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## Neighbors: Staying the course

Love of the lake motivates maritime association's board

BY CHRIS HAMILTON  
 NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

The Lake Superior Maritime Museum Association isn't one of those nonprofits that operates out of a mahogany boardroom, just making a few well-placed calls to raise cash.



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Visitors head for the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center to learn more about the region's history.

Not that some of the prominent Twin Ports citizens on the board probably couldn't do just that.

Nope, these volunteers climb right in the exhibit cases to chase dust bunnies and polish brass, said Thomas Holden, director of the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center. The association provides financial support and volunteers to the 29-year-old museum and visitor center in Duluth's Canal Park.

It's that kind of dedication -- including endless hours of fundraising, administrative duties and educational programming -- that led the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to award the association one of its highest honors, the regional Chief of Engineers Excellence in Interpretive Partnership Award for

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2002.

"It's really a lifetime achievement award," Holden said. "And it's particularly an honor because they recognized them for setting the standard that other associations now follow."

Many board members have experience in the maritime industry, including retired port director Dennis Helberg and Vista Fleet general manager Richard Langlee. The group's members share a deep appreciation of the lake and its storied maritime history.

Board president Bruce Von Riedel is a general construction contractor who has a lifelong affection for Lake Superior. He's also loved tugboats since he was 2 years old. Recently, he refurbished a 40-footer.

"For me, the lake has such a palpable sense of history and, at the same time, we get an everyday feel for it here by our proximity," said board member Dennis Medjo, who is also director of the William A. Irvin Museum.

"The lake is our icon," Medjo said. "If Duluth had a culture in its infancy, it was a maritime culture."

The marine museum is Duluth's No. 1 visitor attraction and it's the most popular venue in the upper Great Lakes region, with 400,000 visitors a year, the association says.

It's also a free attraction and houses Canal Park's only public restrooms. Holden half-jokingly said the Army Corps built the visitor center as the "attic and annex to the restrooms in Canal Park."

The relationship between the 500-member association and museum, which began before it opened its doors on Sept. 29, 1973, is the oldest continuous one within the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Holden said.

Before the Corps of Engineers decided to add the museum to its existing offices, there was little public interest in Canal Park. That is, other than the signature Aerial Lift Bridge or maybe the old Sandbar, where Grandma's Restaurants later

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got started, Medjo said. Back then, Canal Park was primarily a collection of industrial yards and warehouses.

"The nonprofits such as this one are the lifeblood of the community," said Mike Conlan, a museum board member and Duluth's Planning and Development Department director.

"They used to say that this facility created the tourism industry in Duluth."

The maritime museum association supports the small permanent museum staff, and all artifacts and new programs come through the association, board members said.

This year, exhibits and programs include the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition and the restoration of a 5th Order Fresnel lighthouse lens. The luminous brass lens and clockworks, worth an estimated \$250,000, operated for decades on the south pier.

Within the next year, board members hope to have an interactive computer station in place, which the public can use to access detailed information about the ships, such as loads, destinations and sizes, as well as data on weather, waves and water levels.

"I think this board has moved the museum to a new dynamic level," Von Riedel said.

The association tries to raise at least \$30,000 a year through raffles, membership dues, donations and other fund-raisers, Von Riedel said. It also publishes the Nor'Easter, a Lake Superior history journal, six times a year.

The museum's main fund-raiser is the Gales of November, an annual symposium focused on Lake Superior shipwrecks. Last year, a record 600 people attended the 16th annual event in the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center.

Richard Stewart, a board member, is a transportation professor at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Two years ago, UWS accepted the task of cataloging and archiving the museum's extensive collection of papers and photos. Stewart said he often uses the visitor center as a classroom for his

students.

The majority of the artifact collection -- which is four times what's on display -- was donated by shipping companies and private individuals, Holden said. However, the association raises money to buy equipment and develop new exhibits. Last year, it provided \$25,000 for new exhibit cases.

Soon, the association plans to sell reproductions of some charts and pieces of art the museum has on display, Holden said.

"There's a lot more going on here than people think," Von Riedel said.

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