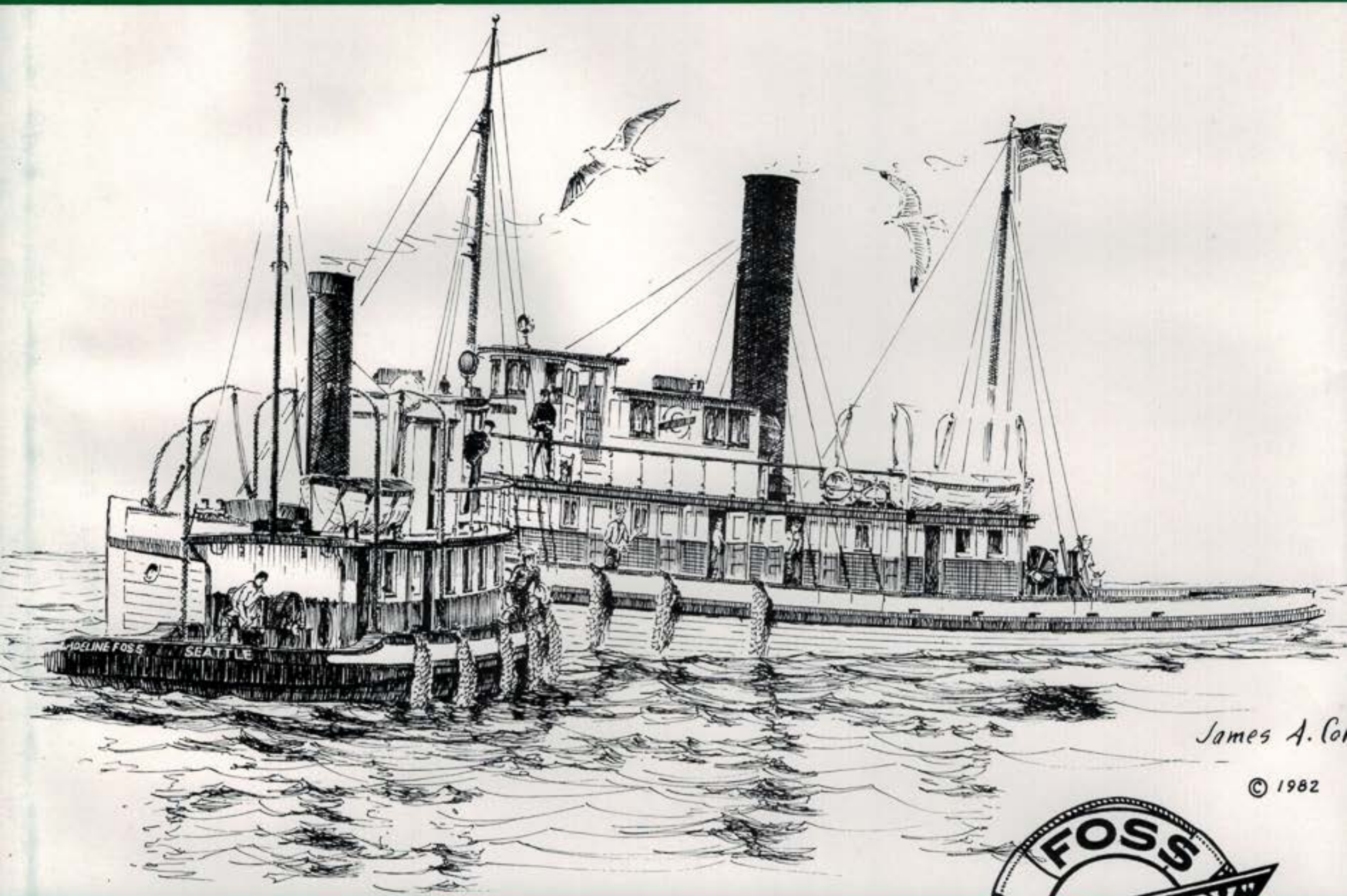


FOSS

Ninety Years of Towboating



James A. Co...

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By Michael Skalley



LESLIE FOSS (1)

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|---------|---|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Built: | 1944 Minneford Yacht Yard City Island, New York | Propulsion: | Superior 1,200-horsepower |
| Length: | 117-feet | Primary Service: | Alaska and Coastwise |
| Beam: | 28-feet | Final Foss Operating Day: | April 19, 1968 |
| | | Status: | Sold - Domestic |

The LESLIE FOSS, designated LT-495 by the U.S. Army during World War II was one of a series of five MIKI-Class tugs built at the Minneford Shipyard in New York. She operated on the East Coast for the Army Transportation Corps from 1944 until shortly after the War.

When the 495 was declared surplus and offered for sale, the Baltimore Towing Company of Baltimore, Maryland, in July 1946 purchased the tug and renamed her the JOHN MICHAEL. They used the MICHAEL in East Coast service until April 1950 then sold her to Kotzebue Oil Company, Kotzebue, Alaska for \$150,000.

Kotzebue Oil owned a number of smaller tugs and several cargo barges and a large oil barge, the ARCTIC CHIEF—all their equipment was used in the Bering Sea and Arctic regions. But with the acquisition of the JOHN MICHAEL, Kotzebue Oil intended to compete in more general towing in other areas of Alaska on a year-around basis rather than be restricted to the short ice-free season in the Bering Sea. The JOHN MICHAEL started work for Kotzebue Oil in 1951 doing general barge towing between Puget Sound and Alaska and it must have been profitable as the Company was able to make payments during the summer to the Sea-First Bank on a marine mortgage against the tug.

But in early November, Kotzebue's fortunes took a turn for the worse. The JOHN MICHAEL left Seattle with the barge ARCTIC CHIEF bound for the Oceanic Fisheries herring-reduction plant at Port Vita on Alaska's Kodiak Island. This was the second trip to Port Vita and the barge was to load 224,000 gallons of herring oil, 18,000 gallons

of salmon oil, and 190,000 gallons of fish soluble. By November 25 all of the \$307,000 cargo was aboard and the JOHN MICHAEL, with the ARCTIC CHIEF, pulled out for Seattle.

Shortly after leaving, the weather started to make-up, and by dawn on November 26, the tug and barge were caught in a raging gale with 50 to 60 knot winds and very high seas. The JOHN MICHAEL was taking a vicious pounding, but hanging on and hoping for a let-up. But at the height of the storm, the brake on the tow winch failed, and the tow line flew off the drum, casting the barge adrift. Wind and sea took charge, grounding the barge on the rocky shores of Marmot Island. Heavy breakers pounded the ARCTIC CHIEF, and she started to break up. The incessant seas kept the barge heaving and twisting, and she eventually slipped off the rocks and sank in 500 feet of water.

The JOHN MICHAEL, severely battered by the seas, headed for shelter and waited out the storm before beginning her return to Seattle—light. Shortly after arrival in Lake Union, she was placed under arrest by the United States Marshall as Oceanic Fisheries had opened court proceedings against the tug and owners for loss of cargo. Sea-First Bank also filed a claim for \$112,000, the amount still owed on the mortgage and Union Oil Company later filed suit for \$15,000 to cover unpaid fuel bills.

Oceanic Fisheries claimed the tug and barge left port in an unseaworthy condition, had inadequate towing equipment, and suffered negligence by the crew. However, investigation revealed that the JOHN MICHAEL's towing gear was approved by a marine surveyor before departure. But a new tow line had been installed prior to leaving Seattle, and the wire was 300 feet shorter than the old line, so it was claimed the shortage of weight and catenary effect would be critical in a storm as severe as the one in which the ARCTIC CHIEF was lost.

During the next three months, claims and counter-claims flooded the court while the JOHN MICHAEL remained under arrest at Lake Union. Then after the legal storm subsided, the Federal Court on March 5, 1951 ordered the tug sold at a public sale by the U.S. Marshall. The major reasons given for this decision were to save the tug's value and prevent accumulation of costs during court proceedings and to reduce deterioration of the vessel during a long drawn-out trial. Kotzebue Oil Company protested the action because a Marshall's sale would not bring enough to enable the firm to resume business. Nevertheless, the sale was held on April 9, 1951 at the Federal Courthouse in Seattle.

Foss Launch & Tug Company bid the highest of the competitors. Besides Foss, Crowley Maritime, and Oceanic Fisheries were bidders. The Foss bid of \$76,000 was only \$1,000 over Crowley's. Foss' explanation of their bid amount was that a MIKI-Class tug in top condition would be worth \$115,000; but they figured to spend \$40,000 in upgrading the tug to Foss standards—therefore, the \$76,000 bid. With the JOHN MICHAEL, Foss now owned six MIKI-Class tugs to serve the flourishing Alaska and Ocean trade.

A few months later the Court dismissed without costs all causes, actions, and claims against Kotzebue Oil Company except the claims of Union Oil Company and Sea-First Bank.

In the meantime Foss towed the JOHN MICHAEL to their Seattle yard for a major overhaul and outfitting to prepare her for long-distance towing. During the period of reconditioning she was named LESLIE FOSS in honor of the eldest daughter of Drew and Donna Foss.

To start off her active Foss life the LESLIE, in late April, towed Milwaukee rail-car barges between Seattle and Bellingham. But with the start of the Alaska summer season, she shifted to the Anchorage barge run, remaining on the haul all summer.

The LESLIE towed on the various Foss Alaska routes between April and September of each year through 1957. The quiet winter months were spent either waiting for the spring activity at Seattle moorings or towing car-barges between Seattle, Bellingham, and Port Townsend. The LESLIE didn't have exclusive rights to the car-barge run, she had to share the work with her five sister-tugs also wintering in Seattle, each one taking the job for a few weeks to keep limbered up.

Ironically, the LESLIE was again at the Oceanic Fisheries dock at Port Vita with barge FOSS-137 on July 2, 1957 loading herring oil and fertilizer for discharge in Seattle—but under different auspices than the LESLIE's call at Port Vita in 1951.

Next came a shift for the LESLIE to southern waters. After a quiet winter in Seattle, she left for southern California in April 1958 with barge FOSS-207 loaded with lumber from Olympia, Washington. The trip marked the beginning of the long-term Foss Coast Lumber Run, so named until after 1961 when the name was changed to Coast & Honolulu Lumber Run.

The LESLIE maintained the Coast Lumber Run and on a regular basis for fifteen months, barging lumber from Puget Sound, Oregon, and northern California ports to southern California. Then in November 1958 a second tug was added, the JUSTINE FOSS, and the two tugs remained on the run through June 1959 then the LESLIE was ordered to resume barge towing to Alaska. She finished out the Alaska towing season in late fall and joined the winter lay-up fleet—but not for long.

In October the LESLIE had a part in the construction of the Hood Canal Floating Bridge as several high-horsepower heavy tugs were needed to shift and hold in place the floating concrete pontoons so they could be joined and anchored to form the bridge structure. The job required the combined strength of the MIKI-Class tugs ADELINE, DONNA, and LESLIE, with the CAROL and ANDREW FOSS assisting. The job was a short one, but it lessened the winter lay-up time.

The LESLIE continued regular Alaska service with few problems from 1960 through 1963, but in 1964 she made long hard tows which took some of the life out of the 20 year old tug—like the one she made in February 1964. With winter weather battering Alaska, the LESLIE was ordered to tow the large refined-oil barge FOSS-98 from the U.S. Air Force oil dock at Mukilteo to the remote airbase at Shemya Island in the farthest reaches of the Aleutian Islands—a 3,000 mile trip from Seattle via the Inside Passage to Cape Spencer and from there across the rough North Pacific to Shemya. Maintaining a respectable speed of 6 knots, the LESLIE, after being weather-bound for nine days, arrived at Shemya on March 20th. After discharging the 36,000 barrels of oil, she returned to Seattle without suffering weather damage, arriving April 6th.

Another wearing assignment was slated for the LESLIE—she was to take part in the 1964 DEW Line re-supply project for the government. So on May 9, 1964 again with the FOSS-98 in tow, she left Mukilteo for the Army base near Naknek in Bristol bay. Arriving off Naknek River the LESLIE and her barge anchored up, and for the next two weeks oil was lightered ashore in small barges towed by the shallow-draft Foss tugs SEA MULE and ELMER FOSS.

During the next six weeks lightering continued at the Bering sea bases of Newenham, Romanzof, and Unalakleet. Then, with her barge empty, the LESLIE returned to Puget Sound for another load and with only four days in port she headed again for the Bering Sea, departing on August 6th. But after only three days, the north-bound leg of the trip suddenly ended at Bella Bella, British Columbia—the LESLIE's engine developed problems. Via radiophone, the Captain reported that apparently a bad load of diesel was dumped aboard in Seattle and he complained that the engine ran erratically and the valves were burning off. He advised that the engine could not be relied on when maneuvering in close stations. The Seattle office directed the LESLIE to continue northward, meet the MARTHA FOSS and exchange tows. The meeting was accomplished and the LESLIE took the MARTHA's light barge and headed for home arriving August 22nd. With repairs made and new fuel aboard, the LESLIE went back to work, but this time on local routine tows until winter lay-up.

On April 9, 1965 the LESLIE, with Captain Stan Thurston in charge, left Seattle with two combination deck-cargo and petroleum barges for a seldom-heard destination, Amchitka, an island 600 miles out in the Aleutian chain. The LESLIE and her crew knew little of the meaning of operation "Longshot" on Amchitka when they left Seattle, even though activity for the atomic project was under way some time before barge-cargo started to arrive.

On May 9, 1964 the first construction crew meal was served on Amchitka and it was the first meal since the Island was abandoned by the Military in 1945. A small camp for about fifty men was set up for the Atomic Energy Commission job. The coordination of the early stages of the base construction was handled by the Alaska District, U.S. Army Engineers. The first cargo to the Island consisted of sixteen bunkhouses and four portable buildings for kitchens, mess, and recreation rooms. The 20 buildings, each 10 × 24 feet, were shipped via Military Air Transport from Tacoma. Power for the camp was supplied by two generators with a total output of 70 kilowatts. The plants were also air-lifted. During the first year all necessary cargo was air-shipped from Seattle. Very little was known about what was going on at Amchitka except that a highly important government project was in the making.

Captain Thurston's sailing orders on the first barge trip stated: "You will be carefully watched and checked by the contractors (Norcoast Construction Company), the United States Army Engineers, and other government agencies." Norcoast Construction was only involved with the development work, buildings, roads, and utilities.

The initial cargo carried by Foss consisted of 500 tons of general cargo, 60,000 gallons of diesel, and 225,000 gallons of gasoline. The LESLIE and her two barges arrived at Amchitka on May 1st and spent several extra days discharging, due to the very primitive conditions for unloading. Before returning home, she barged extra supplies from the Navy base at Adak to Amchitka. The diversion lengthened out the trip and she didn't return to Seattle until June 28th, after a three months' absence.

The LESLIE spent the remainder of 1965 on routine tows to Alaska and 1966 turned out very similar with the exception of a 43-day Panamanian trip in the spring. With Captain Dale Gudgel as skipper she ran light to Balboa, picked up a floating machine shop and delivered it to Tacoma.

The LESLIE's 1966-1967 winter days were quiet ones and just as well, for the 22-year old tug had to conserve her aging machinery for the coming season when she was scheduled for more long hard tows to the Aleutians.

A year and a half had passed from the start of the project before the major drilling operation for the Atomic Energy Commission, handled by Holmes & Narver Construction Company, got under way, necessitating a tug and barge sealift.

Foss was awarded the extensive Amchitka towing contract and all their available equipment was utilized to keep cargo moving on all routes.

The LESLIE went back to work in April, and with Captain Gudgel she left for Amchitka on Voyage #3 of the Holmes & Narver contract. With good weather she completed the voyage in 34 days, a fast run for the 5000-mile round trip.

However, the rest of her runs did not turn out as favorably. After 16 years pulling heavy barges for Foss, the LESLIE began to experience mechanical failures, equipment breakdowns, and parts replacement. To complicate repair work, she was the only Foss MIKI powered by a Superior diesel and parts were not as readily obtainable as for the Enterprise engines in the West Coast-built MIKI's. Delays and expensive time loss for the LESLIE were unavoidable as evidenced by her performance record for 1967. On her last run to Shemya in August she started out from Seattle with a general cargo barge with Captain Jay Jacobson in charge—Captain Jay had arrived in Seattle less than four weeks earlier after spending several months in Vietnam aboard the MARGARET FOSS. The voyage to Shemya was routine until the evening of August 12 when halfway across the lower Gulf of Alaska the Superior broke down. The engineers opened up the engine and found Number 4 piston in two pieces. Eighteen hours later a spare piston was in place and they were back on course.

Then on August 14 Captain Jacobson radioed that the direction-finder and radar had both failed during the day and to add to the troubles, they were experiencing rough weather. At 0645 on August 19 when about 30 miles from Dutch Harbor, the main engine broke down again. Fortunately, the fishing vessel VIRGINIA SANTOS was in the vicinity and towed the LESLIE and her barge into safe anchorage at Dutch Harbor, arriving at 1800 that night. The engineers checked out the engine and found a valve had gone through the cylinder head. With repairs made, they were ready for a trial run, but the engine wouldn't turn over. Another check revealed a severely bent "con" rod. The LESLIE was considered deadlined at Dutch Harbor and the engineers started tearing down the engine. The Seattle office arranged to ship a new head, rod, and piston by air freight.

Next day the LESLIE received word by radio that four crates of engine parts, totalling 2,007 pounds would leave Anchorage at 0600 August 22 and arrive Dutch Harbor at noon. But the parts failed to show up. They were sent to Fairbanks by mistake. By August 24, the parts still hadn't arrived—the plane was weather-bound at Cold Bay. The parts finally did arrive August 25 and the installation started. However, prior to this, on August 22, the ADELINe arrived in Dutch Harbor from Amchitka and took over the LESLIE's tow for Shemya and the LESLIE, upon completion of the repairs, was to return the ADELINe's empty barge from Dutch Harbor to Seattle. With repairs completed on August 27, the LESLIE left for home and without further incident arrived in Seattle on September 11. But her future usefulness was considerably in doubt as all towing companies had been constantly upgrading their equipment and powerful high-speed tugs were necessary to compete for jobs. Foss had sufficient new and more able tugs to call on, so the LESLIE was towed to Tacoma for drydocking, minor repairs, and lay-up.

Then a business upswing began in April 1968 and all the fleet was in motion with the exception of the LESLIE. But on April 12 a rush job came up, and Foss brought her out of lay-up to tow oil barges between Tacoma and a severely damaged tanker lying at Nootka Sound, B.C. The oil was to be pumped out of the tanker, the MANDOIL II, into barges for delivery to Tacoma.

The LESLIE left Tacoma on April 14 with the oil barge FOSS-98 bound for Nootka and after delivering the barge, she returned light to Tacoma to take a second barge to the tanker. On the way up the Straits, abeam of Neah Bay, the electric steering broke down and the ANDREW FOSS was sent to take over. The next morning, still at Neah Bay, the LESLIE was ordered to Tacoma for permanent lay-up and by April 19 she was fast alongside the tie-up float—her career with Foss over.

But with one door closed, another opened for her. On June 6, 1969 Foss sold her to Robert Martin of Gig Harbor who ran Gig Harbor Marine Charters. Martin's purpose in acquiring the LESLIE was to register her as a yacht and modify the tug for charter served to any place in the world. He renamed her ENCHANTER. The new owner modernized the galley and upgraded the quarters for comfortable living, accommodating fifteen persons. She could be used for underwater salvage, extended cruising, or fishing charters.

Robert Martin used the ENCHANTER in this type of service for several years then he sold the boat to the well-known tugboat Captain "Jug" Nolze for a return to the work she was built for.

The ENCHANTER was still equipped for towing and with the necessary document changes, Captain Nolze was ready to crash the Alaska towing business as an independent operator. He entered into a bareboat charter with Northland Marine Lines of Seattle for use of his boat in towing container barges to their delivery ports in southeastern and southwestern Alaska. At this time Nolze renamed the tug POLAR NAVIGATOR so as to have a similar name to Northland Marine Lines' own tugs, POLAR SEA and POLAR STAR. For the next several years the POLAR NAVIGATOR towed on a regular basis and in competition to Foss Alaska Line.

Captain Nolze passed away during the life of the charter, but Northland Marine Lines continued operating the tug until November 1976 when, afflicted by serious financial problems, the company filed for bankruptcy.

The POLAR NAVIGATOR was seized by a local shipyard for non-payment of repair bills and several other firms also filed claims against the tug for unpaid bills. To clear the case, the NAVIGATOR was sold in May 1977 at a U.S. Marshall's sale. Her new owners, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Sinkey of Olympia, Washington, planned to live aboard the vessel and use her for private cruising. They berthed the boat in Olympia and spent the next several months transforming the commercial tug into a comfortable well-appointed home afloat. They left the towing gear intact just in case it was ever needed.

In May 1978 the Sinkey family cruised from Olympia to Juneau, Alaska. At Juneau they anchored in front of the old Alaska Juneau Gold Mine as a base of operations. During the summer of 1978 they chartered the tug for several weeks to a geophysical study outfit in southeastern Alaska and the Sinkeys acted as crew.

In early June they received an unusual request for tug services from Southeast Skyways of Juneau. One of their "Beaver" airplanes crashed at the head of Pinta Bay on the west side of Chicagof Island, but the plane could be salvaged. Fortunately, the pilot escaped uninjured and was rescued the next day. The Sinkeys agreed to provide the services of the NAVIGATOR and the next day they left for Pinta Bay. The tug anchored in a deep water bay close by the downed plane and each salvageable piece of the plane was floated out of Pinta Bay on inner tubes and barrels over to the POLAR NAVIGATOR. Both wings, the pontoons, engine, and fuselage were safely towed to the tug and hoisted aboard. Salvage complete, the tug returned to Juneau, her mission accomplished.

The POLAR NAVIGATOR remained in southeastern Alaska through September 1978 and the final few weeks of the cruise were spent relaxing in Pybus Bay, then the family crew of four and dog headed back to Olympia, arriving in early October.

The Sinkeys decided it was time to sell the 35-year old tug as maintenance was costly and operating expense excessive for a boat with but little offsetting income.

So in early 1979 the tug was sold to a construction company in northern California. They berthed her at the Foss-Seattle yard where the Sinkeys had the tug tied up for repairs. The newcomers intended to do general towing out of the Gulf of Mexico, but apparently nothing developed as last report has the former LESLIE now named WESTERN SEA I tied up in Everett in some legal complications.



MARTHA FOSS Northbound out of Puget Sound, July, 1961 with triple tow for Pure Oil Co. at Pavlof Bay, Alaska.
(Courtesy of Roger Dudley and Foss Tug Co)



Five Foss tugs, LESLIE, EDITH (3), WEDELL, ANDREW and CAROL (just visible) positioning one of the center spans of the Hood Canal Bridge in 1960. (Courtesy of Foss Tug Co)



The entire ocean-going fleet of Foss tugs as of November, 1953 on Lake Union. From left, the AGNES, LESLIE, BARBARA, JUSTINE, DONNA, CHRISTINE, MARTHA, and WEDELL. (Courtesy of Roger Dudley)