

# GREAT WHITES OF THE GREAT LAKES

THESE TWO STEAMSHIPS OFFERED A UNIQUE BRAND OF SERVICE FOR A HALF-CENTURY  
BY BRIAN J. CUDAHY

From Duluth to Buffalo, there are still those that remember the glistening white steamers that once did a thriving cruise business on the Great Lakes.

The five Great Lakes provide the United States with more miles of shoreline than does either ocean and the commerce that sails these inland seas is the stuff that feeds and fuels the industrial engines of our economy. Ore and coal, grain and cement, imports and exports. Nor are the Great Lakes without their own distinctive maritime culture and traditions.

From Coast Guard icebreakers that each winter

battle to keep the Lakes navigable when nature tries to dictate otherwise, to folksinger Gordon Lightfoot lamenting the loss of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, the times and the legends of those who sail out of ports like Duluth and Toledo and Buffalo are truly a part of the nation's maritime lore.

One kind of vessel that sails the Great Lakes but rarely these days is the passenger ship. Here and there, day excursion boats still ply their trade, and ferries will always sail out to places like Mackinac Island. The only large-scale indigenous passenger vessels still active on the Lakes — railroad car

ferries that cross Lake Michigan on several routes — clearly belong on anyone's list of endangered species, and it's been over six decades now since the last of the last of the true Great Lakes overnight passenger steamers — Georgian Bay Line's 2662-ton *South American* — carried her last passenger. That the Chicago, Duluth and Georgian Bay Transit Company, as the line was officially known, was

able to survive longer than any of the other steamship companies that once posted regular dividends hauling passengers on the Great Lakes was due to the fact that the company, from its inception in 1913, had cast its operations away from point-to-point common carrier transportation and to an out-and-back cruise-style business.

Until its last active season on the Lakes — 1967 — these vessels worked a regular seven-day circuit, pausing at five or six different ports *en route*, and allowing a passenger to plan a week-long cruise out of any of them. A Georgian Bay cruise, in other words, never really began or ended — it was more like a continuous performance.

Of course, it almost seems like a bad joke to think of some place like Cleveland as a port-of-call on a romantic seven-day voyage. But, in point of fact, Georgian Bay passengers would stream ashore for several hours in the strangest



North American before her overhaul and the addition of a second stack.



A magnificent image from a time long past. The *South American* and *North American* lead the *City of Grand Rapids* and the *Greater Buffalo*, docked at the Soo.