



The 634-foot American Courage freighter heads toward Lake Superior through the Soo Locks on the St. Mary's River in Sault Ste. Marie in May of 2015. Many freighters are about 1,000 feet long. ROD SANFORD/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

Life on 'floating islands'

A way of life for generations, shipping is a \$3.8B industry in Michigan

NICOLE HAYDEN | TIMES HERALD

Ken Gerasimos sailed the Great Lakes on various freighters for more than two decades, starting when he was 18 years old, but his love for the water started years before that. ¶ The 60-year-old would spend the family vacations of his youth visiting his father on Ford Motor Company-owned freighters he worked on. ¶ He was 5 years old when he first got a taste of what life on a freighter entails. ¶ "All officers could bring their family on board," he said. "We would see the same kids every year and the passenger quarters were really nice. We would build kites and fly them off the back end (of the ship), and feed the seagulls, and play shuffle board."

As he got older, the visits included painting the ship, learning how to steer in the wheelhouse and learning how to use the compass to navigate.

Now many years later, Gerasimos has followed in his father's footsteps and worked up the ranks to grab the title of first mate on the last ship he sailed on. He now works on land as the port captain of the Great Lakes Fleet.

As Gerasimos progressed over the years, so has the shipping industry.

The Great Lakes shipping industry extends beyond Michigan. It includes Canada, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. The nearly 1,000-foot freighters transport bulk dry goods such as iron ore, coal and limestone, according to The Lake Carriers' Association. Prior to the 1970s, ships typically spanned just 600 feet.

Typically there are around 25 crew members working on any one of the freighters that travel through the Great Lakes. But the whole Great Lakes shipping industry creates nearly 227,000 jobs, according to Julia Fields, Chamber of Marine Commerce spokeswoman. In Michigan, the shipping industry accounts for just under 27,000 jobs, according to the American Great Lakes Ports Association. In the whole Great Lakes region, the industry generates \$35 billion in revenue each year. In Michigan, it's a \$3.8 billion industry.

Frank Frisk, a retired chief steward and cook for The Interlake Steamship Company, said his salary ranged from \$40,000 to \$60,000 during the first years that he worked part-time on a ship. He said it wasn't unheard of for others to earn upwards of \$120,000 as they climbed higher through the ranks.

As technology has progressed, certain jobs have disappeared.

Frisk said ships at one time had watchmen on the front end of the boats as well as in the pilot's house. Now cameras are used that allow for a better line of vision through fog and in the dark. Frisk is now a maritime consultant at the Great Lakes Maritime Center in Port Huron and a contributor to boaters.com, which tracks freighters through the Great Lakes.

While ships have gotten nearly twice as large as they once were, the standards of living for the ship crew have also grown.

"When I started, I was sharing a deck hand room with two other guys," said Gerasimos. "There used to be a lot more people on board and now most ships have individual rooms for everyone."

Ships now have amenities like television, some internet access, and comfortable, recliner chairs. Union agreements came into play around the 1990s, Gerasimos said, which prompted better quality of life for crew members.

More educational opportunities and safety regulations also have developed since then.

The freighters, or "floating islands," as Gerasimos refers to them, are long, narrow ships that can hold around 70,000 tons of product.

Around 164 million metric tons of cargo are delivered by Great Lakes vessels each year,



The Northern Lights are seen behind the Cason J. Callaway freighter in this photo taken by crew member Kenneth House.



A freighter passes under the Blue Water Bridge near Port Huron. MARK R. BUMMEL/TIMES HERALD

according to the Chamber of Marine Commerce.

The cargo gets pumped onto the ship through cargo holes, the holes get covered, the ships travel to their destination, and then the cargo get unloaded through a vacuum system.

"It's the cheapest way to transport that much bulk cargo," Frisk said. At times, freighters of the Great Lakes could make their way to the Atlantic Ocean, or even find themselves destined for Europe.

"There is grain that comes out of the Great Lakes that is taken to Europe," Frisk said. "It's a special grain from Thunder Bay that is in de-

By the numbers

27,000
Michigan jobs related to the Great Lakes shipping industry

227,000
Jobs throughout the entire region

164 million
Metric tons of cargo delivered by Great Lakes vessels each year

\$3.8 billion
revenue generated in Michigan by Great Lakes shipping each year

mand in Ireland. The only absolute option for transporting that is a dry bulk cargo freighter, it's impossible to move it by air."

Gerasimos, who is originally from Michigan but now lives in Minnesota, said sailing on freighters has allowed him to see many beautiful sights through his travels.

"I remember going past Pictured Rocks when we were going from The Soo Locks to Marquette," he said. "We stayed kind of close to shore and the water was just like glass. The setting sun was beaming off the water, and after you passed Pictured Rocks, you could see it was reflecting in the water. It was an amazing, amazing sight."

Life on a freighter, which typically includes two months on a ship, followed by one paid month off, can allow Great Lakes crews to see the Northern Lights in Lake Michigan, sun rises and sunsets, eagles and the true brightness of stars.

"In winter time, when we were breaking ice through the St. Mary's River we would have deer walking out in front of you going from one island to another island," Gerasimos said. "You see a lot of amazing sights out there...I loved it from day one."

For more information about Great Lakes freighters and to follow their travels through a live tracker go to www.boaterd.com.

Contact Nicole Hayden at (810) 989-6279 or nhayden@gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter @nicoleandpig.