

"CAP" RUKERT



W. G. Norman Rukert

W. G. NORMAN RUKERT

*Silhouette of a Pioneering Spirit
on the Baltimore Waterfront*

by

HELEN DELICH BENTLEY

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Introduction

Of all the bank files which support the financial relationships which thousands upon thousands of Maryland businesses and individuals have entrusted to Maryland National Bank over the years, none tells a more astonishing story of determination and success than our file on Captain W. G. N. Rukert. It is a story which began in 1920, when Maryland National, many mergers ago, was the Drovers and Mechanics Bank. It is a story which traces an unbroken record of accomplishments over 47 years—from Cap Rukert's release from the Port of Embarkation, U. S. Army, as a Captain in the Quartermaster Corps, through one of his most recent tributes, a newspaper feature entitled "Rukert at 80 Still Building—Planning." It is a remarkable story. But, so is the man.

Despite all his many accomplishments, I don't believe there is any other way to think of Cap Rukert than as just "Cap." To most people, and especially to me, this expresses the right combination of proper respect and informality. If anyone deserves respect, certainly Cap does. His accomplishments demand it. And yet the sum total of his fabric as a person just doesn't tolerate pomposity—and Cap doesn't either.

One of the most basic responsibilities of a bank and its officers is participation in the financial affairs of local private enterprise. Cap, I think, is the epitome of the entrepreneur. His faith, his dedication, and his success in his business, built over the years by the force of his commitment to the concept of private enterprise indicate nothing else. Cap is a man of strong opinions and convictions. He has never hesitated to express them. And, more important, he has put his thoughts into action at every opportunity.

Cap's business is, of course, entirely related to the Port of Baltimore. Since his whole energy is really devoted to his business, in

effect the Port is the beneficiary. It is ironic to some degree that his desire and ability to compete has benefited his principal competitor, The Maryland Port Authority, as much as it has himself.

Competition is good for all of us, and the Port Authority is really better for having to compete with Cap than it would have been as a quasi-public monopoly. In any event, few Marylanders doubt the value of the Port of Baltimore to the rest of the State. And so, all Cap's efforts toward a better Port have really been for the benefit of us all.

Any community can use men who are outspoken in behalf of their convictions, who carry forward their beliefs and back them with all the resources at their command, and whose singular dedication to all this is the real constitution of integrity. Baltimore can certainly point with pride to Cap Rukert as being another of its great businessmen, in the exact tradition of those who built this city in its early days. In due course of history, I think we will find Cap recorded with the notable Baltimoreans of all time.

We at Maryland National Bank are proud of our long association with Cap and our participation over the years in the growth of his business. I know I speak for my predecessors, Heyward Boyce and Stanley Trott, as well as for myself, when I both congratulate and thank Cap for his wonderful contributions to our business community, and for the pleasure of association with him in the realizations of his goals for his company.

You will certainly know some of the reasons for our pride when you have read this booklet.

ROBERT D. H. HARVEY
*Chairman of the Board
and Chief Executive Officer
Maryland National Bank*

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EW MEN AT AGE 80 would be looking forward to going in debt somewhere between one and three million dollars to build a new facility and then planning for still another multi-million dollar project when that is completed.

But that is why Capt. W. G. N. Rukert is considered the port's most rugged individualist. After he takes a moment or two—although really he is a sentimentalist and will cherish the best wishes warmly—to observe his eightieth birthday, he will get right back to figuring out how soon Pier 5 Clinton street can be finished.

From Broadway to Chase's

His further dream—one that has been with him since he first bought Miller's Wharf at the foot of Caroline street—is to have a modern marginal terminal running all the way from Broadway to Chase's Wharf right in the heart of downtown Baltimore.

The stalwart white-haired octogenarian almost appears to be looking far off when he talks about owning such a facility "within walking distance of the city."

He owns all but two buildings in that area now. His determination probably will result in his owning those also.

Investor of Own Money

“Cap” is really the only individual who has invested personal funds in public waterfront facilities in recent decades. Today he is the only one doing it outside of the Maryland Port Authority.

“I have been in debt ever since I started,” the old-timer muses. “I guess I will be as long as I live.”

However, Captain Rukert does not tie himself up in a big long-term loan to cover all of a project at one time. He borrows just so much at a time on a short-term basis; as soon as that is paid off, he goes in for more.

Right now he is “only in debt of \$365,000 to cover the first stage of remodeling Pier 5” which he bought from the Pennsylvania Railroad earlier this year.

As soon as the loan for the purchase was paid off, he borrowed to fill in the area from the present Pier 5 out to the port warden line. After that is paid back, he will go in for whatever amount is needed to complete the next step.

When Pier 5 is completed, Captain Rukert believes it will be the best terminal in his complex, which includes Lazaretto Terminal, Pier 5, and several wharves from Broadway to Caroline street. In addition, Rukert Terminals Corporation operates the Pennsylvania Ore Pier.

When Pier 5 is completed, it will be a three berth marginal wharf—“the best in the harbor just as Lazaretto today is an ideal place for efficiency.”

On Job at 7:30 a.m.

Although the years are beginning to tell on him, the former Army captain still carries himself erectly and with pride. And he is still a workhorse, on the job 5½ days a week from 7:30 a.m. on. His principal regret is that he is not thirty years younger to really give newcomers stiff competition and to put over some of his new dreams.

Just let someone try to interfere with his operation or take away some of his business—particularly if that someone is the Maryland Port Authority—and his powerful voice can be heard all the way uptown.

Only a few years ago when he learned that the State agency was going to get an account he had nurtured and brought to Baltimore, he burst into a commissioners’ meeting and threatened the whole group, most menacingly Joseph L. Stanton, executive director.

Resents New York Intrusion

“The old man” or “Cap” hates New Yorkers’ moving into Baltimore waterfront circles. He gasps and swears vehemently every time he learns of another New York branch office opening here. In his opinion, the New Yorkers are not interested in the over-all welfare of the Port. Their interest is only to make money while business is good here, and pull up stakes when it slides downhill, he believes.

“We Baltimoreans have to stay here forever,” he roars. “No one is interested in this port as are Baltimore companies, and we have to stick together.”

Captain Rukert seldom wears matching coat, trousers or waistcoat, and he always slouches an expensive felt hat on his snowy head while working on the several properties he owns, or in one of the crowded offices in the nondescript building at the foot of Caroline street, where the smell of fish meal is penetrating.

Lusty Lungs, Drive, Humor

Then there are his lusty lungs, sarcastic tongue, crackling sense of humor, provocative personality, and the traits of relentless drive and never taking a vacation or a rest which endear him to everyone—even his most intense competitors.

On their fiftieth wedding anniversary, he took time off to take Mrs. Rukert on a Caribbean cruise aboard the S.S. *Santa Paula*.

One of his sheds burned down while he was away, and he has refused to take another vacation. Earlier this year when he was in the hospital for an overhaul, he chafed at the bit until they let him get back on the job.

His agitated voice when something is not to his liking can be heard booming around Canton or Caroline street at any time, hollering at his son, Norman, or any one of his other faithful men for not doing things just as he dictated or feels they should be done.

Although most of the time he doesn't mean his heated chastisements, his blood pressure shoots up whenever he learns something is not quite going his way.

Despite all of his rugged outward appearance, Cap is a real sentimentalist and a softie when someone is in trouble. He is known as a soft touch by all who work for him. He has probably financed more funerals, more births, more hospital bills, more new homes and more automobiles for his people than any other single individual around the Port of Baltimore.

The stormy old soul is just like a ship at sea when trouble brews—"Let's see what we can do to save the situation and help humanity."

Hobby Is Growing Plants

His favorite hobby is growing plants and flowers of all kinds. He even had a greenhouse built in at his home on Belvedere avenue after he was forced to move in from the country because of the long drive every day. "Cap" still gets upset when he thinks about his beautiful farm on Butler road and visits it with considerable nostalgia once in awhile.

Whenever he has seen that Baltimore could gain more cargo by being able to please more customers, he has inaugurated specialized services—whether it be export crating, weighing, sampling, packing, bagging, fumigating, drumming ores.

If it has to do with handling cargoes in and out of Baltimore, "We'll do it" is his motto.

Respect of His Opponents

Even those persons who have been, and still are, on opposite sides of the fence in legal dealings and rate fights, hold the highest respect for the "old man" because of his past accomplishments and the fact that, even today, he does not sit back and try to keep operating as he did years ago, or just rest on his many laurels.

He well realizes that changes must be made if progress is to be made, and he keeps closely in touch with every move in Baltimore's competing ports, always keeping in mind that he might be able to lure some of that cargo this way.

In Philadelphia, a railroad executive had this to say about him a decade ago: "Cap Rukert is ahead of all of 'em. Marginal wharves are the only type for the future, with trucks playing such an important role in moving freight today—unless you can afford a finger pier 400 to 500 feet wide."

Born at the beginning of the steam age, Rukert and his firm handled the last of the sailing ships—the old *Abraham Ryberg* in 1941—bringing foreign cargo (cotton and cottonseed oil) into this port.

He started working before he finished the eighth grade, first performing odd jobs, as a newspaper reporter and then as a railroad clerk before going to the Terminal Warehouse Company with the Pennsylvania Railroad.

He still loves to recall his days as a reporter and the fact that he helped cover the Baltimore fire. With the recent deaths of Noland Williams and Charles Young, Cap is about the last newspaper man around who was on duty during those fevered days in 1904. The three of them covered police districts together.

Father Disapproved News Job

But when his father heard about an assignment which had a bawdy house atmosphere, he pulled his son out of the newspaper business and got him a job with the Pennsylvania. Ever since then,

he has had ties with that railroad, dealing primarily with them at all his terminals.

While with Terminal, he was sent to Washington to urge the Army to obtain special permits for critical materials needed to build onto Shryock's wharf. Although he did not succeed in his mission, the Army decided here was a man they needed to help them operate their port facilities. Before he knew it, he was assigned to Bordeaux, France.

However, while he was undergoing briefings, a new colonel was sent to the Baltimore area to head all activities here. While looking around, Colonel Miller decided what he really needed was someone who knew the waterfront. When he was told that such a person was now undergoing training in the Colgate Warehouses to work in Bordeaux, Colonel Miller "drafted" Rukert to assist him in Baltimore.

Having already sold his home and moved his family in with his mother, he had to get relocated in Baltimore. And then, "We went full speed ahead, doing the biggest job on the Atlantic Coast in shipping supplies to Europe."

It was that experience which convinced him he could go into business for himself. With that notion in mind, he and his brother, George, ventured jointly into warehousing, his brother supplying the money and Cap the experience.

"The first big break I got was at a meeting where I heard that the French were planning to resume potash movements to America and that a load was destined for Baltimore," the untiring operator recalls. "Why, that was like sweet music to my ears."

French Potash After War

"I got a friend who knew about it and told him there was plenty of space at Block street, where the Germans had stored potash before the war. So we got the French potash and later the German."

That stroke of luck caused him to look for more space and he

found some of the docks along Thames street available for \$135,000. He had only \$3,000 to pay down, but he convinced Willoughby McCormick, founder of McCormick & Co., to let him pay him off in profits.

About that time the waterfront operation and the uptown household warehouse business began conflicting, so the two brothers separated cordially, with Cap sticking to his docks.

Caroline Street Office

His main office is still located in that building at the foot of Caroline street, which once was the center of the coffee trade from Brazil.

During the depression, Rukert was lucky in that he had also linked himself with the Southern Pacific Railroad in the intercoastal trade. This plus the farm potash accounts helped him weather the lean years.

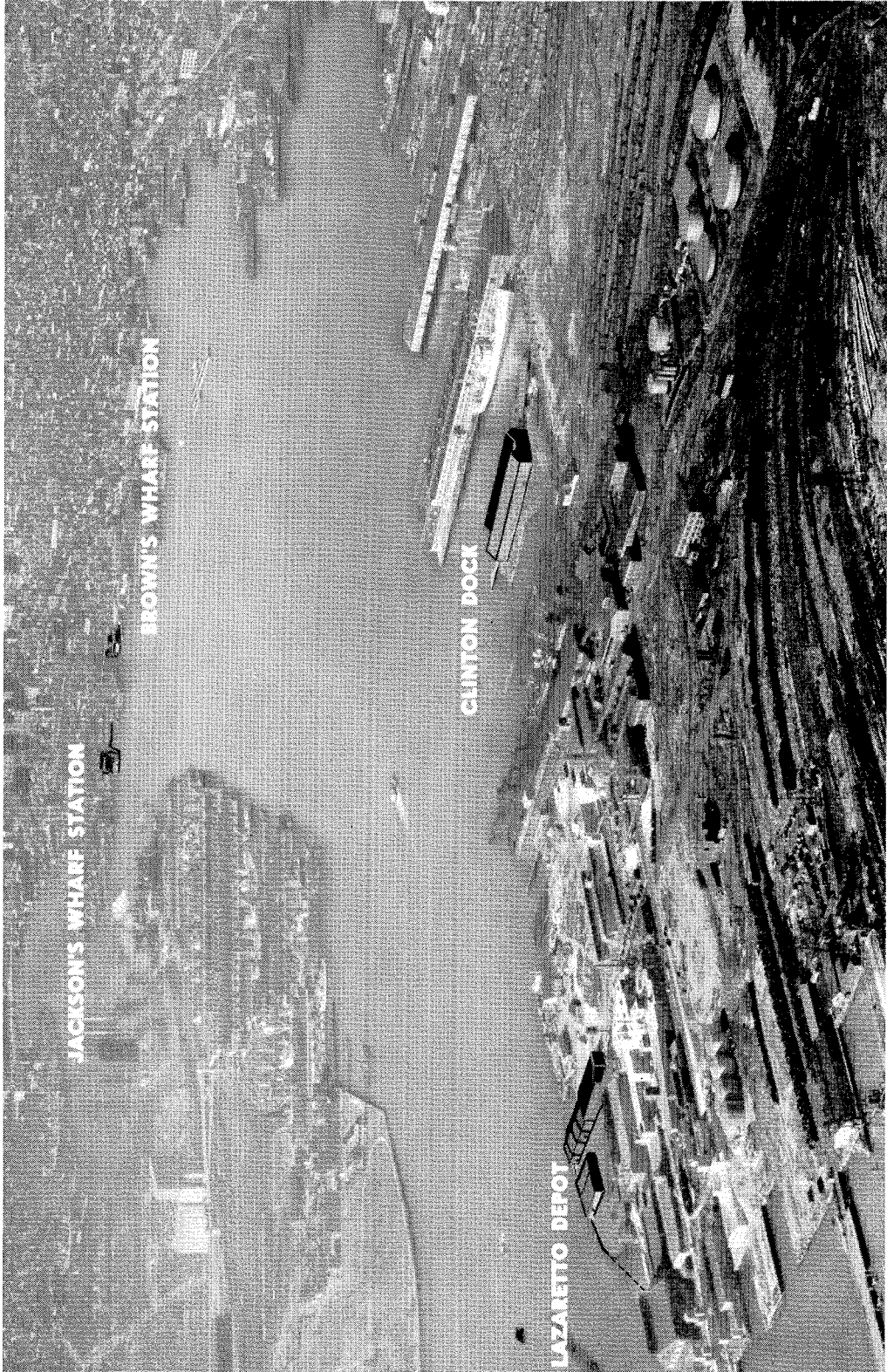
His first tie with the pier he is now about to spend one to three million dollars on came in 1937 when he leased it from the Pennsy.

Warehouse from Pottstown

The warehouse placed on top of it came from Pottstown, Pa., where the steel buildings used by a cement manufacturing plant were sold in bankruptcy. They were brought to Baltimore in sections via rail. A new warehouse will be erected there after the pier has been completed.

Four years later, the Western Maryland sold him Browns Wharf and, another four years the Lazaretto facility. In between he has picked up one of two piers and warehouses "and we still need more."

In the days of growing pains, he suffered one terrific loss when someone stole \$40,000 of merchandise from the rear of the warehouse and replaced it with rubbish and rags, which were not discovered until some time later.



Four main piers and warehouses of the Rukert Terminals Corporation

CITATIONS



BELL AWARD

Presented to CAPT. W. G. N. RUKERT

by

MARITIME SQUARE CLUB

February 4, 1967

MARITIME SQUARE CLUB OF BALTIMORE

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Annual Meeting of the Maritime Square Club—February 4, 1967, at the “Eastwind.” Presentation of the “Bell Award” to Captain W. G. N. Rukert by Club President, William E. Storf.

The goals of our club shall be to foster Masonry, promote friendship and good fellowship among masons in the Maritime Industry and strive for the welfare of our Nation, our craft, and our fellow men. Captain Rukert has always lived according to these goals and has been an inspiration to everyone who has known him during his 50 years or more on the waterfront. Much has been said and written about Cap’s brilliant career—from an Army Captain in his early years, to Baltimore’s most successful private pier operator today; I will not attempt to elaborate on this tonight.

However, I would like to recall an incident that occurred recently during a day in the life of Captain Rukert. It seemed that the line of transportation had broken down between piers in the Canton area on the delivery of important cargo to a ship which had a deadline to meet—our honored guest proceeded to grasp the “bull by the horns” and spent the better part of the day at the piers, personally engineering a job which seemed impossible, but which was accomplished under his guidance. This is typical of Cap’s aggressiveness in pitching in to get a job done no matter how difficult it may be, and is only one of many reasons why Cap has made a success out of his life and that his business has grown and prospered.

It is only fitting then tonight ladies and gentlemen that this great man be presented with the “Bell Award,” the second in the Club’s history, for his outstanding contributions to the whole community and more importantly, for his unselfish love for his fellow man.

William E. Storf
WILLIAM E. STORF



City of Baltimore

MAYOR'S CITATION

TO

Captain W. G. N. Rukert

Chairman of the Board, Rukert Terminals Corporation

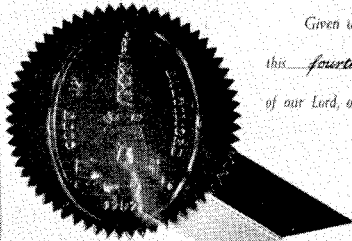
Greetings

I, Theodore R. McKeldin, Mayor of the City of Baltimore, do hereby confer upon you the Mayor's Citation for your contribution to the civic welfare of our municipality. Wherefore, I have issued and signed this certificate and Award of Merit as an earnest expression of appreciation and a symbol of gratitude for the splendid quality of public service which you have rendered, especially for your many outstanding contributions to the Port of Baltimore and to the entire Maryland maritime community.

Given under the Corporate Seal of the City of Baltimore

this fourth day of February, in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and sixty-seven.

Theodore R. McKeldin
MAYOR



THE COMPTROLLER



CAPT. W.G.N. RUKERT

GREETINGS

I, Hyman A. Pressman, Comptroller of the City of Baltimore, do hereby designate you as an Admiral of the Baltimore Harbor.

Wherefore, I have issued and signed this Certificate and Award of Merit as an earnest expression of appreciation and a symbol of gratitude for the splendid quality of public service which you have rendered.

Given under the Corporate Seal of the City of Baltimore

this fourth day of February, 1967.

Hyman A. Pressman
Comptroller

