



Annual Grafton Towboat Festival showcases river occupation lifestyle

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ALTON - For those living in the River Bend, cargo barges traveling up and down the area's rivers is an everyday spectacle. Although many are accustomed to seeing the rows of barges on the water daily, many have not had the opportunity to get aboard and explore.

This weekend, Grafton will host **The Annual Towboat Festival** on both Saturday and Sunday. The festival, organized by the Grafton Chamber of Commerce, attracts hundreds of visitors from surrounding counties to enjoy live music, special deals, free giveaways and much more.

Tours of the working vessels will be conducted from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. both Saturday, Aug. 1, and Sunday, Aug. 2. The festival, walking tours and the crew's involvement with answering questions gives others the opportunity to learn and explore a worker's life on the Mississippi River.

The barge industry provides jobs for many hands in the area. Unfortunately, the job requires a lot of time away from home to travel the rivers, transporting cargo to the necessary locations. The workers work, eat, sleep and live on these vessels, an experience the families are not personally familiar with.

"My kids think I hunt sharks," said Jake Melitello, a Tankerman on the Darrel Thomson and father of two. "I work on a tow boat and we push a barge that refuels these boats and barges. I work 12-hour shifts and I work seven days in a row then get two days off and work seven nights in a row and get five days off. Then it starts all over again."

The towboat festival offers an exceptionally unique opportunity for the families to see where daddy spends his time when he is away for work.

Melitello says he is one of the lucky few that gets to go home at night and even though they are long hard days, he is grateful that he doesn't have to stay away from his family for too long.

"Even though I get to see my kids and wife every night, it's hard on them because the river industry never stops for holidays or bad weather," said Melitello. "We work in rain sleet and snow."

The three-year river veteran says he enjoys his job and knows that his experience is not shared with many.

"I love working out here and most people do," said Melitello. "You see parts of nature a lot of people don't get to experience."

The event takes place at [The Loading Dock Bar and Grill](#). The Dock will have hot dogs, brats, popcorn and snow cones for sale near the boats and will provide an array of activities for the kids to include painting, sidewalk chalk art, bubbles and more.