

REO

SHIPPING

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I: THE BALTIC

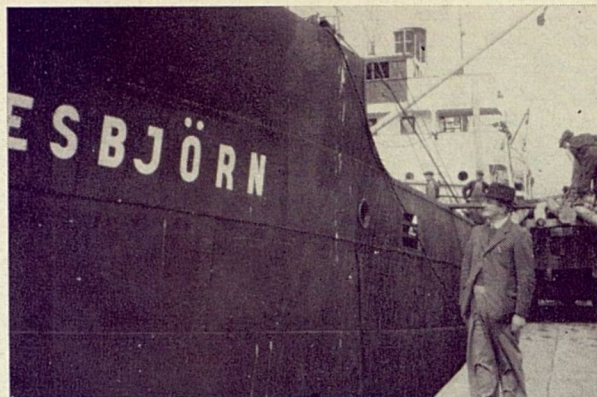
While the term 'FOW' may not have been familiar to the entire staff of R.E.O. in those now far off days of the Scheme, all staff caught up with it eventually. It became one of intriguing interest which has lasted right up to the present time.

It is used each year in the official shipping announcements, made shortly after the Spring Equinox, about mid-April, to herald the opening of the official Baltic shipping season, which lasts only 6-7 months.

This eagerly awaited news is the annual signal to merchant fleet men and tramp shipping owners alike that open water conditions in the Gulf of Bothnia and Finland had returned, and navigation is once again possible for all vessels in those waters where the usual winter freeze allowed only approved ships with steel reinforced prow and combings to operate with the assistance of ice breaker tugs.

On receipt of the FOW bulletin in R.E.O., feverish preparations were made to get the pre-planned pole shipping programme under way. In the peak year of 1949 for this country a total of 143,000 poles was shipped from Baltic ports alone. The vessels had already been chartered, on the basis of mutually suitable loading dates for a lump sum payment or at a rate per cubic foot of poles shipped, whichever could be secured having regard to the terms and suitability of ships. Sometimes space on regular liner ships were secured to help out the acute shortage in the early days of pole supplies, and to lift left-over smaller lots, and to avoid when possible the premium terms demanded for chartered ships in the great scarcity of tonnage which existed in the years following the recently ended world war.

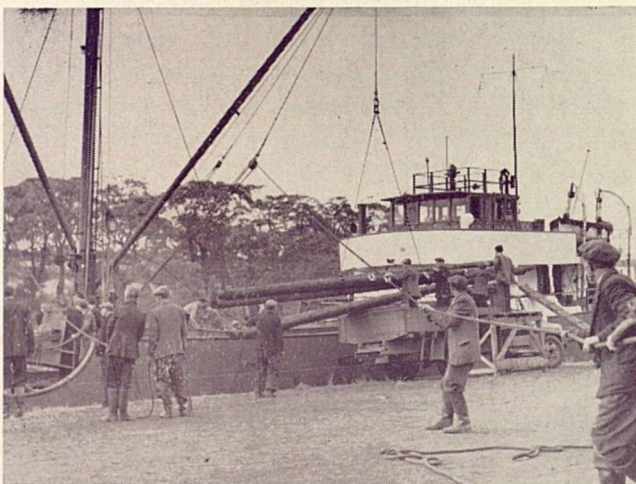
Meanwhile, in Finland, the pole supplies were rafted and road/railed from the inland northern



The author was on the quayside when the first-ever pole boat docked in Limerick.



Loading supplies in Dublin on the MV 'Whitsun' for the famous beaching operation on Arranmore.



The M.V. 'Surte' unloading her cargo at Ramelton, Co. Donegal, against a backdrop of picturesque trees — an indication of the type of harbour used in bringing supplies to the Inishowen Peninsula.

and southern forests down to the several loading ports designated. They were despatched usually in very large consignments — the largest lake raft ever constructed in Finland was of E.S.B. poles — so as to ensure at all times guaranteed full cargoes for the larger vessels. The sailing schedules for each of the ships were pre-arranged to fulfil the supply quotas fixed for each of the port depots at Dublin, Cork and Limerick, where the poles were creosoted after seasoning, skinning and processing before issue to the construction areas.

Over the years, upwards of three quarters of a million poles in more than 100 cargoes were shipped from Finland. A few small lots came from Sweden, and two shipments from Canada found their way to every part of rural Ireland. In 1948, several boats from the Baltic and one from Canada, each having made better time than the advised ETA, due to fine weather on voyage, arrived almost together in Dublin. At that time the then already heavily congested docksides were spilling over with general cargo as liberty ships unloaded long-awaited foodstuffs and other priority supplies.

There were in consequence no berths available, nor could any be assured within a reasonable time for the pole boats. It was then decided to unload the poles into the water and float them in rafts towed by Port and Docks Board tugs around the mouth of the river to Tolka Basin, where the rafts were anchored and undone and the poles picked out of the water during full tides by mobile shore cranes operated from the bank of the newly acquired East Wall Polefield.

This operation avoided the very heavy daily demurrage penalties involved in extending restricted discharge periods allowed due to the insatiable clamour for shipping space everywhere in Europe in those days. The arrangements also relieved the heavily burdened road fleet which had often to be helped out by hired horse transport on the unloading operations. Where did I hear recently that wooden poles were in such short supply then — even in Finland — that the only acceptable inducement our Government could offer the Finnish Government for the necessary export licences was scrap metal!

II Coastwise Shipping

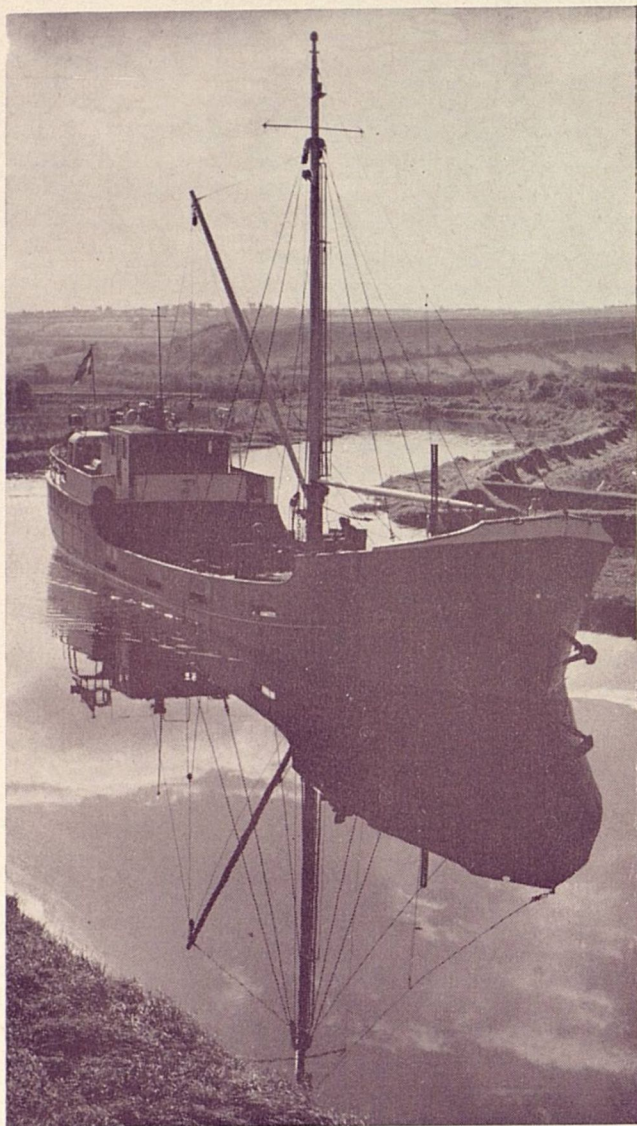
The experience gained from overseas shipping proved of very great value when it was decided in the 1950s to embark on the coastwise haulage



The M.V. 'Make' moves up the Shannon estuary with the largest-ever cargo of poles for Rural Electrification. A former owner of this ship was the flying Finn, Paavo Nurmi.

of area construction supplies to the more remote regions on the North Western and Southern sea-boards and to Arranmore, Beare and Valentia islands. At this stage there was still a serious shortage of heavy duty rail and road transport, and the available fleets were very hard pressed to meet the ever-increasing construction rates being attained in the field.

Many of the North West areas then being selected had no rail facilities, or only narrow gauge lines, some of which were in process of being dismantled when Rural Electrification development started in Donegal. There was also the problem of cross-border transport, always at prohibitive rates due to the double and treble handling involved. When the hundred-area rate of construction per annum was demanded by the Government in 1955 (100 were actually completed in 1956) the survey of most of the ports



Sailing through the fields on her way to Letterkenny with an REO cargo is the M.V. 'Uranus'.

and harbours west of the Shannon as well as all those in Tirconnail had been completed.

A few area shipments were then made coastwise out of Dublin, Cork and Limerick to specially selected landing points on the North West coast. It was no deterrent that in many of these ports there had not been a single cargo boat since the old Congested Districts Board, which built them as Famine relief works, had ceased its activities in the earlier decades of this century.

The coastwise idea developed eventually into a large-scale activity, extending into the farthest corners of the country under the stimulus of the District Engineers, especially in Sligo. They were quick to see the advantages from the construction cost angle, whereby the complete furnishing of

an area with materials in one fell swoop gave a head start to the field crews, all of which were anxious to figure in the "top ten" honours list of this period.

In the next years practically every usable harbour, jetty and pier on the Northern and Western seaboard—and even a private landing stage at the Franciscan Fathers' Monastery on the Ards Peninsula near Creeslough—was used to land cargoes. As most of the piers were prohibited landing places in closed ports except for fishermen, the permission of the Revenue Commissioners and the approval of the Department of Industry and Commerce had to be obtained in advance. For each shipment the cargoes were loaded mainly at one of the three port depots and occasionally at Galway, Sligo, Ballina and Westport, where overseas consignments had been discharged for distribution and economic reasons, or because of pressure of work elsewhere. On one occasion a 5 port, 7 point operation was carried out by loading at Dublin; discharging and reloading at Cork; discharging at Galway, Cleggan and Newport and returning to Cork to load a pole cargo for Dublin! This ship, the 'Flevo', was lost with all hands in the North Sea a few years later.

Looking back over the records and remembering the hazards, it is a near mystery how the Irish and Dutch captains employed on the work ever navigated (safely) even the approved channels considering too the absence of up to date navigation charts necessary in sea areas. Most of them had been long silted up and were fringed by foul ground of one kind or another; not to mention the always turbulent Atlantic especially at Teeling, Downings, Burtonport, Bunbeg, Malin Head, Portsalan and Donegal pier itself.

It was no less difficult at Cleggan in Galway; Portmagee and Valentia Island in Kerry; Newport, Belmullet Ballina and Westport in Mayo, and Castletownbeare and Beare Island in Bantry Bay. Both Loughs Swilly and Foyle also became well known to the captains of the handpicked coasters, each of which had to be selected carefully and specially chartered with an eye for individual local requirements. The strongly-running Atlantic tides and tidal streams of the more obscure mainland and island waters of the North West coastline were never relished by the ship-owners. At Bunagee, with cargo for Cudaff and some other areas on the Inishowen Peninsula,

MATERIALS: NATIVE POLES AND IMPROVISATIONS

Lest at this distance of time an erroneous but nevertheless widely held impression takes further root and persists into the future, opportunity is now belatedly taken to remember and record with pardonable satisfaction the quite sizeable content of native-grown poles erected in the construction of the miles of networks on the scheme to date. Even though supplies of suitable home-grown sticks have been tardy and hard to come by, there are in all almost 100,000 of them (or about 10% of the total) used on the lines, still doing sturdy duty—alongside their neighbours of Finnish (mainly), Swedish (5%) and Canadian (2%) origin. In seeking and gathering together these supplies the Forestry Division of the Department of Lands and the native forest owners have long deserved an unreserved encomium for their work, which enabled a start to be made with the Scheme somewhat earlier than expected. Later on these home suppliers helped to maintain the increasing momentum until the planned stock build-up could cope with the ever-growing field demands.

From these sources too came the larch sticks with which almost all of the networks of the Limerick Rural Area of Patrick's Well was constructed. In addition, very large quantities of Irish oak crossarms were obtained from these native growers. On this point of native supplies it is worthy of note too perhaps that several lines — notably in the Ratoath and Ballytore areas — were erected with Irish-manufactured concrete poles on an experimental basis; but their further use unfortunately failed for economic reasons to penetrate beyond these confines, at any rate for rural area work.

Other unique features of the networks also tending to get lost in the dimness of time and emphasising the earlier problem of material supplies, are the miles of stay wires which formerly served as British Admiralty steel hawser ropes. Also still standing up to "Debbie"-type storms are the shackle insulators salvaged from the makeshift wartime airfields in England and also secured at the disposal sales of British surplus war stores at the end of the last world war.

the services of a local pilot was unobtainable for any consideration on a day the Atlantic was playing up. At Malin Head pier, the ship was eventually unloaded after continued dodging in and out of the single berth, to avoid the worst effects of a wrong-way wind which caused a dangerous under-surface ground swell. At Port-salan, the captain of an Irish coaster refused to make a return trip when the locals told him that a coaster of the size of his vessel had not been seen there for more than 36 years! The narrow pool of tidal water which serves as the port of Letterkenny on the River Swilly was also refused by several owners after a few exciting trips there with very small boats. Since then navigation conditions have been improved immensely and much larger vessels now ply regularly to the port.

Perhaps the most exciting experience of these activities took place on the foreshore of Arranmore Island, 5 miles off Burtonport Pier. The plan — accomplished after much persuasion of the shipowners and many hazards on the last days of the trip in the rock-strewn waters of the smaller islands on the route — was to discharge the vessel between tides, after beaching on a selected shallow water section of foreshore. Close to the beaching site were several small partly-

covered stags of rocks, very dangerous in stormy weather.

Everything went fairly well until the evening of the third day, when a north eastern gale hit the area, raised a heavy swell on the spring tide running at the time, dragged the anchor, smashed the moorings and almost tossed the ship into the middle of the island only 50 yards off and then lifted it within a few feet of the rock stags. Only the skill and heroism of the ship's captain and the Arranmore Lifeboat crew saved the ship from disaster. The 8 m.m. film and some photographs of the entire operation, taken by a priest holidaying on the island at the time, still makes very exciting viewing — especially the shots of the captain's wife and child being taken off the ship at the height of the storm. The lashing of the mooring ropes and the securing of life lines from the lifeboat, and the battle of holding off the almost empty vessel from an inglorious end on the razor-edged rocks, are other highlights of these records.

Despite this experience, coastwise shipping was a complete success — economically and otherwise — in the circumstances prevailing at the time. Only one accident (not fatal) was recorded against the activity during its 5 years of operation.