

Viewing the lore of sweetwater seas



Julie Caniller



Allan Hayes

We're standing in what was once the smoking lounge of the *City of Detroit III*, a giant sidewheeler steamboat that carried passengers in luxury all over the Great Lakes. We're in the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle in Detroit. It's one of the

many museums throughout Michigan that preserve the history and the nautical lore of the Great Lakes, the largest body of fresh water in the world. Their exhibits also provide a wealth of useful boating information.

The *City of Detroit's* elegant lounge is like a beautiful chapel. It is typical of the opulence of 1912, the year the ship was built. It was the largest sidewheeler in the world at the time.

The lounge, known as the Gothic Room, was the showpiece of the ship. Hand carved wooden Corinthian columns flow into lacy golden oak

arches suspended below the blue and gilt ceiling. The room is washed with the reds, blues and greens that shine through a three-paneled window containing more than 700 pieces of stained glass.

Throughout Michigan, lovers of our sweetwater seas have joined in efforts to restore and cherish memorabilia of the lakes. This steamboat Gothic Room, for example, was rotting in a barn in Ohio years after the ship was scrapped in 1955. The museum and volunteers raised the money to purchase the historic treasures. They donated thousands of hours to the task of stripping, vanishing and reassembling the magnificent room, piece by piece.

From the Gothic Room we step across to a separate wing where *Miss Pepsi* occupies a prestigious place. She was an early unlimited hydroplane and first of her class to qualify for a race at more than 100 miles per hour. The Dossin family, owners and racers of *Miss Pepsi* from 1949 to 1954, donated the boat as well as substantial funds to the museum.

We watch as a volunteer works on the painstaking task of stripping *Miss Pepsi's* 34-foot mahogany hull and refinishing it. We also view other exhibits at the museum devoted to powerboat racing on the Detroit River.

Next, we experience the Great Storm of 1913. Allan follows all the steps in the museum's interactive exhibit, and temporarily becomes a Great Lakes seaman facing that November storm. It rocked the Great Lakes with the greatest havoc and destruction since the introduction of commercial aviation. Its 70-mile-per-hour winds and massive waves blew dozens of vessels ashore, sank eight huge freighters in Lake Huron, and cost the lives of 235 seamen.

Allan survives the storm, but just barely.

Afterward, he studies the huge topographical map of all the Great Lakes. He is fascinated by the underwater geography visible from

that perspective. Lake Superior, he notes, looks like a mixing bowl, Lake St. Clair like a butter dish, and Lake Erie like a long, shallow platter.

The Dossin Museum also displays antique navigation instruments, dozens of beautiful models of ships and boats important in Michigan history, and continuous videos on marine subjects. Visitors can view Detroit River traffic through a submarine periscope.

The next major Dossin exhibit, scheduled to overlook the Detroit River by February, 1991, will be the 30-foot working pilot house of the *William Clay Ford*. The 767-foot flagship of the Ford fleet carried iron ore to the firm's Rouge Steel plant until her retirement in 1984. Visitors will be able to walk the deck, handle the controls, and learn the history of the huge lake freighter.

Moving to the Upper Peninsula, the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum and Lighthouse overlooks Lake Superior's Whitefish Bay, often called the graveyard of the Great Lakes. The museum opened in 1989 in a small white clapboard structure on Whitefish Point, near Paradise and Sault Ste. Marie. Its exhibits demonstrate the rugged life of Great Lakes sailors. They begin with artifacts from the *Invincible*, a small fur trading schooner that in 1816 became the first documented shipwreck on Lake Superior.

The museum's most popular shipwreck exhibit memorializes the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, which went down in November, 1975, with all of its 29 crewmen.

Thirty miles southeast across Whitefish Bay, you can explore an actual lake freighter. The former ore carrier *Valley Camp* welcomes visitors from a dock on the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie. You can see her

steam engine and how the crew lived, slept and worked in her dining room, crew's quarters and pilot house. Le Sault de Ste. Marie's Historical Sites, Inc., calls the *Valley Camp* the world's largest Great Lakes maritime museum.



WEATHERING THE STORM—Allan Hayes tries on a life jacket, part of the interactive exhibit at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle.

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