

By Tony Bennett



## PATRICK LAPINSKI

WRITER, AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

**"M**y great aunt Pearl's brother Lyle went down on the steamer Cypress in 1907," maritime writer Patrick Lapinski said. "He was 18 years old and signed on as a deckhand. It was a brand-new ship and it sank on its second voyage. It was 22 days old."

Lapinski was talking about his early inspirations and influences that added up to his becoming a person who tells the stories of the shipping industry in the Twin Ports region. Clearly, for him, it's just about in his DNA to do so. And, as a storyteller, he also knows how to throw in a twist.

"He survived," Lapinski added of his distant relative. "He managed to get in a lifeboat with the captain and the mates...but he died of hypothermia on the beach in Michigan." Another twist, for good measure.

Lapinski – who has written for this very publication as well as numerous others in the region in his capacity as a freelance writer – has turned his lifelong interest in the tales of the Great Lakes into a life as an author of books that include titles like *Great Lakes Shipping: Ports and Cargoes*, *In the Yard: the History of Fraser Shipyards* and his most recent, *Grain Terminal Elevators of Duluth-Superior*.

"I've always had an interest in the ships," he said. "It's always been there. Pearl had a cabin out on Lake Superior, and we'd just sit and watch the boats come and go out of the Superior entry all day. It was a constant parade of ships. She had books about the shipwrecks that we would read at the cabin by gaslight."

Photography, not writing, was his initial route into telling the stories of the maritime industry in the area. "I started photographing on the ships, and, one day, I ended up bartering a ride on a boat," Lapinski said. "And I ended up doing a lot of talking to the crew members and got hooked into a lot of sea stories."

By the 1990s, Lapinski was taking pictures and writing articles for industry publications. "I did a lot of oral histories," he said. "I really gravitated toward telling the stories of the people that were sailing, and I loved photographing the ships."

He balanced this work with a job in industrial film and advertising for many years, but he's all in on his passion, nowadays. In addition to his writing and photography, Lapinski runs a website, [inlandmariners.com](http://inlandmariners.com), that also features video, audio interviews and more and has done so for more than two decades.

"I've always been kind of a collector of stuff," Lapinski said. "It's just accumulating. I've got a large book collection. I've got 40,000 slides, plus digital. It's a massive archive, but it's my work. And so Inland Mariners is a place to put all of that, but I've hardly touched the surface."

Managing the artifacts produced by a lifetime capturing the essence of a thing is no easy task, but Lapinski does it because he wants to sing the songs of the unsung heroes that help make the Twin Ports run. "I like doing research," he said. "I like geeking out on the history of how things evolved. It's kind of my way of giving back to the community I grew up in." 📷