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Mark Copier / The Grand Rapids Press

Paul Dalman, left, and Dale Rosema watch the Great Lakes freighter Richard Reiss navigate Lake Macatawa with a load of coal for the Holland, Mich. power plant. The two are able to recognize many ships without even looking at the names printed along their sides.

Web site helps satisfy Great Lakes boat watchers' fascination with ships

By Lori Gilles / The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- Listening to Paul Dalman and Dale Rosema talk about ships in the Great Lakes is fascinating.

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The two are able to recognize many ships without even looking at the names printed along their sides, and they enthusiastically discuss what is clearly a much-loved hobby.

"I think almost everyone who lives on the Great Lakes has at least a little bit of a fascination with ships. They are amazing things to watch," Dalman said.

Amazing things to watch, but also amazing things to study. There is no formal organization or club for boat enthusiasts in Michigan, but there is a Web site that ties people like Dalman and Rosema with others all around the Great Lakes.

"Most of the active people are in Michigan, Ontario and Ohio," Dalman said. "There's a large number of former sailors, retirees, enthusiasts and also people who have moved away but still like the Great Lakes and want to reconnect."

Boatnerd.com was started in Detroit by a man named Neil Schultheiss. Hosted by Oakland University, the site contains photo galleries and statistics on all ships that travel the Great Lakes. "It's kind of like

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baseball cards, but for boats,” Rosema said.

The site also has discussion boards on everything from lighthouses to scale ship modeling, along with maps, charts, histories and news.

“The site is a huge source of information. If you post a question on it, someone who knows the topic will give you an answer in a matter of hours,” Rosema said.

Boatnerd.com also contains schedules of boats coming in and out of every port on the Great Lakes, a very valuable resource, according to Dalman.

“Part of the challenge of the interest here is finding a boat. If you go to Detroit, Port Huron or Sault Ste. Marie, plop your chair down and wait, something will go by pretty soon. But in Holland, it’s tough to know what’s coming when,” he said.

Ships stopping in Holland enter four main harbors: Verplank Dock Co., Louis Padnos Iron and Metal Co., the James DeYoung Power Plant and Brewers City Dock. Holland’s ports are too small to accommodate ships more than about 800 feet long, but they get their share of cruise ships and vessels delivering such materials as coal, stone, sand, gravel and concrete. Padnos also sends scrap metal to Algoma Steel Inc. in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. About 60 ships pass through Holland between April and October, with the bulk of the traffic occurring in spring, when companies are replenishing their inventories, and late fall, when they stock up for the winter. Two years ago, the number of ships in Holland set a record because the extensive amount of gravel delivered for the South Beltline construction project.

The Richard Reiss, owned by Lower Lakes Towing affiliate Grand River Navigation Co., recently was the first freighter of the season to pull into Holland. When it docked at the power plant to unload 12,000 tons of coal, Rosema and Dalman were on hand taking photos. However, if fans can’t take time out of their day to watch a ship dock in person, they can log on to boatnerds.com and keep tabs on 75-year-old freighters via Web cam. Ports from Detroit to Duluth can be viewed in real time, some with sound.

“That’s great if you want to see the 1,000-foot freighters we can’t get here. They are the largest ships that can pass through the Soo Locks. It’s quite a rush to see one in person. They’re absolutely huge,” Dalman said.

One thousand-foot vessels can dock in Muskegon and larger ports like Chicago. However, they can’t pass through the Welland Canal between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and therefore are built solely to travel the Great Lakes.

Dalman and Rosema became interested in ships as boys.

“(My family) used to take the ferry ride across the straits of Mackinac before there was a bridge,” Dalman said. “I also remember when you could just walk out onto the locks at Sault Ste. Marie, look down and see the freighters.”

Growing up in Grand Haven, Rosema said he never was upset that his school bus regularly had to wait for ships carrying construction aggregates under the city’s bridge.

“You can tell which company owns a ship by its smokestack. They are all painted differently and have the company’s logo on them. So, I would constantly be telling my parents what ships had come in that day.”

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At that young age, a lifelong hobby was born for both men.

“Each ship is completely unique, and each has a story all its own. Some are cut apart and reused in what are called four-body replacements. The oldest boat on the Great Lakes is the South Down Challenger. It’s starting its 98th year of service,” Dalman said.

Boatnerd.com has been live for only the past several years, but its hardcopy counterpart, Know Your Ships, has been published annually for nearly five decades. Written by Ann Arbor resident Roger LeLievre, the book deals with anything and everything concerning Great Lakes shipping.

“People search on eBay for back copies they don’t have. It’s like collecting every issue of National Geographic,” Dalman said.

Ship fans also get together several times a year at informal events.

The last Friday in June, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lets people walk out onto the Soo Locks and holds an evening charter boat cruise. Enthusiasts also gather at the Welland Canal in the fall for a swap meet. A full list of event dates and times is available on boatnerd.com.

“You could easily spend hours on this hobby. It’s completely addicting,” Rosema said.

“But, then, there are far worse things our wives could have to deal with,” Dalman grinned.

On the Net:

Great Lakes and Seaway Shipping: <http://www.boatnerd.com>

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