

# Building an Empire

The Foss Maritime Company continues to grow, and the West Coast is primed to reap the benefits

## STORY AND PHOTOS BY JAMES LONGTON

**MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS IN THE MAKING**, the Foss family story is a true example of the classic "American Dream." With a home base in Seattle, Foss Maritime Company was founded in 1889 with a few simple rowboats and today maintains one of the largest fleets of tugs and barges on the American West Coast. The company provides harbor services and transportation operations in all major West Coast ports, including the Columbia and Snake river systems, and continues to provide project management and a complete range of maritime services to customers in the Pacific Rim, Europe, South America and elsewhere around the globe.

Distinct in their trademark green and white, many of the fleet's most prominent and powerful vessels can be regularly seen working the coast of Southern California. This summer I spent a workday aboard the *Morgan Foss*, the second hull of the new Dolphin Class tugboats, as she navigated her home waters inside Los Angeles Harbor. With 5,000 hp, *Morgan Foss* is among the most powerful boats of her size ever built. Watching her maneuver 100,000 tons of steel around the Port of Los Angeles, it was impossible not to be awestruck by the sheer volume of international import activity that takes place in one of the world's busiest seaports. Through this interactive experience, it was easy to develop an appreciation for the rich history and integrity of this world-famous fleet.

## IT BEGAN WITH A ROWBOAT

It all started in Tacoma, Washington, when Thea Foss bought a used row-boat, intending to rent her out to help with the family's finances. Her husband, Andrew, a journeyman carpenter, was away from home working on orders to support his family when Thea came across this fortuitous opportunity.

Thea painted her first rowboat a pristine white with green trim, and soon sold her for a profit, using the money to buy more boats. Upon his return, Andrew discovered that Thea had made more money with her budding boat rental business than he had as a carpenter, prompting him to return to his first creative desire, maritime construction. He began building boats and together the couple created the beginnings of what would become a world-class fleet of tugboats, indispensable in today's international trade industry.

## OFFICE WITH A VIEW

We boarded *Morgan Foss* at Pier D in Long Beach at about noon on a sunny Friday. Before long I was treated to an up-close view of the expert crew as they assisted a tanker into the harbor.

The crew continued to assist ships throughout the day, manipulating them through the corners of the biggest seaport in the United States. Each time I felt like a powerful David, approaching a Goliath of a transport vessel.

Captain Mike Lonich made operating the graceful tug look easy, as seasoned pros often do. In sharing some of his own history and experience, Lonich's substantial expertise and sincere appreciation for his position were obvious.

"Just look at my office setting," he said with a humble grin, peering across the harbor. "The boat really does all the work. The way it can maneuver — sometimes it feels like I'm

operating a flying saucer." As we glided across the water in any and all directions, I could see what he meant.

### **MAN AND MACHINE**

Only 2 years old, *Morgan Foss* is the second in the series of Dolphin Class tugs designed for Foss and built in its shipyard in Rainier, Oregon. The Dolphin's design incorporates a small number of refinements from the prototype and is configured strictly as a high-performance dayboat, built for harbor work.

"These high-horsepower, highly maneuverable, small harbor chasers don't go fast, but they have tremendous power," Captain Lonich said. "The way these tugs handle is really a lot of fun too. It actually maneuvers a lot like a PWG."

Utilizing a cycloidal propulsion system, the tug is ideally designed for ship assist. She can turn a 360-degree circle within the length of the vessel, allowing her to maneuver in extremely tight quarters, and can go from full speed to a complete stop in the same distance. As she guided an ocean liner perfectly into place, it was exciting to feel the tug give an appropriate nudge or even act as the breaks when necessary for the massive vessel.

"But no matter how sophisticated the equipment becomes, you still have that human element that makes it all work," Lonich said. Watching these men and women as they tied off to the colossal ships, the expert timing of the crew made complex operations appear almost simple.

"A lot has changed in the industry," said Lorna Roberts, an able-bodied seaman and experienced deckhand from Sunset Beach. "And the boats are much easier to work now. When I started 19 years ago, everything was hand-tied. We pulled in the lines with machinery, but had to tie everything off by hand. Now everything is done mechanically, so it's quite a bit easier physically than when I started."

### **GROWING THE WEST AND BEYOND**

With offices in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Long Beach, the primary focus of Foss Maritime continues to be the west coast of North America and the Hawaiian Islands. In March, the home office in Seattle announced that its subsidiary company, Gulf Garibe in El Segundo, had joined the Foss family to operate as its newest regional office. The facility will continue to provide line and launch services at El Segundo Moorings and to assist in bringing oil into refineries, transporting it from supertankers to smaller tankers that can navigate inside L.A. Harbor.

"Most of the Foss workload today consists of ship assists, tanker escorts and project movements along the West Coast," said Mike Skalley at the company's headquarters. "But if the right project comes up, we can certainly get a fleet anywhere in the world."

Foss recently completed one of world's largest sealift deliveries to Sakhalin Islands in the Russian Far East and the company continues to bring barges out of Singapore and Central South America. Another of the company's tugs, operated by American Transport and working out of Houston tows a large cargo barge around Caribbean and on to West Africa.

### **GOING GREEN**

Well respected within the international trade industry, Foss also continues to maintain a sense of global responsibility. Seated at the leading edge of maritime technology and committed to maintaining our natural environment, Foss Maritime Company plans to build the world's first hybrid tugboat. Scheduled for launch in Southern California next year, the "green vessel" is designed to reduced nitrogen oxide, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide and carbon emissions. She will also consume less fuel and should be significantly quieter than her conventional predecessors.

"The introduction of the hybrid tug reflects our company-wide commitment to safety and safeguarding the environment," said Susan Hayman, Foss' vice president of health, safety, quality and environment. "We wanted to make a proactive move to introduce technology into the market that would reduce air emissions and help protect the health and safety of our employees and the communities in which we operate."

An important component in bringing this project to life has been the involvement and

support of the Port of Los Angeles, the South Coast Air Quality Management District and the Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners. In exchange for funding, Foss agreed to homeport the new hybrid tug in Southern California for her first five years.

"Foss is proud to be working with the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles on such an important project as the hybrid tug," said Gary C. Faber, president and CEO of Foss.

The new hybrid tug will look almost identical to her sister Dolphin Class tugboats, but will be inherently quieter, cleaner and more fuel efficient. The tug's drive units will be powered by batteries, coupled with diesel generators, and she will feature a modified engine room accommodating two 670 hp battery packs and two 335-hp generators.

While performing tug assist jobs in L.A. Harbor, tugboats spend little time at peak rpm, rarely utilizing their full horsepower. Tugs such as Morgan Foss spend up to 50 percent of their time idling, with the main engines on and ready to respond, but with no power actually being used for propulsion. With Foss' hybrid tug, energy is produced only on demand, so that idling of the main engines will no longer be necessary.

The hybrid tug design is adaptable for retrofit of existing harbor tugs, and could also take advantage of cleaner, less expensive shore power to charge the batteries.

For more information regarding Foss Maritime Company, call (800) 426-2885 or visit [www.foss.com](http://www.foss.com).