

THE BOX THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

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As many of us are aware, till the mid 50's the concept of shipping was limited to a) bulk (eg: loading rice, wheat, coal etc. in loose bulk form without packing) and b) break bulk (ie; loading individual units of packed cargo like cotton bales, wheat bags, paper reels etc).

Malcolm P McLean, a truck driver born in North Carolina, USA (in 1913), who eventually became a very successful entrepreneur, transformed the centuries old shipping industry and thus revolutionized the transport of cargo worldwide. By developing the first safe, reliable and cost effective approach to transporting containerized cargo, McLean made a contribution to maritime trade so phenomenal that he is known as the "father of containerization".

In the year 1937, McLean was transporting cotton bales in crates by truck from North Carolina to New Jersey, USA. Arriving at N.Jersey dock and waiting for his truck to be unloaded onto a ship, he was watching other trucks being unloaded. Every crate on every truck had to be unloaded, put in a sling and hoisted up and then down into the hold of the ship. There, more dockworkers took it off the sling and made sure it was properly stowed in the ship. This method called "break-bulk shipping" was slow and labour intensive, and there was lots of pilferage and accidents. It struck him that he was looking at a lot of wasted time and money. In nineteen years, after many setbacks in life, McLean converted his thought into a business proposition.



Photo 1: Ideal X
First Container being handled in 1956

By mid 50's his Pan Atlantic Co was the first to design a transportation system around the packaging of cargo in huge metal boxes that could be handled by cranes and transported by trucks as well as ships. In April 1956, McLean's converted oil tanker the Ideal X (see photo 1) having platforms welded on deck, carried 58 new 35 ft aluminium containers from N.Jersey to Houston. At Houston these were unloaded onto trailers and transported by road. His vision of creating a way in which cargo could be shifted easily from trucks to ships to trains without loss or delay was successful.

Photo 2:
Modified Container Ship handling a Sealand Container



Out of the operations of Pan Atlantic, he founded Sea-Land Service Inc in 1960 which became the pioneer in multimodal transportation of cargo and one of the largest shipping line in the world. His efforts to increase efficiency resulted in standardized container designs that were awarded patent protection and was recognised by ISO (International Standards Organisation). Container handling costs per ton became 36 times cheaper compared to break bulk system. Sea-Land could transport goods eliminating several steps in the process, making it a much cheaper, quicker, safer and convenient mode of transportation (see photo2). A ship's average time in port shrank from 3 weeks to 18 hrs. The first fully cellular container ship the Sea-Land Gateway City began regular service between New York, Florida and Texas, heralding a revolutionary change in shipping. In 1964 McLean opened a 101 acre port at Elizabeth, New Jersey to handle the growing container traffic. Later Sea-Land existed under various changes of ownership from RJ Reynolds to CSX Corp, until it was acquired by and incorporated into the operations of A.P.Moller-Maersk Group in November 1999. McLean was named the "Man of the Century" by the International Maritime Hall of Fame.

Malcolm P McLean died on 25th May 2001 leaving behind an industry which is improving further day by day, in terms of container design, port and vessel capacity. Thanks to this great visionary and entrepreneur, we all know that containerisation has transformed global trade in manufactured goods as dramatically as jet planes have changed the way we travel, and the Internet has changed the way we communicate.