



**WORLDLY WEALTH:** Dubai's docks are piled high with containers filled with goods that will be shipped around the world. Picture: THE NEW YORK TIMES

# World would be lost without big metal box

*A US truck driver launched containers 50 years ago. Without them, globalisation would not have been possible, argues SARAH MURRAY*

**A**PRIL 1956 was an eventful month. Elvis Presley's Heartbreak Hotel became his first gold record. Actress Grace Kelly married Prince Rainier III of Monaco. And the last French troops left Vietnam.

Less well remembered is the fact that on April 26, what one reporter described as an "old bucket of bolts" set sail from the US port of Newark, New Jersey, and headed for Houston, Texas.

The vessel — a converted Second World War tanker — was a curious-looking craft. But with a reinforced deck carrying 58 metal boxes, the Ideal-X initiated the first scheduled containership service, an idea that was to have profound implications for the world.

Since the late 1960s, this steel box has transformed world trade. Few people notice containers, but more than 90% of global trade travels inside them. As Marc Levinson argues in his recently published book, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the Economy Bigger*, this metal object paved the way for globalisation.

The genius behind the shipping container was Malcom McLean, a North Carolina truck driver who watched cotton bales being loaded on to a vessel and realised it would be easier to hoist the whole trailer.

McLean's simple idea was to end break-bulk shipping, in which



**TRADE MAKER:** A woman carries wood on her head as a container truck passes by

cargo had to be separately loaded, packed, arranged and unloaded — a practice that had changed little in centuries.

However, while the use of containers could reduce shipping costs dramatically and deliver goods much faster, the concept took time to catch on.

Ports operators and ship owners were reluctant to put money into new equipment, vessels and port infrastructure and, down on the docks, unions saw jobs under threat and dug their heels in.

The dock workers' worst fears were eventually realised. Back then, shifting cargo required hooks, nets and sheer brute force. As big machines and containers took over, thousands of labourers were put out of work. In 1986 the International Longshoremen's Union told the *New York Times* that the number of its members working in New York Harbour had plummeted to 8 500 from more than 30 000 in 1960.

A revolution was gathering momentum with intermodalism, an efficient system whereby containers could be shifted seamlessly

from boats to trucks and trains. Throughout the 1970s, this system spread throughout the global transport network, creating an environment in which, today, goods are in almost perpetual motion.

Containers also transformed cargo-carrying vessels into gigantic low-slung craft, with the deck acting as a vast tray on which the boxes were stacked. One of the largest today is the OOCL Shen-zhen, which is roughly the length of three football fields (275m).

Containers allow goods to be transported in previously unimaginable quantities, cutting prices and increasing supply. Living standards have improved as the world is able to buy cheap televisions, cars and washing machines from far-away markets.

With dramatically lower shipping costs, manufacturing processes were radically altered. Geography became irrelevant for manufacturers, who now make their jeans or computers where wages are lowest.

If containers are responsible for bringing us what we need, they can also deliver unwanted cargo.

Stowaways have caused headaches for sea captains since the earliest days of shipping, but as immigrants go to increasingly extreme lengths to escape poverty and persecution, the container has provided a new hiding place.

Another, still darker, side of the container has gained attention in recent years. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the realisation that a shipping container could transport chemical, biological or nuclear weapons to US soil has sent a chill through the corridors of power.

Even lost or damaged containers have their impact. While yachtsmen worry about being hit by one of the thousands of containers lost overboard each year, one group of professionals hopes to benefit from cargo lost at sea. Scientists trying to gain a better understanding of ocean currents are tracking the movement of 29 000 plastic ducks floating around the world 14 years after their container crashed into the sea in the north Pacific.

The steel boxes even prove useful once their careers in the transport chain are over. In SA, growing numbers of schoolchildren find themselves in classrooms made from containers. Since the 1990s, shipping company Safmarine has been donating containers to schools and charities.

Cyberspace has revolutionised the shipping industry, enhancing the efficiency of freight handling, cutting down on paperwork and allowing shippers to track the progress of their goods on the internet. But behind all this hi-tech activity is a low-tech object of profound importance. For until a Star Trek-style transporter permits solid objects to be beamed across time and space, we are stuck with bubble-wrap, brown paper and a big metal box.

■ Sarah Murray is a New-York based freelance writer