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North from Pittsburgh, Route 79 goes straight toward Lake Erie. It is different than leaving Philadelphia, because no suburbia sprawls outside the city limits. Five miles from downtown, maybe less, the country opens into forest and hills, high verdant hills and tall conifer trees.

Erie is a day trip for many visitors, but my friend is a serious bird watcher. She needs time to explore the natural and avian attraction of a region. I also like to putter around on hiking trails watching the birds and the watchers. Bird watchers pack a lot more money than herders. I keep hoping to be standing on a trail at the right moment to have the head of Audubon tap me on the shoulder and say: "Excuse me, sir, but you sound like you're from Texas. Would you by any chance know of a spot in West Texas where our organization might set a base camp?"

Admittedly, thinking a bitterweed sheep operation will attract bird lovers to see Chihuahua Ravens pull dead wool for nest liners all winter and the red-headed vultures feast on the rest of the carcasses all summer is a long shot. But our betting on green cow hides and lamb pelts coming back is not a proposition the handicappers in Las Vegas care to book on the "go" side.

Unlike other trips, however, my part was business-oriented. Study these facts first: Lake Erie is the next to the smallest of the Great Lakes, being 57 miles wide at the widest point and 240 miles long at the apex. But the depth

was the kicker in my deal. Lake Erie is the shallowest of the five lakes, averaging 62 feet in depth and only 210 feet in the deepest part. Being so shallow causes serious navigating problems from ground swells. (Ground swells are deep rolling waves of water off distant storms.) Sunken ships cover the bottom of the lake, weighed down with rich iron ore. Hulls filled to brimming in rich treasures from the sailors' sea chests rest in the deep. And big windfalls of antiques lie waiting in the captains' quarters.

At the wharf, an observation tower 187 feet high made a perfect stand to survey the deal. I blew two dollars for an elevator ticket instead of climbing to the top. I figured once I found backers to salvage the ships, they wouldn't want me weakened from climbing 200 stair steps. The reflection on the water plus the depth of the harbor made sighting wrecks from the tower impossible. However, over on the starboard side of the tower (note my natural adoption of nautical terms), a rusty old tub rocked up against the docks. The elevator operator said, "The ship is being converted to a restaurant." Right off I began to figure how many "Captain Dan Catfish House" franchises we could outfit in sunken ships on the shores of the Great Lakes.

The next development was on a hike to the tip of the Presque Peninsula. (The French say press-kill and the folks on Erie say press-qual.) We followed a dim trail the lighthouse keeper used in the old days to bring in supplies on the calm waters of the bay. We trudged in fine sand,

creeping up on a big turtle laying eggs in the dunes and flushing yellow warblers from thickets.

A park sign said the seven mile long peninsula has gained 67 acres on the tip since the first survey in 1900. The increase is easily traced by observing the staggering height of the cottonwood trees from tall ones down to saplings. (Am I being clear? The sand keeps being dumped by the currents around the tip, making the peninsula longer.) The lake is 6,300,000 acres in size. Good thing I took that walk. We are going to have an adjustment in price and acreage if we are going to be furnishing the sand washing aground to make more parklands.

Erie, the town, is sure to support any venture from salvaging rusty ore cargo to pirating on the Main. Foreign competition in ore and steel cut way back on the port's business years ago. One old wrecked fishing boat still operates on the lake. The names or extent of the catch are not posted. Rough fish, I think, have ruined the fishing trade, but I don't imagine having every oriental guy who can toss a net in the ocean selling fish helped the matter.

To date I haven't run title on the lake. The only contract I know who has enough dough to buy the lake, including the Canadian province we'll need to protect the shoreline, is away from his telephone a lot and must not carry a cell phone. We need to be ready by the thaw next spring. I've already spotted an old boy at Barnhart with a

powerful enough winch to start yanking those valuable
treasures from the bottom of the lake..