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U.S. Environmental

The Fate of the Christmas Tree Ship

It was late November and the sights and sounds of the holiday season were creeping into the bustling city of Chicago. Each year, the arrival of the creaking old three-masted schooner *Rouse Simmons* served as a signal for the beginning of the Christmas season. The schooner always ended her shipping season by bringing to Chicago a large and profitable cargo of Christmas trees.

Along with the annual tree buyers, peg-legged and bearded Claud Winters eagerly awaited the arrival of the *Rouse Simmons*. Claud and Captain Schunemann, owner and master of the ship, had an unusual bond. Although their lives were quite different, they seemed to understand and sympathize with each other.

Claud was softhearted under his rough outer appearance. As a child he had lost a leg under a boxcar, so he couldn't handle the demands of being a seafarer. Claud admired the Captain as a fearless sailor and a smart ship operator. In the great storm of 1889 the *Rouse Simmons* was the only sailing ship that was not severely damaged or lost.

The Captain was legendary for his stinginess and stubbornness in working with anyone who might cut into his profits. Claud would have enjoyed the thrill and adventure of a sailor's life. The Captain must have understood this about Claud because he was unusually generous to his stocky peg-legged friend. Once the Captain gave Claud a sliver dollar saying "Always keep this and you'll never be broke." Whenever they met, Claud would show him the coin and say, "Here it is Cap...still good as new and still yearning to be spent."

On the morning of November 27, 1912, Claud stomped onto the Clark Street wharf to await the early morning arrival of the *Rouse Simmons*. Claud had hired a group of men to unload the fragrant pine and balsam trees. When the ship was nowhere to be seen, Claud was sure the Captain was floating offshore waiting for the fog to lift so he wouldn't have to pay charges for a tug to bring him in. But by 4:00 p.m. many of Claud's hired companions had tired of waiting and left. Claud himself was feeling tired, discouraged and hungry. Many busy tugs had come upriver, but nowhere on the horizon could he see the sails or masthead lamps of the *Rouse Simmons*.

The year 1912 had been a devastating one for Great Lakes shippers. The worst snow storm in a century had blasted the lakes for four days in early November, destroying 10 large freighters and littering the shoreline with debris. Four hundred seamen were lost in those four disastrous days.

Meanwhile Captain Schunemann was realizing he could turn a disaster into a fortune. Snow had buried tree farms in Michigan and Wisconsin. Chicago tree dealers were desperate for tree. Captain Schunemann was happy to deliver! At Thompson Harbor just southwest of Manistique, Michigan trees were being crammed into every available space on the *Rouse Simmons*. Well into the evening the Captain had more bundles of trees tied on board the deck, row upon row. The schooner sagged under the weight of her fragrant cargo. He expected this could be the most profitable run he had ever made.

Despite stormy weather, the *Rouse Simmons* set sail at noon on November 25, 1912. The schooner *Dutch Boy* was seeking shelter when its captain spied the *Rouse Simmons* off his bow. He exclaimed above the howling wind, "Mother of God, look! That crazy Dutchman's going out in this, and him with every inch of canvas up."

As the *Rouse Simmons* swung west southwest on course toward Chicago, she was caught in deadly winds of 60 miles per hour. Every part of the ship creaked, moaned and shrieked in the howling gale. Every part of the ship creaked, moaned, and shrieked in the howling gale. Some time during the night two sailor's were sent to check the lashings. A tremendous wave swept them, along with many of the bundled trees and a small boat, into the raging seas. With less weight on board, Captain Schunemann and his first mate were able to

maneuver the vessel toward shelter at Bailey's Harbor.

As fate would have it, the violent wind changed suddenly, producing a furious snowstorm and an incredible drop in temperature. A thick blanket of ice quickly thickened as the unrelenting waves pounded the ship. The situation of the *Rouse Simmons* was becoming more desperate each moment. Battered hatch covers could no longer prevent water from entering the hold where it quickly turned into ice on the trees.

From the station tower at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, men of the old United States Lifesaving Service sighted the *Rouse Simmons* flying distress signals as she continued to move low in the water, driven along by the force of the gale. A rescue team 25 miles to the south launched a surfboat in an attempt to intercept the suffering schooner. Visibility was difficult and a two hour search was unsuccessful. But suddenly there was a break in the snowstorm and the pitiful ship was sighted. She was barely afloat and resembled a mass of ice. Rescuers desperately moved full steam ahead and blinding snow again made it impossible to see the schooner. The *Rouse Simmons* vanished from sight and was never seen again.

Meanwhile, Claud Winters continued to believe that the *Rouse Simmons* would arrive even after a note was found in a bottle on the beach in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. It said, "Friday...everybody goodbye. I guess we are all through. During the night the small boat was washed overboard. Leaking bad. Ingvald and Steve lost too. God help us. Herman Schunemann." Chicago suffered from a shortage of Christmas trees that year.

That Christmas Eve, Claud made his daily trip to the dock. He stood in the falling snow waiting for the *Rouse Simmons* to arrive. The next morning a policeman found him blanketed with snow. Believing to the end that the Captain would come through, Claud's sad life was ended. As the policeman picked up his lifeless body, a silver dollar fell from his frozen fingers and rolled into a crack in the dock, landing in the icy black water below.

It was another 10 years before evidence of the *Rouse Simmons* was discovered. Captain Herman Schunemann's wallet was found among the fish caught in the nets of a Wisconsin Fisherman..

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