

February 2019

# PONTON

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## Conquering Lake Superior

Tracing The Path Of The *Edmund Fitzgerald*

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# Tracing The Path Of The Edmund Fitzgerald

Avalon pontoon conquers Lake Superior



By Jim Wolf  
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**A**fter each trip, the question is always the same: “Where are you going next?” My standard answer is, “Not sure, but we will know when the time comes.” August 17 was a picture-perfect boating day in northern Michigan.

At the Pink Pony on Mackinaw Island Karen and I were sitting at an outdoor table listening to Patrick Springsteen, a local solo artist. Nearby, boats and kayakers drifted as the ferries were busy bringing tourists to and from the Island. As our waiter dropped off a few tropical drinks, I proudly looked at the sun reflecting off the Cuba pontoon — a 27-foot Avalon Ambassador with twin Mercury 400’s — floating mightily behind Patrick who was clicking through the songs. I was immediately in decompression mode. After 30 minutes or so Patrick started to play Gordon

Lightfoot’s *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* and that’s when it hit me. I turned to Karen and said, “I know where the next trip is going to be and it’s going to happen soon.”

I wanted to follow the last path of the Edmund Fitzgerald, go to the wreck site and end up right back on our hoist in Burt Lake. It would be perfect. We could wait for the right weather and then conquer Lake Superior.

## The Edmund Fitzgerald

Anyone growing up in Michigan has heard the song a thousand times. Lightfoot wrote the song as a tribute to the ship’s crew, as all 29 men died aboard the ship without so much as a distress call. From the song I knew it was one of the biggest freighters on the Great Lakes; I knew that it battled

an early November gale with freezing rain in the face of a hurricane west wind; I knew that the searchers all say they’d have made Whitefish Bay if they’d put 15 more miles behind her and I knew from the last line of the song, “Superior, they said, never gives up her dead when the gales of November come early.” After returning from Mackinaw I jumped on the Internet to learn more. After a bit of digging, I learned that the large cargo vessels that roamed the five Great Lakes were known as “Lakers,” and the SS Edmund Fitzgerald was, at the time, the biggest ever built. The Fitz was christened on June 8, 1958 and made its first voyage in September of that same year. It was commissioned and owned by Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company at a cost of \$8.4



million and was named after the chairman of the board — Mr. Edmund Fitzgerald. On November 9, 1975 the Fitz was loaded with 26,116 tons of iron ore pellets at the Burlington Northern Railroad Dock in Superior, Wis., and it left the dock at 2:30 p.m. A second ship, the Arthur M. Anderson sailed 10 to 15 miles behind the Fitzgerald as a precaution, and the two ships remained in radio contact until just after 7 p.m. on November 10th. The swells reached 35 feet and winds raged at nearly 100 mph. The ship contacted Coast Guard officials in Sault Ste. Marie and said they were taking on water. Captain Ernest McSorley was on his final voyage before retirement. He assured a crew member on the Anderson at 7:10 that evening, “We are holding our own” and that was the last anyone heard from McSorley or the Fitzgerald. The exact cause of the sinking remains unknown. The freighter now lies on the bottom of Lake Superior in two sections, at a depth of 535 feet approximately 17 miles northwest of Whitefish Point.

## The Plan

I reached out to my neighbor, who is very well connected with the Coast Guard. He put me in contact with the Sector Commander from Sault Saint Marie who in turn put me into contact with CW04 Scott Harroun (senior marine inspector based out of Duluth, Minn.). Scott was helpful in putting Lake Superior in perspective and blunt when talking about the safety considerations. Should anything go wrong, hypothermia would be our biggest risk factor. Scott stated we would be on our own and needed to

plan to survive for up to two and a half hours between the distress call and any type of meaningful response. In addition to the standard items in our ditch bag (EPIRB, spot satellite messenger, personal locator beacons, strobes, handheld marine radios, flashlights, etc.), it was apparent that a life raft and dry suits were a must for this journey. We also discussed the lack of cell service and the benefits of having a satellite phone, or other forms of communication, in addition to the standard marine radio.

The boat would be the 27-foot Avalon Ambassador with twin Mercury racing engines that we had taken from Clearwater, Fla., to Cuba in June of 2017. The boat was a stock boat other than the addition of a second 100-gallon fuel tank, giving the boat a range of 200 plus miles.

The plan was to depart from Superior, on Monday, September 17 and be back to Burt Lake by Wednesday the 19th. Next on the agenda was to find a crew. Duane Dinninger

## MORE INFO

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To read the full version of this journey [click here](#)

is my right-hand man, long-time high school buddy and lifelong boater. Also, boat smart, mechanically inclined and was one of the crew on our Pacific excursion in 2015 so he was in, but after a change in the forecast, on a moment's notice the date had to be moved up so the other two members I was planning on were now out. I called John Linn who lives in Brainerd, Minn., and shoots all of our still photography. I first met John when he was “on assignment” to document our second excursion trip from Chicago to Mackinaw in June of 2006. John, who has been our photographer ever since, is a dear friend and would be a good addition.

I kept thinking it sure would be nice to find a fourth crew member. Three is okay, but four is always better. The six or seven calls to friends and potential crew members proved fruitless due to the short notice. “Yes, tomorrow morning,” I kept saying to each one of them.

### Travel Day

Indian River, Mich., To Superior, Wis.: 9h:34m, 441.4 miles

We would drive the 3 miles to Indian River Sports Center where the truck and trailer would be waiting. Scott Foresmark, who lives year-around on Burt Lake, was on my short list of calls the prior night. He called back that morning and said he had been up all night thinking about the trip and decided he's in. I must have been grinning from ear to ear and thinking this was meant to be. We have our fourth and he will be a “value added” crew member, especially if we have any medical or dental issues along the way.

It's always busy at Indian River Sports Center and as we pulled in, there was a flurry of activity. I saw the Cuba boat loaded on the trailer and ready to go. A few last-minute items including spare props, oil filters, etc. were still being loaded. The inflatable paddle board, extra fuel cans, anchor and lines, bumpers and Mustang Survival life vests were already on board and secured.

After 20 minutes up I-75 we crossed over the Mackinaw Bridge with Mackinaw Island in the distance. The Straights of Mackinaw were calm, the



sun was bright and the air warm. "Wow," I said. "This is a picture-perfect day to be on the water, boys." The 440-mile ride across the Upper Peninsula was long. At one point, I was thinking it had been less than 24 hours since we decided to fast-track the trip and here we were three hours down the road. I was reading more about the Edmund, Lake Superior, etc., when a thought crossed my mind. I called Dalton Sheldon back at the plant and asked him to find a flower shop in Superior that would deliver 29 roses with the names of each crew member stapled to each stem to Barkers Island Resort. A few fuel stops and nine hours later we rolled into Superior with a windshield full of bugs and a 27-foot Ambassador in tow.

### **Day One** **Superior To Copper Harbor: 10h:17m, 220.15 miles**

Up early, I grabbed the life raft, survival suits and flowers from the front desk and took them to the boat before hooking up with Maria Lockwood from the Superior Telegram. Oh yeah, our Coast Guard contact, Scott, is en route too. Getting the boat situated with the sun rising, John appeared out of nowhere with his wife Carna in tow.

Coast Guard Scott came aboard to check out the rig while John immediately went to work with his camera. After 20 minutes or so Scott and Carna were on their way and we were sitting down for breakfast with Maria from the [Superior Telegram]. After some breakfast and questions about why we do these trips, pontoon boats, the Fitzgerald, etc., we were off. There were hugs and goodbyes to our driver Harold Reckinger as I thought to myself, "I'm sure glad to be going back by boat instead of by car!"

It's 9:30 a.m. and we are finally on our way! Exhilaration and excitement set in as we passed Maria and Harold on the way out. It was a balmy 80-plus-degree day, the seas were calm, we have our four-man crew, 220 gallons of fuel and two 400hp Mercury's pushing us out to sea. As we passed the lighthouse at the end of the inlet, I thought to myself, "Wow this is really happening."

Our first destination was 50 miles up the shoreline to the Bayfield Peninsula sea caves located a few miles past Bark Point. John had done some previous photo shoots in the area and knew exactly where to go. We played around for 45 minutes or so as we took photos, flew the drone and soaked up the natural beauty of the cliffs, rock formations and caves. Next, we navigated through the Apostle Islands. The Apostle Islands is an archipelago of 22 islands located in Lake Superior off the Bayfield Peninsula. Twenty-one of these islands, and a 12-mile segment along the shore of Wisconsin's north coast, is known as the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. Paying close attention to the weather, we knew the winds were picking up to 10 to 15 mph south/southwest and that waves could be a challenge as we crossed the open water towards Ontonagon which was our first scheduled fuel stop. We pondered sticking close to the southern shore, but after going offshore five or ten miles with manageable seas, we decided to go straight across towards the Porcupine Mountains on the eastern shore, which was a 40-plus-mile open water run. We hit a few sections of 3- to 5-foot waves during the crossing, but all in

all it was a fun ride to the other shore. The water color changed from blue to brown as we entered the Ontonagon inlet. A few miles upstream we located the fuel dock and after filling up we were back in the blue water with another 100 miles of coastline to get to Copper Harbor. As Duane was at the wheel, I called Dalton back at the office to help us find a few rooms for the night. He called back with a few suggestions, one of which was the Mariner North Resort. Copper Harbor has no cellular service in the entire town so I worked it out with the owner Peggy to pick us up. After a few calculations, I told her to expect us at around 8 p.m. About halfway from Ontonagon to Copper Harbor we passed the Houghton Inlet. There were several boats anchored along the shore as fellow-boaters were soaking up the last of the warm rays on what felt like a mid-July summer day. With John working the videos and stills, we took a few passes by the lighthouse markers that flanked the mouth of the inlet. The final push to Copper Harbor was smooth and fast with plenty of impressive rock formations coupled with natural beaches to gaze at along the way. As we turned into Copper Harbor it was apparent we were heading west due to a blinding ball of fire low in the sky. The marina is at the very end of the harbor where Peggy was waiting for us at the boat ramp. We dropped bags off at our rooms and quickly made our way to the restaurant as they stopped serving at 9 p.m. A few steaks and drinks later we were ready to call it a night. We talked to Peggy about giving us a ride back in the morning around 7 a.m., which she was not really keen to do. Instead, she said, "Why don't you take my car and leave it at the marina? I always leave it unlocked with the keys in it. This is, after all, Copper Harbor."

### **Day Two** **Copper Harbor To Grand Marais: 11h:41m, 146.96 miles**

Call time was 6:30 a.m. Lying in bed at 6:10 a.m., I immediately noticed the curtains that covered the screened window were blowing and weaving, first slowly and then more violently. "Not good," I thought. Outside was more of the same with the treetops blowing from side to side and the flags standing straight out. The wind was blowing 16 knots, building to 20 knots and supposed to taper off around 1 p.m. The winds were south/southwest, which meant we would be taking them



head

on once

we rounded the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula, which was approximately 15 miles to our east. Locating Peggy's car parked around the corner, I slowly opened the door and looked around to make sure I found the right one. I recognized a pair of shoes sitting between the rear bucket seats which provided some relief that I wouldn't be doing time for grand theft.

We made a quick stop at the Copper Harbor sign to get a group picture on the way into the marina. With the boat loaded and Peggy's car sitting solo in the parking lot, we pushed off with the sun rising below a bank of dark billowing clouds. We passed and waved to the patrons on a ferry boat as we made our way towards the jetty. Back in the open water with the shore off the starboard side, we cruised along at 15 to 18 mph for four or five miles as we sipped our pressed coffee and checked the weather reports. During dinner the night before, John pulled up the Wikipedia page for the Stannard Rock Lighthouse. I was intrigued when I read it was completed in 1883 and is located on a reef that was the most serious hazard to navigation on Lake Superior. The exposed crib of the Stannard Rock Light is rated as one of the top ten engineering feats in the United States. It is 24 miles from the nearest land, making it the most distant lighthouse in the United States. It was one of the "stag stations," manned only by men, and had the nickname, "The loneliest place in the world." Our plan was to go there, but not now, not with this wind. As things stood it was going to be a really long day!

We debated if we should hug the shore down towards Marquette or if we should make a straight line to Munising. We decided to wait and see what the conditions would bring once we got around the peninsula. I pondered the fact that we were unable to refuel in Copper Harbor as the fuel dock did not open until 9 a.m. this late in the season. The one-third rule (one-third out, one-third back, one-third in reserve) would not apply today and according to our estimates, we would be cutting it close.

"Ready boys?" I asked. Bringing the boat up to speed, it suddenly stuttered and slowed a bit. For a second it felt like we may have hit something, but then we quickly realized that we had spun a hub. When you spin a hub, as we did on our Bimini excursion to the Bahamas, you must replace the hub kit by removing or replacing the prop. We learned a valuable lesson in the Gulf Stream and have brought a spare along ever since. Turning the boat around I was thinking we would have to idle the five miles or so back to Copper Harbor to find a convenient location to swap out the props. Scanning the shoreline there were a lot of rock outcrops 75 to 100 yards off shore. Noticing a few areas where no rocks were visible, we headed in and made our way to the rocky shore. Using the anchor lines, we were able to spin the boat around to get the back of the boat close enough to shore to make the change. Twenty minutes later we were navigating our way back to open water.

As we rounded the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula, the wind and waves hit us straight in the face. Three- to 5-foot waves in the typical tight Great Lakes wave pattern proved to be a challenge. Winds were gusting at 20 knots and were not

scheduled to subside for several hours. We kept moving and continued debating our best path given the conditions. After 45 minutes we were 15 miles off shore on a heading direct to Munising. After another hour, land started to slowly disappear on the horizon as we battled the waves. With one hand on the throttles and the other on the wheel, I worked to avoid taking waves over the bow while minimizing the banging on the way down. We were averaging 15 to 18 mph and had 90 plus miles to go.

At some point 30 or so miles from shore the waves started lying down a bit and we were able to ramp our speed up to 30 mph plus. We were wet, cold and tired as Grand Island came into view. I was keeping an eye on the fuel and we were now down to our last two bars on the digital gauge. After the slow four-hour ride, we wanted to go faster, but kept it at a modest speed to conserve fuel. We could see the larger rock formations on the northwest side of the island when we were four to five miles out. Once there we stayed close to shore checking out the towering walls of rock as we made our way around the east side of the island. A few years back we took a few summer vacations to the Munising area and I knew the area well. I made a point to stop at "my happy place," which is a secluded beach on the north side of the island. Pulling into the beach you feel as though you are on a deserted Caribbean island with crystal clear blue water and pure nature as far as the eye can see. We enjoyed drying out a bit while munching on some chips and dip, and took some more photos.

After the short 30-minute break, we resumed our tour around the island. We arrived at the Munising fuel dock with just over 15 gallons in reserve. While refueling, a shirtless John was pumping the WOW inflatable paddleboard that he would use to shoot from at our next stop, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

We departed the marina at 4:15 p.m. and spent the next three hours taking photos, enjoying the splendor and awe of the area on a picture-perfect afternoon. A few highlights were backing into a cave, spotting a picture of what looked like David Garcia, and putting the bow of the pontoon into a 200-foot-tall waterfall. After a quick swim, we decided it was time to put some more miles behind us.

Given the slow go in the morning, we had to readjust our plans and decided it would make



sense to spend the night in Grand Marais. I dialed up Dalton and asked him to call around and find four rooms for the night. The Beach Park Hotel gave us a good deal and the owner offered to come down to the marina to pick us up upon our arrival.

With a nearly full tank of gas, we went wide open and cranked up the music for the hour ride. The sun was going down as we made our way and the high-performance Infinity speakers were blaring. Listening to Seal, I had to smile when I heard the lyrics, “But we’re never gonna survive unless we get a little crazy.”

We tied up, called John, the hotel owner, for a ride, and started gathering our bags. The hotel was only a few blocks away and as we pulled in a huge fireworks show started going off right in front of the hotel and over the bay. I joked that they were for us but John quickly informed us they just held their annual car show event which always concludes with an awesome fireworks display.

Once again it was getting late. We had to rush into town to grab some food before they stopped serving. After dinner, libations and small talk with the locals, we turned in for the night.

**Day Three**  
**Grand Marais To Mackinaw Island:**  
*10h:57m, 202.64 miles*

Another epic sunrise greeted us as we loaded up the boat. The revised plan was to go out to the site of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* to pay our respects, then beach the boat at the Shipwreck Museum, go through the Soo Locks and end up in Mackinaw late in the day.

The winds were blowing offshore south to southwest at 10 to 15 knots. As we got out a mile or two the waves started building with following seas, averaging 18 to 22 mph most of the way. There were storms in the area and you could see them off in the distance. As land faded away the sun rays were popping in and out of the scattered, dark clouds.

We were all feeling quiet and somber as we were going to pay tribute to the lost crew members, which was in no way a joyous event. At one mile out, we slowed down to idle speed as we worked our way to the site of the wreck. John was getting out the drone and camera gear while I went for the box of flowers. Not knowing if we were going to name each and every crew member, I asked Duane to help me look through the flowers to find the captain’s rose. I knew the captain of the ill-fated Laker was named Ernest Michael McSorley. We went through all the names and neither one of us came across it. I said, “He has got to be in here somewhere, let’s go through them again.” After a second time through we surmised that the flower shop must have only had the names of the crew members and the captain must not have been on that list.

Once we were certain we were over the wreck, we decided to read off each name as we tossed in one rose for each crew member. When the last name was read, we realized there was another broken rose in the bottom of the box. The top was broken off and the stem was

also broken in two.

Upon further inspection, we found the little paper with Captain McSorley’s name typed on it stuck under one of the bottom flaps of the box. It proved to be a strange and eerie moment. We read his name as we tossed in his broken rose. We watched the roses as they floated and danced around on the water.

John packed up his drone and gear and we set a course for the shipwreck museum 17 miles away. The waves were 2 to 3 feet and we kept a steady pace as we headed back towards land. We navigated our way through some old dock pylons a hundred yards or so down the way from the observation platform at the Shipwreck Museum. Close to shore I revved up the Mercury 400s to push the nose of the Avalon up onto the sandy shore. There were groups of tourists milling about on the beach and they gave us a few looks as we quickly hopped off the front and made our way towards the museum.

During the weekend when I came up with the idea for the trip, I had called the museum to speak with the director. I was given Bruce Lynn’s email and reached out to him to see if he could provide some insight regarding our planned trip. We had been staying in touch, but due to our last-minute change in the plan, he was unable to be at the museum when we arrived. We were appreciative when he told us that the gentlemen at the ticket booth would have some free passes for entry. We milled around for a half-hour checking out all of the really cool displays including the bell, the dive suit used to bring it up, videos of the wreck, artifacts found, etc.

We grabbed a quick bite, then pushed off and cruised around Whitefish Point and set a heading towards Sault Ste. Marie. A south to southeast wind was now blowing hard. Once again, we were heading straight into the waves and they were only slightly smaller than the ones we faced the prior day. This time around the waves had only traveled 40 miles over open water versus



the 100-plus miles they had traveled the day before. Today I felt a little more aggressive and found a sweet spot between 25 and 28 mph where we would hit a wave and come down on the one behind it. The boat was banging more than I would have liked, however, and we still had a long way to go. This was an excursion trip and we were pushing it to the limits, so our end customers don't have to. The waves were slowly getting smaller and we were slowly going faster as we crossed. About 15 miles out we were still in 2-foot seas, but I now had the throttle pinned as we flew across the tops of the waves at 59 mph. We were all amazed at how well the boat tore through the chop and we were having fun!

We navigated our way down the St. Mary's River to the Soo Locks, which are a set of parallel locks, operated and maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The locks bypass the rapids of the river, where the water falls 21 feet. The locks pass an average of 10,000 ships per year, despite being closed during the winter from January through March, when ice shuts down shipping on the Great Lakes. The lock attendant was a big guy who looked like a lumberjack. He was quite surprised when we told him we had come from Superior.

Once through the locks, we pulled into the George Kemp Marina for fuel and ice. As we filled up the Ambassador, Scott was talking to the crew of a larger pleasure boat and as it turns out they too were from Burt Lake. Now protected with land on both sides we had calm

waters and put the boat through the paces. It was a quick hour down the river as we flew past St. Joseph Island then Drummond Island and into the North Channel that spit us out onto a glassy Lake Huron. It was 3:45 p.m., 88 degrees and one of the best Northern Michigan afternoons of the entire year.

There is no better way to end the boating season than to take a 650-mile, three-day ride with three of your closest friends on a pontoon boat.

Thirty miles later we were floating off the east side of Mackinaw Island staring up at Arch Rock, which is a natural limestone arch that was formed during the ice ages, and to this day stands on the Lake Huron shoreline 146 feet above the water. As I was transfixed on the Arch, I found it to be ironic that at the tail end of the trip I would be right here at Mackinaw Island where this trip idea came a little less than a month before. I was surely glad to be back and especially on such a hot and calm late summer day! The Mighty Mac is five miles long and the longest suspension bridge between anchorages in the Western Hemisphere.

When we determined earlier in the day that Duane and John would be going their own ways, I called Karen and Scott called Brandy to have them meet us in Mackinaw City. As we made our way into the City Dock, we joked we were about to upgrade to a better-looking crew. Karen and Brandy were waiting for us at the dock with their bags and the custom embroidered "Superior Boat" cooler cushions. We had planned to install the cushions to replace the "Cuba Boat" cushions that were on the boat from the Cuba excursion.

Because we stepped up the departure, Dalton could not get the cushions done by the time we had to leave. Sometime during the trip, however, Dalton got them to the girls, who then brought them to us. I love it when a plan comes together, but more importantly, I love having a great team and crew that makes this all happen.

As we made the crossing back to Mackinaw Island, a huge orange and red sun slowly sank into Lake Michigan behind the Mighty Mac. It was picture perfect. ●