

Rouse Simmons

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The ***Rouse Simmons*** was a three-masted schooner famous for having disappeared in 1912 with a cargo of Christmas trees bound for Chicago. The ship was sailing on Lake Michigan in a violent storm when it sank off the coast of Two Rivers, Wisconsin, killing all on board. The legacy of the schooner lives on in the area, with frequent ghost sightings and tourist attractions whereby its final route is traced.^{[1][2]} It was known as "The Christmas Tree Ship" and was one of many schooners to transport Christmas trees across the lake. However, with railroads, highways, and tree farms proving much more economical, the tree-shipping industry was on a steep decline and they had stopped sailing by 1920.

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History

The *Rouse Simmons* was built in Milwaukee in 1868 by Allan, McClelland, & Company, and named after a Kenosha businessman. The schooner was soon purchased by wealthy lumber magnate Charles H. Hackley of Muskegon, Michigan and joined his sizeable fleet. Hackley's ships served across most of Lake Michigan's coastline, and the *Rouse Simmons* became a workhorse, shipping lumber from company mills to several ports around the lake for around 20 years. At its peak the schooner was making almost weekly runs between Grand Haven and Chicago.^[3]

After its service for Hackley the ship exchanged hands several times. Many similar schooners were also frequently sold and they became known as "tramp ships".^[2] In 1910 Herman Schuenemann bought an interest in the ship, expanding that to an eighth in 1912. The other shares were owned by Captain Charles Nelson of Chicago, who owned one eighth and would sail alongside Schuenemann on the fatal journey, and three fourths (the commanding share) were owned by Mannes J. Bonner, a businessman from St. James, Michigan.^[3]

The "Christmas Tree Ship"

The Schuenemann brothers, Herman and August, had been trading Christmas trees in Chicago since the

Career (United States)	
Name:	<i>Rouse Simmons</i>
Builder:	Allen, McCelland, Co Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Launched:	August 15, 1868
Fate:	Foundered and sunk November 23, 1912
Notes:	United States registry #110087 First enrollment issued at Milwaukee, Wisconsin August 27, 1868
General characteristics	
Class and type:	Three mast schooner
Tonnage:	205 gross 195 net
Length:	123.5 feet
Beam:	27.6 feet
Height:	8.4 feet
Propulsion:	Sails
Crew:	5
Notes:	11 persons lost in sinking

ROUSE SIMMONS (Shipwreck)

U.S. National Register of Historic Places

Location:	6 mi. off Point Veach, Lake Michigan
Added to NRHP:	March 21, 2007
NRHP	07000197
Reference#:	
MPS:	Great Lakes Shipwreck Sites of Wisconsin MPS

turn of the century. August died in 1899 aboard the *S. Thal* – a 52-ton, two-masted schooner – when it sank in a storm near Glencoe, Illinois. His younger brother continued the family business. While many rival traders had sold to wholesalers and local grocers, Schuenemann sold directly to Chicago residents at dockside by Clark Street Bridge. By cutting out the middleman in this way the trees could be sold cheaply while still making a profit. The venture used the slogan "Christmas Tree Ship: My Prices are the Lowest", with electric Christmas lights and a tree atop the main mast. The trees were sold for between 50 cents and \$1, but Herman Schuenemann, affectionately known as "Captain Santa", also gave away some of the trees to needy families.^{[2][3]}

Final journey

Schuenemann loaded the schooner with 5,500 trees from Thompson Harbor near Manistique, Michigan and planned to make the week-long journey to Chicago. The difficult weather had discouraged his competitors from making their own journeys, and snow had covered the tree farms in Michigan and Wisconsin.^[4] He hoped that the resultant shortage of Christmas trees would lead to a huge profit and solve his financial problems.^[2]

Already by 1912, November had a reputation for especially violent storms on the Great Lakes. November, 1912, however had been relatively quiet, with only one significant storm so far, which affected especially southeastern Michigan and northwestern Ohio.^[1] (The reports that say another storm had already taken many lives and ships that month^[4] are erroneous, confusing 1912 with the Big Blow of 1913.) Still, a second storm was brewing. The conditions of the day were very poor, with many ships anchoring in port for shelter to avoid being battered by the 60 mph winds that could be anticipated in a November gale.

Local legends say that some sailors refused to board the ship and that the vessel was unseaworthy. Two years previous the schooner had been towed to port by *The Grand Haven Tribune* after it was found riding low in the water. Despite this the journey began at noon, with trees crammed into every possible corner of the ship. The weight of the trees was far above recommendations, especially in the bad winter weather, and was certainly going to contribute to the tragedy. During the night, with storms hitting the *Simmons* hard, two sailors were sent to check the lashings on deck. Both seamen were swept overboard by a giant wave that collected them, many bundled trees, and a small boat. Now that the schooner was slightly lighter and more maneuverable Captain Schuenemann directed it towards Bailey's Harbor. Suddenly, and tragically, the storms worsened; ice formed on the sodden trees and winds battered the hull.^[4]

When the Kewaunee Life Saving Station spotted the *Rouse Simmons* on 23 November 1912 it was low in the water with tattered sails, flying its flag at half mast to signal that it was in distress. Logs from the station show that a surfman spotted the *Simmons* at 2:50pm and alerted station keeper Nelson Craite. Craite found that the station's gas tugboat had left earlier in the day and, at 3:10pm, Craite telephoned the nearest other Station. George E. Sogge of Two Rivers, located just south of Kewaunee, sent out the power boat *Tuscarora* on a rescue mission, but the *Simmons* was not seen again.^[3]

The *Simmons* was not the only ship to go down during the storm, with the *South Shore*, the *Three Sisters*, and the *Two Brothers* suffering similar fates.^[3]

Wreck and debris

A message in a bottle from the *Rouse Simmons* washed onto the shore at Sheboygan. It had been corked using a small piece of cut pine tree and, other than the occasional trees caught in fishing nets, was the only remains of the vessel discovered for many years. The message read:

“ Friday ... everybody goodbye. I guess we are all through. During the night the small boat washed overboard. Leaking bad. Invald and Steve lost too. God help us.^[5] ”

In 1924 a fishing net trawled up a wallet belonging to Captain Schuenemann. The wallet, well preserved because it was wrapped in oilskin, contained business cards, a newspaper clipping and an expense memorandum.^[6] In 1971 the wreck itself was discovered by scuba diver Gordon Kent Bellrichard from Milwaukee. Bellrichard was searching for the *Vernon*, a 177-foot, 700-ton steamer that had sunk in a storm in October 1887, and had been told about an area in which local fishermen had frequently snagged their nets. When his sonar appeared to have located something he dived down to a shipwreck on the bed of the lake 172 feet below. Despite his light failing, Bellrichard managed to survey the wreckage with his hands and concluded that he had instead found the *Simmons*.^[3]

Many of the trees are still in the ship's hold, though two were extracted and shown as exhibits. Several items recovered from the *Rouse Simmons* are now housed in Rogers Street Fishing Village Museum in Two Rivers, including the ship's wheel. The ship's anchor was retrieved and now stands at the entrance to the Milwaukee Yacht Club.^[3] The remains of the wreck are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.^[7]

Legacy

The Christmas Tree Ship lived on through Schuenemann's wife, Barbara, and their two daughters. However, in the latter years they chose to transport the trees by train and merely used a boat as a platform for sale.^[2] The practice of transporting trees by schooner ceased in 1920,^[3] and the increasing popularity of railways, highways and tree farms soon made it easier and more affordable for everyone to buy a tree.^[8]

See also

- The Christmas Schooner - A musical written by Julie Shannon and John Reeger that chronicles the journeys of a fictional Schooner based upon the *Rouse Simmons*.

References

- ¹ ^ Jacobson-Tews, Lori. Pier Wisconsin. "The Story of the Rouse Simmons". Accessed 12 January 2007.
- ² ^ *a b c d e* Boaters Dream, 25 November 2002. "'Christmas Ship,' sunk in gale, has historical ties to Muskegon". Accessed 12 January 2007.
- ³ ^ *a b c d e f g h* Longacre, Glenn V., Prologue Winter 2006. "The Christmas Tree Ship: Captain Herman E. Schuenemann and the Schooner Rouse Simmons". Accessed 12 January 2007.
- ⁴ ^ *a b c* United States Environmental Protection Agency, 9 March 2006. "The Fate of the Christmas Tree Ship". Accessed 12 January 2007.
- ⁵ ^ Jacobson-Tews, Lori. Pier Wisconsin. "The Story of the Rouse Simmons (page 4)". Accessed 12 January 2007.
- ⁶ ^ Jacobson-Tews, Lori. Pier Wisconsin. "The Story of the Rouse Simmons (page 5)". Accessed 12 January

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7. ^ National Register of Historic Places Listings: March 30, 2007. National Park Service. Retrieved on 2007-09-10.
8. ^ Jacobson-Tews, Lori. Pier Wisconsin. "The Story of the Rouse Simmons (page 6)". Accessed 12 January 2007.

- Historical Collections of the Great Lakes Index: Rouse Simmons

External links

- "Load full of Christmas trees went down with the ship" by Dennis McCann at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.
- The Great Lakes Shipwreck Files
- Maritime History of the Great Lakes: Vessel Extracts: Rouse Simmons
- Maritime History of the Great Lakes: Shipwrecks: Rouse Simmons

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