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The Christmas Tree Ship

Story of the Rouse Simmons

By Jon Paul Van Harpen

The schooner *Rouse Simmons* (official no. 110087) was built in 1868 at Milwaukee, WI by Allen McClelland Co. The vessel was 124.16 feet in length 27.5 feet in breadth and had a 10 foot depth of hold, she carried 3 masts and was 244.28 gross tons. First enrollment was on August 27, 1868 at the Port of Milwaukee. She was reenrolled on June 21, 1870 at the Port of Milwaukee for a measure change to 123.42x27.5x8.33, 205.26 gross and 195.0 net tons.

The *Rouse Simmons* was in it's 44th year of service on the Great Lakes when she meet her demise and although there were other tragedy's on Lake Michigan involving loss of life the *Rouse Simmons* received the most press. The Door County Advocate printed 17 stories on the Christmas Tree ship from December of 1912 until October of 1929.

From the Advocate Files 12/12/1912: *Schooner Rouse Simmons Lost. That the schooner Rouse Simmons and her crew of fourteen have been lost there is little doubt, and Capt. Herman Schueneman and Capt. Chas Nelson are among the lost. The balance of the crew were picked up in Chicago. Pieces of wreckage were picked up on the beach at Pentwater, but beyond this there has been nothing found of the schooner or any member of the crew. A man found on the shore at the same point was that of a fisherman that had drowned when a launch was wrecked the week before.*

The loss of the Rouse Simmons recalls the wreck of the schooner Thall and crew about fifteen years ago, which was in command of Capt. Aug. Schueneman, a brother of the master of the Simmons. He too was loaded with Christmas trees, a trade that he had been engaged in for a number of years, and since he lost his life has been followed by Capt. Herman Schueneman. This was the Christmas ship of the Chicago market and she will be sadly missed by many who come to know and look for her arrival with the greens each fall.

There was considerable excitement at the canal yesterday afternoon when a schooner was coming down the lake with canvas that looked like the Rouse Simmons and as she had been reported along the line it was almost certain it was her, as reports from Chicago were to the effect that all the schooners missing had been accounted for, having arrived in port. It was with great anxiety that the people watching her awaited her arrival off the canal. As the carferry Ann Arbor was going out she was requested to run close and if it was the Simmons to hoist a flag. She did not run up the signal and the watchers were disappointed. it was the schooner Butcher Boy, bound south with a load of lumber, and it is safe to say she will be the last of the windjammers to get into port.

12/19/1912 DCA: *The wreck of the Simmons has cunated more or less discussion as to the time of the brother of Capt. Schueneman lost his life and the schooner he was sailing. For the benefit of some of those who are interested we looked up the matter in the files of the Advocate.*

We find the disaster took place on the night of November 9th, 1898. Capt. August Schueneman had loaded the schooner Thal at this port with Christmas trees and a couple of days before left port for Chicago. Getting caught in a storm on Lake Michigan she came to anchor off Winnetka on the morning of the 9th. The wind increased in force as the day advanced and as evening came it was seen by watchers that the vessel was dragging her anchors. Capt. Schueneman attempted to get out of difficulty by putting on canvas but was driven back and when night fell the doomed craft was seen at anchor laboring hard with the seas enveloping her. The following morning only pieces of the schooner were found strewn along the beach, together with her load of Christmas trees and the bodies of the crew, all of whom had perished.

The Thal was a small vessel and carried only 5,000 trees. She was an old boat and had only a short time before the disaster been purchased by Capt. Schueneman. She was built in Oshkosh in 1867.

12/19/1912 DCA: *W.H. Holmes & Co., vessel agents, have turned over to the widow and daughters of the late Capt. Herman Schueneman the schooner Oneida, and the family will carry on the Christmas tree business as heretofore. A shipment of trees and greens have been brought in by rail and have been loaded unto the Oneida, and the vessel is now moored at the old stand at Clark street bridge, the same berth that was ready for the ill-fated schooner Rouse Simmons. The family has prepared a lot of wreathes and other decorations that go with the holiday season, but it is expected that they will not have near enough for the demand.*

7/31/1913 DCA: **MESSAGE FROM THE ROUSE SIMMONS.** – *Bottle Picked Up On the Beach at Whitefish Bay Containing a Farewell From Doomed Crew.*

The story of the ill-fated schooner is again revived by the finding on the beach north of the canal of a bottle containing a message from Capt. Chas Nelson, who was in command of the vessel on the night she went down with all hands.

This message was found Sunday by a son of Frank Lauscher, a fisherman residing at Whitefish Bay and whose postoffice address is Sturgeon Bay, R.F.D. No. 3. The boy was wandering along the beach while his father and uncle, Henry Lauscher, were engaged in attending to their pound net. The boy found a medicine bottle buried in the sand and was in the act of throwing it back into the water when his father noticed that it contained a piece of paper. He arrested the boy in the act by a cry to hold the bottle, which was broken open with a rock and a piece of paper fell out on which was written the following message: Nov. 23, 1912.

"These lines were written at 10:30 p.m. Schooner Rouse Simmons ready to go down about 20 miles southwest of Two River Point, between 15 and 20 miles off shore.

All hands lashed to one line. Goodbye. Capt. Charley Nelson."

The place where the bottle was picked up is about seven miles north of the canal. Frank Lauscher, who is in possession of the piece of paper, will keep it until he hears from the relatives of the captain of the lost schooner, when an effort will be made to determine whether the message is genuine.

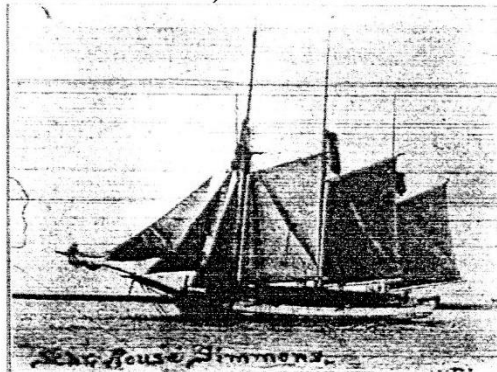
It is most reasonable to suppose that this is the only authentic message from the long lost schooner. It would have been about the hour of night when the men realized that their doom was sealed, and securing a bottle from the medicine chest it is likely they sent their last message to the world while waiting for the end. Washing up on the beach the bottle was partly covered with sand until accidentally found in the matter stated.

So what makes the *Rouse Simmons* more important in history than Capt. Herman Schueneman's brother's vessel the schooner *Thal* that went down 14 years earlier with a loss of all crew including Capt. August Schueneman carrying Christmas trees? As far as the press goes the *Thal* tragedy received 6 articles in the *Advocate*, while the *Simmons* tragedy received 17. If you mention the Christmas tree ship from Manistique to Chicago most people will know what you are talking about. If you mentioned the schooner *Thal* people could not tell if you were talking about a modern yacht or a late 19th century freight carrying schooner. Much like the case of the *Edmond Fitzgerald* and the *Carl D. Bradley*, so what makes one disaster stick out among others?

Well I would guess the answer would be closure. Whenever there is a tragedy whether large like a shipwreck or a death of a close friend or family member, it causes anxiety and fear of our own mortal frailties. The more unanswered questions makes the matter harder to deal with and longer for grieving process to run its full course. We as humans like to find a cause, a thing or person to blame possibly God himself. Even in Gordon Lightfoot's tribute to the *Edmond Fitzgerald* there's a verse "Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours?" In the light of more recent events the media often gets blamed for sensationalism and sometimes justly so. I myself write a lot of shipwreck stories but I always try not to forget the more human side of the disaster. I think the reason the Christmas tree ship memory stays alive is the fact that Christmas itself is a celebration of life, and I believe nobody enjoyed or cared about Christmas more than the Schueneman family with its long tradition of hulling Christmas trees and selling them at the wharf by the Clark St. Bridge in Chicago.

So I guess as far as closure goes the schooner *Thal* with Capt. Augusta Schueneman and crew was witnessed from shore and the victims bodies recovered in a relatively short time after the event. It left few unanswered questions by comparison to the *Simmons* where the only witness was the crew of the lifesaving station at Kewaunee and they did not know until later what vessel they saw displaying distress signals. So long live the memory of the Christmas tree ship and how hard Capt. Schueneman and crew fought and paid the ultimate price trying to bring a load of Christmas trees to the families of Chicago. As far as why, I don't believe we will ever know the answer to that one.

The schooner *Rouse Simmons* was discovered in October of 1971 by Kent Bellrichard a Milwaukee diver. The *Simmons* was found about 6 miles off shore between Two Rivers and Kewaunee in 165 feet of water. The Rodgers Street Fishing Village Museum has the wheel of the *Simmons* along with a crotch and the nameplate of the vessel. The *Simmons* anchor is on display at the Milwaukee Yacht Club. **Underwater Photograph by Tamara Thomsen, owner of Diversions Scuba, Madison Wisconsin. © 2003 DCCP**



The schooner *Rouse Simmons*.