

THE LAKE GUARDIAN



SPRING 2025

PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN DOSKOCH

The Ironton Ferry Celebrating 100 Years of Service

Joel Van Roekel

The author wishes to thank Trevor Dotson and David Miles of the Charlevoix Historical Society for their assistance in researching the history of the Ironton Ferry.



PAINTING CREDIT: LUKE BUCK, [HTTPS://LUKEBUCKART.COM](https://lukebuckart.com)

People have been crossing the Ironton Narrows for centuries. The Odawa people paddled their canoes around and across Lake Charlevoix long before written records were kept. The earliest records of settlers crossing the channel date to 1876. Local farmer Godfrey McDonald enlisted the Odawa to construct a raft sturdy enough to transport his horse, wagon, and livestock. The raft was propelled by the skilled efforts of Odawa paddlers, who used their canoes to tow it across the water.

Soon to follow, Robert Bedwin, owner of the Ironton Village Store and local postmaster, offered to row folks across for a nickel a trip. Bedwin's service lasted four years until the population of Ironton swelled due to the opening of the Pine Lake Iron Company at the northern edge of the narrows.

In 1880, Arden Sheldon decided to enter the ferry business by building an 18 by 24-foot wooden scow large enough to carry two teams and a wagon. A half-inch cable was strung across the narrows to guide the ferry. It was powered by Sheldon and his passengers cranking the cable through a windlass. At times there could be long waits as the crossing couldn't be made until there were enough passengers onboard to crank the windlass.

In 1883, the county supervisors decided that a public ferry was needed. Henry Sheldon was licensed and bonded to run the ferry with a toll fee. Two years later the supervisors got State authorization to operate the ferry and bought it from Mr. Sheldon for \$150. Robert Miller, the Eveline Township clerk was the first hired

ferryman with a contract that paid him 87 cents per day. His salary was increased to \$1.25 per day, but over time politics and dwindling resources led to the county bidding out the position. Joe Tuttle, the next ferryman, won the job at sixty cents per day. In 1890, Joe hired Sam Alexander as his assistant on the ferry. This was the beginning of Sam's storied career as a ferryman.

The ferry entered the modern age, when in 1900, John Theodore Erickson of Charlevoix built a one-cylinder gas engine so that ferryman Joe Tuttle could take the vessel across the narrows without assistance from passengers. He was paid \$1.15 per day to run and maintain the ferry.

Continued on page 7...

SPRING 2025
Inside...

- 1 | The Ironton Ferry: Celebrating 100 Years of Service
- 2 | President's Corner
- 3 | A Lake is More Than a Lake

- 4 | Native Plants Get Their Day in the Sun!
- 5 | Replanting of the LCA Shoreline Demonstration Gardens

- 6 | What's With the Water Levels?
- 7 | Continuation from Page 1/ Captain Sam Alexander
- 8 | Newsbites



PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE STRATTON

Shortly before I sat down to write this message, I read about Matt Hamilton in the Petoskey News. He is the East Jordan Public Schools teacher who won a national award for teaching excellence, the first Michigan teacher to be so honored. That got me thinking about



one of the most uncelebrated resources we have in our watershed, our people. The Lake Charlevoix Watershed Management Plan names 22 members of our Watershed

Advisory Council. There are numerous other stakeholders, each of which is a human organization of some kind. There are tribal, township and county governments, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, businesses, neighborhood groups. Each of those organizations is made up of people

who care deeply about our lake and its watershed. There are many more among us who care just as deeply but have yet to get involved.

To have any hope of protecting and preserving our Lake Charlevoix watershed as place of natural beauty and peace, we will need to tap those human resources in new and more effective ways in the coming months. The state and federal agencies on whom we have relied to carry the burden of large-scale environmental protection are being downsized. From the perspective of those who remain in regulatory positions, we will be one among many watersheds for whom they have responsibility but little in the way of resources. Similarly, our watershed will be one among many who will be looking to private philanthropy to help fill in the gaps in care created by the shrinking of state and federal engagement.

Sadly, being a place of beauty populated by caring people is probably not enough to ensure long term protection. Too many formerly beautiful places have already been overwhelmed

by the forces of development. We will also need to organize ourselves to effectively channel the forces of development. To start the conversation, I have two examples. Efforts to enact a statewide septic code have languished for years. Work can be done within our watershed to fill in the gap left by the collapse of that endeavor. Efforts at shoreline protection are frustrated by a regulatory scheme that divides responsibility for the shoreline at the Ordinary High-Water Mark. Two separate procedures are involved, one for the wet side of the line, the other for the dry. The wet side is regulated by state and federal agencies, the dry side by the city or township in which a particular parcel is located. The system is wasteful of public and private resources and does not protect the lake. Creative solutions are out there but no one has the time or energy to pursue them.

That is why we are engaged in a well thought out and bold campaign to grow the capacity of LCA. We need full-time professional leadership with the singular purpose of preserving and protecting our watershed.

*Tom Darnton,
LCA President*

Mission:

*Protect the natural quality and beauty of Lake Charlevoix.
Promote understanding and support for safe and shared lake use.
Advocate sensible and sustainable practices for lake use and development.*

LCA Board of Trustees

Tom Darnton | President
Erin O'Donnell | Transitional
Executive Director
Dan Mishler | Vice President

Howard Warner | Treasurer
John Hoffman | Secretary
Lyn Jenks | Director
Kim Baker | Director

www.lakecharlevoix.org
Like us on Facebook!

A Lake is More Than a Lake

Joel Van Roekel

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD ETHAN ARRIVED AT HIS GRANDPARENT'S COTTAGE FOR THE WEEKEND.

The ride from downstate was not so long as to be tiring, just long enough for him to feel like he was really away from all that is home. After obligatory hugs, he hauled his duffle upstairs, switched to beach clothes, and headed for the water.

He spent the rest of the afternoon playing on the beach, exploring the lake bottom, and swimming out to the raft. Grandma's supper was incredible even though he'd often eaten the same food at his house. The dinner talk included his grades at school, best friends, and the standing of his baseball team. Shortly after the dishes had been put away, he asked, "Grandpa, can you build a fire?" "Sure," his grandfather replied. Sitting there, watching the fire spit and crackle, he said in a soft voice, "This is the best day of my life." As the flames began to wane and embers glowed softly, he said, "Grandpa, can we make s'mores?" His grandfather said, "We sure can." Holding his stick over the coals, the young boy whispered again, "This is the best day of my life." When the sun had set, the boy, his mother, and grandmother walked lakeside. Three generations sat quietly on the big yard swing, three pairs of eyes looked out over the still water. Suddenly the mood shifted when a dazzling display of fireworks appeared over the lake. When the last rocket disappeared, the boy's voice was heard to say, "This IS the best day of my life."

You might write this story off as a cute moment between grandmother and grandson but it's about more than that. This story is about what can happen at the lake. If you let it, time slows at the lake. If you let it, a conversation that would never happen anywhere else stretches into something that goes deep and will be remembered for a lifetime. Vivid memories of

my boys sitting by our fire, toasting marshmallows, watching sparks disappear into the starlit sky come back as if they happened just yesterday. A third generation now enjoys those nights up here every July. The lake... just might allow incredible moments and deeply meaningful conversations to take place... by the water, or around the firepit, on a dark summer night.

Again, this isn't about cute stories from the lake. Dr. Wallace J. Nichols, a California Academy of Sciences researcher, believes that being "near, in, on, or under water can make you happier, healthier, more connected, and better at what you do."

In his book, *Blue Mind*, Nichols contrasts urban life and that which is had near water. So many of us are surrounded by lives lived in the "constructed" world. Our houses, cars, offices, roads and sidewalks bear little resemblance to what is found in nature. We spend our days in a digital world, eating prepared foods, and touching things that have no connection to anything in the out of doors. This can lead to

a divide between us and the richness of the natural world.

The point is not to vilify the modern life that many of us must live but to create, plan, and celebrate time near the water. Lay on the beach, stand on the dock, sit in the cockpit of your boat. Look out as the sun's rays bounce off the lake's ever changing veneer, "the way the water moves, reflects, glimmers, and glows." Charlevoix the Beautiful, take it in, it will be with you for a long, long time.



PHOTO CREDIT: CHRIS VAN ROEKEL



Native Plants Get Their Day in the Sun!

Erin O'Donnell

PHOTO CREDIT: CHARLEVOIX COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

NATIVE PLANTS ARE EXPERIENCING A SURGE IN POPULARITY WORLDWIDE, AND NOT JUST BY LAKE ENTHUSIASTS. FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION SURVEY REPORTS 1 IN 4 PEOPLE ACTIVELY SEEK NATIVE PLANTS AND LANDSCAPING TO HELP POLLINATORS, INCLUDING AT-RISK BEES AND BUTTERFLIES. FROM BEGINNER GARDENERS TO ENVIRONMENTALISTS, INSIGHTS SHOW THAT NATIVE PLANTS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN SUSTAINING NATURAL ECOSYSTEMS AND PROMOTING A HEALTHIER AND MORE RESILIENT ENVIRONMENT.

With the increased popularity, the Charlevoix Conservation District native tree sale in the spring and native plant sale in the fall have become very busy events. To keep up with growing demand, Tom Darnton and Erin O'Donnell from the Lake Charlevoix Association; Tanner Yurk from The Walloon Lake Association and Conservancy; and Alison Adams and Kyra Allen from the Charlevoix Conservation District met on a cold mid-January day to talk plants! The three organizations will be partners on the Fall 2025 Native Plant Sale.

Mark your calendars for Saturday, September 13, 2025, from Noon-3:00pm, at the Charlevoix Conservation District in Boyne City.

Browse the offerings of garden flat kits and place your order for plants provided by Birdsfoot Native Nursery, which propagates Michigan native species from seed and produce high quality, container grown plants for

landscaping professionals, homeowners and conservation efforts.

Want the earliest sneak peak of the plant offerings? The available plants list will be unveiled at the annual Summer Garden party, the second Saturday in August, and posted to all three partnering organizations websites: www.charlevoixcd.org, www.walloon.org, and www.lakecharlevoix.org



PHOTO CREDIT: CHARLEVOIX COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Replanting of the LCA Shoreline Demonstration Garden

Mike Costa, MSU Extension Master Gardener and LCA Member

THE LAKE CHARLEVOIX ASSOCIATION (LCA) IS GEARING UP FOR THE REPLANTING OF THE SHORELINE GREENBELT DEMONSTRATION GARDENS AT SUNSET PARK IN BOYNE CITY IN THE SPRING OF 2025. WHILE WE ANTICIPATED THIS WORK TO BE COMPLETED IN THE FALL OF 2024, SCHEDULING AND WEATHER FORCED A DELAY OF THIS ACTIVITY. THIS WORK WILL BE PERFORMED BY RYAN'S LANDSCAPING WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF LOCAL MSU EXTENSION MASTER GARDENERS AND VOLUNTEERS FROM THE LAKE CHARLEVOIX ASSOCIATION.

Focus on Native Plants and Erosion Control

The replanting efforts will focus on adding more native plants to help combat erosion, improve water quality, and support local biodiversity along the Lake Charlevoix shoreline. These plants are specifically chosen for their ability to thrive in shoreline environments and their crucial role in preventing soil erosion. By showcasing these plants, the LCA encourages homeowners and local landowners to adopt similar techniques on their own properties.

Educational Value and Long-Term Impact

The demonstration gardens not only provide a beautiful space for the community but also play a vital

role in educating the public about the importance of protecting Lake Charlevoix's shoreline. By incorporating sustainable landscaping practices and focusing on plant species that are native to the region, the LCA aims to set a precedent for responsible shoreline stewardship.

The updated gardens will continue to highlight the benefits of reducing runoff, enhancing water filtration, and providing habitat for local wildlife. These efforts are crucial to maintaining the health of the lake and its surrounding ecosystem for future generations. This initiative aligns with the LCA's mission of promoting safe, shared use of Lake Charlevoix and advocating for sustainable shoreline practices.

PLANTS PROTECT SHORELINES

STABILIZE BANKS

LIMIT EROSION

ANCHOR LAKE SEDIMENTS

REDUCE RUNOFF

ABSORB NUTRIENTS

PROVIDE HABITAT



PHOTO CREDIT: MSU EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER, INTRODUCTION TO LAKES



WHAT'S WITH THE *Water Levels?*

Joel Van Roekel/Julie Stratton

EVERY SPRING, AS THE ICE MELTS AND SHORELINES EMERGE, LAKE CHARLEVOIX'S WATER LEVELS SPARK CONVERSATION. IS THE LAKE HIGHER OR LOWER THAN LAST YEAR? HOW MANY DOCK SECTIONS WILL BE NECESSARY? THOUGH THESE FLUCTUATIONS ARE NATURAL AND BEYOND OUR CONTROL, THEY GARNER SIGNIFICANT ATTENTION—MORE SO THAN WITH MOST INLAND LAKES. WHY? LAKE CHARLEVOIX'S CONNECTION TO LAKES MICHIGAN-HURON THROUGH THE PINE RIVER MEANS ITS WATER LEVELS REFLECT THE DRAMATIC CHANGES OF THE GREAT LAKES.

To the casual observer, Lake Charlevoix seems consistent year to year. Winter ice gives way to spring docks, boats fill marinas, and shoreline plants thrive. Yet, those who know the lake intimately—residents, marina managers, fishing guides—notice change. Bigger beaches or flooded shorelines, adjusted floating docks, and fish schools at different depths reveal shifting water levels. High water years lead to flooding and erosion, while low water levels create navigation and water supply challenges.

Water level fluctuations arise from complex factors. Since the early 2000s, warmer temperatures, reduced ice coverage, increased evaporation, and decreased runoff caused record lows in 2013. Conversely, cold air outbreaks, extensive ice cover, and high precipitation triggered record highs in 2020. Within seven years, Lakes Michigan-Huron's levels fluctuated by over six feet.

The Army Corps of Engineers and Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory have monitored water levels since the 1860s, with official records dating to 1918. Long-term trends and monthly data reveal a dynamic system influenced by climate and other variables. For instance, Lakes Michigan-

Huron were reported on March 21 to be nine inches below last year's level, approximately seven inches under the March average—but expected to rise three inches within a month.

Adaptation is key. Creating living shorelines with deep rooted native plants protects against erosion while supporting local ecosystems. Rain gardens and dry stream beds help manage runoff, and regular septic system maintenance prevents overload during high water and heavy summer usage. Evaluate drainage systems and hardscapes to reduce flood risks. By acknowledging Lake Charlevoix's dynamic nature, we can give it the care it needs to remain healthy and vibrant for future generations.



High Water Levels

The Ironton Ferry

Celebrating

100 Years of Service

Continued from page 1

In 1901, decades before he became famous “Capt. Sam”, Sam Alexander became Captain of the ferry. Sam ran the ferry alone, day and night. Over the next ten years, Michigan’s roads improved and the increase in traffic resulted in the need for a larger vessel. In 1912, a 20 by 36-foot ferry with a double-cylinder Kahlenburg Marine Engine was built by B. Waterman, owner of a new sawmill in East Jordan. This vessel was christened “The Eveline of Ironton.” Shortly after, the deck was enlarged to be able to carry two autos on each side.

Traffic continued to increase and in 1925 it was decided that the Eveline should be retired. The wooden ferry was sold for \$250 with the new vessel costing \$24,000. Oddly enough, it was built in Ferrysburg, Michigan. Sam and Ross Alexander rode on the ferry while Cap’t Bill Taylor and Bill Ripley towed the scow north on Lake Michigan using the Bureau of Fisheries boat “Fulmar.” It took six days to get the new vessel to the homeport due to a storm that forced them to find safe harbor in Ludington. The new ferry, officially dubbed “Charlevoix,” has been in service ever since.

While the ferry has travelled thousands of miles without incident, there have been some notable mishaps over the years. Sometime in the early 1950’s, an unnamed captain took a break to fish and have a pint, halting the ferry about halfway across the narrows. He continued to cast and sip as the line of impatient drivers got ever longer. The fishing happened to be good that day, resulting in the sound of many honking horns being heard up and down the lake.

When he had caught “a good mess of fish,” he powered the ferry back to shore and the waiting column of impatient customers. To no one’s surprise, that was his last day.

Safe passage has been the hallmark of the Ironton ferry, but there have been a few “incidents” over the past 100 years. Ross and Hilda Alexander told of a family in an Overland auto who drove through the bow chain and into Lake Charlevoix. “As the children and grandfather floated up, I grabbed them and pulled them aboard. I could see the wife still down there (the driver and husband had jumped to safety as the car went over) so I took a long pike pole and hooked it in her coat and we pulled her out. We gave her first aid, got the water out of her, and she survived the whole thing.”

Several years later, a driver’s foot slipped off the clutch “causing the station wagon loaded with trees from George Hemingway’s nursery, to drive off the deck and right into the lake. The driver was rescued, the car hauled up, but the trees floated down stream.”

Only one death seems to be associated with the ferry. On an unknown date, the ferryman arrived at six a.m. to find that a car had driven through the chains on the far end of the deck and gone overboard. The Coast Guard was notified and found the car and the body.

Not every crossing is a tranquil three-minute ride across smooth waters. In 2015 the ferry was heading east when a car started smoking and then burst into flames before the ferry could reach the ramp. The blaze was intense enough to warp part of the steel decking and damaged parts of the cabin. The ferry was removed from service for the rest of the season.

Now in its 100th year of service, the Ironton Ferry continues to serve both residents and tourists by the thousands. Ridership in 2016 totaled 41,086 cars and 8,052 walkers or bicyclists. In 2024, those numbers jumped to 70,071 cars and 9,625 walkers and cyclists. It would seem fair to say that these numbers confirm the importance of the little ferry in the narrows.

If you haven’t been on the ferry for a while, put your life on pause long enough for a three-minute trip back



SAM ALEXANDER

A Half-Century of Service

Joel Van Roekel

The author wishes to thank Captain Robert Goodenough for his assistance with the history of the Ironton Ferry.

While dozens of captains have stood at the helm of the Ironton Ferry, none have reached the notoriety of Captain Sam Alexander. While much of his story has been lost, we do know that he was born in 1868 near Quincy, Kentucky. Having grown up in a family of iron smelters, it is no surprise that once the family moved to our area, Sam began working in the iron factory by the north end of the narrows. At the end of the decade, he left the smelter for work on the Ironton Ferry “Eveline.” It took eleven years for Sam to reach the rank of “captain,” a position he held for the next 51 years. Sam married Hattie Williams in 1894, eventually settling in a little white house just a few feet to the south of the ferry landing. And therein lies the story. Over the half-century he worked on the ferry, it is estimated that he traveled over 15,000 miles while never being farther than 1,000 feet from his home. This feat was published in Ripley’s “Believe It or Not?” in 1936 and was circulated in hundreds of newspapers around the world.

in time. Roll down the windows, feel the breeze, and enjoy your own little moment in history.



PHOTO CREDIT: CHARLEVOIX HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE STRATTON



Tributes

**In Honor of
Mike Dow's Birthday**
Tom Darnton
Elizabeth Strawbridge

**In Memory of
Larry Levensgood**
Charlevoix Lions Club

**In Memory of Ann
Rosenthal**
Rochelle & Randolph
Forester Foundation

In Memory of Paul Nowak
Jonathan & Lynn Friendly

**In Memory of
Richard E. Dauch**
Sandra J. Dauch

**In Memory of Hanna
and Gordon Fishman**
Jefrey Fishman, MD

**In Memory of
Martha Salfridge**
Guy and Susan Kenny

eight



Join now!

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Petoskey, MI
Permit No. 110

Lake Charlevoix Association
P.O. Box 294
Charlevoix, MI 49720
info@lakecharlevoix.org
www.lakecharlevoix.org

PHOTO CREDIT: JULIE STRATTON



SELC

A Unique Educational Adventure on Lake Charlevoix

Each May, the Lake Charlevoix Association, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council and the Beaver Island Boat Company proudly host Students Experience Lake Charlevoix (SELC), offering an unforgettable experience for sixth and seventh graders from our local community.

Around 300 students embark on a boat from the Beaver Island Boat Company at Charlevoix and set sail to Lake Charlevoix's west bay. Here, they dive into exciting, hands-on learning activities covering critical topics like water quality, watershed stewardship, invasive species management, and water safety.

Divided into small groups, students rotate through seven interactive stations, each led by our knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers. These stations bring environmental science to life, inspiring future generations to appreciate and protect Lake Charlevoix's natural beauty.



News Bites

PAINTING CREDIT: DANIEL DUNCAN, WWW.DUNCANSTUDIOSBOYNECITY.COM

Save the Date: Mark your calendars for Friday, June 6th! The LCA will unveil newly revamped lakeshore friendly gardens in Boyne City, followed by the annual meeting at Boyne City Hall. Remarks by Jo Latimore, Ph.D., esteemed aquatic ecologist, at Michigan State University. Followed by a reception with light refreshments, including beer and wine. Contact Erin at erinLCA1970@gmail.com or (231)736-0110 to reserve your spot now, or with questions.

Membership Matters: Join or Renew Today: Your support is vital to the continued success of Lake Charlevoix Association's (LCA) lake protection programs. As a valued member, you make it possible for us to advocate for the health and sustainability of our beloved Lake Charlevoix. To join or renew your membership, simply scan the QR code provided above or visit our website at www.lakecharlevoix.org. Online renewal is preferred, but you can also use the remittance envelope included with this newsletter. The LCA is a 501(c)(3) organization, and all donations are fully tax-deductible. We deeply appreciate your commitment to our mission.

Thank you: We extend our heartfelt thanks to each of you for your generosity and continued support. Your contributions enable us to make a tangible impact on Lake Charlevoix, and we are honored that you've chosen to stand with us among the many philanthropic options available today. As we look to the future, we are excited to share updates on our progress and celebrate shared achievements that will ensure lasting benefits for the lake and our community.



Scan QR Code for
WATERLEVELS FORECAST