

# Lake Geneva Cruise Line celebrates 150th anniversary

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In the 1860s, traveling to Walworth County's Geneva Lake by horse-drawn wagon or carriage was no easy task.

That changed in July 1871, when the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad was extended to the town of Lake Geneva, cutting the trip to less than a day from the Windy City.

Three months later, the Great Chicago Fire burned more than 17,000 structures and killed 300 people. For those with means, one attractive option for those getting new houses built was moving north to what would become known as the "Newport of the Midwest."

"This was still the hinterland, but Lake Geneva boomed after that with estates for the wealthy being built, and later camps and resorts opening," said Bill Gage Jr., president of the Lake Geneva Cruise Line, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year.

The company now has 500 seasonal workers and nearly 200 year-round employees, Gage said. In addition to a fleet of eight passenger boats, the parent company of Gage Marine also includes the popular Pier 290 Restaurant in Williams Bay, a catering business, boat sales, a service and storage company, the Lake Life Store and a pier service company.

In the works is a possible Lake Life Distillery, said Gage, pictured here.

Because there were no roads circumnavigating the lake until 1910, delivery of goods and transportation to private homes and lodges was by primarily boat — both private and public — in the early days.

Some of the vessels owned by Chicago millionaires to navigate the lake were as opulent as their estates, Gage said. These included the Wrigley, Swift, Moore and Potter families, as well as others.

One of the companies founded to serve the public was the Lake Geneva Steamship Line, which launched in 1873 with the Lady of the Lake. It competed with the Lucius Newberry, a grand steamer that could carry 700 passengers.

“Those excursion boats were the main forms of transportation back then,” Gage said.

In 1879, John A. Wilson bought both large steamers, forming The Anchor Line, which is the predecessor to Lake Geneva Cruise Line.

By the second decade of the 20th Century, following the introduction of the Ford Model T in 1908, automobiles were becoming common and lessening the need for boats.

Gage said two families merged a motorboat and the Anchor Line in 1916 and changed the name to Wisconsin Transportation.

“Unfortunately, those families had a hard time agreeing on much of anything,” Gage said. The new firm struggled for the next 40 years, hanging on through the Great Depression, World War II and into the 50s.

“But sadly their fleet of boats became decrepit and completely rundown,” he said.

In the 1940s, Gage said his grandfather — Russell Gage, a successful executive — took a fancy to the old steamers and restored one of them for a pleasure boat.

When his son, Bill Gage Sr., was 12, he asked his father if he could drive the family’s nice wooden motor boat.

“My granddad said ‘no,’ but he made a deal with my dad and said if he could find an old boat, he’d help him fix it up,” Gage said. “So my dad came back and said he’d found one, an 87-foot steamer built in 1899.

“So be careful what you ask of your children,” quipped Gage.

The pair restored the vessel, renamed it the Matriark in honor of Gage’s grandmother. Gage still owns it today.

By the mid-1950s, Russell Gage had tired of the corporate world. He bought what was left of Wisconsin Transportation in 1958 and changed the name to Lake Geneva

Excursion Boat and Gage Marine.

Bill Gage Sr. joined his father after serving in the Army for two years, Gage said.

“They took a risk and bought a business that was really in transition,” he said. “The boats were rotting and falling apart and everyone was really going everywhere by car then. So the company evolved into a tourism attraction where people could see the old estates by water and did a major shift.”

In 1962, when the federal government dropped the WWII-era transportation tax, Gage said the company used the windfall — and a significant bank loan — to build a new Lady of the Lake boat.

“That began a 15-year stint where my grandfather and dad kept plowing money back into the excursion boat business,” he said. “And if I was taught a message from them, it was that you have to keep reinvesting and leave a place better than you found it.”

Today, only two of the 12 original boats they inherited remain: the Lady of the Lake; and the line’s working mailboat, the Walworth II.

All the others have been recreated with a nod to the history of Lake Geneva “but much more practical,” Gage said.

In the 1960s, recreational boating was becoming popular and the company began growing the marina business, said Gage, who was born in 1965. He worked for the company as a teenager, pumping gas and later moving up to being a boat captain while in college.

“They say that the first generation starts a business, the second builds it and the third generation is supposed to screw it up,” Gage said with a chuckle.

“But I bucked that trend and the company is now eight to 10 times larger than when I took it over 20 years ago,” he said. “I saw opportunities and continued to reinvest.”

However, Gage didn’t join the company immediately after college.

He stayed away for 15 years, carving out his own successful career in commercial real estate and insurance, including a three-year stint in London.

As his father approached 65, the elder Gage invited his son to come back and take over the company.

“But he told me, ‘your mom and I need to see if you’re any good because we’ve mortgaged the house to run this business,’” he said.

“And I said I’d come home, but I also said ‘I hope this is the best pay cut I ever take,” recalled Gage, who said he never regretted the move.

Two years after his return, his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The surgery did not go well.

“He lived for another 15 months, but never really came back,” Gage said.

“I wish I’d returned sooner, but stuff happens. I got two years with him and we had a great relationship,” he said. “My mom is still with us and is the family matriarch who brings a great perspective.”

Gage has two children, ages 20 and 22. Both have worked for the company. But he wants them to find jobs in the outside world before they consider returning.

“The idea is that they need to stay away for five years and get a promotion at another job before coming back,” he said. “I think the perspective of being an employee is important for anyone, especially the children of company owners.”

As for the future, Gage said he plans to keep investing in the company and the community.

As part of that latter effort and in honor of the company’s 150th anniversary, he said his business donated 15 \$10,000 grants to Lake Geneva and Walworth County organizations, focusing on smaller charities.

“We’ve worked hard and been blessed with success,” he said. “So if I have my way, we’ll give \$250,000 to charities every year as we continue to grow and thrive,” he said.

— *Brian E. Clark*

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