

# Containers: The Early Years

*Some Personal reminiscences of  
Thomas A. Ewig, Chairman/CEO, Martec International*

## **Promoting Bremen/Bremerhaven**

The Ports of Bremen and Bremerhaven were determined to become the primary port for the North Atlantic container carriers, and beginning with a visit by the Senator for Ports and Shipping for Bremen to New York. In about 1963, I personally escorted Senator Bortscheller around the port together with Cliff O'Hara then the Port Director for the Ports of New York and New Jersey. Following his visit they were able to secure such important names as United States Lines, American Export Lines, Sea Train Lines and Sea Land Service for their port.

## **Building Containers**

At that time containers were still being manufactured in the United States by organisations as Fruehauf, Strick and Veenama and Weigers (FRP boxes) and the order books overflowed. Both leasing companies, such as they existed at the time, as well as liner operators, went on a purchasing spree to meet the sign of the times building either 20 ft or 35 ft containers, 8 feet high and made either of aluminum or fiberglass reinforced plywood. Since Carl F. Ewig, Inc was at that time already the agent for Contrans we also placed orders with these manufacturers for the first generation of containers. *(See separate file with photos from 1965. The one is of the 100,000th container in Bremerhaven for America Export Istbrantsen and in the picture are Otto Schuett and Carl F. Ewig first and second from left. The other represents the first Contrans Containers built in the USA by Veenama and Wieggers)*

## **Pioneering Names...**

The names most revered during this time were names such as:

- Malcolm MacLean and Mike McEvoy (Sealand)
- John J McMullen, Don Aldridge and Bill Keely (United States Lines)
- Howard Pack Joseph Kahn, Art Novceck (Sea Train Lines)
- Manuel (Mike) Diaz and Mike Esposito (American Export Lines)
- George Lohman (Farrell Lines)
- Spyros Skoras (Prudential Lines)
- John Arwood and Don McBeth (Tansfreight Lines)
- Jim Amoss (Lykes Lines)
- Jacob and Hans Istbrantsen (Istbrantsen Lines)
- The Johnson Family (Central Gulf Lines)
- Ted DeSmedt (Grace Lines)
- Jim Barker (Moore McCormack Lines)
- Jerry Slater (CTI Leasing)
- Jim Sherwood (Sea Containers)
- Helmut Hansen (Contrans)

### **...and Carriers**

And of course the foreign flags carriers and the many agencies that represented the overseas interests:

- Mike McEvoy, Don Wierda and Lou Welter (Hapag Lloyd)
- Pericles Callimanopoulos (Hellenic Lines)
- Nick Arena (Containership Agencies-Atlantica Lines)
- Mediterranean Agencies-Zim Lines
- Hansen and Tiedemann, Sven Hansen-(Evergreen Lines)
- Roberts Steamship Agencies
- Furness Withy
- Texas Transport and Terminal Corporation
- F.W. Hartmann (Hansa Lines)
- Netumar Lines
- Meyer Lines
- Lloyd Brasileiro
- Delta Lines
- Y.S Lines
- Japan Lines
- The United Fruit Company
- Smith and Johnsen
- A.L. Burbank
- United States Navigation

...and many more whose names I have forgotten and most of which have dissolved into eternity.

### **Doing business with MacLean**

Well do I remember when Malcolm MacLean was leading the charge. I regularly visited him and his people in order to not only promote the advantages of the Ports of Bremen and Bremerhaven, but also to promote the shipbuilder A.G "WESER" Bremen, in order to get Sea Land to place an order for their containerships.

At that time the Sea Land Terminal in the Port of New York was one of the first container terminals and even boasted of having the only turntable ever conceived, capable of turning the gantry cranes 90 degrees, so that they could be moved around the corner of the pier. Ron Katims the Vice President Engineering had designed this unique feature.

Running the business out of their new building directly across from Newark airport were Charley Hiltzheimer as President, Paul Richardson as Vice President Sales, Bill Hamilton Vice President Finance and Warren Leback Vice President Operations. The executive offices were know as the "Golden Carpet" And Malcolm's sister saw to it that at night all desks were clean and clear of all paperwork. Any paperwork left out was thrown away.

We not only succeeded to win Sea Land for the German ports where the local office was headed by my father's best friend Heinz Arens and later by Carl Wettstein, but we were also able to secure a portion of the largest containership order ever placed at that time. The order was for eight 33 knot vessels of which A.G "WESER" obtained three, Nordseewerke Emden got three and RDM Rotterdam received two. These vessels are presently running under the Military Sealift Command. That day in the board room on the "Golden Carpet" will always remain with me as Warren Leback announced the winners of this enormous contract.

At the same time Messrs Pack and Kahn (a couple of fur traders) decided to also move from converted tankers to real first generation containerships and placed an order for two gas turbine vessels in Emden called the Euro Liner and Eurofreighter to compete head on with Sea Land. In fact most of the executives of Sea Train were trainees of the Sea Land school, including such names as John Arwood who later became President of Trans Freight Lines.

### **Business Life**

These were all the players of the day. All of them had offices south of Wall Street and ate their lunches either at The Whitehall Club on the top of 17 Battery Place or The Downtown Athletic Club next door or the Produce Exchange in 26 Broadway. As a young and energetic salesman I could make 6 to 8 visits per day just by riding elevators and walking a few blocks.

When the World Trade Center was built in 1971 onwards it became even easier since many had their offices in the North Tower. In fact when the Trade Center (where we were tenants on the 28th floor for 12 years 1972-1984) had a prerequisite that one had to be employed in international trade in order to lease space in the building.

### **Opposition to containers**

These were the pioneering days and there were many of the "older" generation that we strongly opposed to containerization for example I can well remember many news articles quoting such people as Richard Bertram, then Managing Director of the North German Lloyd, called it "That damn containerites" stating it is too expensive and would not last. Some others followed his call while the more progressive (including my father) felt this was the wave of the future not be held back.

I guess the rest is history as lines consolidated, disappeared and grew. The fact that the Journal of Commerce now lists the 50 containership operators calling US ports - down from 100 some five years ago - tells the story. I am sure that those of you who read these words have your own stories in relation to your geographical locations. In any case these were heady times.

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