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A SPECIAL PUBLICATION OF THE LUDINGTON DAILY NEWS • MAY 2026



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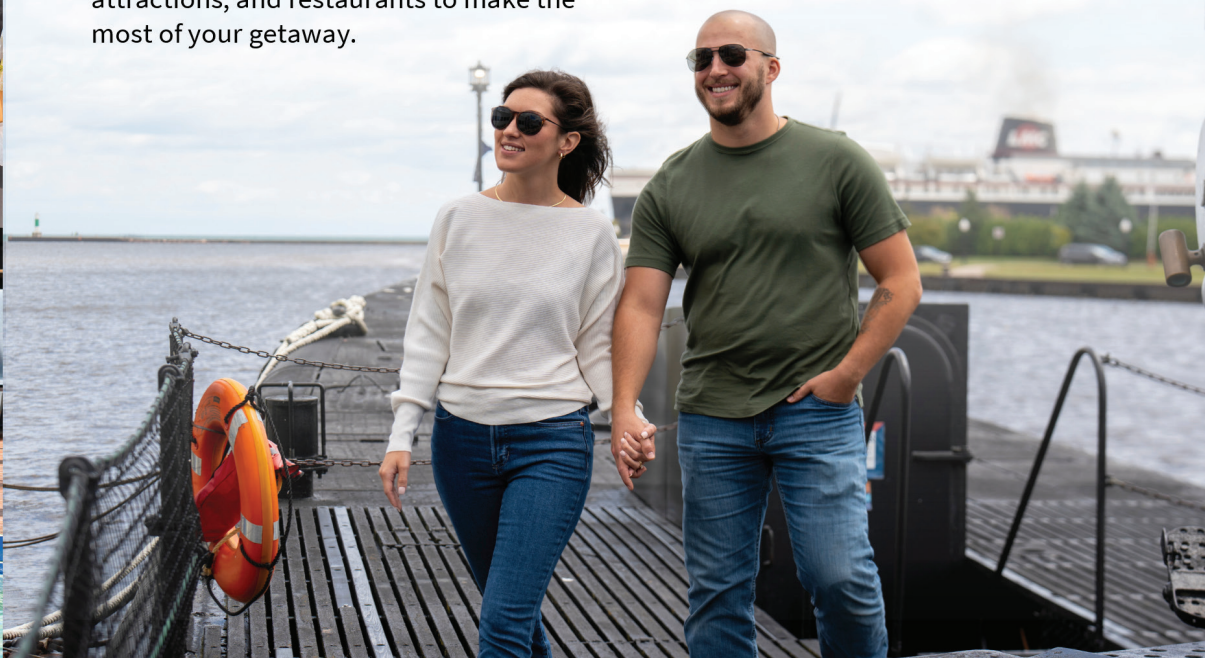
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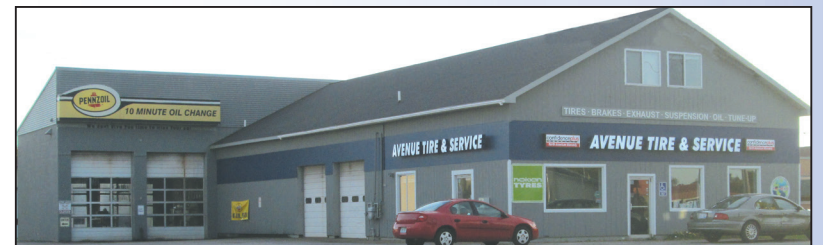
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BEFORE THE FIRST VOYAGE:

The SS Badger's Spring 'Light-Off' Signals a Return to Life

LUDINGTON — Long before the first passengers board each spring, the SS Badger begins its sailing season in a place most never see — deep within the engine room, where a carefully timed process brings the historic steamship back to life.

Crew members refer to it simply as the “light-off,” the moment when the Badger’s coal-fired boilers are ignited following months of winter layup.

“Last night, the boilers were lit aboard the SS Badger as the ship prepares for a new sailing season,” according to a post from the SS Badger Ferry on its official Facebook page.

In other posts, the moment is described as the start of the vessel’s “first watch” of the season — a phrase rooted in maritime operations that also hints at a deeper continuity.

The wording may be simple, but the process behind it is anything but.

Each spring follows a familiar progression: the boilers are lit, systems are tested, and the ship moves steadily toward sea trials and opening day. For the crew, the sequence marks the transition from winter maintenance to active service.

The repetition is part of the rhythm of a seasonal vessel — one that has operat-

ed on Lake Michigan for decades.

WHY IT CAN'T BE AUTOMATED

Unlike modern vessels powered by diesel engines or computerized systems, the SS Badger’s steam plant depends on continuous human input.

Fuel must be introduced gradually. Air-flow must be balanced. Combustion conditions shift constantly as temperatures rise.

There is no single switch to bring the system online.

Instead, crew members monitor and adjust fuel feed into the fireboxes, air supply for combustion, and steam pressure as it builds.

Small changes in any one of those variables can affect performance. Experienced operators learn to read the system — by gauge, by sound, and even by feel.

That level of responsiveness is difficult to replicate with automation, particularly in a system designed long before digital controls became standard.

A SYSTEM ROOTED IN ANOTHER ERA

Coal-fired steamships once dominated Great Lakes shipping, powering both freight carriers and passenger vessels. Crews worked in shifts to maintain

steady steam production, feeding boilers and managing heat levels throughout each voyage.

The SS Badger, launched in 1952, is one of the last remaining examples of that system still in regular passenger service.

While many ships have transitioned to modern propulsion, the Badger continues to operate using its original steam-powered design — adapted over time, but still reliant on the same fundamental principles.

EXPERIENCE PASSED WATCH TO WATCH

The Badger’s engine department is built

on experience.

Social media posts from the SS Badger Ferry highlighting crew members such as longtime Chief Engineer Kevin Diedrich and engineer Scott Rogers describe careers that span decades aboard the vessel, with individuals working through multiple positions in the engine department and contributing to the operation of the ship’s steam-powered systems.

That continuity plays a critical role during the spring startup. Bringing the boilers online requires judgment developed over time — knowing how quickly to raise temperature, how to balance air-

published by

**SHORELINE
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LUDINGTON DAILY NEWS
OCEANA'S HERALD-JOURNAL
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Oceana's Herald-Journal

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(231) 873-5602 • (231) 873-4775 fax

White Lake Beacon

PO Box 98, Whitehall, MI 49461
(231) 894-5356 • (231) 873-4775 fax

Interim Publisher: Paul Heidbreder

Sales: Shelley Kovar, Monica Evans

Graphics:

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News: Lois Tomaszewski, Shanna Avery, Alexis Settler, Cristina Juska, Sean Chase, Larry Launstein Jr., Kate Babel

Circulation:

Jeriann Steiger

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flow, and how to respond as the system comes up to pressure.

For many aboard, it is a process repeated year after year.

WHY IT MATTERS: A WORKING LANDMARK

The SS Badger is more than a ferry. It is a designated historic vessel and one of the last operating coal-fired passenger ships in the United States.

Recognized by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers as a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark, the ship represents a form of maritime technology that has largely disappeared from active service.

Unlike museum ships, the Badger remains fully operational — carrying passengers and vehicles between Ludington, Michigan, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

Maintaining that status requires more than preservation. It requires the systems to be run, maintained and understood in real-world conditions.

MORE THAN A MECHANICAL PROCESS

The Badger's own materials describe the operation as “more than a job — it's a family,” reflecting the long tenure of many crew members and the shared purpose that defines the vessel's operation.

That continuity shapes moments like the spring startup, where the process of bringing the boilers online is carried out by crews who have done it many times before.

No single post calls it a tradition. No crew member publicly labels it a ritual.

But the elements are there:

- A process repeated each year
- A defined beginning — the lighting of the boilers
- Language that marks the moment (“first watch”)
- And a reliance on experienced hands to carry it forward

A RETURN TO MOTION

For passengers, the start of the season is marked by boarding, departure times and the view of shoreline fading into open water.

For the crew, it begins earlier — in the heat of the boiler room, as pressure builds and the ship prepares to move once again.

On the SS Badger, history is not preserved behind glass.

It is brought back to life each spring — one boiler, one watch, and one crossing at a time.

Long-serving engineer reflects on career aboard the S.S. Badger

From coal passer to chief engineer, Kevin Diedrich helped power a Great Lakes icon

LUDINGTON — After more than two decades aboard the SS Badger, Chief Engineer Kevin Diedrich is retiring this season following a 24-year career that spanned every position in the vessel's engine department.

For Diedrich, that experience was earned over a career that began at the most demanding level of the ship's operation and progressed through every rank below deck.

Diedrich joined the Badger in 2001 as a coal passer and advanced through positions including fireman and oiler before becoming chief engineer. In an interview with the Mason County Press, Diedrich said he had worked “every job in the engine room,” gaining a comprehensive understanding of the vessel's coal-fired steam system.

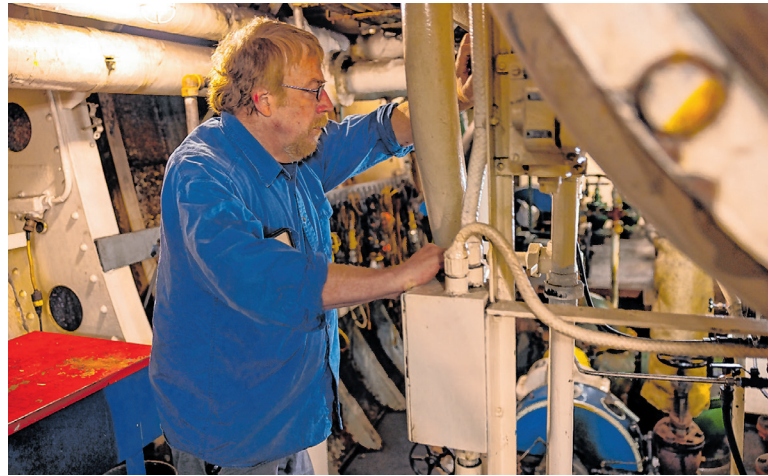
The Badger is operated by Interlake Maritime Services and remains one of the last coal-fired steamships in regular service on the Great Lakes.

A RARE SKILL SET ON A HISTORIC VESSEL

Designated a National Historic Landmark, the Badger continues to operate much as it did when it launched in 1953. Its propulsion system — powered by boilers and reciprocating steam engines — requires constant monitoring and hands-on expertise.

Unlike modern diesel-powered vessels, the Badger relies on systems that demand institutional knowledge built over time, making long-serving crew members critical to both daily operations and long-term preservation.

In a feature produced by Wisconsin Public Radio's Wisconsin Life, Diedrich described the vessel as unique, reflecting on the distinct nature of its machinery



and operation.

DRAWN TO THE WATER

A native of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, Diedrich grew up watching ships travel across Lake Michigan — an early connection that shaped his career path.

According to the Wisconsin Life feature, that familiarity with the carferries operating out of Manitowoc played a role in his decision to pursue maritime work, eventually leading him aboard the Badger.

The ferry continues to connect Manitowoc and Ludington, serving as both a transportation link and a longstanding part of the region's maritime identity.

LEADERSHIP BUILT FROM EXPERIENCE

By the time Diedrich became chief engineer, he had already spent years learning each role within the engine department. That background informed his approach to leadership, grounded in firsthand knowledge of the work required at every level.

The engine room operates as a coordinated system, with each position contributing to the safe and efficient function of the vessel. Having performed each of those roles, Diedrich brought both technical expertise and practical understanding to the job.

That kind of progression — from

entry-level labor to department leadership — reflects a traditional maritime career path that has become less common as newer vessels rely more heavily on automation.

MARKING A CAREER OF SERVICE

Diedrich's tenure aboard the Badger spans more than two decades, as the vessel continued to carry passengers and vehicles between Michigan

and Wisconsin.

In a recent post on its official Facebook page, the SS Badger said Diedrich “has worked every position in the engine department” since joining the crew in 2001 and credited him with helping “keep this historic vessel running.”

The post thanked him for his “24 years of service, commitment, and the many memories” created aboard the ship and wished him well in retirement.

Regional coverage by the Herald Times Reporter also highlighted his long tenure and ties to the Manitowoc port.

CARRYING HISTORY FORWARD

While passengers experience the Badger from its decks, much of its operation happens out of view — in the engine room, where systems built decades ago continue to run under careful supervision.

The vessel's continued use of steam propulsion makes it both a working ferry and a piece of living history, requiring the experience of those trained to operate it.

Each voyage across Lake Michigan carries that legacy forward — powered not only by steam, but by the knowledge of those who have kept the Badger running for generations.



At the Helm: Mark Barker Guides the Badger Through Change and Into the Future

BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

There is someone you might not see when sailing aboard the SS Badger, but his experience and perspective influence nearly every aspect of the vessel and its operation.

That someone is Mark W. Barker, president and CEO of Interlake Maritime Services — the company that owns the Badger as part of its broader maritime portfolio.

Shortly after Interlake acquired the Badger operation, Barker framed the company's commitment in clear terms.

"As a maritime company, we understand how important the Badger connection between Ludington, Michigan, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin is to those communities," Barker said in a January 2021 interview with *The Maritime Executive*.

"Interlake is fully committed to continuing its operation as the largest cross-lake passenger service on the Great Lakes, a key part of U.S. 10 and a vital link across Lake Michigan."

In a 2024 interview with the *Ludington Daily News*, Barker described the scope of his role and the structure behind the operation.

"As president and CEO of Interlake Maritime Services, I oversee all of the companies," Barker said.

A LEADER SHAPED BY THE LAKES

Barker's connection to the industry is generational.

"I grew up in the business," he said in that interview, noting his father led Interlake and took the company private in 1987.

Barker joined the company in 1995,

sailing aboard its vessels as a third assistant engineer before moving ashore in 1996 as a fleet engineer. After earning a business degree, he returned to Interlake in 2002, working in finance and treasury before being named president in 2007.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME INDUSTRY

Interlake's business spans both bulk freight shipping and passenger service.

"The Great Lakes is a huge maritime operations center," Barker said in the 2024 interview.

"We are moving the building blocks of America," he said, describing cargo operations that include iron ore, limestone, salt and coal.

But the Badger operates differently.

"Commercial shipping and the car ferry are, at their most basic level, the same operation," Barker said in the same inter-

view. "Maintenance, crewing and safety are very similar."

"The sales side of the business is very different," he added. "On the ferry operation, we are catering to families, truckers, vacationers and tourists. We are very much more a public-facing operation."

Each roughly four-hour crossing between Ludington and Manitowoc requires coordination between vessel crews, dock operations and passenger services on a fixed schedule.

TESTED BY OPERATION

That operational reality was underscored in 2023, when a failure involving the dock ramp system in Ludington forced an early end to the Badger's season.

"This is not how we hoped our 70th season would end," Barker said at the time in a public company statement, "but

we are fully committed to making the extensive repairs — and doing it the right way — so that we will be back better and stronger... to serve our loyal passengers and port communities.”

Following that shutdown, Lake Michigan Carferry — under Interlake ownership — undertook significant repairs to dock infrastructure in Ludington.

READY FOR THE SEASON

By the 2024 sailing season, that work — including improvements to shore-side infrastructure — was beginning to show results.

In a LinkedIn post ahead of the season, Barker pointed to the behind-the-scenes effort required to keep the Badger operating.

“Exciting news! The SS Badger is out on a training run as it gets ready to set sail,” he wrote. “Our team, along with our partners who helped construct a new ramp lifting system in Ludington, put in a lot of hard work over the winter.”

INVESTING IN THE VESSEL — AND ITS FUTURE

Barker has also pointed to longer-term considerations for the vessel.

In a 2022 interview with the Ludington Daily News, he said the company was beginning to evaluate future fuel options for the coal-fired ship.

“We’re looking at all options,” Barker said at the time. “At the end of the day, we need a boat that is sustainable — economically, environmentally, from everything.”

“Coal is not the most favored fuel in the world,” he added.

He also said the vessel’s historic designation is not solely tied to its fuel source.

“The boat is historic in its nature,” Barker said in that interview. “The role the boat has played in the economy and the railroad and the region has a hugely historic significance.”

IMPROVEMENTS ONBOARD

Since Interlake acquired Lake Michigan Carferry in 2020, improvements have included both passenger-facing and

crew-focused updates.

According to company statements and prior Ludington Daily News reporting, those have included:

- repainting and maintenance work completed during dry dock periods
- updates to onboard systems, including passenger entertainment options
- ongoing improvements to passenger spaces and amenities

Behind the scenes, upgrades have also focused on crew accommodations.

“It’s important to us... they have reasonable accommodations,” Barker said in 2022. “Our goal is to keep and retain people.”

A COMPANY OPERATING AT SCALE

The Badger operates as part of Interlake’s broader Great Lakes fleet.

The company’s bulk carriers transport millions of tons of cargo annually across the region, supporting industries such as steelmaking, construction and energy.

Recent investments, including the construction of the MV Mark W. Barker, re-

flect a continued focus on modernization within the company’s fleet.

A STEADY CONNECTION

While expansion into additional ports is not part of the company’s plans, Barker said the ferry’s mission remains consistent.

“They can count on the Badger to continue connecting Michigan to Wisconsin,” he said in the 2024 interview.

At the same time, the vessel’s future remains part of an ongoing conversation — from long-term fuel considerations to continued investments in infrastructure, crew and passenger experience.

For Barker, the path forward is not defined by a single change, but by steady progress.

Ensuring the Badger continues to operate for future generations, he has said, means balancing what makes the ship historic with what will keep it viable — a challenge that will shape the next chapter of one of the Great Lakes’ most recognizable vessels.

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STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTOS

Two Beacons, One Passage: Lighthouses Guide the Badger Between Shores

A pair of historic breakwater lighthouses – one in Ludington and the other in Manitowoc, Wisc. – serve as guiding lights for the S.S. Badger whenever it crisscrosses Lake Michigan.

Truth be told, those two historic maritime beacons help to serve all boating traffic – large and small – and are just two of the more than 120 lighthouses that protect ships of all sizes as they sail across the 3,200 miles of her Mitten State shorelines and of all those lighthouses, it's the North Breakwater Light in Ludington, and its sister candle along the shores in Manitowoc, that welcome the Badger and her passengers spring, summer and fall.

Located in downtown Ludington is the Stearns Park Beach North Breakwater Light, which was built in 1871 and for decades has been the shining beacon for the S.S. Badger carferry, many massive freighters and scores of fishing boats and other pleasure craft.

The lighthouse will reopen for visitation on May 19, and remain open until Sept. 27.

According to published tourists brochures, "... the white, pyramid shaped tower that is known as the Ludington North Breakwater Light (not an official lighthouse, since a house has never been

attached to it) has a history that's as fascinating as its structure. With \$6,000 from Congress, the first Ludington light was constructed on the outer end of the south pier, and lit in 1871. Standing only 25 feet, the upper section housed a service room, which the light keeper could use during inclement weather.

"Money was no problem when it came to constructing Lake Michigan pierhead lighthouses, but Congress frequently dragged its feet in appropriating funds for the construction of keeper's dwellings. Edwin Slyfield, light keeper in 1891, encountered dangerous conditions when he had to navigate the pier during November gales in order to service the light. It wasn't until 1900 that a keeper's quarters was finally constructed, and Mr. Slyfield and his family finally had a home."

Those brochures continue that "... the Army Corps of Engineers recommended in 1906 that a pair of timber breakwaters be constructed in an arrowhead formation to protect the entrance to the harbor. Work was completed on this project in 1914, and it became clear that the present light was not adequate for the number of carferries entering the harbor. Five years later, the timber breakwaters began to decay, and concrete structures were approved as a replacement. In 1923,

it was decided that a new light should be built at the end of the North Breakwater, rather than the south side. So in 1924, the present tower began to take shape, fabricated of steel plates over a steel skeleton. This four-sided, white pyramidal tower was built with four porthole windows on each of the three decks. The unusual shape was designed to deflect the strong waves of Lake Michigan. A fourth-order Fresnel lens, manufactured in the United States rather than France, was installed in the new station's lantern.

The North Breakwater Light was automated in 1972, and the Fresnel lens (now on display at Historic White Pine Village) was replaced in 1995 by a Tidelands Signal 300 mm acrylic optic. In 1994, the crib on which the light sits settled, and the tower tilted four degrees to the northeast. Cost to repair it was considered excessive, so the Army Corps of Engineers decided it was safe and to leave it as is. Looking at the North Breakwater Lighthouse today, the tilt can still be seen.

Four hours away by Badger steaming standards, and according to other published reports, "... Manitowoc's lighthouse is an iconic landmark of the area and a popular attraction for tourists. The public is welcome to walk out on the pier and come right up to the lighthouse for

pictures or fishing. On the walk out there, it is common to see birds and fauna as the pier goes through a nature preserve. The best way to get to the lighthouse is to park in the Lighthouse Park parking lot and walk out on the pier with the blue railing. Dogs are allowed and there is a dog park located on the way out."

The Flint and Pere Marquette Railroad launched a railroad car ferry service between Manitowoc and Ludington in 1897 using the Pere Marquette, the first steel car ferry. In 1900, the ferry transported 27,000 railroad cars across Lake Michigan. The S.S. Badger, which has been converted to carry automobiles and passengers, is the last of the fourteen railcar ferries that served this route.

According to the Wisconsin Maritime Museum website, "Phil Carlucci spent roughly \$325,000 to renovate and paint the lighthouse in time for the 100th birthday of the lighthouse in 2018. The gleaming white lighthouse was the talk of the town after its restoration, and Carlucci hoped to work with the Wisconsin Maritime Museum to coordinate tours and events at the lighthouse. Since 2019, Manitowoc Sunrise Rotary has been working with Philip Carlucci to offer tours of the lighthouse to schoolchildren and other interested groups."

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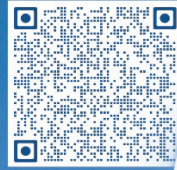
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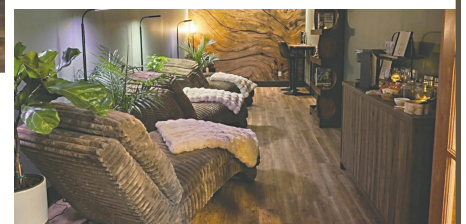
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Two Ports, One Passage:

How the SS Badger Connects Ludington and Manitowoc

From opposite shores of Lake Michigan, two communities share a daily rhythm shaped by history, industry and the steady crossing of a working ship.

Each morning during the sailing season, the routine begins the same way on both sides of Lake Michigan.

On the east shore, in Ludington, vehicles line up along the docks as the coal-fired steamship SS Badger prepares to depart. Across the lake in Manitowoc, that same vessel will arrive hours later, completing a crossing that has connected the two communities for more than seven decades.

“There is nothing else like her around,” Capt. Ed Wiltse, the Badger’s master, said in prior reporting.

For both ports, the Badger is not simply a piece of history. It remains a working ship — one that continues to shape daily life along each shoreline.

A SHARED DAILY RHYTHM

In Ludington, the Badger’s departure signals the start of activity along the waterfront. In Manitowoc, its arrival serves as a similar marker, drawing attention as it moves into harbor and ties up along the dock.

Though separated by roughly 60 miles of open water, the two communities mirror each other in subtle but consistent ways. Each builds part of its seasonal

rhythm around the ferry’s schedule — a cadence defined by departure, crossing and arrival.

The routine repeats daily through the warmer months, linking the two ports in a pattern that is both predictable and enduring.

A WORKING SHIP, NOT A RELIC

While the Badger is often described for its historic status — built in 1953 and designated a National Historic Landmark — those who operate it emphasize its function over its legacy.

“Operating the Badger is not like sailing on a laker,” Wiltse said, underscoring the vessel’s unique design and handling.

The ship’s complexity reflects that distinction. A documentary on the vessel describes it as “a complex ship with miles of pipes,” highlighting the systems required to keep the coal-fired steamship in operation.

That complexity is part of what connects the two ports. Each successful crossing depends on coordination, timing and the ability to move safely between harbors on opposite sides of Lake Michigan.

CONNECTING TWO WATERFRONT ECONOMIES

Beyond its daily routine, the Badger continues to serve as a direct link be-

tween Michigan and Wisconsin.

Each sailing carries passengers, vehicles and commercial traffic, providing an alternative to the drive around the southern end of the lake. For Ludington and Manitowoc, that movement supports seasonal business activity tied to tourism, dining and waterfront commerce.

Visitors arriving in Ludington often head for beaches, parks and downtown shops. Those disembarking in Manitowoc are met with a harbor district that includes museums, marinas and local businesses.

The exchange works in both directions, reinforcing the Badger’s role as more than transportation — a steady conduit between two regional economies.

A SHARED EXPERIENCE ACROSS THE LAKE

For many passengers, the connection between Ludington and Manitowoc is personal as well as practical.

“It was quite a thrill reliving the trip to Manitowoc,” one former crew member said in a Badger account reflecting on returning to the route decades later.

That sense of continuity — of making the same crossing across generations — is part of what defines the vessel’s place in both communities.

SEASONAL BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

On each side of the lake, the Badger’s first sailing in the spring signals the start of a new season.

In Ludington, it marks the transition into the busiest months of the year. In Manitowoc, the ship’s arrival serves as a similar indicator, bringing renewed activity to the waterfront.

When the sailing season ends in the fall, the absence is just as noticeable. The daily crossings stop, and with them, the routine that connects the two ports.

TWO COMMUNITIES, ONE CONNECTION

Despite differences in geography and local character, Ludington and Manitowoc share a relationship defined by repetition and reliability.

From one shoreline, the Badger departs. On the other, it arrives. And in that continuous movement, the two communities remain linked — not only by water, but by a shared experience shaped by the same vessel.

“It was one of the best experiences in my 86 years,” the former crew member said, reflecting on the crossing.

For more than 70 years, that experience has been repeated thousands of times — a passage that continues to connect two ports, one trip at a time.

PORT TO PORT — LUDINGTON & MANITOWOC AT A GLANCE

LUDINGTON

- **Location:** West Michigan shoreline, Mason County
- **Population:** Approximately 7,600 (city)
- **Waterfront identity:** Lake Michigan port city with a long history in shipping, rail and tourism
- **Key waterfront features:**
 - Ludington Municipal Marina
 - Stearns Park beach
 - Harbor View Marina and channel walkway
- **Tourism drivers:**
 - Ludington State Park
 - Port of Ludington Maritime Museum
 - Downtown shopping and dining district
 - Charter fishing and outdoor recreation
- **Economic role of the Badger:**
 - Anchors seasonal tourism traffic
 - Brings visitors directly into the downtown and waterfront corridor
- **Community rhythm:**
 - Ferry departures mark daily activity along the harbor
 - Strong tie between maritime history and modern tourism economy



SHARED BY BOTH PORTS

- Direct connection via the SS Badger
- Seasonal tourism economies tied to Lake Michigan
- Strong maritime heritage
- Daily rhythm shaped by ferry departures and arrivals
- Role as regional gateways between Michigan and Wisconsin

MANITOWOC

- **Location:** Eastern Wisconsin shoreline, along Lake Michigan
- **Population:** Approximately 34,000
- **Waterfront identity:** Historic shipbuilding and maritime manufacturing center
- **Key waterfront features:**
 - Manitowoc Marina
 - Riverwalk and harbor district
 - Lakefront parks and shoreline access
- **Tourism drivers:**
 - Wisconsin Maritime Museum
 - Rahr-West Art Museum
 - Downtown and lakefront dining
- **Economic role of the Badger:**
 - Delivers visitors directly into the harbor district
 - Supports seasonal business activity tied to tourism and waterfront events
- **Community rhythm:**
 - Ferry arrivals signal daily waterfront activity
 - Serves as a visible link to cross-lake travel and regional connectivity



SS BADGER AT A GLANCE

- Built: 1953
- Length: 410 feet
- Route: Ludington, Michigan to Manitowoc, Wisconsin
- Distance: Approximately 60 miles
- Crossing time: About 4 hours
- Capacity: Up to 620 passengers and 180 vehicles





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STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTO

Two Destinations, One Journey:

Great Lake Getaway Itineraries in Ludington and Manitowoc

LUDINGTON, Mich. — Travelers looking for a short, walkable getaway on both sides of Lake Michigan can build their trip around the schedule of the SS Badger.

According to itineraries published by the ferry's operators, both Ludington and Manitowoc offer compact, accessible experiences designed for one- to three-day stays, particularly for passengers traveling without a vehicle. The sample itineraries appear to be built around the

Badger's daytime sailing schedule rather than its overnight crossings.

Below is a detailed look at how those itineraries unfold.

Ludington itinerary (as outlined by SS Badger)

DAY 1: VOYAGE AND ARRIVAL

- Morning departure from Manitowoc aboard the Badger
- Afternoon arrival in Ludington

- Check into local lodging
- Explore downtown Ludington and the waterfront
- Dinner in town

As outlined on the Badger blog, the Ludington itinerary begins with the lake crossing and arrival in Ludington, then shifts into an afternoon and evening of downtown and waterfront exploration.

DAY 2: BEACH TOWN BLISS

- Breakfast and coffee downtown

- Visit Stearns Park and the Lake Michigan shoreline
- Browse downtown shops and restaurants along Ludington Avenue
- Visit the Port of Ludington Maritime Museum or spend time near the harbor
- Enjoy additional time at the beach, marina or waterfront parks

The second day centers on Ludington's beach-town setting, with time built in for the shoreline, downtown and maritime attractions.

DAY 3: VOYAGE AND DEPARTURE

- 7:30 a.m. — Grab coffee to go
 - 8 a.m. — Board the Badger for departure
 - 9 a.m. ET — Depart Ludington on the daytime sailing
 - Noon CT — Arrive in Manitowoc
- The Badger's blog specifically references an early-morning boarding window from Ludington, which aligns with the daytime east-to-west crossing. Under the current 2026 full-season schedule, the ship departs Ludington at 9 a.m. ET and arrives in Manitowoc at noon CT.

CROSSING LAKE MICHIGAN

For these itinerary posts, the ferry crossing is part of the daytime travel experience, not an overnight trip. The current full-season daytime schedule lists a four-hour crossing, with departures from Ludington at 9 a.m. ET and departures from Manitowoc at 2 p.m. CT. Overnight sailings are offered separately in some periods, but those are not the sailings reflected in these itinerary blogs.

Manitowoc itinerary

(as outlined by SS Badger)

DAY 1: VOYAGE AND ARRIVAL

- Morning departure from Ludington aboard the Badger
- Noon CT arrival in Manitowoc
- Check into nearby lodging
- Explore downtown Manitowoc
- Spend time along the riverwalk and marina area
- Dinner in town

As presented on the Badger blog, the Manitowoc itinerary begins with the daytime crossing from Ludington, followed by a walkable afternoon and evening in downtown Manitowoc.

DAY 2: MUSEUMS AND WATERFRONT

- Breakfast and coffee downtown
- Visit the Wisconsin Maritime Museum
- Explore local shops and attractions
- Spend time along the waterfront, riverwalk or marina district
- Additional free time to walk or relax in town

The second day highlights Manitowoc's downtown and maritime character, with most suggested stops located close to the ferry dock.

DAY 3: DEPARTURE

- 8 a.m. — Breakfast
- 9-11 a.m. — Free time or walk along the riverwalk
- 11 a.m. — Check out of the hotel
- 11:30 a.m. — Lunch
- 1 p.m. — Check in for the Badger voyage
- 2 p.m. CT — Depart Manitowoc
- 7 p.m. ET — Arrive in Ludington

The Manitowoc itinerary clearly references the daytime west-to-east sailing, with a 1 p.m. check-in and 2 p.m. departure. Under the current 2026 full-season schedule, that crossing arrives in Ludington at 7 p.m. ET.

ONE TRIP, TWO DESTINATIONS

Taken together, the itineraries present a coordinated travel model: short stays of one to three days, walkable downtown and waterfront access in both ports, and scheduling built around the Badger's daytime crossings.

The result is a looped experience — one that begins on one shoreline, crosses Lake Michigan and continues on the other side without requiring extensive travel planning.

BUILT FOR SIMPLICITY

The itineraries emphasize ease of movement and accessibility, particularly for passenger-only travel. By concentrating lodging, dining and attractions within close proximity to each ferry dock, both Ludington and Manitowoc function as self-contained destinations.

For travelers, the structure is straightforward: arrive, explore, cross the lake and repeat.

MORE TO EXPLORE

For additional suggested sites and places to visit in each port, travelers can explore the "Great Lake Getaway" blog series on the SS Badger website, which includes destination-specific posts for Ludington and Manitowoc.



STEVE BEGNOCHE PHOTO

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Cross the lake, double the experience: A guide to both sides of the Badger

From lighthouse-lined beaches in Ludington to maritime history along Manitowoc's riverfront, a trip aboard the SS Badger connects more than two ports — it offers two distinct ways to experience the Lake Michigan shoreline.

Whether visitors step off into a beach town atmosphere or a harbor steeped in maritime history, both ports offer easy, walkable access to key attractions. Pair that with a calendar full of seasonal festivals — and a broader lineup of regional events within a short drive — and the crossing becomes more than transportation; it becomes part of the destination.

What to See: Highlights Near Each Port

LUDINGTON (MICHIGAN SIDE)

- Stearns Park & North Breakwater Light
- Expansive beach, pier access and one of the most recognizable lighthouses on Lake Michigan.
- Ludington Waterfront Park
- Marina views, walking paths and fre-

quent community activity just steps from the dock.

- Downtown Ludington (James Street corridor)

Shops, galleries and dining within easy walking distance.

- Sandcastles Children's Museum
- A quick, family-friendly stop a few blocks inland.

- Ludington State Park (short drive)
- Dunes, trails and the Big Sable Point Lighthouse for those extending their stay.

MANITOWOC (WISCONSIN SIDE)

- Manitowoc North Pierhead Lighthouse

A bright red harbor landmark visible upon arrival.

- Wisconsin Maritime Museum
- Home to the submarine USS Cobia and extensive Great Lakes history exhibits.
- Downtown Riverwalk district
- Shops, restaurants and scenic waterfront walking paths.
- Rahr-West Art Museum
- A historic mansion setting with rotating exhibits.
- Lincoln Park Zoo (short drive)

A free, family-friendly attraction.

WHEN TO GO: SEASONAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS (PORT-LEVEL)

June | Early Summer Kickoff

- Ludington: Gus Macker Tournament; Lakestride races

- Manitowoc: Harbor events and early-season waterfront activity

Why go: Smaller crowds, full access to attractions.

July | Peak Season

- Ludington: Freedom Festival (July 3-4); West Shore Art Fair
- Manitowoc: Harbor festivals, live music and downtown events

Why go: Peak energy, festivals and Fourth of July celebrations.

August | Summer in Full Swing

- Ludington: Offshore Classic Fishing Tournament; weekly concerts
- Manitowoc: Regional food and music events; active harbor scene

Why go: Strong activity with slightly lighter crowds than July.

September–October | Fall Finish

- Ludington: Lumber Days (early October); fall shoreline views
- Manitowoc: Smaller festivals and relaxed harbor atmosphere

Why go: Scenic crossings, fewer crowds and seasonal color.

WORTH THE DRIVE: LARGER REGIONAL EVENTS

(All within a reasonable drive from each Badger port — ideal for day trips or extended stays.)

NEAR LUDINGTON (WEST MICHIGAN)

- National Cherry Festival (early July, ~2 hours north)
- One of Michigan's largest festivals, featuring air shows, concerts, parades and waterfront events.
- Electric Forest (late June, ~45 minutes south)
- Nationally known music and arts festival drawing visitors from across the country.
- Michigan Irish Music Festival (September, ~1.5 hours south)
- Major regional event with multiple



stages, cultural exhibits and family programming.

NEAR MANITOWOC (EAST WISCONSIN)

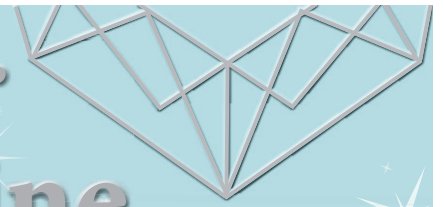
- Wisconsin State Fair (early August, ~1.5 hours south)
- One of the largest state fairs in the Midwest, featuring agriculture, concerts and food attractions.
- EAA AirVenture Oshkosh (late July, ~1 hour southwest)
- The world's largest aviation gathering, drawing international visitors.
- Door County Fall Festival (October, ~1.5 hours north)

A signature fall event with food, crafts and peak autumn color.

PLANNING TAKEAWAY

- Best overall timing: Mid-June through early July
- For peak festival energy: Fourth of July week in Ludington
- For major regional events: Late June through early August
- For balance: August sailings
- For a quieter, scenic trip: Early fall

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Two shores, one route:

Badger carries U.S. 10 across Lake Michigan

LUDINGTON — The SS Badger is widely known for its nostalgic appeal and passenger experience, but its function within the nation's transportation network runs deeper than a typical ferry crossing.

The vessel operates as part of U.S. Route 10, carrying vehicles and passengers between Ludington and Manitowoc as a designated segment of a federal highway. For travelers, that means the route does not end at the shoreline — it continues across Lake Michigan aboard the Badger.

That distinction places the Badger in a unique category among Great Lakes ferries. Rather than serving solely as a recreational or seasonal attraction, the

vessel functions as a transportation link that supports both passenger travel and commercial traffic.

By connecting two states directly across the lake, the Badger provides an alternative to the longer drive around Lake Michigan. The ferry's approximately four-hour crossing can save travelers roughly three hours compared with the nearly seven-hour drive around the southern end of the lake through the Chicago corridor, depending on traffic conditions. The difference is even more pronounced when compared with the northern route. Driving around the top of Lake Michigan via the Mackinac Bridge can take approximately nine to 11 hours, making the Badger the

most direct connection between the two states and reducing travel time by several hours while eliminating hundreds of miles of driving.

Transportation officials formally recognized the Badger's role in the highway system in 2015, when U.S. Route 10 was extended across Lake Michigan, reinforcing the ferry's place in a broader network of interstate travel. The designation underscores the vessel's importance not only to tourism, but also to economic activity in shoreline communities.

The Badger is not designated under the federal America's Marine Highway Program, which identifies specific maritime freight corridors. Even so, its sta-

tus as part of a U.S. highway highlights its significance as infrastructure rather than a niche service.

For communities on both sides of the lake, that distinction carries weight. The Badger supports tourism, connects regional economies and provides a reliable transportation option that has endured for decades.

While passengers may board for the experience — from open deck views to onboard amenities — the crossing itself remains grounded in function.

The Badger, in effect, serves as a bridge across Lake Michigan — one that continues to carry traffic, commerce and tradition between Ludington and Manitowoc.

Four-hour crossing offers a direct link between Michigan and Wisconsin, cutting hours off travel while serving as a floating segment of the federal highway system





Two Crew Members, One Day at Sea

BY KATE BABEL
SHORELINE MEDIA STAFF WRITER

LUDINGTON — As the SS Badger prepares to open its 2026 sailing season May 15, the work behind the scenes is already underway — driven by a crew whose roles span every corner of the historic vessel.

From navigation in the pilothouse to maintenance deep within the ship, the Badger's crew is responsible for safely guiding the vessel between Ludington and Manitowoc across Lake Michigan.



First Mate Chris Roelant described his role as both operational and managerial,

serving directly beneath the captain while overseeing the deck department.

"The first mate is right below the captain, so he's in overall command of the ship, and then I'm in charge of the deck department," Roelant said. "That includes making schedules, handling payroll, making sure everyone knows their job and does it right — and stepping in if anything goes wrong."

That structure allows the captain to focus on broader command responsibilities, while the first mate manages the day-to-day operations of the deck crew. In emergency situations, Roelant said, the responsibility would shift quickly.

"If anything were to happen to the captain — God forbid — I would take over command of the vessel to get it safely into port," he said.

A typical day begins with coordinating the deck crew and assigning maintenance tasks before transitioning to navigation duties.

"I'll grab something to eat, check in with the crew, assign jobs — a lot of it is preventative maintenance," Roelant said. "There's a schedule they follow during the crossing, and they're good about staying on top of it."

After departure from Ludington and once the vessel clears nearshore traffic, Roelant takes over watch in the pilothouse.

"That's making sure we don't hit anything — monitoring radar, watching for other vessels and lining us up for Mani-

towoc," he said.

Below deck, the engineering department keeps the Badger operating — a system built on experience and progression through the ranks.

Scott Rogers, a junior engineer, has spent two decades aboard the vessel, starting in 2006 as a dishwasher before transferring to the engine room the following year.

"I started as a coal passer and worked my way up," Rogers said. "I became a qualified member of the engine department, then a fireman keeping the fires going, then a watertender monitoring boiler levels, and later an oiler with more responsibility over machinery."

In 2022, Rogers moved into his current role as junior engineer, responsible for systems beyond the engine room, including plumbing, electrical work and passenger areas.

"This position takes care of everything outside the engine room — plumbing, electrical and the passenger staterooms," he said.

His day begins with a check-in in the engine room before shifting to daily maintenance and inspection rounds throughout the ship.

"I check with the engine room to make sure I'm not needed for repairs, then spend about an hour on maintenance," Rogers said. "After that, I go to the passenger area, check in with the cruise director's office and review any work

orders. If there aren't any, I make my rounds."

Rogers said his role also includes assisting passengers during boarding and disembarking, including operating accessibility equipment when needed.

Even after his shift ends, the responsibility continues.

"Even when my workday is done at 4 p.m., I'm still on call 24/7," he said. "If anything happens and they need more hands, they can call me at any time."

He also plays a role in operating the vessel during docking and training newer engineers — specialized skills developed over years aboard the ship.

"I can operate the engines as the boat is making the dock, and I help train new engineers," Rogers said.

For Rogers, the work is personal as well as professional.

"The Badger is like my second home," he said. "My coworkers are like brothers, and we all have a great time keeping this old girl running and getting passengers safely across the lake."

As opening day approaches, that combination of experience, routine and teamwork ensures the Badger is ready for another season on the water.

Each member of the crew — from the deck to the engine room — plays a critical role in keeping the vessel running, a coordinated effort that allows one of the Great Lakes' most recognizable ships to continue its daily passage between two shores.



Two shores, one team spirit: SS Badger fuels local sports traditions

BY SEAN CHASE
LUDINGTON DAILY NEWS

LUDINGTON — The SS Badger is a massive part of the history and economy of Ludington and Mason County, and that role also extends to the local prep sports scene.

The impact is felt when a retired horn is used to signal touchdowns during the Ludington varsity football team's games at Oriole Field, and in multiple other sporting events that bear the name.

Although the Orioles football team doesn't travel via the SS Bager for competition, the Ludington boys varsity soccer team does.

Between Badger Bingo and exploring the ship, it's a great bonding opportunity for the team to bond early in its season.

"It's a cool experience," Orioles boys varsity soccer head coach Kris Ander-

son said. "There are some kids, we live in Ludington, but they never go across on the boat. For some kids, it's their first experience going across on the car ferry. And just seeing the bonding of the kids in the things they do on the boat and then the time over there, as well, it's a cool trip."

While it is a cool trip, it is an experience unique to Ludington sports.

"It's a neat team-building opportunity that not really any other schools have," coach Anderson said. "Not many schools have that opportunity, or live in an area where you can do that kind of thing. Yeah, maybe some schools in the southern part of the state just go across the border. But that's a bus ride. That's nothing different, nothing new. This is a unique deal."

The tradition began in 2021, and every other fall, the Orioles board the Badger and travel across Lake Michigan to Wisconsin for the Car Ferry Cup.

Currently, the Car Ferry Cup resides in Ludington. The Orioles have won all five titles and have allowed only two goals since the cup's inception.

"We've won them all," coach Anderson said.

While it would make sense for the Ludington girls varsity team to participate in some form of the Car Ferry Cup, due to the Badger's schedule, that isn't possible.

"It's really tough because that's right about when postseason play is going to start," Orioles girls varsity head coach Kris Anderson said. "It's really tough to sneak something in (at that time of year)."

This season, the Badger begins its full season on May 15.

The boys soccer team will once again participate in the Car Ferry Cup in 2026. It's currently slated for late August.

When the idea of traveling across Lake Michigan to compete against

teams in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, the Mason County Central varsity cross country teams were also involved.

For the Spartans, the trip began with a single idea from cross-country head coach Ed Sanders.

"About ten years ago, I came up with the idea of possibly taking the cross country team across via the Badger to a meet in Wisconsin," coach Ed Sanders said. "Two Rivers, Wisconsin, hosted an annual meet in late August that would work perfectly into our season schedule. Once I ironed out all the details with the MHSAA, athletic director Tim Genson, and the Mason County Central School Board, it became a reality."

Since its inception, the Spartans' boys' and girls' varsity cross country teams have made the trip to Two Rivers, Wisconsin, for the meet.

"Two Rivers High School has been an amazing host year after year," coach



Sanders said. "I am pretty sure that the MCC cross country team was the first athletic team from the Mason County area to travel out of state for an athletic competition. And, to travel via the Badger is even cooler."

The Spartans' boys' and girls' varsity cross country teams still travel to Two Rivers, Wisconsin, for a meet.

In 2025, the MCC girls varsity cross country team finished seventh out of 11 teams at the Two Rivers Invite. The other 10 of those were representatives from Wisconsin High Schools. Junior Maylan Sanders was the Spartans' best finisher in eighth place.

Junior Jackson Poll took home 30th

place for the MCC boys team.

"Our first year going across on the Badger was a really cool experience for me to see how the kids reacted to the trip," coach Sanders said. "About 75% of the team had never been on the Badger, and about 50% of the team had never been out of the State of Michigan. After arriving in Wisconsin, two of my girls held hands as they stepped onto Wisconsin, their first steps into foreign soil they said. Every year we still have many who are first time Badger travelers. Team bonding is a huge part of the trip, as well. Being able to give the kids this opportunity and experiences is another reason I love to coach."

Outside of cross country, the Mason County Central track team has an annual Lake Michigan Carferry meet.

On April 24, the Spartans welcomed 13 varsity track and field teams to town for the third annual meet. Ludington and Pentwater also compete in the meet.

However, there aren't any Wisconsin teams represented in the meet due to the Badger's schedule.

Last year, Kingsley won both the boys and girls competitions, narrowly edging out Ludington's boys and girls varsity track and field teams.

Manistee won the inaugural boys meet in 2024, while Grand Traverse

Academy won the girls meet.

No matter how the events take shape, local schools wouldn't be able to make all these opportunities available to their students without the community's help. For MCC, that help comes from a famous musician who was also a Spartan.

"Maynard Keenan, an MCC alum from the Class of 1982, and lead singer of Tool, A Perfect Circle, and Puscifer, has been very generous in helping make this trip possible," coach Sanders said. "Maynard is a great guy who loves to give back to MCC. The cross country team does a couple of fundraisers to offset some of the cost."

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Where history meets mystery: The legends of Lake Michigan

From the glass-calm surface to the surge of choppy waves, a trip on the SS Badger is more than a ferry ride; it is an immersion into a storied past. As this landmark steamship bridges the gap between Michigan and Wisconsin, it glides over submerged secrets and through the same waters where legends were born and history took its course.

Originally known as “Michigami,” meaning “large lake,” Lake Michigan formed as glaciers retreated thousands of years ago. Indigenous communities traversed its waters and shores long before European explorers arrived.

Some of the earliest inhabitants along the lake were the Hopewell cultures, which declined by around A.D. 800. They were followed by Late Woodland and historic tribes, including the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Menominee, Sauk, Meskwaki and Miami, among others.

French explorer Jean Nicolet is often credited as the first European to reach the lake, around 1634, while searching for a passage to China. Another name that resonates locally is Jacques Marquette.

Born June 1, 1637, in Laon, France, the Jesuit priest helped establish early missions at Sault Ste. Marie and St. Ignace. Alongside Louis Jolliet, he explored and mapped portions of the Mississippi River Valley in 1673.

On his return journey in 1675, after celebrating Mass near present-day Starved Rock, Illinois, Marquette fell

ill with dysentery. Traveling north along the eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan, he died near what is now Ludington, on the Buttersville Peninsula. Though his remains were later moved to St. Ignace, a cross was erected to mark the original burial site.

Today, the Father Marquette Memorial stands on a hill overlooking Pere Marquette Lake and Buttersville Beach, maintained by the Pere Marquette Memorial Association.

Lake Michigan — the only Great Lake located entirely within the United States — has long shaped settlement and commerce. From fur trading to the lumber boom and beyond, it fostered the growth of shoreline communities such as Ludington, Pentwater, Manistee, Manitowoc, Two Rivers and Cheboygan.

With that maritime history comes mystery.

Stories persist about the so-called Lake Michigan Triangle, an area often described as stretching from Ludington to Manitowoc to Benton Harbor and back again. Similar to the Bermuda Triangle, the region has been associated with unexplained disappearances of ships and aircraft, along with occasional



reports of strange lights over the water.

Among the most enduring mysteries is the fate of Le Griffon, a French ship that vanished in the late 1600s with its crew and cargo. Later tragedies are documented, including the sinking of the SS Pere Marquette No. 18 on Sept. 9, 1910, during a fierce storm. While some wrecks have been discovered, others remain lost beneath the lake’s surface.

“The Great Lakes have more than 6,000 shipwrecks, and Lake Michigan alone accounts for a significant portion of those losses,” according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “Many remain undiscovered, preserving a record of maritime history beneath the surface.”

Another oft-told tale is that of “ghost ship” sightings — phantom vessels reportedly seen in heavy fog, echoing the lake’s long maritime past. Though unverified, such stories have become part of the region’s folklore, passed down through generations of sailors and shoreline residents.

Lake Michigan’s history is also defined by the Pere Marquette car ferry fleet, once the largest of its kind in the world. These vessels extended the Flint

& Pere Marquette Railroad across the lake to Wisconsin ports including Milwaukee and Manitowoc. Today, the Badger continues that legacy as a floating segment of U.S. 10, carrying passengers and vehicles between Ludington and Manitowoc.

While the SS Badger follows a historic cross-lake route long used by commercial vessels, maritime records indicate the corridor passes through waters where shipwrecks have occurred — meaning passengers may travel near, though not directly over, some of Lake Michigan’s submerged history. However, the Badger does not advertise or chart its route as passing directly over specific wreck sites. Many wreck locations are either not precisely mapped or are intentionally protected, and modern navigation avoids hazards, meaning known obstructions are typically charted and avoided.

Beyond the history and lore, the lake is known for its striking natural beauty — vibrant sunsets, expansive beaches and fog-laden mornings. The steady rhythm of waves and the hum of passing ships remain a constant backdrop for residents and visitors alike.

From Ludington State Park and Stearns Park Beach to Mears State Park in Pentwater, and across the lake to Red Arrow Park in Manitowoc and Neshotah Park in Two Rivers, those drawn to Lake Michigan can walk familiar shores while reflecting on the deep history — and enduring mystery — of its waters.



BY THE NUMBERS — LAKE MICHIGAN SHIPWRECKS

Lake Michigan's maritime record tells a story of commerce, danger and discovery.



1,500+

shipwrecks are estimated beneath Lake Michigan



Only about **300**

have been located to date



1910: The S.S. Pere Marquette No. 18 sank in a storm, killing 28 people



1679: Le Griffon disappears, one of the Great Lakes' oldest unsolved maritime mysteries



300+ miles

of Michigan shoreline shaped by shipping, storms and industry

Today, many wrecks are preserved within the **Michigan Underwater Preserve System**, protecting them as historical resources and dive sites.

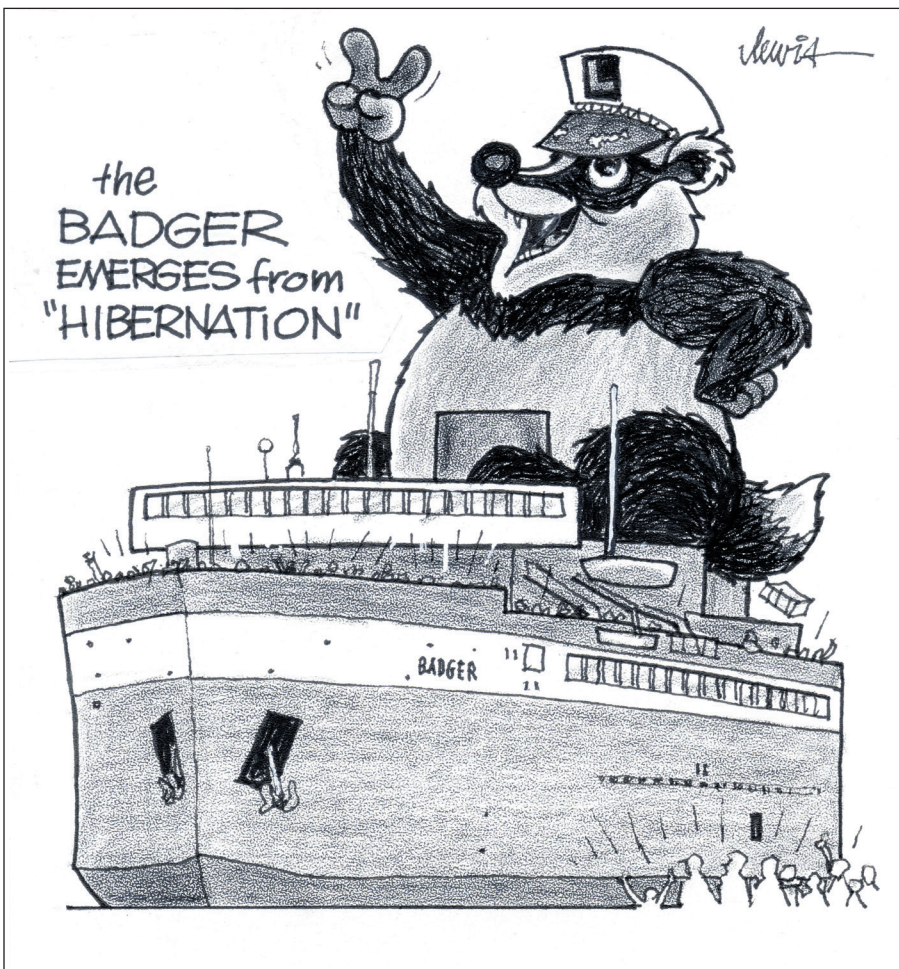
THE LAKE MICHIGAN TRIANGLE

An area of mystery in the waters of the Great Lake

The so-called Lake Michigan Triangle stretches from Ludington to Manitowoc to Benton Harbor and back again. The region has been associated with unexplained disappearances of ships and aircraft, along with reports of strange lights over the water.







BY THE NUMBERS: SS BADGER

450

Approximate number of crossings the SS Badger makes each sailing season.

50

Approximate number of crew members needed to operate the Badger.

745

Number of crew mealtimes prepared by the galley during the sailing season. The galley serves five meals each day to keep crew members fed through the season.

378

Number of Lake Michigan crossings during the sailing season in which Badger Bingo is played.

6,800

Approximate number of Badger Bingo games played during a sailing season.

7,000-PLUS

Approximate number of prizes awarded during Badger Bingo each season.

713 MILES

Length of U.S. Highway 10, which officially includes the Badger's ferry route, stretching from Bay City, Michigan, to Fargo, North Dakota.

6 LAPS

Walking around the upper deck six times equals about 1 mile.

2002

Year the Steamship Historical Society of America named the Badger Ship of the Year.

2016

Year the U.S. Department of the Interior designated the Badger a National Historic Landmark.

410 FT, 6 INCHES

Overall length of the Badger.

106 FT, 9 INCHES

Height of the ship, about the equivalent of a seven-story building.

6,650 TONS

Beyond the Crossing: New Ways to Experience the S.S. Badger

While the traditional four-hour journey between Ludington and Manitowoc remains the hallmark of the S.S. Badger, it's far from the only way to experience this historic vessel. From overnight sailings to shoreline cruises on both sides of Lake Michigan, passengers have multiple options to tailor the trip to their schedule — and their sense of adventure.

One of the most distinctive options is the overnight crossing, offered during the height of the summer travel season. Running June 19 through Sept. 7, these sailings give passengers the chance to experience the Badger in a quieter,

more relaxed setting.

From Ludington, overnight sailings operate seven nights a week, departing at 8:45 p.m. Eastern Time and arriving in Manitowoc at 11:45 p.m. Central Time.

The experience continues in reverse from the Wisconsin shoreline. From Manitowoc, overnight crossings run seven nights a week, departing at 1:30 a.m. Central Time and arriving in Ludington at 6:30 a.m. Eastern Time.

Whether boarding in Michigan or Wisconsin, the overnight sailing offers a different rhythm than the daytime crossing. Passengers can settle in as the shoreline fades, enjoy the ship's amenities in a more laid-back atmosphere, and either wind down for the night or start the day with a sunrise arrival on the opposite shore.

For those looking to stay closer to land, shoreline cruises offer a flexible alternative — and two distinctly different experiences depending on which port you choose.

From Ludington, evening shoreline cruises run 9–11 p.m., with boarding at 8:30 p.m., and are scheduled for June 6, July 4, July 25 and Aug. 22.

These sailings follow the shoreline as daylight fades, offering views of Stearns Park, the North Breakwater Light and the waterfront from the lake. The July 4 cruise provides a unique vantage point for Independence Day festivities, with passengers on the water during peak fireworks viewing.

From Manitowoc, shoreline cruises take on a different tone. Afternoon sailings run 2–4 p.m. Central Time, with boarding at 1:30 p.m., on June 13, July 18, Aug. 1 and Aug. 15.

These cruises highlight the Manitowoc harbor and lakeshore in full daylight, offering a relaxed, scenic outing that contrasts with the evening ambiance on the Michigan side.



At a Glance: Shoreline Cruises

Two ports. Two perspectives.
One Badger experience.

LUDINGTON (Evening Cruises)

9–11 p.m. | Board at 8:30 p.m.

June 6	Sunset sailings along the
July 4	Ludington shoreline, including
July 25	a prime Fourth of July fire-
Aug. 22	works view.

MANITOWOC (Afternoon Cruises)

2–4 p.m. CT | Board at 1:30 p.m.

June 13	
July 18	
Aug. 1	Daytime cruises showcasing
Aug. 15	Manitowoc's harbor and
	lakeshore.

Together, the two ports create a complementary experience — sunset cruising from Ludington and daytime sailing from Manitowoc — each offering a different way to enjoy the Badger without making the full cross-lake trip.

Whether choosing an overnight crossing or a shorter shoreline excursion, passengers still experience the defining elements of the Badger — from onboard dining and entertainment to the unmistakable feel of traveling aboard a National Historic Landmark.

For repeat riders, these options provide a fresh way to experience a familiar ship. For first-time passengers, they offer flexible entry points into a Lake Michigan tradition that continues to evolve while

staying rooted in its history.

Other events include:

- **Murder Mystery Theater Nights**

Evenings during our Spring/Fall season; boarding will be at 8 pm. Event starts at 8:30 pm. Advance tickets required; limited capacity.

- **Pilot House and Engine Room Tours**

Offered on select evenings during the Spring/Fall season. Approximately two-hour guided experiences. Small group sizes; advance booking recommended.

- **Open Boat Nights**

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Feeding the Crossing: Galley operations aboard the SS Badger

LUDINGTON — On a ship known for its coal-fired engines and National Historic Landmark designation, one of the most active operations aboard the SS Badger unfolds far from the boiler room.

It happens in the galley — where meals are prepared and served to passengers and crew during each Lake Michigan crossing.

“Much of the Badger experience includes good food,” crew member Sue McDonald said in a post on the ferry’s official blog. “The galley makes sure everyone is happy.”

McDonald joined the Badger as a galley prep cook, assisting lead cooks with preparing meals for both passengers and crew — a role that reflects the behind-the-scenes coordination required to keep service running smoothly throughout a sailing.

A KITCHEN DESIGNED FOR THE CROSSING

Food service aboard the Badger is centered in the Badger Galley and Upper

Deck Café, where passengers can choose from a range of meal and snack options during the trip.

According to the Badger’s blog, recent seasons have expanded offerings to include rice bowls, and mac and cheese bowls, along with traditional items like burgers, sandwiches and breakfast selections. Beverage options, including fresh-brewed coffee, are also part of the onboard experience.

The setup allows passengers flexibility — whether they want a full meal or something quick to take back to their seat — while crew members work to keep lines moving during busy periods.

THEN AND NOW: A SHIFT IN SERVICE STYLE

While today’s food service is designed for convenience, earlier eras aboard the Badger reflected a more formal dining tradition.

In the 1950s, meals were served in a style similar to railroad dining cars.

“This was in the era of fine railroad car

dining ... silver, pewter, china and cloth napkins,” recalled former waiter Bill Bussell in a Badger blog feature about his return visit to the ship decades later.

Bussell, who worked as a college student during summer sailings, described a fast-paced environment even then, making repeated trips through the dining room to serve passengers during structured meal periods.

The contrast highlights how service aboard the Badger has evolved — from plated, sit-down meals to a more flexible café-style format — while continuing to accommodate large numbers of travelers during each crossing.

A CREW EFFORT BEHIND THE SCENES

Galley work aboard the Badger is part of a broader, team-driven operation.

In addition to preparing food, crew members coordinate to keep service areas stocked and ready throughout the trip. The work requires organization and adaptability, particularly during peak

travel periods.

“It gives me the opportunity to try different recipes ... get creative,” one crew member said in a Badger social media post.

PART OF THE EXPERIENCE

For passengers, the galley is more than a place to eat — it is part of the rhythm of the crossing.

A morning coffee, a hot meal midway across the lake or a quick snack before arrival all become part of the onboard routine.

Decades ago, servers carried trays through dining rooms set with linen and silver. Today, meals are served in a more casual setting, but the goal remains the same: making sure passengers are taken care of from departure to arrival.

On a vessel that has connected Ludington and Manitowoc for generations, the galley continues to play a quiet but essential role — helping shape the experience of traveling across Lake Michigan.



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Make the Most of the Crossing: Fun Finds You on the Badger

A trip aboard the SS Badger is more than a way to get from one shoreline to the other — it's an experience shaped by how each passenger chooses to spend their time.

During the four-hour crossing, travelers will find a variety of ways to stay entertained, relax or simply take in the journey across Lake Michigan.

One of the most popular traditions onboard is Badger Bingo, where a mix of games, trivia and humor creates a lively, interactive atmosphere. Families can also take part in scavenger hunts or pick up activity books to keep younger passengers engaged throughout the trip.

From there, the experience opens up, with multiple spaces and activities to match the mood of the moment.

TAKE IT ALL IN

Passengers can move freely about the decks, enjoying fresh air and ever-changing views. From watching the Badger cut through the water to spotting passing freighters or shoreline landmarks, the scenery becomes part of the entertainment. Cameras and phones come out frequently, as passengers capture everything from open water to lighthouse views. As the ship nears port, the approach offers a memorable perspective

of the coastline.

SLOW DOWN AND SETTLE IN

For those looking to unwind, the Badger offers plenty of places to relax. Whether it's stretching out on deck, settling into a lounge or catching a movie in the onboard theater, the steady hum of the engines and gentle motion of the ship become part of the experience. Small maritime displays and historical elements throughout the vessel also offer a chance to connect with the Badger's long-standing role on the Great Lakes.

STAY CONNECTED — IF YOU WANT

While many passengers embrace the opportunity to unplug, others can stay connected. Wi-Fi is available for purchase onboard, allowing travelers to browse, check messages or enjoy simple games on personal devices during the crossing.

FOOD, DRINKS AND TREATS

Dining options range from quick snacks to full meals, along with coffee, soft drinks and adult beverages. From classic concessions to lighter fare and ice cream treats, there's something to satisfy a wide range of tastes while enjoying the lake views.

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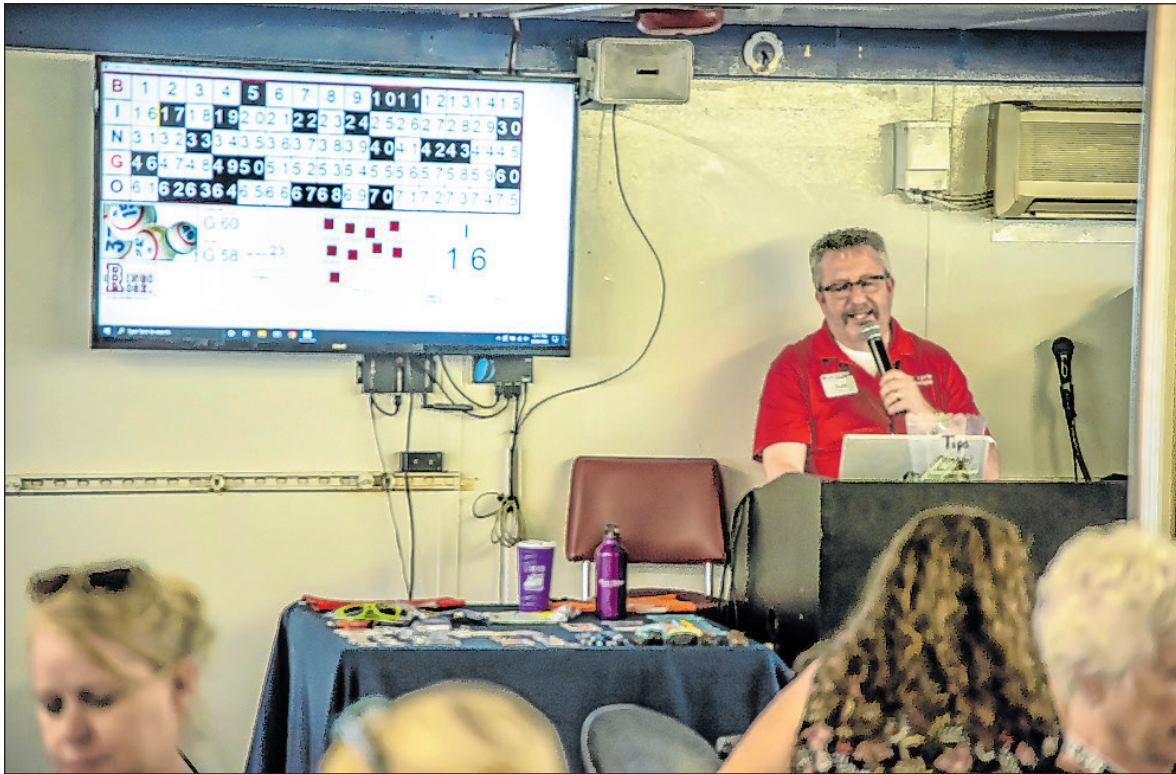
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GAMES AND FAMILY FUN

Passengers can gather around board games, deal a hand of cards or visit the ship's game room for a bit of friendly competition. Classic travel games — from "I Spy" to spotting freighters or shoreline features — often become part of the experience, especially for families.

Younger travelers have their own space in the Kid's Port Play Area, where hands-on activities such as coloring, scavenger hunts and activity books help keep them engaged. Nearby options, including games and movies, add even more ways for kids to stay entertained throughout the trip.

A stop in the onboard gift shop offers another way to pass the time, with souvenirs and Badger-themed items available to mark the journey.

Many passengers also gather on deck for departure and arrival, taking in the sounds and sights as the Badger pulls away from — or returns to — port.

In the end, no two crossings are exactly alike. Some passengers fill their time with activities, while others prefer to sit back and take it all in. Either way, the Badger offers the flexibility to make the journey as lively or as laid-back as desired — a big part of what keeps travelers coming back.

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More than a souvenir: Badger novelties let passengers take the trip home

LUDINGTON — For many passengers, the journey aboard the SS Badger does not end at the dock. It continues in the small reminders they carry home — tokens that capture the spirit, sound and nostalgia of a Lake Michigan crossing.

The Badger's onboard gift shop — known as the "Boatique" — offers a range of keepsakes that go beyond standard souvenirs. Each item, whether playful or practical, ties back to the experience of traveling aboard the historic steamship.

Among the most distinctive is the Badger horn, a novelty that echoes the vessel's unmistakable presence. It is less about utility and more about memory — a lighthearted way to recall

the deep, resonant sound that signals arrivals and departures in Ludington and Manitowoc. More than that, the horn taps into one of the most defining sensory moments of the voyage. The Badger's powerful blast is rooted in maritime tradition, once used to signal position and movement on open water, and today it remains a signature part of the crossing. For passengers, that sound marks the beginning and end of the journey — a cue that lingers long after the ship is out of sight.

While a physical horn-style souvenir is not widely featured in official materials, the Badger leans into that identity in another way: offering its iconic horn as a downloadable ringtone through

its website. The approach underscores how central the sound is to the experience — something passengers can carry with them not just as an object, but as a living reminder that can be heard again and again.

Other items reflect the ship's maritime heritage and family-friendly atmosphere. A captain's hat lets younger passengers — and the young at heart — step into the role of commanding the vessel. Jigsaw puzzles and blueprint-style prints appeal to those drawn to the Badger's engineering and history, while branded apparel offers a wearable connection to the crossing.

Together, the selection mirrors the Badger itself: equal parts transporta-

tion, tradition and experience. The ship's appeal lies not only in getting from one shore to the other, but in the time spent onboard — watching the shoreline fade, feeling the lake breeze on deck and settling into the rhythm of the voyage.

Souvenirs extend that experience. Long after the trip ends, a sweatshirt, puzzle or novelty item can bring passengers back to those moments — the hum of the engines, the open water and the sense of crossing something larger than the lake itself.

For repeat travelers, those items often become part of a larger tradition. Each trip adds another piece — another reminder of a vessel that has carried generations across Lake Michigan.

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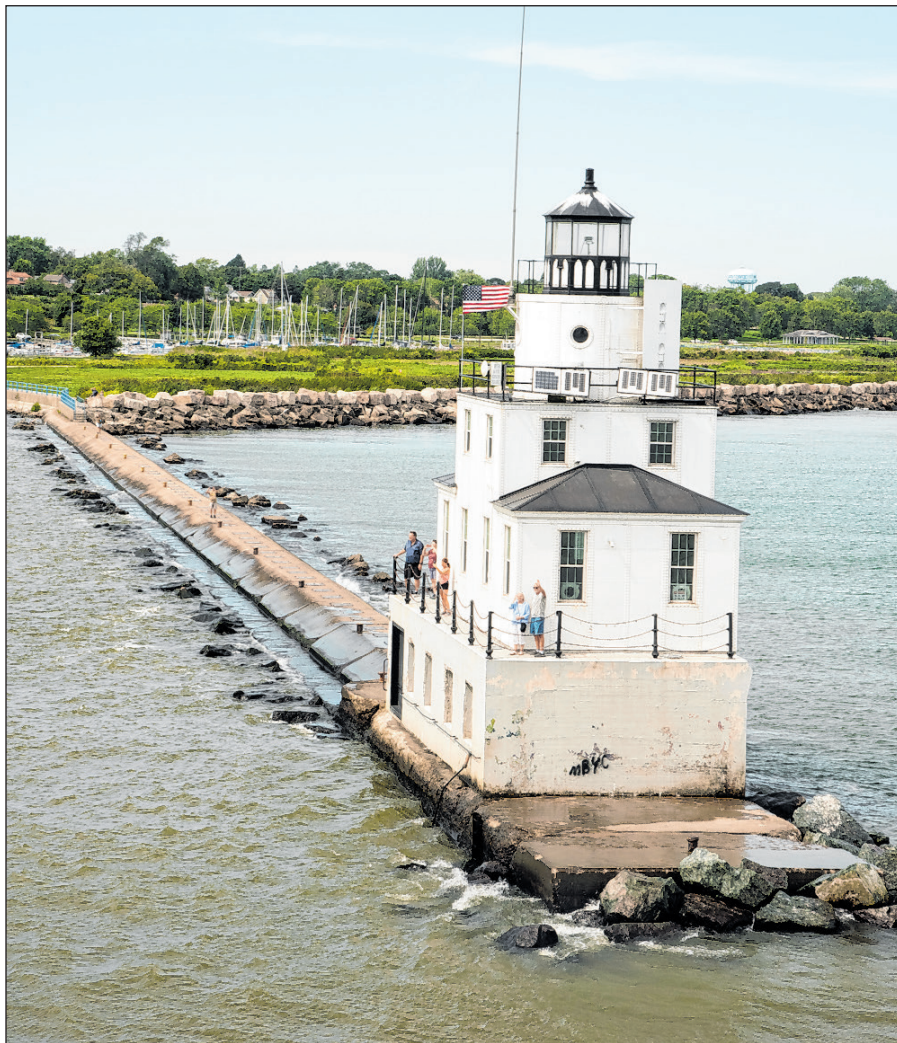
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A crossing aboard the SS Badger isn't just a way to get from shore to shore — it's a four-hour moving vantage point across Lake Michigan. From wide-open water to golden-hour skies, the ship offers a range of photo opportunities for casual snapshots and serious shooters alike.

With open-air decks, indoor vantage points and plenty of room to roam, passengers can capture everything from sweeping landscapes to candid travel moments. The key is knowing where — and when — to look.

THE BOW: INTO THE OPEN LAKE

At the front of the ship, the bow delivers one of the most dramatic perspectives on the Badger. Facing forward as the ferry cuts through the water, this is where you'll capture that "journey ahead" shot — endless blue stretching to the horizon.

Early in the trip, especially departing Ludington or Manitowoc, the bow frames shoreline fade-outs and that unmistakable sense of leaving land behind — a strong composition point for story-

telling images.

THE STERN: WAKE AND MOTION

Head to the back of the ship for a completely different visual. The churn of the Badger's wake creates texture and motion — a natural leading line that draws the eye across the water.

This is also one of the best places for timing shots as the shoreline reappears near the end of the voyage. The contrast between open water and approaching land makes for compelling frames.

UPPER DECK RAILINGS: CLASSIC LAKE MICHIGAN VIEWS

The Badger's expansive outdoor decks offer unobstructed views in nearly every direction.

From here, photographers can capture:

- Wide-angle lake panoramas
- Passing freighters or recreational boats
- Changing water color and wave patterns

Midday light creates crisp, high-contrast images, while late afternoon softens everything into warmer tones.

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SUNSET AND NIGHT CROSSINGS: THE SHOWSTOPPER

If your sailing lines up with evening light, this is where the Badger truly delivers.

Sunsets over Lake Michigan often stretch across the entire horizon, with reflections shimmering across the water. On night crossings, the experience shifts — deep blues, silhouettes and, eventually, a sky full of stars.

The ship's open decks make it easy to move and adjust angles as the light changes.

Inside Looking Out: Framed Perspectives

tives

Not every great shot happens outside. The Badger's indoor lounge spaces and seating areas provide natural framing through large windows.

These shots work especially well when:

- Weather pushes passengers indoors
- You want contrast between people and landscape
- Reflections add depth to the image

The mix of interior activity and exterior scenery helps tell a fuller story of the trip.

CANDID MOMENTS: LIFE ON BOARD

Beyond the scenery, some of the best



photos come from the experience itself. The Badger offers a range of onboard activities, including family-friendly spaces like the Kid's Port play area.

Look for:

- Families gathered on deck
- Travelers watching the horizon
- Kids engaged in activities or games

These moments add warmth and authenticity to any photo collection.

BONUS: SHARE AS YOU SAIL

For those who like to post in real time, onboard Wi-Fi is available for purchase, allowing passengers to share images during the crossing.

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Dockside After Dark: Badger Becomes the Destination

LUDINGTON — When the SS Badger ties up for the evening in Ludington, the experience does not end with the last vehicle rolling off the car deck. In 2026, it is just beginning.

A new slate of dockside programming is transforming the historic ferry into an evening destination — one where visitors can step aboard without ever leaving port. From immersive theater to behind-the-scenes tours, the Badger is extending its role beyond transportation and into entertainment, education and waterfront nightlife.

The shift is intentional. With the vessel docked overnight in Ludington, operators have created opportunities to activate the ship during its down time, offering experiences that appeal to both visitors and locals looking for something different along the lakeshore.

Among the most distinctive offerings are the murder mystery theater nights, where the Badger becomes a stage. Guests are drawn into a themed storyline — this season featuring a 1950s-style whodunit — interacting with actors, following clues and working to solve

the mystery as the evening unfolds. The event blends performance with atmosphere, using the ship's historic setting to heighten the experience.

For those more interested in how the vessel operates, pilot house and engine room tours provide rare access to spaces typically off-limits to passengers. These guided experiences take visitors into the heart of the ship, from the bridge where navigation decisions are made to the engine room where the Badger's coal-fired steam system continues a maritime tradition that has largely disappeared from

modern fleets.

Rounding out the lineup are open boat nights, a more casual option that invites guests to wander the decks, enjoy live entertainment and take in the harbor from a different vantage point. With food, drinks and music available, the ship takes on the feel of a floating waterfront venue.

Together, the events represent a broader evolution. The Badger is no longer just a way to cross Lake Michigan — it is becoming a place to spend the evening, even for those who never leave the dock.

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Badger Dockside Events Schedule — Ludington 2026

All events take place in the spring and fall aboard the Badger while docked in Ludington, typically following the vessel's evening return.

MURDER MYSTERY THEATER NIGHTS

Evenings during our Spring/Fall season; boarding will be at 8 pm. Event starts at 8:30 pm. Advance tickets required; limited capacity.

PILOT HOUSE AND ENGINE ROOM TOURS

Offered on select evenings during the Spring/Fall season. Approximately two-hour guided experiences. Small group sizes; advance booking recommended.

OPEN BOAT NIGHTS

Multiple evenings offered in the Spring/Fall season. Flexible entry window after the ship docks. Live entertainment, concessions and bar service available.

Because the Badger overnights in Ludington, these events are unique to the Michigan port. In Manitowoc, the vessel's shorter turnaround time limits similar programming, making Ludington the hub for dockside experiences.

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Maritime Heritage Lives Here

BY STEVE BEGNOCHE

Crossing water is as integrated in American history as red, white and blue is on the flag of this nation celebrating its 250th anniversary this year.

From the European's "discovery" of the new world and the arrival of settlers to transport of goods, freight and passengers through the ensuing centuries, this nation has always relied on ships and boats, from schooners and barges to massive 1,000-foot freighters and ferries to help conduct business and connect a

widely dispersed people.

The Port of Ludington Maritime Museum and the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in the Michigan and Wisconsin ports the SS Badger sails between, tell of the rich Great Lakes maritime history - from shipbuilding to shipwrecks, from the merchant marine to a submarine and much more.

Remember, too, when riding the steam-powered, coal-fired SS Badger, you experience part of that history on a working vessel that is a National Histor-

ic Landmark and highway on the water linking the Michigan side of U.S. 10 with the Wisconsin and Minnesota side of U.S. 10 transporting passengers, cars, RVs, motorcycles, trucks and more on its 410-foot-long moveable strip of maritime highway.

And both have gift shops!

PORT OF LUDINGTON MARITIME MUSEUM

On three floors of a former Coast Guard station now listed on the Nation-

al Register of Historic Places, the Port of Ludington Maritime Museum packs in exhibits exploring Ludington's continuing maritime tradition with stories told in exhibits both local and beyond.

Opened in 2017, the museum features a challenging and enjoyable interactive display putting you, the visitor, in the pilot house of the P.M. 22, to simulate bringing the carferry into or out of port under different scenarios. Make a mistake that goes uncorrected quickly and you crash, abruptly ending the simula-



tion as pilot house glass shatters on the screen.

While that exhibit is a favorite of many visiting Port of Ludington Maritime Museum, one of three Ludington facilities owned and operated by the Mason County Historical Society, other interactive displays and experiences await you. The first occurs as you enter the museum and are greeted by Coast Guard Captain Nels Palmer brought back to life in a holograph. He was in charge of the station when it opened initially and tells of rescues and life there.

Elsewhere, you can meet the ghost of Capt. Van Dyke peering into his quarters as the Captain talks about his experience.

One exhibit takes you through the Armistice Day Storm of 194- as it strikes the Midwest and the Great Lakes catching people unaware in the days before round-the-clock weather forecasting and alerts. You move with the storm through the exhibit that climaxes as it pummels the Great Lakes, sinking three ships near Pentwater and wreaking havoc throughout Lake Michigan and beyond. You can take a simulated dive on those wrecks, hear the stories of some survivors in their own words, and pause to read the names of those lost. One other result of the storm? The beginnings of the modern weather service as we know it so the nation wouldn't be caught by surprise again.



The fascinating Jacob Lunde scroll spread across the walls of the third-floor lumbering era gallery depicts the Ludington harbor in great detail. A must-see. Ludington, being the Michigan home

port of the operating carferry system for more than a century, takes pride in that connection as noted in other displays and exhibits.

A few miles away, on the Buttersville



Peninsula, the Mason County Historic Society also operates Historic White Pine Village, in 2026 marking its 60th year of operation, housing many historic structures from around the county moved on site and arranged in a village-like array detailing other aspects of the county's history.

For more information on hours, admission, events and exhibits, visit <https://masoncountymihistory.org/>

WISCONSIN MARITIME MUSEUM

Likewise, the Wisconsin Maritime Museum takes pride in sharing that region's shipbuilding history. In fact, the SS Badger was built in 1953 at Christy Corp. in nearby Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin.


It has an amazing collection of car ferry artifacts on display including a Model Ship Gallery with models of many Great Lake ferries - including a diorama of how the iron ore carrier the Edmund Fitzger-

ald lost in a November gale lies on the bottom of Lake Superior -- and many other vessels.

Stroll through the exhibits in its modern facility and be immersed in the maritime world of the Great Lakes.

Check out, also, the Wisconsin-built boat gallery, and the Waterways Room where you can launch boats and control gates and locks as the vessels navigate the waterway. You might get wet - but you'll have fun and learn while doing. (Aprons are available to keep you dry.)

New this year is "Surfin' Wisconsin, USA" that runs through October. "Experience the incredible thrill of surfing, Midwest style! Surfin' Wisconsin, USA, dives into the culture of Lake Michigan surfing, where wind, water, and grit come together to create a uniquely Great Lakes adventure," the museum proclaims on its website announcement. Those who live along the shores of Lake Michigan have



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seen these winter surfers braving cold, snowy conditions to ride waves. “This exhibit celebrates the surfers who brave icy waters and unpredictable conditions to chase freshwater waves. Through striking photography and vintage boards, visitors will explore the history and spirit of Great Lakes surfing,” the exhibit description notes.

Three other recent exhibits explore different aspects of the area’s maritime history.

Wisconsin’s Shipwreck Coasts “features artifacts, stories, and interactives from several shipwrecks that were lost beneath the vast natural highways along Wisconsin’s coastlines.”

The “Adriatic and the Birth of Self-Unloaders” exhibit is a permanent installation of self-unloading bucket technology salvaged from the shipwreck Adriatic in Sturgeon Bay. It also features an interactive element demonstrating how the tech-

nology worked using gears and a bucket conveyor system.

Are you aware of Manitowoc’s role in World War II?

“Turning the Tide – The Role of Manitowoc’s LCTs in WWII” details how The Manitowoc Shipbuilding was the lead shipyard 1,465 building Landing Craft Tanks (LCT)-5s and designed the first LCT-6 while exploring the role the LCTs played on D-Day and other amphibious assaults during WWII.

To further explore the WWII connection tour USS Cobia WWII submarine USS Cobia that rests in the Manitowoc River dockside at the museum visible from the SS Badger. Several options are available for a submarine visit including guided and self-guided tours.

For hours, admission prices, events and more details, visit <https://www.wisconsinmaritime.org>



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Coal, steam and stewardship: SS Badger balances history with survival



LUDINGTON — Long before passengers line the railings for a Lake Michigan sunset, the day aboard the SS Badger begins somewhere hotter, louder and far less visible.

Down in the engine spaces, crews move through a routine that has changed little in decades — checking gauges, tending boilers and preparing a coal-fired system that still powers the ship much as it did in 1953.

For those who work aboard it, the Badger is not just historic. It is hands-on.

“It’s not something you can automate,” one longtime crew member has said in describing the daily work of maintaining the vessel’s steam systems — a process that relies on constant human attention, judgment and experience.

That reality sits at the heart of what makes the Badger unique.

A SHIP WHERE THE PAST IS STILL PRACTICED

The SS Badger, a National Historic Landmark, remains the last coal-fired passenger steamship operating in the United States. Its massive Skinner Uniflow engines and coal-fired boilers are not preserved as artifacts — they are still in

daily use.

That distinction is exactly why the ship matters.

Historic designation materials emphasize that the Badger is significant not simply because it exists, but because it continues to operate as a largely intact example of Great Lakes rail ferry technology — a system that once carried entire railcars across Lake Michigan.

In practical terms, that means the work is different here.

Crew members are not overseeing computerized systems. They are managing fire, water and pressure — a balance that must be maintained continuously throughout each crossing.

It is a skill set that is increasingly rare.

“WE’RE CARRYING HISTORY EVERY TRIP”

For ownership, that responsibility is not lost.

Leaders with Interlake Maritime Services, which operates the Badger, have consistently framed the vessel as more than a business asset. It is, as they often describe it, a “floating piece of history.”

In public remarks and company materials, President Mark Barker has emphasized that keeping the Badger running is

about stewardship as much as service — maintaining a vessel that represents an entire era of Great Lakes shipping.

That mindset shapes decision-making.

“We’re not just operating a ferry,” Barker has said in discussing the ship’s role. “We’re preserving a piece of maritime history that people can actually experience.”

WHERE MODERNIZATION MEETS PRESERVATION

Still, history alone does not keep a ship sailing.

Since its return to service in 1992 as a passenger and vehicle ferry, the Badger has undergone a series of updates — some visible, others not.

Passengers see the changes in the form of lounges, staterooms, food service and family-friendly amenities. Behind the scenes, navigation systems, safety equipment and communications have all been modernized to meet current standards.

Some of the most critical changes have been environmental.

Facing federal pressure over coal ash discharge, the company installed a new ash-retention system that captures material onboard rather than releasing it into the lake. The upgrade allowed the ship

to continue operating while aligning with modern environmental expectations — without abandoning its historic propulsion system.

It is a compromise that reflects the broader challenge.

THE LINE THEY CAN’T CROSS

There are limits to what can change.

Switching away from coal, for example, would fundamentally alter the ship’s defining feature — the very system that earned it National Historic Landmark status.

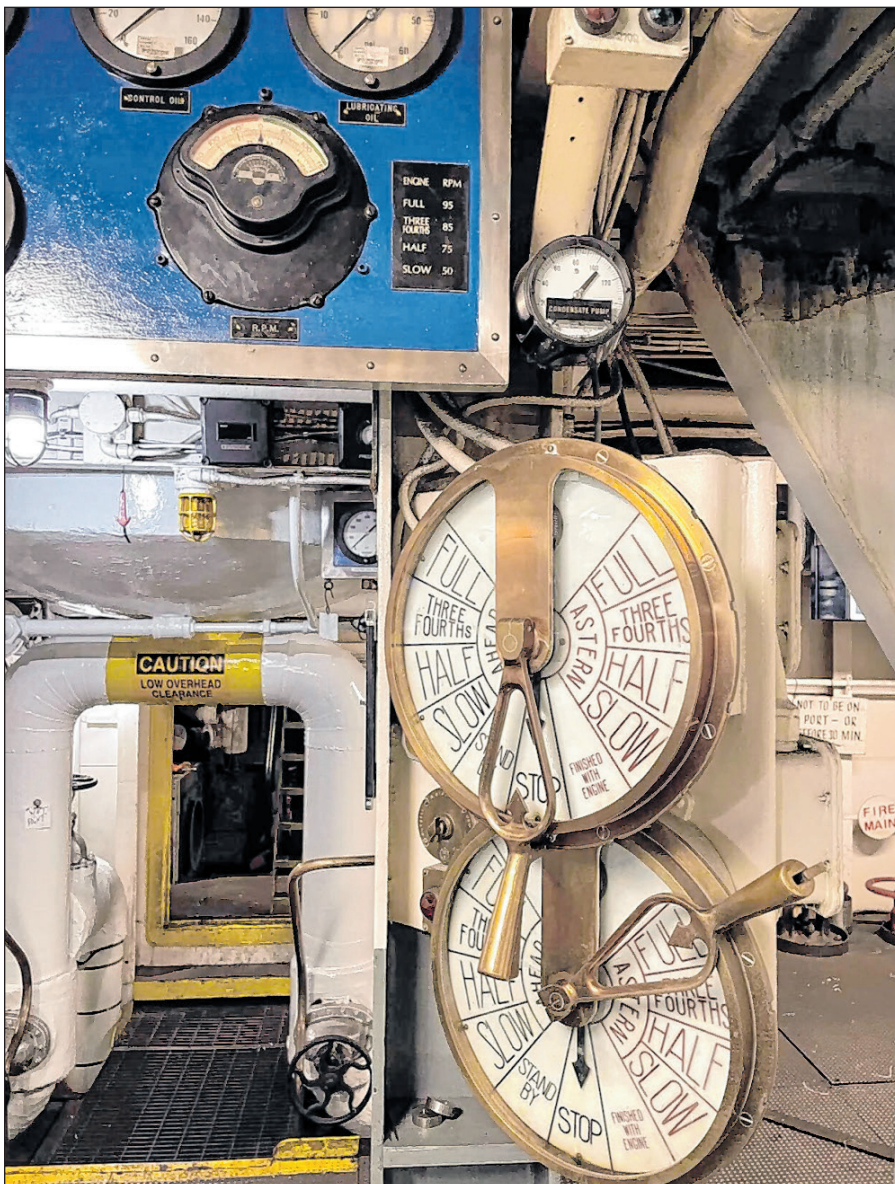
That creates a narrow operating lane: modernize enough to survive, but not so much that the ship loses its identity.

“You have to respect what the vessel is,” is how one maritime historian familiar with the Badger’s designation has summarized that tension. “If you take away the steam plant, you take away its significance.”

SKILLS THAT CAN’T BE REPLACED

That balance extends to the people onboard.

Operating a coal-fired steamship requires knowledge that is no longer widely taught — skills passed down through



experience rather than formal training programs.

Crew members learn by doing: how to read the behavior of the boilers, how to respond to subtle changes in pressure, how to keep systems running smoothly across a four-hour crossing.

It is work that connects generations.

In that sense, the Badger preserves not only machinery, but also a way of working — one that would otherwise disappear.

MORE THAN A CROSSING

For passengers, the Badger offers a blend of nostalgia and novelty — the chance to step into a different era while still enjoying modern comforts.

For those who operate it, the experience is more exacting.

Each trip between Ludington and Manitowoc is a negotiation between past and

present — between maintaining authenticity and meeting the demands of a modern vessel.

Too much change risks erasing what makes the Badger special.

Too little risks making it unsustainable.

KEEPING HISTORY IN MOTION

The Badger endures because it continues to do both.

It burns coal and runs on steam.

It passes inspections and meets regulations.

It carries passengers — and a legacy — across Lake Michigan.

And each time it leaves the dock, it proves something increasingly rare:

History, in this case, is not just remembered.

It is still working.



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Premiere screenings and events

LUDINGTON SCREENINGS

- Saturday, May 16
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- Ludington Area Center for the Arts

PANEL DISCUSSION

- Saturday, May 16
- Doors open: 1 p.m.
- Program begins: 1:30 p.m.
- Port of Ludington Maritime Museum

Panelists scheduled to include Drayton Blackgrove, Jonathon Leese, Shelby Soberalski and Thom Hawley.

AT THE MUSEUM

The Port of Ludington Maritime museum features a third-floor exhibit dedicated to the SS Badger, tracing its role in the region's railroad carferry industry and broader maritime history.

OPEN BOAT NIGHT

- Saturday, May 16
- 8:30 to 11:30 p.m.
- Ludington dock, 701 Maritime Drive
- Live music by Joe Stickney; admission \$10; free for children ages 4 and younger

MANITOWOC SCREENING

- Sunday, May 17
- 3 p.m.
- University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Manitowoc Campus Theater
- Scheduled two days after the SS Badger's season begins May 15

TICKETS

Advance tickets available online.

The SS Badger Story: New Film Examines Rise, Decline and Survival of Carferries

LUDINGTON — A new feature-length documentary examining the history and legacy of the SS Badger will premiere this spring, tracing the rise and decline of railroad carferry service on the Great Lakes and the vessel's continued operation today.

Railroad on Water: The Legend of the SS Badger, produced by Delay In Block Productions, explores the evolution of cross-lake rail service from its emergence in the late 19th century through its peak in the early 20th century and eventual decline, including the end of cross-lake rail service in 1990.

The film highlights the SS Badger's unique place in that history as the last coal-fired steamship operating in the United States. Launched in 1952 and entering service in 1953, the vessel was the largest railroad carferry ever built, capable of carrying up to 34 railcars. Today, it continues to operate between

Ludington and Manitowoc, transporting passengers and vehicles across Lake Michigan.

The documentary features archival footage and interviews with historians, sailors and others connected to the vessel, offering both historical context and personal perspectives on its legacy.

"This film has been a labor of love over the past three years," said director and producer Drayton Blackgrove. "From uncovering rare archival footage



to connecting with the sailors who lived and worked aboard the Badger, it's been an incredible journey."

Blackgrove, a Michigan-born filmmaker and founder of Delay In Block Productions, has focused much of his work on documenting railroad history and operations across the United States. He began producing rail-related video content as a teenager and has since developed documentary projects highlighting historic

rail lines and equipment.

Thom Hawley, marketing director for Lake Michigan Carferry, said the film reflects both the vessel's historical significance and its continued role in the region.

"The SS Badger is more than just a big ship — it's a symbol of Ludington's maritime heritage," Hawley said. "This documentary captures not only the ship's legacy, but the people and communities that have sustained it."

In a separate statement, Hawley said the production also looks ahead.

"The documentary captures the heart of this historic vessel while presenting a forward-looking narrative about the SS Badger and the company that continues its legacy," he said.

A second premiere screening is scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday, May 17, in Manitowoc, two days after the Badger begins its 2026 sailing season.



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