

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

SHIP-SPOTTING 101 *Things to do in Erie or Elsewhere*

By David Frew

May 2020

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



I grew up on Erie's west side, within a few blocks of the Cascade Docks. And yes, that makes me an official "Bay-Rat."

Unlike the gorgeous developments that grace today's Bayfront, my childhood colleagues and I were presented with a literal dump at the bluffs that overlooked the location of today's Bayfront Parkway. In those days people drove cars to the edge of the bluffs and pitched old appliances, rusty car fenders, and other nasty stuff from the trunks of their cars. Today's Niagara Pointe was an oil storage field, and the three docks that currently contain condominiums, a concert venue, and marinas were crowded with commercial ships. The Bayfront Parkway space was lined with coal cars waiting to be unloaded. The most important health precaution for an adventuresome Bay-Rat was to be sure that his Tetanus shots were up-to-date.

High end Bay-Rats had television sets, watched Ozzie and Harriot, and understood that the best thing for a youngster was to attend college like Ricky Nelson's older brother, David. But for many that was not realistic. For one thing, it took too long. Back then, anyone could get a good-paying job the day after high school graduation (or before) and make enough money to buy a *very* cool car, like a 1949, two-door Mercury. You could find work at one of the shops on West 12th Street, or better yet on the ships. It was a simple matter to wander down to the Cascade docks and sign up on one of the commercial ships that traveled the Great Lakes. Big money, adventure, excitement, and winters off.

I am not sure how I managed to stray from the typical Bay-Rat career path and go to college. But in hindsight friends who worked the ships did quite well. Several are multi-millionaire investors today, and men of leisure. There wasn't much to spend money on at sea, and there was an unlimited opportunity to work extra shifts. Not to mention the excitement of visiting exciting Great Lakes ports such as Duluth, Milwaukee, Burns Harbor, Thunder Bay, and Detroit. We envied our commercial sailor friends when they came home for the winter.

Straying from my Bay-Rat upbringing by going to college did not mean that I lost interest in ships. On the contrary, old Cascade Docks roots percolated out during my professional career, often causing me to choose maritime research and writing topics. Thus my "diversion" into academic cases and books about shipwrecks, commercial fishing, and maritime businesses.

These days I continue to be obsessed with ships and shipping and have found an amazing website that panders to this passion. I will share it so that you too can become a Junior Woodchuck (Remember Donald Duck comic books?) ship-spotter.

Here it is:

1. Google: "Realtime Upper Great Lakes Shipping Locations"
2. When the Charlevoix site opens, scroll down and to the right to Lake Erie
3. There you will see all the ships currently traversing the lake
4. By scrolling, you will be able to see all of the lakes, the Atlantic Ocean, and the river systems filled with barges and tugs
5. Each ship carries a transponder, and when you click on it, you will see pictures of the ship, its history, destination port, speed, etc.

Spring is an exciting time at the Port of Erie since Donjon Shipbuilding and Repair at the foot of Holland Street has the only 1,200-foot dry-dock on the upper Great Lakes and attracts winter layup business. Ships begin to arrive in late fall and queue up for off-season hull repair, welding, engine modifications, paint jobs, and more.

Most years there are several ships sequestered here for the off-season and by spring they are slowly being returned to service. That is where the above website becomes exciting.

As each ship leaves, a ship-spotter can watch it return to service and/or follow it for the rest of the season. The Cason J Calloway, pictured above, has been in Erie for months and is almost ready to return to service. She is a classic 1952 steamship built in traditional Great Lakes style with the wheelhouse forward and engine room aft. She was one of three ships built for Pittsburgh Steamship Company and at 647-feet she was the maximum length capable of turning inside Conneaut, Ohio's harbor. Her designed role was to deliver iron ore from Duluth to Conneaut for use in Pittsburgh's steel mills.

The Calloway was modified several times over her 70-plus year career: lengthened 120 feet in 1974, and converted to a self-unloader in 1982, making her more competitive and extending her career. Her current specifications are 767-feet-long with a beam of 70 feet. Since her conversion to a self-unloader, she has carried a variety of cargo, including grain and aggregate as well as iron ore, and visited more ports.

She leaves Donjon this season with a sparkling new paint job and a well-tuned, steam-turbine powerhouse. Students of Great Lakes shipping superstition will note that the letter "J" was added to her official registry so that she would not have a 13-letter badge, a very bad omen in the world of shipping.

Photo from https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2017/04/see_20_monster_boats_of_the_gr.html

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

