

Gone But Not Forgotten: Images of Wooden Commercial Ships

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Introduction

Starting with Able Neff (1803-1888) and ending with Charles Neff (1908-2002) four generations of my family were involved with commercial shipping starting on the Fox and Wolf Rivers of Wisconsin in 1843 and ending on the Gulf of Mexico in 1969 when a tug owned by Charles was destroyed by Hurricane Camille.

My great grandfather Capt. Samuel O. Neff (1842-1904) started his career in commercial shipping when he was 12 years old by hauling sand from Lake Winnebago to Oshkosh in a log canoe. During his long career he owned and operated many ships.

In 1892 Capt. Sam and his sons Capt. Sidney (1863-1907) my grandfather and Charles (1870-1940) renamed their firm Neff & Sons a general freight company on the Great Lakes with cargoes that included coal, lumber, ore and salt. After the death of Capt. Sam the brothers continued the partnership until 1905 when they split the firms assets and continued with their own firms. Sidney died in 1907 and his wife sold all of his ships and none of his sons were involved in commercial shipping.

In 1926 Charles moved to Cleveland where there was more business for his ship brokerage firm and Neff & Sons now became Charles, Harold (1901-1954) and Charles Jr. (1908-2002). The brothers moved to the Gulf Coast sometime after 1950 and Charles Jr. operated a business with a small tug until it was destroyed by a hurricane in 1969.

Charles Sr. realized that the era of commercial shipping by small firms in small ships was going to end and he started to collect items of historical interest such ship plans, photographs and when photos were not available he made drawings using color pencils and crayons and what paper was at hand. His collection eventually was transferred to his daughter Marcella Neff-Fisher and she and her brother Charles Jr. decided how to distribute it. Macy Neff-Fisher also privately published a book about the Neff family shipping history in 1991.

The ship plans and other items in the collection were given to the Milwaukee Public Library Maritime Collection. The Oshkosh Public Museum also has material related to Neff ships. In the process color slides were made of the drawings and photos and I was given the slides. Duane Clemmer the husband of my cousin Carolyn Neff-Clemmer made digital copies of the slides and the notes for each slide compiled by Marcy Fisher. Some of the original drawings were distributed to family members a few were probably sold and some were given to the Wisconsin Maritime Museum.

Since then Walter Lewis of the Maritime History of the Great Lakes has included the Charles S. Neff Collection of ship drawings and photos with notes compiled by Marcy Neff-Fisher in his web site. The link to the collection is <http://images.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/121986/data?n=1>

Walter also made a copy of Marcy Neff-Fisher's book and that is included in the Charles S. Neff collection.

I have selected a subset of the drawings and photographs from the Charles S. Neff collection for this report.

Steam Power Paddle-Wheel Ships

Paddle-wheel ships had shallow drafts so they were a good choice for transporting goods and passengers on rivers. They were flatboats with the engine, cargo and passenger accommodations above the deck. They were not safe to use on large lakes. The paddle-wheels were mounted either on both sides or the stern.



Figure 1: Drawing of the W. A. Knapp a side wheel steamer built in 1853 in Oshkosh.

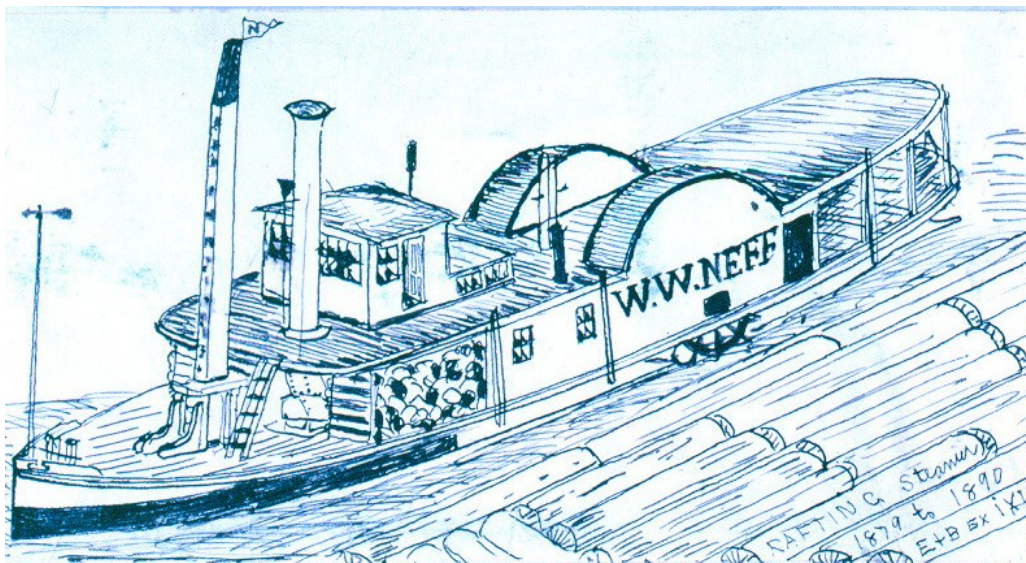


Figure 2: Drawing of the W. W. Neff a rafting tug built by Capt. Will Neff in 1879.

The W. C. Knapp was owned by the Neff's and was used on the Fox and Wolf Rivers to transport passengers and goods. It was one of the Neff owned ships that was taken to the Mississippi River at the outset of the Civil War. The army had sized ships on the Mississippi at the outset of the war and as a consequence riverboats were in short supply.

The boats sent to the Mississippi were taken up the Fox River to Portage and locked through the canal to the Mississippi and then taken downstream to Prairie du Chine on the Mississippi. In order to pass a shallow region of the Fox River a temporary dam was built on the Fox (an old logging practice).



Figure 3: The Henrietta a stern wheel steamer built in 1879 by the Corp of Engineers. Capt. Ed. Neff the older brother of Captains Will and Sam was the captain of the Henrietta for many years.

Schooner/Barges

The the type of ship used on the Great Lakes evolved over time. The harbors were shallow and the ships had to have a shallow draft as a consequence. If the ships had to use a canal the the length and width of the canal locks capped the length and width of those ships.

There were a very large number of small firms competing for the shipping business and that kept the shipping costs low. To be successful the firms had to be efficient and that meant they needed ships that could be operated by a small crew and had a large cargo capacity. The Great Lakes schooner came very close to satisfying those requirements. Because the lakes and rivers froze during the winter shipping was seasonal and that made it very difficult to compete with the railroads.

Many of the schooner hulls were converted to barges and the larger hulls were converted to screw steam ships. There were a few photographs of Great Lakes schooners and a number of drawings of schooners in the Charles S. Neff collection.

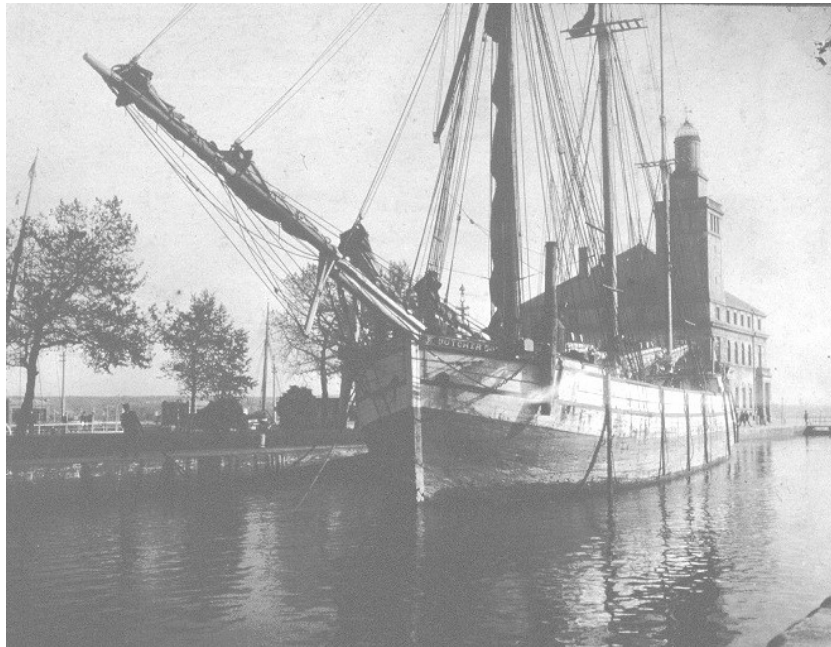


Figure 4: Butcher Boy built in 1868 in De Pere, Wisconsin.

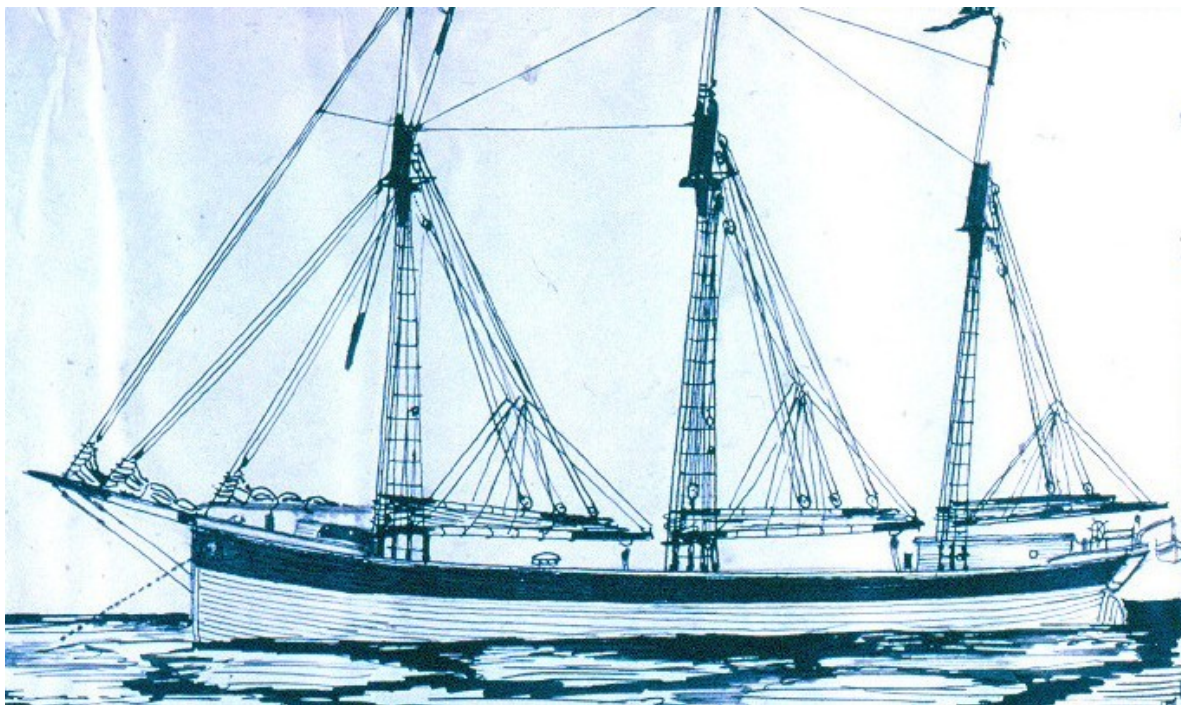


Figure 5: Charles Neff drawing of the Butcher Boy showing the commonly used fore and aft gaff rigged sails for Great Lakes schooners.



Figure 6: Drawing of the schooner Trader built in 1851 in Oshkosh.



Figure 7: The schooner Richard Mott is listed as being built in 1851 in Buffalo New York. In this drawing the top sails are shown.



Figure 8: Schooner Harriet Ross was rebuilt from the former Cambridge in 1854 in Buffalo New York.



Figure 9: The City of Toledo was built in 1865 in Toledo Ohio.

One of faults of a shallow draft flat bottom schooner is that they can capsize even though they have a centerboard. The City of Toledo had capsized and Capt. Sam was able devise a method for righting the ship that was an extension of standing on the centerboard.

He extended the length of the centerboard and piled sand on one side of the extended centerboard and then used three tugs to pull on lines attached to the masts from that side of the ship. That caused the sand to slide onto the centerboard and the weight of the sand and the pulling by the tugs caused the ship to right. When the ship righted the combination of the sand falling off the centerboard and the lines from the tugs prevented an overshoot. The coordination of the three tugs was an essential part of the process.

Schooner/Barge to Steam Barge

At the end of the sail era they were making large vessels that could sailed or towed and they became known as schooner/barges. Some of the larger ones were then converted to steam power using a single screw propeller. The conversion involved a major reconstruction. An example is the Sidney O. Neff that was built in Burger & Burger in Manitowoc Wisconsin in 1891 as a schooner/barge. Neff & Son's owned it until about 1899 and sold it. In 1908 a major reconstructed converted it a steam barge.



Figure 10: A photograph of the Sidney O. Neff when it was a schooner/barge sometime between 1891 and 1907. This image was downloaded from the Maritime History of the Great Lakes website.

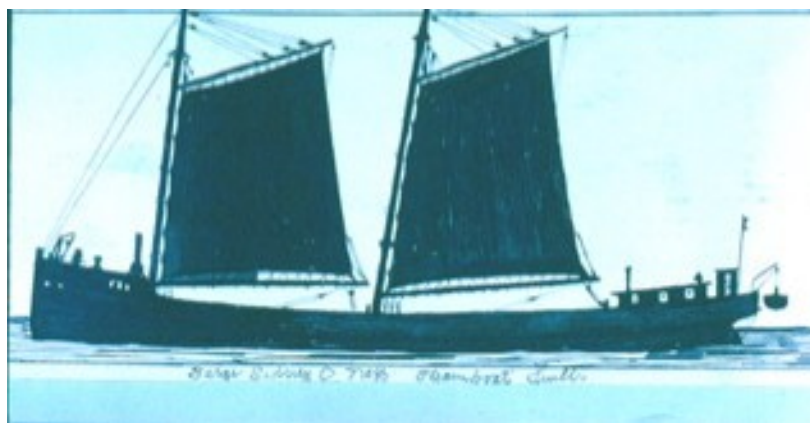


Figure 11: A Charles Neff drawing of the of the Sidney O. Neff when it was a schooner/barge. Note the rudder and stern details.

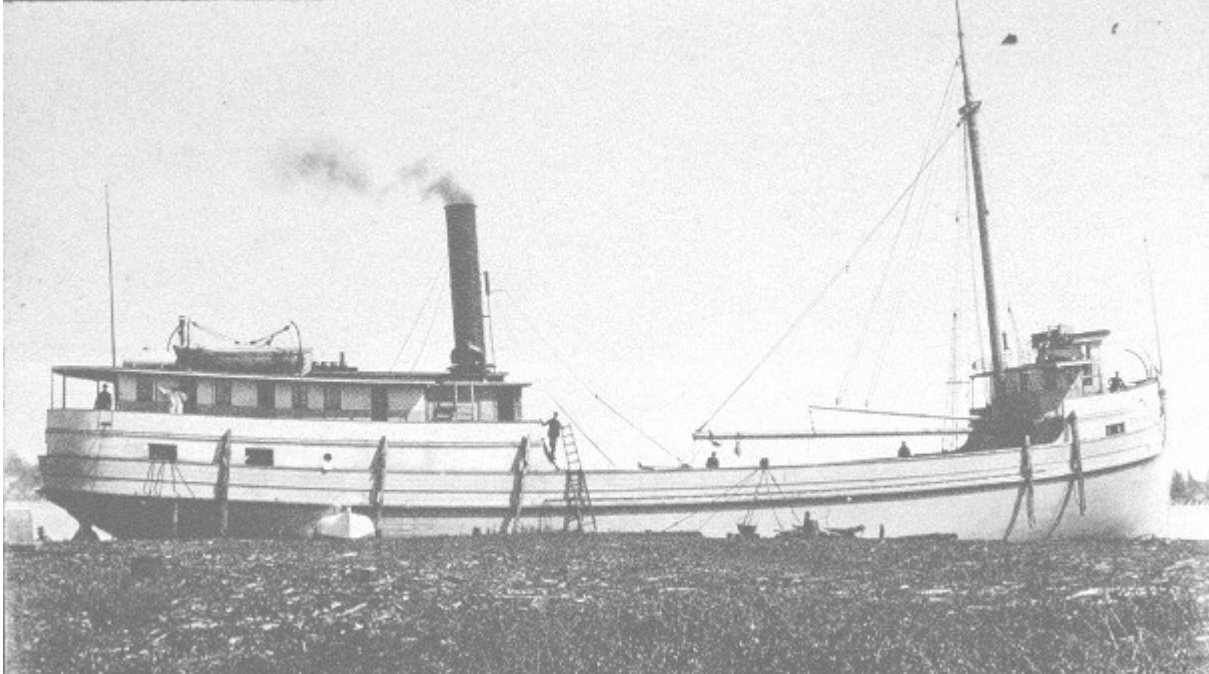


Figure 11: The Sidney O. Neff after conversion to steam barge drawn up on shore so the stern and rudder can be seen.

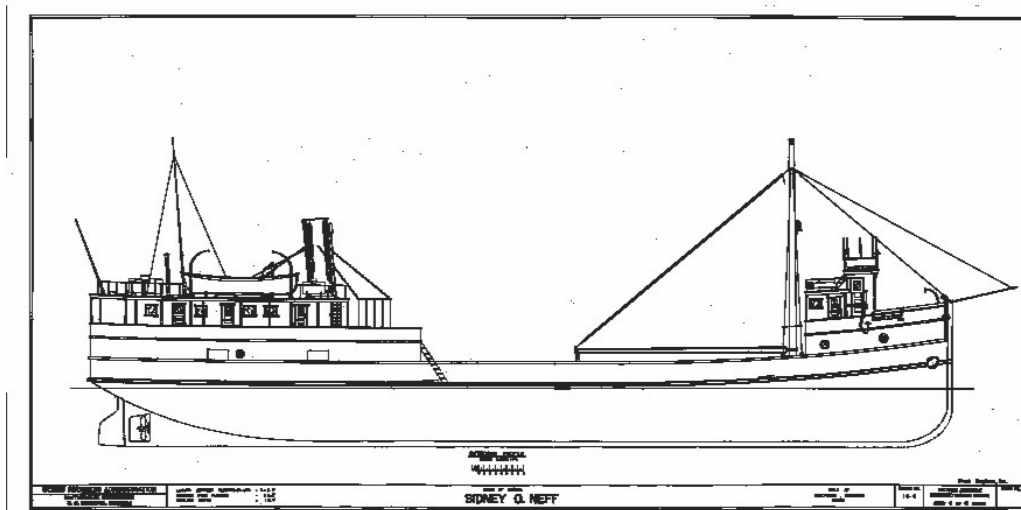


Figure 12: Drawing of the Sidney O. Neff from the Historic American Merchant Marine Survey 1936-1937.

The Sidney O. Neff was one of the last wooden commercial ships on the Great Lakes it had been used for almost 40 years a very long time for a wooden ship. Sometime after the survey it was stripped of all usable components and tied up at dock. In 1939 it sank at the dock was raised and while being towed in 1940 out to be scuttled it sank again in the channel leading to Menominee and Marionette. The Corp of Engineers demolished it to clear the channel a sad ending to a long career.

