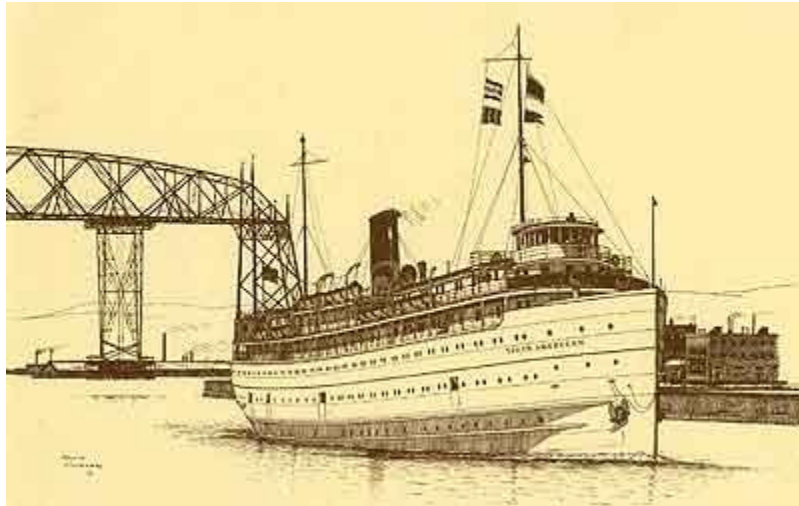


# A Trip Down the Lakes in 1929

On a warm, July afternoon in 1929, a crowd of well-dressed people mills about a dock of the Chicago, Duluth & Georgian Bay Transit Company on the bayfront near the heart of downtown Duluth. Many of the men are attired in white flannel trousers, crew-neck sweaters, blazers and deck shoes. The women wear print dresses and sensible block-heel shoes. Some have a sweater draped about their shoulders because of the cool breeze off the water. Most of the younger women are hatless, although several sport velvet headbands or a more rakish cloche. All are excitedly talking about their upcoming adventure, for looming above them is the silhouette of the *South American*, one of the two half-sisters of the Georgian Bay Line. The twin funnels belch smoke as the captain gets up steam in the scotch boilers for a 4 p.m. departure.<sup>1</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the Twin Ports hosted thousands of passengers each summer as a preferred port of call for more than a dozen Great Lakes cruise liners. The *Juniata* and *Octorara* of the Anchor Line were frequent callers at the Head of the Lakes, as were the *Huronic*, *Noronic* and *Hamonic* of Canada's Northern Navigation Company. But the most frequent caller was the *South American*, which for 40-plus years featured round-trip voyages between Duluth and Buffalo.<sup>2</sup>



**From her launching in 1914 until 1923, the *South American* had one funnel, as depicted in this pen-and-ink drawing by the late Arvid Morken of Superior. A second funnel was added for aesthetic purposes when the ship was rebuilt following a major fire in 1922. (Duluth Seaway Port Authority Collection)**

On this July afternoon in 1929, the crowd begins to file up the gangplank, assisted by pursers in uniform. The throng is representative of middle-class, middle America. A doctor and his wife from Mankato took the train to Duluth that morning and will disembark in Detroit for a week-long medical convention. A young couple from Ashland spent the night at the Hotel Duluth and will ride the *South American* to Buffalo where they will pay homage to a unique North American rite of passage and honeymoon at Niagara Falls. A mining company executive from Hibbing will get off the boat in Houghton-Hancock and spend a week with his brother, an engineer at the

Calumet & Hecla Consolidated Copper Company. A widow from Indianapolis and her two teen-age sons will ride the *South American* to Mackinac Island, later ferrying to Harbor Springs to spend a month at their cottage on Lake Michigan's Grand Traverse Bay.<sup>3</sup>

As the *South American* slips under the newly-renovated Duluth Aerial Lift Bridge, the passengers settle into their berths and cabins and perhaps repair to the promenade deck for a last look at the North Shore receding in the distance. Below decks, the galley crew is busy preparing dinner. Most of the cooks, bakers, wait staff, bellhops and chambermaids are college students from the Midwest, having the adventure of a lifetime and getting paid, to boot. A not surprising number of the college students will meet their life partner on Lake Superior or Huron or Erie, and years later, will take a 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary cruise aboard the *South American* or *North American*.

Most of the college-age staff will gain weight by September, the result of spending the summer eating some of the finest baked goods this side of New York City.<sup>4</sup> Dinner is served at 7 p.m., and the menu this evening includes fresh lake trout, purchased from a Booth Company boat while the *South American* was docked in Duluth.

The first stop on the *South American's* itinerary is the twin hillside communities of Houghton-Hancock on Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. Entering the Keweenaw Waterway on the west side of the peninsula, the vessel slowly picks its way through the Portage Ship Canal and the Lily Pond, a refuge for Lake Superior maritime traffic since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built the waterway early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The stop is short, and the *South American* is underway again before midnight, steaming out the Chassel end of the waterway into Lake Superior's Keweenaw Bay.

The *South American* passes through the Soo Locks the next morning, and after a slow passage down the St. Mary's River and its narrow channels, the cruise vessel turns westward and reaches Mackinac Island on the underside of Michigan's Upper Peninsula by mid-day. The *South American* will dock at the island for nearly a day. A number of the passengers who boarded in Duluth will disembark on the island and spend a week before returning to the Twin Ports when the vessel makes her upbound trip. Others will take the ferry to the Lower Peninsula, where they will catch a train to points south.<sup>5</sup>

Casting off again, the *South American* sets a course east into the northern reaches of Lake Huron. Since it is early summer, the vessel detours into the rocky North Channel of Georgian Bay before swinging back through the Main Channel east of Manitoulin Island into southern Lake Huron. The bluebird weather that has accompanied the vessel south and east changes overnight, and the *South American* wallows through 12-foot waves and 25-knot winds as she steams south down Lake Huron under leaden skies. The morning on Lake Huron reveals the dark underside of the cruising experience. Seasickness in stormy weather is as much or more a reality on the Great Lakes as it is on ocean cruises. When the *South American* pitches and rolls, it is taken for granted that the bellboys will be kept busy unplugging sinks

and mopping stateroom floors.

Summer storms never last long on the Great Lakes, and by the time the *South American* noses into the St. Clair River separating Lake Huron from Lake St. Clair, many of the passengers are up and about, strolling the decks. <sup>6</sup> Detroit is the next port of call, and in many ways, the Motor City is an even busier terminal for the *South American* than Duluth or Buffalo. A large percentage of the Duluth passengers are Detroiters returning from 10 days or two weeks spent at a resort in northern Minnesota. <sup>7</sup> The *South American* and other Great Lakes cruise vessels also do a steady business travel trade between Detroit and Buffalo.

Casting off into the Detroit River, the *South American* begins the final leg of her voyage. Below Detroit she turns southeast, setting a course to pass north of Lake Erie's Bass Islands. Cleveland is only a couple of hours' sailing time ahead, and from Cleveland, she will make the short hop to her eastern terminus in Buffalo. There, another group of passengers will file aboard for the journey of a summer to the Upper Lakes.

Little more than three months later, the world turned upside down. The stock market crash on Wall Street on October 29, 1929 swept away a decade of excess and ushered in an equally long decade of depression. America lost its innocence in the 1930s, and for many people, a summer jaunt to the Upper Lakes was no longer an affordable luxury. Surprisingly, however, cruise vessel traffic on the Great Lakes rebounded during the mid-1930s after several down years at the beginning of the Great Depression. Although as much as a fifth of the U.S. population was out of work at some point during the 1930s, the remaining 80 percent benefited from the longest sustained period of deflation in the nation's history. Prices for nearly everything – including cruise vessel packages – remained steady or dropped from 1929 levels. Ironically, American entry into World War II in 1941 kept traffic steady through the end of the war in 1945, partly because the government encouraged Lakes cruises as an alternative to automobile travel. <sup>8</sup>

The industry went into quick decline after World War II. A fatal fire aboard the Northern Navigation Company's *Noronic* in Toronto harbor in September 1949 ushered in tough, new fire prevention rules for cruise vessels. <sup>9</sup> The construction of the interstate highway system beginning in the late 1950s made summer automobile trips increasingly popular, and the rise in scheduled air service at the same time spelled the beginning of the end for the *South American* and her sisters in the Great Lakes cruise fleet on both sides of the border. <sup>10</sup>

Talk to an octogenarian in any Great Lakes port city, and if the conversation turns to cruising, there's a better than even chance that his or her eyes will light up at that memory of a trip across the Lakes back in 1929.

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<sup>1</sup> The *South American* Bids Chicago Adieu, [www.wright.edu/~william.lafferty/v1n2page5](http://www.wright.edu/~william.lafferty/v1n2page5) The *South American* was launched at Ecorse, Michigan in 1914 but she suffered a destructive fire while in winter layup at Holland, Michigan in 1922. Completely rebuilt in time for the 1923 navigation season, she sported a second dummy funnel for aesthetic purposes. Most passengers would swear that smoke issued from both stacks. Another way to tell the two vessels apart is that the *South American* had conventional round portholes, while the *North American* had square portholes.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. For much of the period, the *South American*'s slightly older half-sister, the *North American*, cruised between Chicago and Buffalo, which accounted for the "Chicago" in the parent steamship company's name. The routes, however, were not totally rigid. The *North American* rarely called on Duluth, and the *South American* was not an unknown visitor to Chicago.

<sup>3</sup> The older of the teen-agers is perhaps the author's father, who frequently rode the *North American* from Chicago to Mackinac or Harbor Springs during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Mackinac Island was dubbed the "Bermuda of the North" for its cool breezes and absence of hay fever.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hodges, "Cruising Down Memory Lane," *The Detroit News*, [www.170.211.225.100/georgianbay/memoryland.txt](http://www.170.211.225.100/georgianbay/memoryland.txt)

<sup>5</sup> Create a Great Lakes Fantasy Trip, [www.michiganhistory.org/museum/kidstuff/depress/fantasy.html](http://www.michiganhistory.org/museum/kidstuff/depress/fantasy.html) The ferry was the only way to get back and forth across the Straits of Mackinac. The bridge connecting Michigan's two peninsulas began construction in 1954 and was opened to traffic on November 1, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.. One mile equaled nine times around the ship.

<sup>7</sup> C.P. Labadie, "You auto have seen it," *Minnesota's World Port*, Spring 1999. Some of the upbound Detroit and Buffalo passengers had their cars shipped to Duluth, which were driven up special gangways and stored in the "tween-decks" area of the vessel.

<sup>8</sup> Hodges, "Cruising Down Memory Lane." Gasoline and rubber rationing during the war prevented most long-distance automobile trips, and trains were often booked solid with the priority traffic of soldiers and sailors.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Edwards, "The Burning of the *Noronic*," [www.walkervilletimes.com/28/noronic1.html](http://www.walkervilletimes.com/28/noronic1.html)

<sup>10</sup> The *South American* bids Chicago Adieu. The *North American* was sold to Canadian interests in 1962. The *South American* made her last cruise in 1967.