

The Three Copper Cigars

“794 to the Eileen, come in on the Eileen”. The McAllister Towing Company night dispatcher was calling the canal boat Eileen McAllister. He repeated the message because they always did and the pilothouse people never answered the first call anyway. This was over the big blue RCA, VHF radio that took up a large portion of the shelf at the back of the pilothouse. It was a warm evening in August, sometime around 1961. “Eileen back” the mate said as he keyed the mike. He hoped the next job would send us on our way to the canal with an oil barge instead of the New York harbor work we had been doing for the last couple of days. Regular canal Captains/Mates were not too fond of the harbor and much preferred the New York State Barge Canal work to the hectic pace of the local work. Here in the harbor it was never stop, always a new tow or shift or helping on a ship job. Derrick barges, coffee barges, railroad barges, carfloats, oil barges, deck scows, scrap barges, copper barges, ammo barges (overtime, actually double-time, so not looked down on too much), shifting at the fruit, coffee, railroad or general cargo piers. Always something, hardly ever “hangin’ on”. And even worse was the chance they would be ordered to do a tough ship assist.

“ Eileen, you have two copper boats out of Raritan going to Yonkers, they are ready now” said the dispatcher. “Pick up the Gillen 25 and the Manhattan 15 for delivery to Phelps Dodge as soon as possible”.

We were at Gulfport Staten Island, N.Y., so that was about a 30 minute trip if the Raritan railroad bridge opened when we got there. Rounding the bend at Perth Amboy the mate blew the three long blasts on the whistle to notify the bridge we wanted to get through. The bridge answered with three so we knew he would be opening. Just past the bridge on our right or north side was the copper dock. The 25 and the 15 were inside four other barges so we had to do some shifting to get them out and ready to tow. The dock people were there to tell us exactly how they wanted the light barges lined up for loading. This was a free shift for them. When the deckhand saw how much shifting was involved he started to complain and the mate said “okay, okay, break the oiler out to help you”. I never refused overtime.

The deckhand and I made all the required moves and finally got the two barges alongside, one ahead of the other, and left the pier. We went past the still open Raritan River Railroad Bridge and headed up the Kills for the Hudson River and Yonkers.

Just like we did after almost every tough job we all met in the Eileen’s tiny pilothouse with fresh coffee and a supply of cigarettes. The pilothouse at night on a long tow is a quiet place to reflect, to dream, to talk of family and fantasy. The engineer came up also after awhile and we began to talk about the value of the cargo on the barges. Copper cigars or ingots weighed about 200 pounds each. They were stacked on the barge in groups of five across and five across perpendicular on top of that for about five layers. The stacks on the barge totaled about 40 so we figured the value was about \$200,000., a lot of money. We wondered how they kept track of all this. Did they know how many bars were on board?

Would they miss a couple? Did Raritan tell Yonkers how many were coming up on the barge? What was the value of one bar at the scrap dealer? Would the scrap dealer take it? We kept going round and round on the subject.

The value of copper scrap at the time was .65/pound. That would be \$130 each. This was a lot of money in the 1960's. "The scrap dealer wouldn't take it though said the engineer". "Yeah, we would have to cut it up into small pieces said the mate". "A lot of work' said I.

Nothing was said for a long time as we made our way up past Elizabeth Port in New Jersey and then Port Richmond, Staten Island in the dark, just looking at the shore lights, not saying much when the deckhand broke the silence off Saint George and said "we could get in big trouble if we were caught". Yeah... but how will we get caught I said. "Especially if we cut it up". Well, one thing led to another and before you know it the whole crew is out lugging copper bars to the engine room. It wasn't easy, the shape and weight didn't lend them well to carrying. They were about 4 foot long, 5 inches across at the center and tapering to about 3 inches near the ends. They looked like big cigars. After struggling half the night three bars were brought down into the engine room. They were heavy and tying a rope sling around them was tough because they had a tendency to slide out.

The dispatcher called and wanted to know when we would land the barges because the oil barge Manhasset was almost topped off at Gulfport and was going to Rensselaer, near Albany, N.Y. We couldn't make it back in time so the Ellen F. McAllister was sent to pick the Manhasset up, bring her up the Hudson and pass her off to us. That suited us just fine.

I set up one of the cigars up on the work bench and began to cut a three inch piece off the end with a hacksaw. Two hours later with sore arms and only halfway through, I gave up and went to my bunk for some rest before the 5:30 am wake up call.

The copper barges were dropped off and the Eileen headed south to meet the Ellen F. The Ellen F. had the barge alongside so we came around and went into the pushing notch at the stern of the barge and put out the pushing gear and safety lines. We traded some books with the Ellen F. crew and let their lines go. By this time it was mid morning and a bright clear day. Later, when the mate got off watch and came to lunch he remarked that the New York City police boat had been behind us for two hours. No one thought much about it and even later when we saw police helicopters over us a couple of times as we headed up the river we didn't give it a second thought.

We were getting ready to land at Gulf Rensselaer the next morning when the deckhand said we had better hide the bars because today was crew change day and we didn't want anyone to know what we had. It was decided to put the bars in the bilge and to continue cutting them up when we came back in a week.

We landed the barge and the dock man said there were some guys in suits asking about the tug a little earlier. We let go of the Manhasset and made our way up to McAllister's dock which was really just two sets of piles and put our lines out. Up on the bank were the McAllister runner, the relief mate who lived local and three guys in dark suits.

Nobody looked happy. We still hadn't put it all together so we went about our business tying up and shutting down.

When the board that served as a gangway was put out everyone but the mate came aboard. We were told to get everyone together in the galley but when they saw how small it was we were herded to the stern. When we were all gathered the men introduced themselves as FBI agents and asked us where the copper ingots were. Well, you could have blown us over. All kinds of emotions went over us, surprise, fear, remorse, shock, terror. No one could speak, no one wanted to speak. The men asked again "Okay guys, where are the copper bars you took from the barge yesterday?" Realizing we were caught the mate said they were in the engine room bilge. We were made to take them out, bring them up on deck and lug them up to the agent's cars on the bank. Then we sat down individually with the agents and gave up all our personal information, including USCG License numbers for those that had them. This was scary. There were a lot of calls to the copper plant, McAllister's New York office and the New York FBI office. All this took time because they had to keep going up to the runner's office and then back down to the boat. We really didn't care anymore though because we figured we were going to jail for a long time anyway.

The relief crew had all arrived by now but weren't allowed on board. The Peter B. McAllister tried to come alongside to tie up but they were waved away and told to hang on over at the Albany wall. We should have been home by now, it was getting late and we hadn't been allowed to call our families.

After what seemed like forever, the agents (now with some NYS Troopers) gathered us all together and after chewing us out and warning of severe consequences if anything like this happened in the future, they told us the copper company was not going to press charges, McAllister was going to put a note in our file but we were not fired and we were free to go home! We were so relieved we felt like crying but held it in.

Later, on the train to the city we got together and after a few minutes of babbling we were all very quiet. We expected to get a good ribbing from the other crews and we did for years to come but I guess we deserved it.