

SOUTH AFRICAN SHIPPING

PART ONE – TO 1960

1. EARLY YEARS

During the Dutch and early British settlement at the Cape, local sailing vessels went up the west coast on fishing, sealing and guano-collecting expeditions, and as settlements grew along the southern African coast (especially in the later years of the British governing the Cape), they also moved small volumes of cargoes. Some of these small vessels (brigs, schooners, etc) were locally owned.

The first steam coaster and several later steam coasters were British-owned, as were some vessels engaged in sealing and fishing. Several **fishing vessels** (sailing vessels and steamers) were owned locally, including some steam trawlers. Steam **whalers** operated out of Cape Town, Saldanha Bay and Port Natal, while Captain John Grindrod (based in Durban) conducted whaling operations in Mozambique and along the coast south of Port Natal.

Gradually, local coastal shipowners began to emerge :

- **The Barrys** (c1859-1865; Breede River to Cape Town; sailing ships also traded on this route, some continuing to Britain with grain or hides and skins);
- **Thesen** (1869 – calling mainly at Knysna, Mossel Bay, Cape Town and west coast fishing harbours) This company continued trading under various ownerships until 1965 when it was bought by Safmarine and exchanged for shares in Unicorn Lines.



Thesen's schooner *Albatross* in which the family came to the Cape from Knysna in 1869.

Photograph : Grindrod Collection

- **Stephan Brothers** (c.1880-1916 when bought by Mitchell Cotts; Cape Town-west coast);
- **Smith, Webster & Co** (1890-1917 when bought by Thesens; Cape Town-west coast);
- **T.N. Price** (c.1890-1896; taken over by Smith's Coasters; Port Natal-Port Shepstone-Port St Johns).

- **Smith's Coasters** began trading in with chartered vessels in 1896 (Port Natal-Port Shepstone-Port St Johns) and later, once the fleet had expanded, extended the service to Cape ports. This company continued trading until it merged with African Coasters in 1966 to form Unicorn Lines.

Other companies also ran coasters, but most of these were feeder vessels owned by British companies.

The **tugs** in the harbours were owned, initially by the respective harbour boards (some by Union or Castle Lines) and, later by the Cape Colonial Government. From the time of Union (1910) the tugs and other harbour craft were owned by the South African Railways and Harbours Administration and their succeeding organisations.

While a few locally-owned sailing ships traded out of South Africa (e.g. the Port Elizabeth-owned *Mazepa* and Grindrod's *Bangkok*), no foreign-going steamships were locally-owned at this time.

2. BETWEEN WORLD WAR 1 (1918) AND START OF WORLD WAR 2 (1939)

- **Thesens** continued trading, mainly along the west coast as far north as Walvis Bay, with occasional voyages along the east coast to Mossel Bay, Knysna, Algoa Bay, East London and Durban.
- **Smith's Coasters** continued trading from Durban to Cape ports, carrying mainly sugar. They had done well and, in the 1930s, built the first ships for a South African owner.



Smith's Coasters' *Gamtoos* was built for the Durban-Cape Town sugar trade in 1936. During World War 2, she was used to clear debris from the harbours in North Africa. After the war, she ferried teams to the west coast island to collect guano. She was sunk as an air force target in 1991. Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

- Three ships were bought by the **South African Railways and Harbours Administration** (known as **SARships**) in 1919 to carry coal and other minerals to Asia or West Africa and they loaded railway sleepers for the return voyage to South

Africa. Although the original trio were sold, the SARship fleet grew via acquisition including the brand-new *Erica*, the first foreign-going ship built for a South African company (1926). At the outbreak of World War 2, SARships had four vessels, two of which were sunk during the war.



Erica, one of the SARships operating before and after World War 2. Photograph : Brian Ingpen Collection

- **Frontier 1922 Shipping Company** began in 1922 and in 1933, African Coasters was formed (both companies were the idea of Captain John Grindrod) and the former was absorbed by the latter in 1937.



Frontier Steamships (1922) (and later African Coasters) operated the 1927-vintage coaster *Border* from Durban to Port St Johns from 1935 until her purchase by Coastal Steamships for the west coast trade in 1946. She was wrecked south of Port Nolloth the following year. Photograph : Grindrod Collection

- **Coastal Shipping** was formed in 1933 for trade between Cape Town and the Breede River and the west coast. The company ceased trading 1935.
- All harbour craft were owned and operated by South African Railways & Harbours, and, with larger ships entering the South African trade (especially larger Union-Castle liners) new, larger and more powerful tugs were ordered.



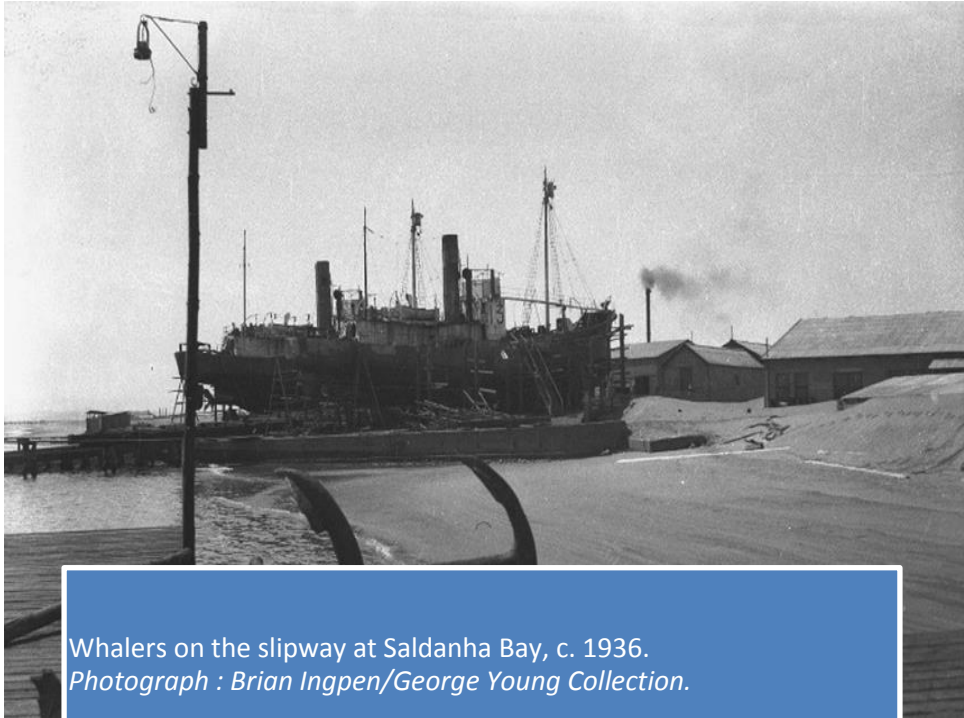
The Durban harbour tug Sir David Hunter, assisting the British India liner Shirala as she sails from the port in July 1947. The 1915-vintage tug was replaced by the new oil-burning steam tug A.M. Campbell in the early 1950s. *Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.*



Sir William Hoy began service in Durban in 1928 and remained at the port until she was scrapped in 1979.

- Fishing continued in all ports from Mossel Bay as far north as Walvis Bay, then a South African enclave. Some fishing was also done from other ports.
- The first South African fisheries research ship, *Africana*, began operating. *Pieter Faure* had also been used for fisheries research, but was not a dedicated vessel for this purpose.

- Whaling was important (whale products fetched high prices in Europe) and whaling operations were conducted out of Durban, and Saldanha Bay, while Irvin & Johnson, with overseas partners, operated a large whale factory ship and several catchers for Antarctic whaling and whaling off Durban. Another whale factory ship was operated by Durban-based interests with a Norwegian whaling company.



Whalers on the slipway at Saldanha Bay, c. 1936.
 Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

3. 1940 to 1961

The immediate post-war years heralded an unprecedented shipping boom as cargoes – backlogged by the wartime disruption to shipping - needed shipment and the reparations in Europe and Japan created a huge trade in steel, cement and food, particularly grain. Thousands of passengers were seeking berths to flee the damaged European cities or to seek new beginnings in countries that offered opportunities. Thus shipping seemed a profitable business at the time and, like elsewhere, new endeavours sprang up in South Africa.

3.1 SOME SHORT-LIVED ATTEMPTS TO ENTER SHIPPING

Using a variety of old ships - sold by their owners as surplus or as past their economic lives, and even in two instances using converted dredgers - a number of other shipping companies sprang to life in South Africa in the late 1940s. Some of these tried the Indian Ocean islands trade, only to find that the cargo flow was one-way from South Africa, with little return cargo, thus making the passage from the islands a financial loss. Other companies tried to break into the already over-tonnaged Durban to Cape Town route. Thus, without proper analyses of the conditions of the time, many of these endeavours faded within a few years,

and in some cases, the ships ended as derelicts in South African ports. Some of those companies are listed below :

- The fishing company, **Ovenstones**, operated two small coasters from Cape Town to the west coast in 1941. Both were bought by Thesens for their west coast service.
- The Finnish barque, *Lawhill*, that was captured by the South African naval forces and taken as a war prize vessel in 1940, operated under the South African flag until she was sold in 1947. She carried mainly grain and timber from Australia to South Africa, but also carried South African cadets and junior officers.
- **Union Sea Freighters** (1949-1950) operated two ships between Durban and the Indian Ocean islands. Lack of cargo caused the company to cease trading.
- **Atlantic Shipping Company** (1945-1946) operated a four-masted sailing vessel on various voyages, but the company ceased trading when the vessel was laid up and scrapped.
- **Union Steamships** (1946-1947) operated two ships along the west coast (both were bought by Thesens) and another (a freighter) traded from South Africa to the Mediterranean until she was sold, also in 1947.



Formerly a Dutch coaster, *Springbok* operated to the west coast. As *Walvis*, she traded briefly for Union Steamships whose fleet and operations were taken over by Thesens in 1949. Initially named *Ovambo* and from 1950 *Ovambo Coast*, she continued on the west coast trade until she was wrecked on Marcus Island at the entrance to Saldanha Bay in July 1958.

Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

- **Alpha Steamship Company** (1946 to 1948) ran five trampships, mainly moving South African minerals to Europe.
- **Arden Hall** (1947-1951) traded to West Africa using old tonnage and ceased trading due to the age of the ships and the lack of cargo.
- **Van Riebeeck Lines** (1950 to 1954) had two ships that traded to West Africa but the vessels were old and poorly maintained, which, coupled to the lack of cargo, forced its closure.
- **Neptune Shipping** (1952-1955) had three ships for trade between Durban and the Indian Ocean islands and West Africa. Lack of cargo, the age of the ships (and the cost of operating such old vessels) and the loss of one on the South West African (Namibian) coast led to its closure.

- **Cape Recife Shipping** (1955) operated a small coaster between Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, but the small volumes of cargo caused its early closure.

3.2 OPERATIONS THAT CONTINUED FOR LONGER:

- **Union-Castle Line** registered two freighters in Cape Town in 1946 to appease the South African government who wanted more local involvement in the company that was benefiting from the UK-South Africa mail contract. (The ships were manned by Union-Castle British officers and ratings. Both had been scrapped by 1961.)



The Union-Castle freighter *Good Hope Castle* arriving in Cape Town in 1946. She later transferred to the South African flag as a token gesture by Union-Castle to the South African government who were demanding more local participation in the company that held the contract to carry mail between South African and Britain. She carried passengers; hence the people on the quay waiting to greet their friends and relatives aboard. *Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.*

- **Northern Steamships** and the associated **Southern Steamships** (owned by the Johannesburg-based Nomikos brothers) operated four Liberty ships (one was wrecked shortly after her naming ceremony) and a war-built tanker. The fleet expanded initially and a new freighter and a new tanker were ordered. The companies ceased trading in 1962.



Built in 1943 as the Liberty ship *John G Nicolay*, but completed for the US Navy as *Albireo*, and sailed as *AK 90*, Northern Steamships of Johannesburg bought her in 1947 and renamed her *President Steyn*. She is seen here during her renaming ceremony in Cape Town. She traded for Northern Steamships until 1951 when she was sold and renamed *Hidalgo*. She was scrapped in Japan as *Ocean Sailor* in 1967. Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

- **South African Lines (SAL)**, was founded in 1945 by a Greek shipowner Eugene Eugenides, to trade to West Africa and South America. SAL began a joint South Africa-Europe service with Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linien in 1951, an association that led to a buy out of SAL by the German company Globus Reederei that retained South African registration for some of its ships.
- **Safmarine** was established in 1946 with American and local finance, initially using chartered ships to trade between South Africa and the United States. Three Victory ships were bought in 1947. A triangular service (South Africa-UK-USA) evolved and, by 1960, four new ships had entered service. The company's services changed to South Africa-United States and South Africa-United Kingdom. Chartered ships augmented the owned vessels to provide a more regular service. Safmarine also operated two new vessels for worldwide tramping.



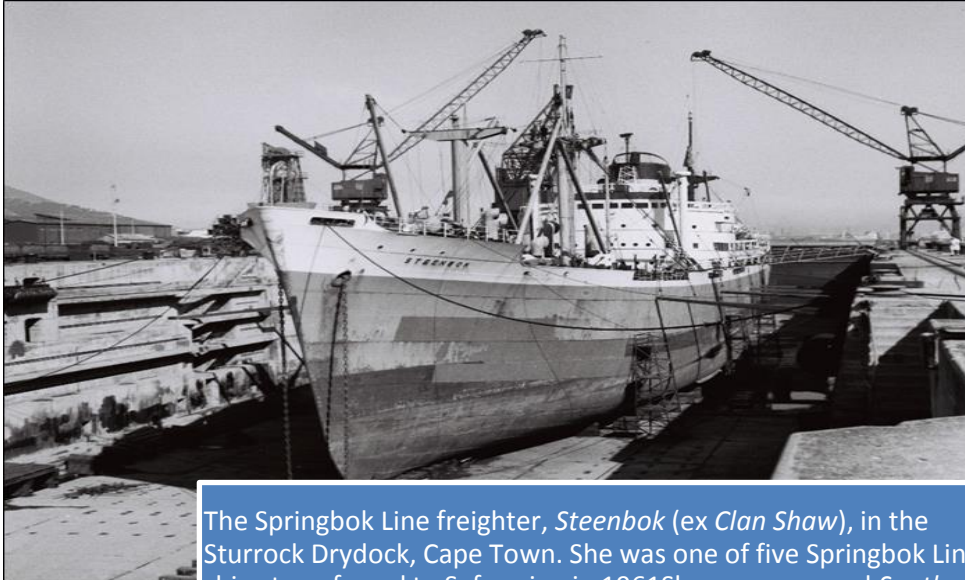
The third Victory ship to join the Safmarine fleet in 1947 was *Vergelegen*. She became *South African Victory* and later *S.A. Victory*.
Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.



Built as *Sira* in 1953, *S.A. Pioneer* (ex *South African Pioneer*) was one of four Global-class ships bought by Safmarine in the 1950s. Renamed *S.A. Pioneer* in 1961, she traded for Safmarine until April 1972 when she caught fire and was seriously damaged after a collision in fog with the tanker *Silver Castle* near Port Elizabeth. She was scrapped soon after that sad event.
Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

- **Durban Lines** was established in 1957 to trade between Durban and Mozambique.

- **Springbok Line**, a subsidiary of the British & Commonwealth Group, was formed in 1959 with five ships that traded until the company and its ships were merged with Safmarine in 1961.



The Springbok Line freighter, *Steenbok* (ex *Clan Shaw*), in the Sturrock Drydock, Cape Town. She was one of five Springbok Line ships transferred to Safmarine in 1961. She was renamed *South African Seafarer*, abbreviated in 1966 to *S.A. Seafarer*. Later that year, she was wrecked at Green Point near Cape Town harbour while inward from Britain with a cargo of record value.
Photograph : Brian Ingpen/George Young Collection.

- The major coasting operations (**African Coasters, Smith's Coasters** and **Thesens**) continued to operate along the southern African coast, the former two on the Durban-Walvis Bay range and Thesens mainly along the west coast. From 1954, their operations had been boosted by the abolition of the SAR&H's "Sea Competitive Railway Rating Policy" that had attracted coastal cargoes to the railway system at ludicrously lower rates than the coasters could offer. With those rates now abolished, the companies were able to grow, but the lack of capital forced them to buy older tonnage.



African Coasters bought several old ships in the mid-1950s, including *Bulwark* that had been built on Teesside in 1920. Expensive to operate, this old coal-burner was not ideal for the South African coastal trade. She was wrecked at Danger Point on 1 April 1963. Photograph : Grindrod Collection.



In the wake of the abolition of the Sea Competitive Railway Rating Policy of the SAR&H, more cargo became available and, lacking capital for investment in modern ships, the coasting companies bought old tonnage. *Induna* was one such vessel owned by Smith's Coasters.

- **SARships** continued to move South African mineral exports to Asia and to return with railway sleepers from Australia, but when railway development slowed down, and other materials were used to make sleepers, the demand for Australian hardwoods decreased and the ships (now only two) moved coal from Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) to Cape ports for railway locomotives, steam tugs, steam trawlers, powerstations, as well as for industrial and domestic use. One ship was

scrapped and chartered ships augmented the remaining vessel on the coal run, especially in winter when coal demand was greater.

- **Mobil Oil** began operating two locally-flagged product tankers along the South African coast. The operation only lasted from 1961 to 1965, by which time the Cape Town refinery was operating, thereby reducing the volume of coastwise oil product cargoes.
- Five new oil-burning tugs, two new coal-burning tugs and a number of new pilot tugs replaced older tugs in the harbours. The oil-burners with their longer range were particularly useful in salvage and ocean towage operations.



The 1959-vintage *F.C. Sturrock* (shown above in Durban) and her sistership Cape Town's *Danie Hugo* were the second pair of oil-burning tugs to be delivered to the SAR&H Administration. In 1950-1951, the first pair of oil-burning steam tugs were completed : *F.T. Bates* (for Cape Town) and *A.M. Campbell* (for Durban). A fifth similar tug, *J.R. More*, arrived in Durban in 1961.
Photograph : Brian Ingpen

- The trawling fleet was modernised as a number of steam trawlers were replaced by modern side-trawlers. A new, custom-built fisheries research vessel, *Africana II*, entered service in 1951, and an inshore research vessel, *Sardinops*, was built at the Globe Engineering yard in Cape Town. She operated for over 50 years.
- Whaling activities continued from Durban and Saldanha Bay.

SEE SOUTH AFRICAN SHIPPING – PART 2 – 1961 TO THE PRESENT