



## CURRENT HIGHLIGHTS

### Highlights Archives

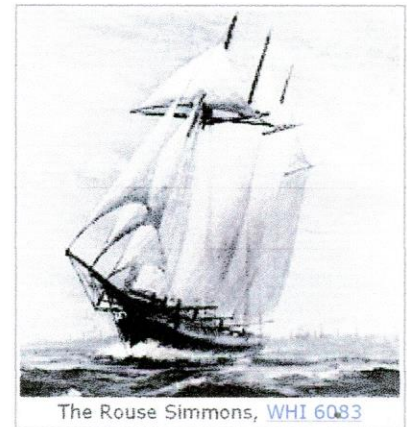
#### The Tale of the Christmas Tree Ship

On a chilly November day in 1912, Phillip Bauswein penned a letter to his sister in Chicago. He wrote, "This will be my last letter. I have a beautiful blue spruce tree for your baby's grave. We are all on board and will pull the ropes, and off we will be." Phillip had no idea how prophetic his letter would be. A week later, Phillip's sister Augusta nervously awaited at the pier in Chicago. Her brother's ship was now several days overdue after a tremendous storm had swept Lake Michigan.



Phillip was one of 16 crew members that departed Thompson, Michigan, on November 22, 1912, aboard the [schooner Rouse Simmons](#). Loaded with her yearly cargo of Upper Peninsula Christmas trees, the Rouse Simmons set sail on her final trip of the season. Captain Herman Schuenemann was anxious to get home to Chicago — not only to deliver his cargo of Christmas cheer, but also to return to his family for the winter after spending a long season away sailing the Great Lakes. The Great Lakes were notorious for whipping up ferocious November storms that could wreak havoc on any vessel caught out on the lake, but Captain Schuenemann and the Rouse Simmons had weathered many Great Lakes storms. With confidence in his vessel and homesickness in his heart, Captain Schuenemann ordered the lines to be cast off and set sail for Chicago.

The Rouse Simmons never arrived at Chicago. She was lost with all hands somewhere on Lake Michigan, but no one knew exactly where or why. It was not until 59 years later that the Rouse Simmons was discovered, lying in 170 feet of water northeast of Two Rivers. The ship was remarkably intact and still held her cargo of Christmas trees, stacked neatly in her hold. Today, after nearly a century in the cold depths of Lake Michigan, the Rouse Simmons and her cargo of trees remain well preserved in the cold, fresh water, and her legend has grown to mythical proportions. The subject of numerous books, television programs and holiday plays, the Rouse Simmons' tragic tale arouses growing interest each year.



The Rouse Simmons, WHI 6083

Despite its legendary status, the Rouse Simmons' wreck site has never been properly studied or documented. A visit to the Rouse Simmons today is like touring an underwater museum, where many artifacts lie untouched since they were handled by the crew in their last desperate hours that fateful November day. There is much we can learn from the Rouse Simmons' remains. Nineteenth-century vessels were not constructed from any written plans, and much of how these vessels were constructed is lost to us today. By studying wreck sites like the Rouse Simmons, we can not only learn about how these vessels were constructed, but also about how the crew lived, worked, and died on the Great Lakes.

The Wisconsin Historical Society's Maritime Preservation and Archaeology Program is focusing this

summer's efforts on documenting the Rouse Simmons wreck site. Staffed largely by volunteers, the maritime program is spending two weeks in the chilly depths of Lake Michigan to document the shipwreck, as well as to look for clues that may tell us why the seemingly seaworthy vessel sank.

The Rouse Simmons project has several goals. The first is to document 19th-century hull construction, because not only does the Rouse Simmons possess a unique and dramatic story, she is also a rather unusual vessel. She is a double centerboard schooner — a rare vessel type on the Great Lakes. Double centerboard schooners were built specifically for the Great Lakes lumber trade, and today we have a poor understanding of why a few shipbuilders chose to add two centerboards, while most other shipyards installed only one centerboard.

The survey crew is also looking for clues as to why the Rouse Simmons sank. Of primary interest is how the ship's wheel ended up nearly a mile north of the shipwreck. Was it knocked off the vessel in the storm, leaving the crew no way to steer the schooner in the heavy seas? The survey crew will look to answer these and other questions during their dives on the Rouse Simmons. The results of the survey will be published this winter, as well as presented at many venues throughout the state. The results of the project will also be used to write a nomination of the Rouse Simmons to the National Register of Historic Places.

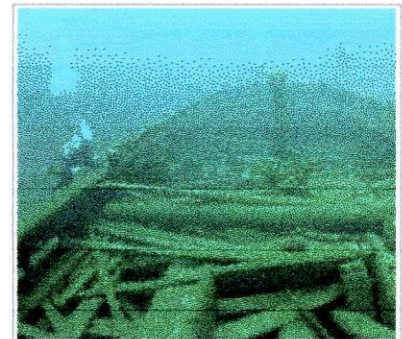
To learn more about the Rouse Simmons, the Schuenemann family, and Great Lakes schooners, explore the pages of Rochelle Pennington's definitive work, [Historic Christmas Tree Ship: A True Story of Faith, Hope and Love](#), which is available through our online store.

In addition to work on the Rouse Simmons, the maritime staff has been busy completing the installation of eight new Maritime Trails signs. [Wisconsin's Maritime Trails](#) expand heritage tourism opportunities, foster wider public appreciation of the state's rich maritime past, and encourage preservation of these unique maritime sites. The trails wind above and below the waves, creating an integrated network of Web sites, interactive kiosks, museums, interpretive signage, public presentations, shipwreck moorings, lighthouses, and historic waterfronts that can be enjoyed by individuals of all ages. You can also explore several [Great Lakes shipwrecks](#) online and learn more about how crews document these fascinating sites.

:: Posted August 18, 2006



The stern of the Rouse Simmons remains largely intact, making this underwater museum extremely important.



Archaeologists explore the hold of the Rouse Simmons.

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