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The Christmas Tree Ship and Captain

The “Christmas Tree Ship”, known formally as the *Rouse Simmons*, left the harbor of Thompson, Michigan on November 28, 1912. She was headed for Chicago’s Clark Street wharf with a full load of evergreen Christmas trees. The seas on that dreadful November day were torturous and the sky was filled with blinding snow. The brave Captain Herman Schuenemann was outdone and his beautiful ship sunk; losing his load, his life, and 15 loyal comrades (Sch. 1). The *Rouse Simmons* was a great three-masted schooner that provided many families throughout Chicago with Christmas trees. The loss of this great vessel affected families of the crew, loggers in Thompson, and many families preparing to celebrate Christmas around one of the greatest lakes in the world.

Herman Schuenemann was not born into a sailing family. His father, Frederick, was born in Germany. He and his wife, Louise, moved to New York sometime between 1845 and 1855. After several years in New York, the Schuenemann’s moved to Manitowoc, Wisconsin. A few years later, Fredrick and Louise moved to Algoma, Wisconsin. Shortly after the Schuenemann’s moved to Algoma they had their first baby, a boy named August. Within the next four years the Schuenemann’s had two more babies, Mary and Herman. Unfortunately, the young family didn’t have much time together because Fredrick was drafted to fight in the Civil War in 1864. He had no choice and was gone almost immediately. While he was gone, Mary became crazy and committed suicide (Neuschel 5).

Fredrick didn't last long away from home. After a few months away from home his eyesight started to get to the point where he couldn't perform many tasks on his own. The government sent him home quickly, where Herman was his eyes for a few years. Herman was an excellent student and always did very well in his studies. It seemed that he would complete much more schooling than anyone else in his family ever had. This theory held up until he, like his brother, was lured to the docks and the great ships of the 1800's. The best possible explanation for Herman quitting school and going to work on the lakes was that he just wanted to get away from the poverty his life would be destined to fall into if he stay with his family (Neuschel 6). "On a sailing vessel a boy would learn to live with the unseen and contend with the unexpected. There was a mystery and adventure aboard a ship which spoke to the heart in ways which could not be articulated, and make the cares of home seem far away and not quite so real."

August Schuenemann was slowly working his way to the top of the sailing world. He started off as a crew member for a very prosperous old sailor, Johnny Doak, then became master of one of Doak's ships. This gave Herman even more inspiration to succeed. He could already see how his brother had pulled himself out of poverty and was starting to make a name for himself (Neuschel 12). In 1875, August became partial owner of the *W.H. Hinsdale*. The schooner was soon nothing more than scrap lumber, but August now had himself on solid ground and a good foothold for Herman. With the money the brothers had been making they moved the Schuenemann family to Chicago (Neuschel 12).

By 1889 Herman was working hand in hand with his older brother August. Around the time of 1890 the ownership of the *Josephine Dresden* was transferred from August to Herman (Neuschel 18). Although Herman now had his own vessel and was making decent money; he was still having problems supporting his family. He was getting little help from August, and he

had no choice but to invest some of his money into some land-based businesses. In 1894-1895 he owned both a grocery business and a tavern (Neuschel 19).

By the late 1890's the Schuenemann brothers had gotten into the Christmas Tree business. Their business grew so fast that within a couple years they needed to buy more vessels to transport all the trees (Neuschel 19). In the fall of 1898 August purchased a 31 year old schooner named the *S. Thal*. The first time she set sail, in early November, was the last time he was ever seen. The *S. Thal* was stranded in a ferocious Lake Michigan storm, off the coast of Glencoe, Illinois, and was never seen or heard from again (Neuschel 20).

August's death did not slow Herman down one bit. He moved around constantly trying to find the best possible business opportunity. Although he tried many things, he realized that the best money producer was the Christmas tree business (Neuschel 21). He purchased the *Mary Collins* and used her for a short time, until he bought the *George L. Wrenn* (Neuschel 22). The *George L. Wrenn* was the most known "Christmas Tree Ship" of that time period. Herman made many voyages with her from Thompson to Chicago.

Herman's business kept growing at an amazing rate. Within a few years of purchasing the *George L. Wrenn* he started to control every aspect of the Christmas tree business. Herman took many risks by purchasing many different aspects of the trade. First, he hired a crew that helped run the ship, but also cut and hauled the Christmas trees when they were docked in Thompson. He managed to cut another corner by selling his trees straight to the public off of the ship. This eliminated the need to sell his trees at a whole sale price to a local merchant (Neuschel 21). In 1910 Herman bought another schooner, this one name the *Rouse Simmons*. The *Rouse Simmons* is the last ship he ever owned and came to be known as the "Christmas Tree Ship". The same year that he bought the *Rouse Simmons*, Herman became owner of the "Northern Michigan

Evergreen Nursery.” Every one of his investments paid great dividends and he was soon doing much better than he ever thought possible (Neuschel 23).

The *Rouse Simmons* was the biggest asset to Herman’s new business. It was a three-masted schooner built in Milwaukee by the Kenosha shipping interests. It was 125 feet long and about 24 feet wide (Meron). The *Rouse Simmons* could easily carry anywhere from 6,000 to 8,000 evergreens on its deck (Neuschel 24). This ship was the biggest thing anyone in the Schuenemann family had ever owned.

The *Rouse Simmons* was designed to withstand Lake Michigan’s horrendous storms during the stormy season. The stormy season on Lake Michigan runs from late fall through early winter. More ships have sunk during those few months than any other time of the year. Herman Schuenemann was very aware of the potential danger of sailing on the Great Lakes during the stormy season, and he was usually very cautious about putting his ship and crew in harms way.

On November 23, 1912 the *Rouse Simmons* was loaded with Christmas trees for the last time. Captain Schuenemann figured that this would be the best year, for profit, that he had ever seen. The demand for trees had increased, but the number of vessels shipping them had decreased. Knowing this, Herman had his crew load the *Rouse Simmons* with more trees than she had ever carried in her many voyages. He ordered that they lash another 500 evergreens to the deck. The crew discovered that the deck was already overloaded, so they had no choice but to tie trees to anything they could find, including the masts (Neuschel 2).

The weather on that cold, November day was slowly turning into one of the great storms that Lake Michigan was known for in late November. Some of the crew knew that the added weight to the ship would be a major problem if they encountered rough seas. While the crew was getting the *Rouse Simmons* ready to sail away, all of the rats on the ship ran to shore. To a sailor,

this is one of the worst omens that one could witness before he is ready to head to sea. One sailor in particular, Hogan Hogensen, abandoned the ship and took a train back to Chicago. Everyone else decided that the rats were only an old superstition and they would sail with the ship back to the “Windy City” (Orr).

The *Rouse Simmons* was well on its way to Chicago when it encountered some of the roughest water Captain Schuenemann had ever seen. Not only was the water rough, but there was terrible wind and blinding snow (Neuschel 25). He did everything he could to try and save his ship and crew. His ship was becoming more damaged by the minute. The water and snow was starting to freeze to the Christmas trees on his deck and were adding much more weight to the ship.

A car ferry named the *Ann Arbor No. 5* was doing everything it could to find its way back to a safe harbor on the stormy day of November 23. Its captain was trying to reach the Sturgeon Bay Shipping Canal when he sighted a three-masted schooner a few miles north of Kewaunee. It was rather obvious to him that the vessel was in distress and being badly beaten by the storm. There was nothing he could do and he stayed on his route to Sturgeon Bay (Neuschel 25). About an hour after the first sighting, the life-saving crew at Kewaunee spotted a ship several miles away that was flying its distress signal. They decided there was nothing they could do in their row-powered boat and called another life saving station, in Two Rivers, that had a powerboat. The crew at Two Rivers attempted to save the ship, but they could never find it. The ship seen off of Kewaunee flying its distress signal was never seen again.

The family and friends of the crew on the *Rouse Simmons* finally accepted the fact that it was sunk in early December. Some of the trees on the ship were washed to shore and were gathered and sold at the Clark Street wharf. Any hope that the ship might be just lost was erased when a

bottle, sealed with a note, was washed to shore. The note was signed by the first mate Nelson and read, "These lines written at 10:30 p.m. Schooner R.S. ready to go down about 20 miles southwest of Two Rivers Point between 15-20 miles offshore. All hands lashed to one line. Goodbye" (Sch. 2).

For a few years after the loss of the *Rouse Simmons*, Herman's wife, Barbara, kept on the tradition of selling Christmas trees to the city of Chicago. She owned her own ship, but didn't do any of the sailing. Mrs. Schuenemann hired her own crew and made wreaths and other decorations with the help of her daughters. After the death of her husband, she never trusted the sea again and started to ship all the trees by rail rather than by boat. Barbara sold Christmas trees until she died in June of 1933 (LaBrassuer part 2).

The *Rouse Simmons* was finally found, off the coast of Kewaunee, in 1971. The diver who found the remains, G. Kent Bellrichard, is from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bellrichard photographed his expedition, which showed solid evidence that the remains were that of the *Rouse Simmons*. He showed the letters that were painted on the side of the ship, and retrieved a china bowl that had "R.S." engraved in its side, the ship's foghorn, and a few preserved Christmas trees. Artifacts from one of the greatest ships to ever sail the Great Lakes are displayed at the Marine Museum in Manitowoc, Wisconsin (Meron 2).