

# LAKE ERIE: HISTORY AND VIEWS

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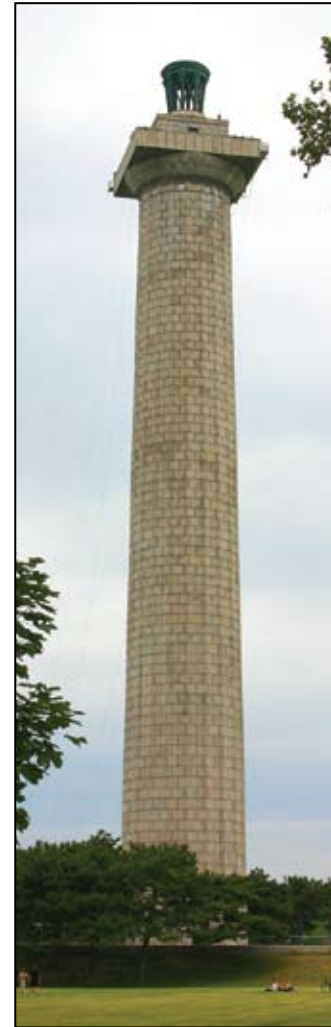
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## PREFACE

From the time I was a small boy, the Great Lakes have been a passion. Their waters provided my first drink, first bath, first swim and the lake-effect snow to build my first snowman and make my first ski down its ancient shoreline. The lakes kept the area in which I grew up cooler in the summer and warmer in the fall and early winter. They have helped shape my most profound feelings that include a passion for history and a fear and love of nature.

Many of our family's roots were planted along the shores of Lake Erie during the 19th and early 20th centuries. On my father's side, two generations of immigrants worked near Lake Erie in factories and machine shops. My mother's side of the family owned and operated hotels and livery stables in harbor towns along this southernmost Great Lake. Both parents received higher education in institutions with Lake Erie as a backdrop. One of my mother's first teaching experiences was in the Cleveland Public Schools, educating the children of steelworkers.

My parents cultivated my mind through travel around the region and considerable storytelling. This exposure included picnics while watching giant iron-ore laden boats lock through the Welland Canal; seeing Niagara Falls from every angle; and picking apples, cherries and peaches along the agricultural belt. We also watched as the finishing touches were being put on a huge new hydroelectric power project along the Niagara River.

I covered the Love Canal saga as a young radio reporter and interviewed a grown-up Roger Woodward on the 20th anniversary of his plunge over Niagara Falls wearing nothing but a bathing suit and life jacket. One winter, I worked in the vineyards on Lake Erie's southern shore, pruning and tying vines that produced grapes for the National Grape Cooperative and Welch's.

My sister's interests in the natural aspects of the lakes helped to move her to an advanced degree in geology. My wife's life has similarly been shaped by the Great Lakes. Her father fished Lake Erie and the Niagara River on Saturday mornings in search of perch, walleye and the elusive muskie. My wife, children and I still enjoy time during the summer at "The Peninsula" (Presque Isle) at Erie, Pennsylvania. Our best times together as a whole family are when we are drawn together in the comfort of the view of one the lakes.

When I was a child, radio stations far from our home in Buffalo fueled my interest in the cities around the Great Lakes. I was transported from my bedroom nightly as I tuned in stations from Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and Toronto. These stations delivered the feel and distinct personalities of each of these important lake cities. The sounds of hosts, newsmakers and callers reflected the unique dialects and colloquialisms of the areas they served.

WGN Radio conveyed the feel of a town built as the major connecting point to the great agricultural Midwest. Unique farm reports mixed with the business news of a big city. The station's polite personalities discussed cultural events and covered the cult following of Cubs baseball, painting a picture of Chicago. WJR, the "Great Voice of the Great Lakes," reported on the woes of Detroit's striking and unemployed auto workers and provided relief from the news of the day with the "Afternoon Music Hall." The gritty blue-collar spirit of Cleveland could be heard over the airwaves of WWWE (WTAM), where Pete Franklin would squabble nightly with gravel-voiced sports nuts calling from bars around the steel mills about the Browns, Cavs and Indians. Sixty miles to the north from my home, yet a world away, Gordon Sinclair and Betty Kennedy were broadcasting to the Dominion in British-influenced Canadian tones. CFRB projected a Toronto that was a more sophisticated metropolis than its counterparts on the U.S. side.

One of my favorite views has always been along Interstate 90 between the New York State line and Erie, Pennsylvania. This stretch of highway traverses the beds of Erie's predecessor lakes, Warren and Whittlesey. As the road climbs the ancient shoreline of Lake Whittlesey, the panoramic view of Lake Erie is at its best. On a clear day, I could see across the lake to Long Point, Ontario and beyond, nearly 60 miles, to the stacks of the coal-fired power plant at Nanticoke. In between, spaced neatly on the bright blue water, were silhouettes of the unmistakable lakeboats with their plumes of black smoke.

The lakes were a constant influence on our lives. Lake-effect snows drifted to the second story of our home in 1977 as we bonded with neighbors, sharing shoveling duties and hot chocolate. Winter's bone-chilling winds, blowing unbroken for 241 miles from Toledo, chapped the faces of my father and me, along with 16,000 other hockey fans, as we marched across open parking lots to the back steps of Buffalo's Memorial Auditorium. There we entered the smoke-filled,

beer-drenched hall to watch the NHL's Sabres do battle on a manmade slab of ice, just feet from the head of the vast frozen Lake Erie.

In my twenties, I scoped out traffic conditions from an airplane for several years, reporting for WGR radio in Buffalo to thousands of Western New Yorkers on the frequent closings of N.Y. Route 5, because of ice-cold waves crashing across the roadways; motorists stranded on the Buffalo Skyway; and about the rescues of trapped ice fisherman. A few years later I mourned the death of a mentor, friend and co-worker who lost his life in a helicopter crash into the Niagara River in January of 1993, while he performed my former duties.

My favorite literature has always centered on the Great Lakes region. In the back of my mind are Holling Clancy Holling's fictional *Paddle-to-the-Sea*; detailed descriptions penned by the unnamed authors of the W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project of the Depression era; histories about the lake cities; and volumes on industry, sociology, geography, geology, archaeology, plants and wildlife.

Growing up along the Great Lakes in the Buffalo, New York area meant that Lake Erie and Lake Ontario were especially close at hand. Just a few miles from our home was the mighty Niagara River, more of a strait with no major tributaries, between two vast inland seas.

Niagara Falls is where I have often stood in wonder over my 40-plus years. It is the focal point where my thoughts begin to shift from day-to-day concerns to how this part of the earth has shaped who we are today. As the water passes by, I think about how this region must have looked before man walked the earth, how early humans must have reacted when they first gazed upon the immense bodies of water and heard the deafening roar of the cataract, back before the days when so much water was diverted to generate power, move ships and support industry. Back to a time when the faint smell of wood burning from a distant village along one of the lakes' shores meant an Indian hunter aboard a dug-out canoe was getting close to home. The lakes' natural beauty and allure must have been incredibly moving for the first European explorers, perhaps of greater significance for their time than the current generation's knowledge of the first astronauts landing on the moon in 1969.

My thoughts move forward in time to the Great Lakes' beginning as a route for early commerce, the setting for several bloody wars, and the end of a journey to freedom for slaves as a young nation struggled to understand the meaning of the words "Land of the Free." I consider the building of the many Great Lakes cities and towns possible through the vision and sweat of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came to this land and region for opportunity or out of necessity.

Along the shores of these bodies of water, thousands of men and women labored for countless hours in great factories to support the efforts of the United States, Canada and other nations in global wars. I also sadly recall how man turned his back on the lakes, partly out of greed and ignorance and later because of an economy that lessened the importance of heavy industry in the region. I think of what was left in the shadows of the 1960s and 1970s as the desire to be near the lakes diminished. Access to many areas along the lakeshores was lost for years, blocked by rusting fences, shuttered mills and polluted beaches.

Happily I shift to the past 35 years as people have worked more closely with nature, and I am amazed at how the Great Lakes show their resilience!

I have visited countless museums and libraries; driven around each of the lakes; flown over them; pored over books, maps, nautical charts, the Internet and information from historical societies; and had the rare privilege, inaccessible to the public, of traveling up the Great Lakes aboard a 1,000-foot lakeboat.

This book explores the formation of Lake Erie, its discovery and settlement, and the history of the towns and cities that encircle it. I also take you on a trip to the upper Great Lakes aboard the *M/V Walter J. McCarthy Jr.* I hope you will enjoy this book and use it to learn more about the great Lake Erie and the region that forms the backbone of two great nations. And I hope that it will help to encourage you to explore your roots and to continue to grow roots in the place *you* live!

*Tom Langmyer*

## INTRODUCTION

Many business travelers experience the view of Lake Erie from a commercial jetliner flying from Chicago to New York at 30,000 feet. The southern shore of the lake lies under one of North America's major air routes.

Flying out of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, the traveler doesn't see much. It's an overcast day and clouds obscure the view of Lake Michigan. But as the plane continues east, the cloud cover gives way to a clear view of the ground. From the left side of the plane, passengers can see the flat land of western Ohio, supporting a neatly laid-out patchwork quilt of farms. As the Maumee River comes into view, America's Heartland is about to give way to Lake Erie.

The lake is now in sight and the highways and buildings of Toledo are right below. Looking up the western lakeshore to the north, one sees Detroit and Windsor split by the Detroit River, which provides Lake Erie with most of its water. Past Toledo, Point Pelee on the Canadian side looks like an arrow in the water, pointing directly south at the plane.

Within a few moments passengers are looking down at Lake Erie's western islands. A large monument dedicated to Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie is spotted on South Bass Island. The tiny specks in the water are actually pleasure boats dotting the lake around the islands.

Soon the southern shoreline slips beneath the plane as the aircraft begins to fly directly over the water. One sees the wake of a lake freighter headed for Cleveland, creating a huge "V" in what seem to be tiny ripples on the lake's surface. Passengers on the right side of the plane look down upon sprawling Cleveland and, further along the lakeshore, see a plume of steam from the power plant at North Perry, Ohio. On the left, the Canadian shoreline looks isolated and peaceful.

As the southern shoreline comes back into view for those on the left side of the plane, two arms can be seen gesturing toward the eastern end of the lake. The sandy Presque Isle peninsula at Erie, Pennsylvania, is in the foreground, and across the lake, the larger arm of Long Point, Ontario.

The view of the lake shifts further off to the left as the plane heads over the Allegheny Plateau and the hills of western New York. The sight is dramatic before the lake ends abruptly at Buffalo. On the Canadian side, a straight ribbon of water, the Welland Ship Canal, joins Lake Erie with the distant blue of Lake Ontario. North of Buffalo, the Niagara River also winds its way to Lake Ontario, carrying the bulk of Erie's waters. What looks like a puffy white cotton ball, midway between the lakes along the river, is the mist from Niagara Falls.

Within moments, Lake Erie's panoramic view disappears, ending the passengers' moments of interest, reflection and wonder. After this half-hour portion of the flight, they return to their newspapers or take a snooze before the plane lands at LaGuardia.

## A RICH PAST AND FUTURE

Lake Erie, the second smallest of the five Great Lakes, is rich in geologic and human history. Carved by glaciers, and preceded by other lakes, Lake Erie is named for the Eriez Indians who lived in the region. *Eriez* is believed to mean "wildcat" or "people of the panther." French explorers referred to the lake as *Lac du Chat* (Lake of the Cat).

Control of the lake was highly contested because it provided a route for transportation and trade. The region's rich agricultural land and natural resources were also sought-after. Eventually, Canada and the United States shared the lake.

Settlements grew into cities as canals to the interior and routes to the sea connected the lake with the world. Iron ore from Minnesota was shipped down to the growing lake cities as Pennsylvania and West Virginia coal was brought northward by the trainload to make steel. Lake Erie steel was used to build cars that poured off assembly lines. Within a relatively short time, the lake became overburdened and polluted and the great fishing and recreation industries were nearly destroyed.

Environmental legislation and activity to reduce pollution has helped to clean the lake during the past 35 years. Lake Erie once again supports fishing, recreation and a booming tourist industry. While the work is far from over, the odds are now in Erie's favor.

## LAKE ERIE: HISTORY AND VIEWS

The purpose of this book is to take the reader on a journey back in time to understand how the lake came to be, become familiar with its physical characteristics, and learn about the people who settled here and their communities. The book also looks at the present through text and photos. By no means is this considered to contain comprehensive information on the lake or surrounding communities. Other fine books go into great detail on a variety of subjects related to Lake Erie. This book is also not intended to be a tourist guide with lists of attractions, amusements, dining spots and lodging. Many guidebooks exist for that purpose.

It is hoped that the text, numerous illustrations, graphics, historic postcards and photos will catch the eye and help fuel interest in the lake and region. Younger generations will be able to see now desolate retail and industrial cores of many lake towns and learn of the bustling activity of years past, before these centers of activity were left behind by suburban sprawl, subdivisions and strip malls. Perhaps this book may bring back some forgotten memories and its views from all angles might inspire more interest in this Great Lake. So please sit back, relax and enjoy the story of Lake Erie.

## LAKE ERIE: HISTORY AND VIEWS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Fishing boats at Port Stanley, Ontario. The Terminal Tower building, Cleveland. The south shore of Kelleys Island, Ohio. Detroit's 47-story Penobscot building, completed in 1928.