditions too treacherous for the *Kasota* to tow the masted schooners into port. Inman would need a tugboat to shepherd each of the vessels through the canal.¹

But no tugs were coming. Again and again, Inman sounded the *Kasota's* whistle, the agreed-upon summons. But it was night, and even though Duluth in 1884 had an active port, only one tug operated after sundown. Eventually, the little *John A. Paige* steamed out of the harbor and took one of the schooners in tow. Inman spent the rest of the night holding the remaining schooners off shore until the laboring *Paige* could finally maneuver them into port.

As the bleary-eyed Inman guided the *Kasota* to dock the next morning, he pondered the city. A growing settlement with an expanding harbor, Duluth was described by many as the new Chicago. Yet it was a port where tugboat men were slow to meet the steamers and sailing vessels that called there. During several years of sailing Lake Superior with Wilson's Transit Line, Inman had seen many freighters, beset by weather, wallow

¹ Here and below, Byron Inman, letter to the editor, *Duluth Daily Tribune*, Oct. 14, 1885. See also, *Duluth Evening Herald*, Mar. 12, 1904.

Mr. Miller is a writer and editor for the University of Wisconsin—Superior. He lives in Duluth.

off Duluth until a tugman found it convenient to offer assistance. Vessel masters who tried to steam into the port alone often found themselves straying from the shallow, meandering channels and running aground on one of many mudbanks.²

The situation gave the former tugboat master something to think about. That winter, the 35-year-old Michigan native tendered his resignation as master of the *Kasota* and borrowed enough money to purchase the tug *J. L. Williams* in Buffalo, New York. A short time later he announced he would take the 67-foot *Williams* to Duluth to start a towing business. His surprised friends were skeptical, telling him he was trading a job with a respected employer for certain starvation, but Inman was confident he would succeed.

Confidence and tugboats were hallmarks of B. B. Inman's 40-year career on the Great Lakes. As a young man he had commanded some of the most renowned schooner-towing tugs on the St. Clair and Detroit Rivers. When that business died out, he mastered some of the biggest steamships on the lakes, before establishing his own tug line in Duluth. Inman's life was the quintessential American story of success and failure. Always seeking an advantage and never fearing a calculated risk, he parlayed a single tug into a fleet of 22 by the turn of the century, becoming widely known and respected on Duluth's waterfront and around the Great Lakes. He played host to politicians, entertainers, and railroad magnates but was happiest in the company of his fellow sailors. When he lost his company to a corporation battling to control towing on the lakes, Inman gave up virtually everything, but he started over again. Only an early death ended Inman's dream.

Born May 3, 1849, to Jerome and Cordelia Inman of Ray, Michigan, Byron Bonaparte Inman grew up in Port Huron, located where the broad expanse of Lake Huron pinches together to race into the St. Clair River. Quitting school at 14 to take a job as cabin boy aboard the steamer *Belle*, Inman linked his life to shipping on the Great Lakes.³

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the lakes were rapidly becoming a great national transportation artery. From Lake Ontario to Lake Superior, hundreds of schooners hauled limestone, coal, grain, and other supplies to the devel-

oping northern-tier states. Most schooners were modest vessels ranging from 80 to 250 feet in length and boasting two or three masts. But schooners were wedded to the wind, and they were soon eclipsed by coal-fired steamships. After the Civil War, steam-powered freighters steadily grew in size and increased in speed and reliability. Before long, many shipowners were using their graceful schooners as little more than barges pulled behind powerful steamers. This proved faster than relying on the capricious wind, and in the shipping business, time was money.

After working for seven years aboard various schooners and steamers, Inman landed a job as wheelsman on the river tug *George E. Brockway*. Virtually every port on the lakes had at least one harbor tug, often a 60- or 70-foot steam-powered craft that could deftly push and pull a schooner or steamer up to its dock. But river tugs like the *Brockway* were a breed apart. The St. Clair and Detroit Rivers linking Lake Huron to Lake Erie were a schooner captain's nightmare. Crowded with all manner of steamers, ferries, and smaller craft, the rivers also had a frightful current of three or four miles per hour. A schooner coming downriver might careen along barely under control, while one headed upriver might fight for days against the current. To meet this challenge, dozens of American and Canadian river tugs charged fees, based on a sailing vessel's size, to tow schooners through the two rivers. Powerful vessels some 130 feet long, the tugs bore colorful names like *Sweepstakes*, *Satellite*, and *Champion*. Their captains prided themselves on two things: towing as many schooners as possible at the same time and never letting their tows run aground.

Inman thrived in this hectic, unregulated business, and he soon became the *Brockway's* mate. Being 21 years old with a respectable job, he married Amelia Dempster of Port Huron. Over the next decade Inman gained fame by towing numbers of schooners at once—no small feat considering the rivers' currents and poorly marked channels. "The tug *Champion*, Capt. Byron Inman, now carries the broom [signifying a 'clear sweep' of competitors] for having towed large tows through the river," a Detroit newspaper noted in July 1878. "The *Champion* passed down yesterday forenoon with seven large schooners in tow. . . . This is the largest tow that has passed this port this season."⁴

² Here and below, *Daily Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1894.

³ Here and two paragraphs below, Hiram Inman, Byron Inman Biography (hereafter "Biography"), 1 page, Aug. 13, 1929, Byron Inman and Family Papers, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center (NEMHC), Duluth. See also, John B. Mansfield, *History of the Great Lakes* (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1899), 2:44–46.

⁴ "Biography"; *Detroit Free Press*, clipping, 1878, scrapbook, Inman Papers.

But as steamers continued to replace schooners, the need for river towing declined. By 1882 Inman decided to get out. Signing on with Captain Thomas Wilson's fleet, he became master of the 234-foot steamer *Hiawatha*. Although he had made some trips on Lake Superior as a young sailor, it was as a master for the Wilson's Transit Company that Inman came to know Duluth.⁵

The *Hiawatha* usually towed the barge *Minnehaha* as it traded between Lake Erie ports, Chicago, and Duluth. The vessels brought the first load of railroad rails to Agate Bay on Lake Superior's wild North Shore in 1883. The next year Inman took command of the *Kasota*, a new 247-foot steamer, among the largest on the Great Lakes. The same year, the *Kasota* carried one of the first loads of iron ore shipped from Agate Bay, renamed Two Harbors.

In 1884, when Inman decided to go into business towing vessels in the Duluth harbor, schooners that used sails on the open lakes needed tugboats to tow them in and out of port. The newer, steam-powered freighters were more maneuverable than schooners, but they, too, depended on tugs to guide them through poorly marked harbor channels and push them into tight mooring berths. Duluth had a dozen others, but they were busy towing dredges or rafts of logs, not vessels. To Inman, this presented a golden opportunity.

"He had often seen vessels come up the lake in a storm and have to wait outside the harbor until some tug would find it convenient to come out for them," Inman's brother Hiram said in a 1904 newspaper interview. Hiram had been a mate aboard the *Hiawatha* and *Kasota* under his brother's command. "The harbor was only

dredged to fourteen feet at that time," Hiram recalled, "and the vessels that came in without tugs often ran aground. I remember after one storm there were five vessels aground in the harbor here. The captains tied their whistles down

in an attempt to get tugs to come to their assistance, and the five whistles made such a noise that the citizens came very near rising up in their wrath and lynching the captains for robbing them of their sleep." After a number of captains promised to patronize Inman if he would go into vessel towing exclusively, he purchased his tugboat, bringing it to Duluth in the spring of 1885.⁶

Wasting no time, Inman secured some of his trade from vessel masters he knew but often won a tow simply by pulling alongside an arriving boat and offering his services. Similarly, when fire was discovered at the Northwestern Fuel Company's coal dock that year, Inman sped his tug there within minutes, first pulling two vessels out of danger, then returning to lend the tug's pumps to fighting the blaze. The

Duluth Daily Tribune reported "The *J. L. Williams* was the first on the scene, arriving before she had hardly steam enough to move herself." When treacherous November gales began to blow, Inman used the *Williams* to free the steamer *Kitty M. Forbes*, stranded on Outer Island in the Apostle Islands.⁷

The next spring, Inman returned to Duluth from his home in Port Huron with the *J. L. Williams* and a new tug, the *Cora B*. By the middle of summer he bought out another small tug line, adding three to his fleet. The vessels now bore "Inman Line" on their bows, and local newspapers dubbed B. B. "Commodore Inman."⁸



Capt. B. B. Inman, a confident yet careful mariner

⁵ Here and two paragraphs below, "Biography." See also, Alexander C. Meakin, *Master of the Inland Seas: The Story of Captain Thomas Wilson and the Fleet That Bore His Name* (Vermilion, Ohio: Great Lakes Historical Society, 1988), 40.

⁶ *Evening Herald*, Mar. 12, 1904.

⁷ *Daily Tribune*, June 19, Nov. 10, 1885.

⁸ *Daily Tribune*, May 12, Aug. 7, 1886; vessel photographs, NEMHC.



Tugs tow a pair of schooners into the canal entering Duluth's harbor, passing Canal Park's industries, taverns, and bordellos, 1890s

In 1886, Duluth presented almost limitless possibilities to the enterprising Inman. A quarter of the grain grown in Minnesota's Red River valley and the Dakotas passed through the port, bound for midwestern mills. Vessels returning from lower Great Lakes ports carried coal for heating homes or manufactured goods for settlers scattered across the upper Midwest. That year alone the port recorded more than 1,800 arriving and departing schooners and steamers.⁹

When Inman opened shop in Duluth, the city boasted 18,000 residents, most living in ramshackle wooden houses perched on the hillside overlooking the harbor or in downtown boarding-

houses and hotels. Many men worked at the port, handling freight in dockside warehouses, unloading barrels and boxes from boats, and shifting the cargo to waiting freight wagons or boxcars. Others worked in the 8 grain elevators, 13 sawmills, and 4 coal docks that lined the waterfront along the adjoining Superior and St. Louis Bays. It was rough, physical labor that could be dangerous, sometimes even fatal. At the end of their long workdays, many men found solace at one of the 84 saloons that kept thirsts slaked.

Inman fit perfectly in this rawboned frontier port. He was a robust man who sported a fashionably short haircut, a luxuriant moustache, and a seemingly ever-present derby. He dressed well, as

⁹ Here and below, Archaeology Department, Minnesota Historical Society, Duluth–Superior Harbor cultural resources study, Aug. 1976, p. 65–74. See also, *Duluth City Directory*, 1884–1902; William F. Leggett and Frederick J. Chipman, *Duluth and Environs: An Historical, Biographical, Commercial & Statistical Record* (Duluth: Leggett and Chipman, 1895).

befitted a man who owned his own company, but his face bore the telltale creases of years spent staring at the sea and sky from an open pilot-house. Inman's friends and business associates, who called him "B. B.," described him as popular and gregarious. While he would steadfastly refuse to hire an alcoholic captain, he would not hesitate to send groceries anonymously to a needy neighbor. When influential people visited Duluth, it was usually Inman who toured them around the harbor aboard one of his tugs. When an old boss from Detroit needed work, the entrepreneur gave him a job.¹⁰

Inman's tugboat business boomed in the late 1880s. In 1887 he bought the tug *Record*, his first iron-hulled vessel, and hired his brother Hiram as assistant manager. The following year B. B. moved his wife and two children, 10-year-old Grace and 7-year-old Walton, from Port Huron to their new home in Duluth. He also purchased the steamer *Ossifrage* to carry passengers and freight between Duluth and Port Arthur, Ontario. But the passenger service did not fare well, and neither did his 17-year marriage. He and Amelia separated and would eventually divorce. Meanwhile, she took their children back to Port Huron. Soon Inman began boarding with Asa D. and Mary R. Frost, a young couple he had met two years earlier.¹¹

Always looking for ways to keep his tugs busy, Inman stumbled on the wrecking business in 1889 when the steamer *City of Cleveland* and its tow barge *John Martin* ran aground near Two Harbors. Inman dispatched the *Record*, which quickly freed the barge, but the *City of Cleveland* was in much more serious trouble. Some experts said it could not be saved.¹²

Sensing a business opportunity, Inman had his men shift the *City of Cleveland's* cargo to a barge while hard-hat divers patched the steamer's leaking hull. Heavy pumps were brought in from other cities to drain the flooded steamer, and Inman even carried sightseers to the wreck aboard the *Ossifrage*. Less than a month after grounding, the *City of Cleveland* was floating safely in Duluth's harbor.

Inman's salvage job netted him \$8,000—enough money to buy a good tug—and an instant reputation as a wrecker. "That man, Byron Inman, handled that wreck in tip-top style," a Cleveland

vesselman told the *Duluth Herald*. "He watched every move that was made and knew just what to do and when to do it." flushed with success, Inman quickly returned the *Ossifrage* to its builder and bought the pumps and tools needed for salvage work.

Inman's quick entry into the salvage or wrecking trade was typical. Although his formal education had been brief, he was an aggressive businessman and keen student of human nature. While he owned few of his own boats outright, he kept enlarging his fleet by buying vessels under mortgage or trading boats with other tugmen. To fill his occasional excursions around the harbor, he sometimes offered free passage to female store clerks but charged a stiff fare to males who accompanied them. He dealt honestly with ship captains, carefully keeping notes about which ones preferred powerful tugs and which ones had enough confidence to navigate the harbor with a smaller one. When a particular captain arrived in port, Inman dispatched a vessel suitable to his tastes. Any captain who stopped by the office to chat could be sure that Inman would order a tug to ferry him back to his vessel, saving the mariner a long walk around the docks and building goodwill for future business.¹³

Inman's dock at the foot of Seventh Avenue West was a popular gathering spot. Idlers might ask the commodore for a free meal; the curious might be invited aboard a tug for a trip around the harbor. On warm summer evenings, dozens of men, women, and children congregated outside the tug office to take in the waterfront bustle. The dock was one of the few places near Duluth's downtown where spectators could watch the passing boats without risking virtue and purse among the prostitutes and drunks of the nearby bowery.¹⁴

There were seldom many tugs to be seen at the popular dock. Steamers in port could summon Inman tugs simply by blowing four long blasts on their whistles, a signal that frequently echoed around the harbor. On many days the tugs uninterruptedly towed vessels in and out of port or shifted them from one dock to another. The charge for these services ranged from \$5 to \$180, depending on the size of the vessel and the distance towed.¹⁵ Inman also kept his boats busy with other tasks. Some towed empty schooners to near-

¹⁰ *Daily Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1894.

¹¹ *Duluth Daily News*, Mar. 9, 1887; untitled clippings, Feb. 7, May 3, 1888, scrapbook, Inman Papers.

¹² Here and two paragraphs below, *Evening Herald*, June 20, 28, July 12, and *Minneapolis Star*, June 26—all 1889, scrapbook, Inman Papers.

¹³ *Daily Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1894.

¹⁴ Untitled clipping, Apr. 12, 1891, scrapbook, Inman Papers.

¹⁵ "Inman Tug Line Rates: 1896," Inman Papers.



Inman's employees outside the company office, with brother Hiram standing on the balcony; the ladder led to a lookout perch for spotting approaching vessels in need of a tow.

by ports like Two Harbors or Ashland, Wisconsin, where they could be loaded with iron ore and towed away by steamers. Others carried supplies to remote lakeside lumber camps or pushed dredges around the harbor. The smallest tugs served as dispatch boats, carrying messages to other tugs or ferrying supplies to waiting vessels.

Inman most often used wooden tugs ranging from 45 to 80 feet long, painted with black hulls and red cabins. Some sported figureheads atop their pilothouses—horses, coachmen, or eagles. Inside each vessel was an engine room, boiler room, and coal bunker as well as bunk space for the crew and a small cooking galley. The crew consisted of a captain, who steered the vessel and conducted its business; an engineer, who handled the engine throt-

tle; one or two firemen, who shoveled coal into the boiler and handled tow lines; and a cook.

Life aboard the tugs was far from easy. Many crewmen lived in towns on the lower Great Lakes, and when the upper lakes' shipping season began in April, they left their homes and family to work aboard Inman's boats until December, when winter put an end to navigation. They worked as many hours a day as their tug was needed and received one day off each month. Because they were liable to be called out at any time of day or night, most men slept and ate meals on their boats.¹⁶

If the lifestyle was grueling, the work was downright dangerous. Tugs sometimes caught fire or were rammed and sunk by the vessels they were towing. The thick, manila tow ropes pulled tight by the weight of a ship could snap under the strain, whipping across decks to flick off limbs or heads. The careless man who got his hand wrapped in a tow line could lose his fingers—or more—if it suddenly were pulled taut. Other hazards were more insidious, as many engineers could attest after slowly going deaf from years in noisy engine rooms. For all this, firemen could expect to earn about \$37 a month, while an engineer could make \$75 and a captain up to \$100.

The 1890s opened with Inman owning seven tugs and buying more. Despite increasing business, however, he was strapped for cash. In 1892 he incorporated as the Inman Towing Association, selling \$200,000 worth of stock to vessel owners, shipbuilders, and dock operators in Duluth and neighboring Superior, Wisconsin. With the opening of an iron-ore dock in Superior and the anticipated explosion of shipping there, the owners may have realized that a single businessman like Inman could not keep up with the demand without an infusion of cash. Inman used the funds to buy four more tugs and a schooner. "We shall unquestionably have the finest tug line on the Great Lakes before the close of 1893," he predicted, "and I believe it will be the best one to be found in any American harbor."¹⁷

But before conquering 1893, Inman first had to live out 1892. Along with selling stock and expanding his fleet, he faced another challenge when the marriage between his friends Asa and May Frost fell apart. Inman found himself in the middle of a messy battle.¹⁸

¹⁶ Here and below, *Duluth News Tribune*, June 1, 1899.

¹⁷ *Evening Herald*, Dec. 12, 1892.

¹⁸ Here and two paragraphs below, *Mary R. Frost v Asa D. Frost*, divorce case 6430, District Court, Duluth, May 28, 1892; *Asa D. Frost v Byron B. Inman*, civil case 6674, District Court, Duluth, Aug. 18, 1892, microfilm, St. Louis County Clerk's Office.

May, as Mary was known, had moved to Duluth from Colorado a decade earlier to escape Asa, who had a drinking problem. Asa followed her, however, and announced that he had recovered from his alcoholism. The couple reconciled and opened a grocery, renting a room to Inman after his divorce. When Inman traveled during the winter to promote his towing business, he exchanged amiable letters with Asa. He presented May with gifts and sometimes escorted her on lengthy boat or train trips while Asa was working. From time to time, Inman and May even traveled as husband and wife so that May could ride free of charge on Inman's complimentary passes from various railroads.

By 1890 Asa had begun to suspect his friend was having an affair with May, and the friendship quickly soured. Inman took up residence in a room above his tug office. Asa began drinking again and was hospitalized in October. That winter May moved out, this time for good. After spending the winter in Florida, she filed for a divorce, granted on July 9, 1892. A month later, Asa sued Inman for \$25,000, claiming Inman had used his money and his standing as a "man of large means" to deprive Frost of his wife. May countered that it was Asa's drinking and abuse that had destroyed the marriage, and the case was dismissed in September.

Inman and May married in January 1893, and, apparently unhampered by any Victorian stigma attached to divorce, the 43-year-old groom quickly drew his 33-year-old wife into Duluth's social whirl. They entertained other couples and Inman's friends from around the lakes. She was popular, he was prominent, and their names appeared on the society pages of local newspapers.¹⁹

One shadow over their happy relationship was May's dread that her new husband would drown. It was a troublesome fear for a woman whose fortunes were so closely tied to the water. May tried to overcome it by joining Inman in his endeavors. When he bought the tug *Bob Anderson* and sailed it to Duluth in the spring of 1893, she went along, taking turns at steering. Over the years they dabbled in yachting, and May earned a limited pilot's license for the Duluth harbor and St. Louis River. Her fears never went away, however, and an unexpected call while Inman was on the water would fill her with dread.²⁰



May Inman, striking a playful pose with a kitten

Although 1893 began happily, matters took a turn for the worse when a nationwide financial panic suppressed shipping traffic. Even worse, the rival Smith-Fee tug line, a newcomer to Duluth, grabbed for a share of the port's vessel-towing business. Inman responded by cutting his fees and trying to tow every vessel he could, even stationing tugs as far as 30 miles out from Duluth to solicit approaching boats. "We'll chase them to Port Huron for every boat that comes in before we'll let them have a boat," Inman vowed. The tug war quickly turned brutal, with some tug captains trying to ram their rivals. The dispute lasted much of the summer, until Inman finally settled it by buying the Smith-Fee line's three tugs and two scows. The victory left him financially drained.²¹

¹⁹ *Duluth Commonwealth*, Jan. 19, Aug. 9, 1893.

²⁰ United States Inspectors' Certificate to Pilots, issued to May R. Inman, May 13, 1895, Inman Papers. B. B. Inman claimed in a Nov. 15, 1900, letter to the *Detroit Free Press* that May was the first woman to receive such a license. This and her 1893 trip gave rise to the legend that she sailed the lakes as a "lady pilot," although she apparently used the license little.

²¹ Duluth newspapers covered the tug war all summer; *Evening Herald*, Aug. 10 (quote), 11, *News Tribune*, Aug. 11, Sept. 24, *Duluth Commonwealth*, Aug. 10, 17, Sept. 26, and *Marine Record*, Sept. 28—all 1893.



The Inmans on the porch of their rented East Superior Street home

Duluth was now a much different city than when Inman had arrived. The population had ballooned to nearly 60,000. Brownstone buildings topped by ornate turrets and cupolas lined downtown streets, where streetcars trundled past storefronts shaded by striped awnings. On the waterfront, freight sheds and warehouses lined the slips. Grain elevators and coal docks continued to sprout along the waterfront, and the glow from blast furnaces and foundries lit the night sky farther up the St. Louis River. Thirty-one tugboats, 18 belonging to Inman, plied the harbor.²²

Inman had only one shipping season to rebuild his business before another tug war broke out. In 1895 his opponent was Walter Singer, a powerful, enterprising quarry owner from Ashland, who had been operating three tugs in Duluth for two years. Although Inman's fleet was at its peak of 22 vessels, Singer boldly bought three more tugs for the challenge. "For some time Capt. Singer has been improving his fleet of tugs and quietly announcing

A relaxed domestic scene, possibly taken with May's box camera. She probably painted the floral and marine scenes hanging in their fashionable Munger Terrace apartment.



²² *Duluth and Environs; Duluth City Directory, 1893.*

that he proposed to take a small hand at least in vessel towing," a Duluth newspaper reported on June 13. "Yesterday he had one of his tugs in the harbor and solicited vessel towing. He has things about ready to make a hustle and of course Capt. Inman will stay with him."²³

The war quickly escalated. Soon Inman and Singer tugs were racing onto the lake to solicit business from approaching steamers. Competition was so keen that two tugs once raced each other for two hours to reach a vessel. Often these races cost more in burned coal than the fees received for towing.²⁴

The war dragged on until September 1, when matters took a grim turn. Inman's *Pathfinder* and Singer's *Medina* were jockeying for the chance to tow the steamer *Joliet*. At the last minute the *Pathfinder* tried to cut off the *Medina*, but the tugs collided and the *Pathfinder* overturned. Three men managed to jump free, but a fourth hesitated and went down with the boat. Federal inspectors revoked the licenses of the tugs' masters, but the war raged on.²⁵

Inman's problems continued that fall when a bitter gale caught several of his tugs on Lake Superior as they returned from an unsuccessful salvage job. The *Pearl B. Campbell* disappeared with four men aboard. The year's only bright spot was the birth of daughter Mary.²⁶

In an effort to end the costly battle in early 1896, Inman and Singer revealed they had privately arranged to share tows and set fees. In addition, a weakened Inman had agreed to operate only seven tugs so Singer could have more of the market. "Captain Singer and myself, after a season of hard fighting, in which we both lost considerable money, signed an agreement last fall, which was to last for all time, by which we agreed to divide the business and maintain reasonable rates for towing. I will try to stick to it, and I think he will do the same," Inman said.²⁷

The move angered vessel owners, who did not like the higher fees or Inman's decision to reduce his fleet. Some owners hinted they would provide their own tugs in Duluth. This pressure prompted Inman to scuttle the deal, so the war dragged on throughout 1896, and both sides continued to lose

money. That fall, dozens of unpaid bills for coal and several mortgages on tugs and equipment came due. Inman had no choice but to declare bankruptcy.

Proceedings revealed that the commodore was \$171,000 in debt. Banks and private lenders held mortgages on virtually all of his vessels, many of them mortgaged for far more than their appraised value. Even his former wife held a \$9,500 lien on the *J. L. Williams* from their divorce settlement.²⁸

Just as the loss of his company seemed imminent, Inman was rescued by Augustus B. Wolvin and George A. Tomlinson, prominent Duluth vessel operators. These men paid Inman's debts and bought the best of his tugs. The pair was said to "have a high appreciation of the commodore as a hustler for vessel towing while, possibly, they have not as great an admiration for his financial talents."²⁹

In the spring of 1897, the newly organized Inman Tug Company incorporated. Among the five people elected to the board of directors were Inman and Melville H. Wardwell, vice-president of Clyde Iron Company in Duluth. Inman was back in business, thanks to Wolvin, Tomlinson, and Wardwell, but their involvement proved a dubious blessing.³⁰

Appointed general manager, Inman ran the fleet consisting of the *Record*, *J. L. Williams*, *M. D. Carrington*, *L. L. Lyon*, *A. C. Adams*, *Edward fiske*, *Bob Anderson*, *Pathfinder*, *Buffalo*, and *Effie L*. The company also chartered the new tug *B. B. Inman* from its builder. With towing and salvage the line's mainstays, the war with Singer continued through 1897 and 1898. A third company, the Chicago-based Barry Line, joined the competition to complicate matters further.³¹

The beginning of the end of the Inman Tug Company came in 1899. Powerful vessel owners had been frustrated for years with the delays and expenses their boats encountered at many ports because of inadequate tugs, strikes by crewmen, or hefty increases in towing fees. In response, the owners quietly began organizing the Great Lakes Towing

²³ *News Tribune*, June 13, 1895.

²⁴ *Evening Herald*, June 14, Aug. 13, 1895, Mar. 12, 1904; *Duluth Commonwealth*, June 15, July 1, 1895.

²⁵ *Evening Herald*, Sept. 4, 7, and *News Tribune*, Sept. 2—all 1895.

²⁶ *Evening Herald*, Oct. 2, 1897; *News Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1895.

²⁷ *Detroit Free Press*, Jan. 26, 1896, clipping, scrapbook, Inman Papers.

²⁸ *Evening Herald*, Jan. 23, 1897.

²⁹ *News Tribune*, Dec. 24, 1896.

³⁰ *Evening Herald*, Apr. 4, 1897.

³¹ *Evening Herald*, Apr. 4, 5, 6, 1897; *News Tribune*, May 14, 1897.



Inman tugs J. L. Williams and Buffalo unsuccessfully fighting a fire aboard the steamer Winslow, 1891

Company to provide consistent service at major ports. Among those involved was Wolvin. Acting unofficially on behalf of Great Lakes Towing before it was formally organized, he discreetly bought up tugs and docks and held them in trusteeship for the new company. It gradually became clear to Inman that one of Wolvin's first moves had been to gain control of the Inman Tug Company two years earlier.³²

When Great Lakes Towing finally incorporated in 1899, Wolvin won election as second vice-president, Wardwell became secretary, and Tom-

linson emerged as a key stockholder. With them in control of Inman Tug, the commodore could do nothing to block sale of the line he had nurtured for 14 years. Great Lakes Towing combined his tugs with Singer's fleet, which it had also purchased, and incorporated the tugs as a subsidiary, Union Towing and Wrecking Company. An embittered Inman stayed on as manager for a year, until he lost his job in a minor dispute over whether to tow a shipowner's vessels with one tug or two.³³

The turn of the century found the 51-year-old Inman out of work and short of cash. He and May

³² Alexander C. Meakin, *G—The Story of the Great Lakes Towing Company* (Vermilion, Ohio: Great Lakes Historical Society, 1984), 2–7; Bills of sale of vessels from Walter H. Singer to A. B. Wolvin, trustee, Aug. 14, 1899, Army Corps of Engineers Collection, Canal Park Marine Museum, Duluth.

³³ Meakin, *G*, 2–7; Bills of Sale . . . Singer to Wolvin; *News Tribune*, June 1, 1900; *Evening Herald*, June 1, 1900.

had spent most of his profits on entertainment, business trips, and May's journeys to Florida and Bermuda each winter to escape Duluth's bitter cold. Inman's only hope lay with the two tugs he still controlled. For a time he used the sidewheeler *E. T. Carrington* to ferry excursionists and put the *W. B. Castle* to work carrying lumber-camp supplies and towing logs from camps to sawmills. Early in 1901, this plan fell apart when both vessels had to be sold to pay liens against them.³⁴

Faced with uncertain prospects yet wanting to move on, Inman turned his full attention to an ambitious project he had begun four years earlier. Based on his experience as captain of the *Kasota*, Inman had designed a steamer that he believed would sail through ice more efficiently than existing vessels. His patents for an icebreaking boat, registered in November 1897, called for a powerful vessel with a bulbous bow below the waterline that would smash ice from underneath and push it up and away from the steamer's path. The vessel's widest point would be at its bow, instead of amidship, enabling

the vessel to slip through the broken ice with reduced friction on its hull.³⁵

Noted Great Lakes marine architect Frank Kirby endorsed Inman's plan. Indeed, Kirby's employer, the Detroit Drydock Company, was eager to build the steamers if financial backers could be found.³⁶ Inman promoted his design widely, and it received rave reviews from vesselmen and newspapers in cities including Chicago, Detroit, and Montreal. If his design worked, it would revolutionize Great Lakes shipping, for instead of an April-to-December season, vessels could operate all year free from the tyranny of ice. For patent-holder Inman, a success would mean thousands of dollars in royalties for every boat built.

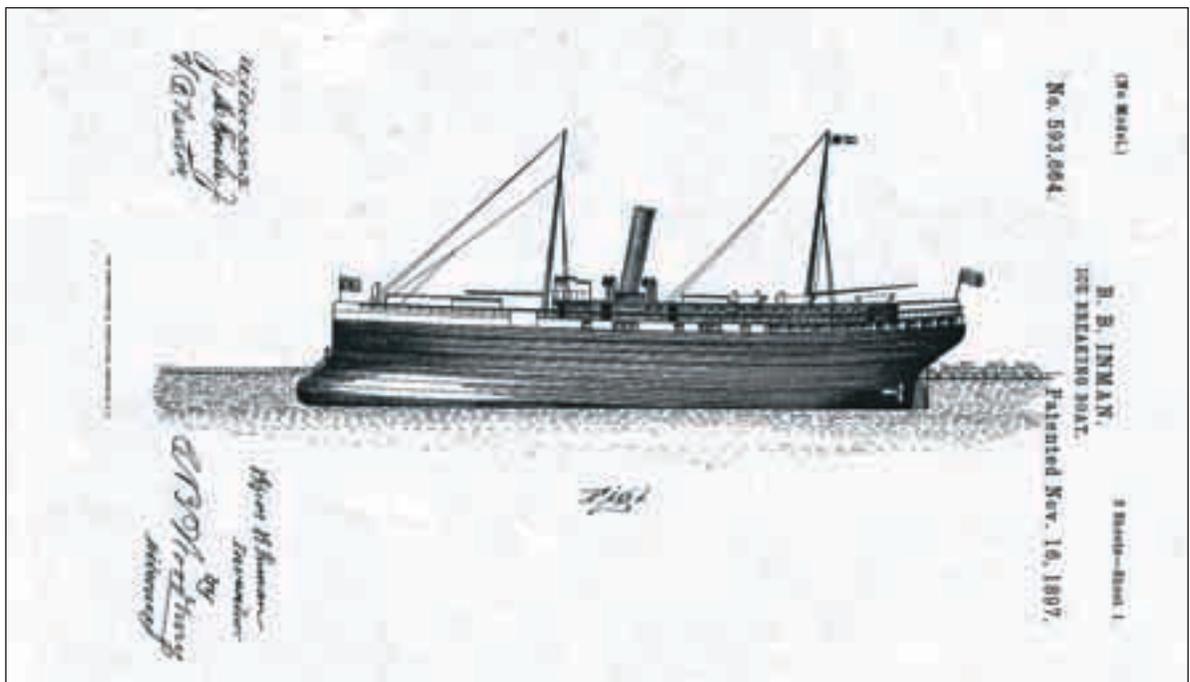
For a time Inman believed himself on the verge of closing deals with several companies to build vessels based on his design. To tide him over financially, he took a job in the spring of 1901 as a substitute captain for the Pittsburgh Steamship Company, which was rapidly expanding to serve the needs of the new U.S. Steel Corporation. Inman got his job with the help of his old friend—and nemesis—Wolvin, now manager of the fleet.³⁷

³⁴ *Evening Herald*, Aug. 14, 1900.

³⁵ The icebreaker is described in U.S. Patent 593,664. See also, *Evening Herald*, Mar. 20, 1897, and extensive correspondence in the Inman Papers.

³⁶ Frank Kirby to Inman, Feb. 26, 1897; Alexander McVittie, Detroit Drydock Company, to Inman, Jan. 29, 1899—both in Inman Papers.

³⁷ "Biography."



Inman's 1897 patent for an icebreaking boat featuring a bow that projected beneath the waterline. Modern freighters use a similar design for reduced water resistance and increased speed.

In his new position, Inman became master of the biggest steamers on the lakes. The *Kasota* had been 247 feet long, but now he was sailing giants like the 400-foot *James Watt* and the 450-foot *Cornell*. Handling the bigger vessels seemed no problem, but the long separations from his wife and daughter and their financial insecurity weighed heavily upon him. "I am feeling well but do miss you and Mary so much," he wrote his wife from the *Cornell*. "Take good care of yourself and I will get started at something before long that will put us in good shape to live again."³⁸

Inman's return to sailing aggravated May's fear that he would be lost in a shipwreck, a real concern when major storms regularly claimed vessels. Sometimes she put up a brave front, but the old fear showed through: "I was rather alarmed yesterday when I read of the wreck of a two-stacked boat off Eagle Harbor Monday morning," she wrote in September 1901, "but [I] suppose your slow old boat could not have been that far in 12 hours, a fact I was glad of, but now I would give a great deal to know where you are—you are constantly in my mind and I know your trip is not being pleasant."³⁹

Inman sought to assure his wife that he was prudent, as he did when his steamer, the *James Watt*, was the last boat sailing up Lake Huron in December. "We . . . will be alone, but we have lots of fuel and provisions and we will take our time and only go when it is absolutely safe, so don't worry about me."⁴⁰

After a long season, Inman returned home to some good news. Although his icebreaker project was going nowhere, he had been promoted to assistant superintendent of Pittsburgh Steamship. That winter he, May, and Mary moved to Milwaukee, where Inman was to supervise repairs being made to several vessels laid up there.⁴¹

The spring of 1902 found Inman in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, supervising the fleet's operations. The shipping season was uneventful, and its end meant that he again would winter in Milwaukee to watch over repairs. When the temperature plunged, May and Mary departed for Florida while Inman took up residence in a hotel.

Inman had to spend most days outdoors, tramping from boat to boat to oversee the work. "I have been very busy . . . looking over the boats," he wrote to May that winter, "so you see I have got no snap this winter. I will have to go to Chicago every week until spring, as there is 15 boats there, and we are to do lots of repair work. But that is what I want so the time won't drag, for I am so lonesome without my dear ones. But if you both can only gain down there and come home to me in the spring in good shape, I won't care."⁴²

The hectic pace took its toll on 53-year-old Inman. Late in January he became ill, but despite a lingering cold, he kept working. On February 11, he relented and spent the day in bed. After some badgering by the hotel's proprietor, he agreed to see a doctor, who diagnosed him with pneumonia, well advanced. Inman did not consider his illness serious and refused to contact his brother Hiram. But his condition quickly worsened, and on February 14, the proprietor summoned Hiram by telegram. It was too late. Inman died February 15, 1903, before Hiram could get to Milwaukee and only a few hours after May had learned he was ill.⁴³

May and her daughter had Inman's body brought back to Duluth and laid to rest in Forest Hill Cemetery. They lived in a Duluth boarding-house for a year, taking in laundry and sewing. Hiram, who worked for Union Towing, did little for them beyond buying a few parcels of land that his brother had owned. The icebreakers that were going to make so much money remained unbuilt, and May and Mary moved to Oregon to start a new life.⁴⁴

When Inman died, the news ran on the front page of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, but in Duluth, where he had lived and worked for years, his passing barely made the newspapers. The tugboat empire he tried to build had been swallowed by Great Lakes Towing, and the boats and fleets he handled in the 1890s were being displaced by bigger boats and bigger fleets. In a city rushing to embrace the future, no one wanted to look back and remember someone who had failed.

³⁸ Byron to May Inman, Sept. 26, 1901, Inman Papers.

³⁹ May to Byron Inman, Sept. 18, 1901, Inman Papers.

⁴⁰ Byron to May Inman, Dec. 18, 1901, Inman Papers.

⁴¹ Here and below, "Biography."

⁴² Byron to May Inman, no date, Inman Papers.

⁴³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Feb. 17, 1903.

⁴⁴ Mary Inman White to St. Louis County Historical Society, Feb. 19, 1955, Inman Papers.

The photos and drawing are from the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, Duluth.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).