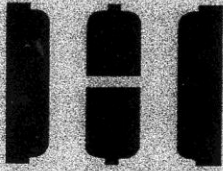


KENOSHA



HISTORY
CENTER



Southport

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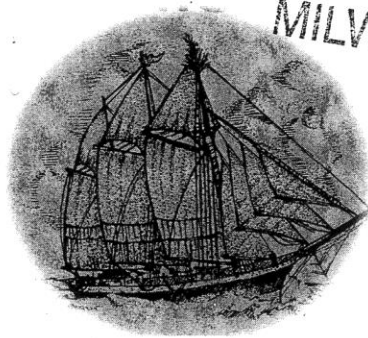
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MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY The Christmas Tree Ship: Rouse Simmons

In the years following the Civil War, Chicago was one of the great grain and lumber shipping centers of the world. From the prairies of the great Middle West came the golden grain for shipment to the industrial Atlantic seaboard and even to the European continent beyond. From the forests of Michigan's dual peninsula, where the greatest lumbering operations in history were taking place, came schooner loads of finished lumber for Trans-shipment westward to the treeless plains then rapidly opening up to the settlement through the magic of the Homestead Act. As the hub of these great pipelines of supply and demand, her harbor was cluttered with marine activity almost wholly restricted to sail craft.

One of these ships was the Rouse Simmons, a fine three masted schooner, Milwaukee built in 1868. Slightly more than 200 tons burden, the vessel's hull measured 125 feet in length and 27 feet across her beam, about the average for a "fore and after" laker. Her hold measured slightly more than 8 feet, governed by the depth of navigable rivers, harbors and channels of that day. The vessel was built by Kenosha shipping interests and named for a local merchant. In her first years of service the Rouse Simmons plied between Manistee and Chicago, her hold filled with scantling and her deck piled high with joist, basic products of lumber industry.

In 1873 the Rouse Simmons came into hands of Charles H. Hackley of Muskegon and remained part of his fleet for a quarter of a century. During her career in and out of Chicago harbor, the vessel was credited with more than a thousand cargoes and her experiences were those of the average lake sailing



schooner. Several times she left cathead and jib-boom on one or another of Chicago's bridges. In a fog-bound collision with another schooner, she narrowly escaped her own destruction. Waterspouts, storms and squalls tore her sailcloth, riggings and ratlines, broke her spars and tackle. Once she sank in Traverse Bay area but was raised, refitted and sailed again. Another time the vessel was dismantled in a violent storm and left helpless in mid-lake.

When the forest of Michigan ran out, Hackley sold his fleet and while other lumber barons ran off to greener fields he stayed behind in Muskegon to rebuild the fortunes of the once great Sawdust City. Hackley left behind schools, a library, an art gallery and a public park well stocked with meaningful statuary and one would like to think some benefits were paid for out of the Rouse Simmons' earnings.

In the declining years of her maritime career the Rouse Simmons was owned by mariners, that is, captains who owned their ship. In a sense she was a tramp, picking up cargo of lumber, logs or cedar posts as opportunity afforded.

In 1910, Herman Schuenemann bought an interest in the Rouse Simmons and the doughty craft became "Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship." Since the early 1880's the Schuenemann family brought Christmas annually by schooner on the closing voyage of the sailing season. In 1898, August, nicknamed "Christmas Tree Schuenemann," lost life and cargo of evergreen off Glencoe, Illinois, in a small schooner. Hermann, his brother, took over trade and year after year a Schuenemann ship would tie up in Chicago harbor with a load of Yuletide cheer.

In early October 1912, the Rouse Simmons cleared Chicago for the last time and made her way to Thompson in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They're her crew of seamen and woodchoppers went into the backcountry to gather her cargo.

Annually for twenty years the inhabitants of Thompson looked forward to coming of the ship and then fell in with her crew, gathering the evergreen and loading the cargo. The Christmas tree operations at Thompson were a source of revenue

to many folks in the area. Into the cutover lands in School Craft County the men fanned out, set up camps and harvested the evergreens of saleable size and condition.

On November 22, 1912, the Rouse Simmons left Thompson, Michigan, late in the day in a rising gale. As the tug pulled the three-master out into the lake, the people on shore looked fearfully at the dirty weather in the skies and feared for the safety of the ship, captain and crew. That night heavy seas closed in upon her as she made her tortures way south bearing her cargo of Christmas cheer.

On November 23, 1912, the Rouse Simmons, half ways home to her haven in Chicago harbor, was sighted off Kewaunee, Wisconsin, flying distress signals. The Kewaunee Coast Guard phoned down to Two Rivers Station, where a 34-foot power launch was available to intercept the stricken ship and give her what aid they could. For five hours the guardsmen searched through twilight mists and murky darkness but the Rouse Simmons was never sighted. Grudgingly, the lake gave up some evidence of the tragedy. For a quarter of a century Two Rivers fisherman pulled up their nets, after stormy weather, and found waterlogged evergreens fouling their catches. Thirteen years later the Captain's wallet, still wrapped with oilskin and rubber band intact, was cast up on the shore some miles south of Two Rivers.

Herman's widow, Barbara, and her three daughters continued to bring evergreens into Chicago for another twenty years, first by sailing schooner, then by rail. In a changing world, in 1933, Barbara passed away and the family enterprise died with her. Barbara's grave is in Acacia cemetery and sharing her headstone is the Captain's name and between the two is graven the figure of an evergreen tree.



**Rouse
Simmons
Store in
Kenosha**