



The Christmas Tree Ship

It was a Friday when the Simmons left Manistique and so vicious was that storm that the Butcher Boy didn't venture out of the harbor until Sunday.

A Phantom Ship In The Storm

Some say the Coast Guard watchers at Sturgeon Bay caught a momentary glimpse of the Simmons through the swirling snowstorm and another steamer reported seeing a craft shaped like her three miles offshore at Kewaunee. She was said to be flying distress signals.

A rescue boat was launched from Kewaunee, but couldn't reach the troubled vessel. A Coast Guardsman who had been involved in the vain attempt reported later, "her sails were blown to tatters, her deck swept clean, her hull sheathed in ice."

Rescue boats were also launched from Two Rivers, and when they had rounded Two Rivers Point, (now Rawley Point) the crewmen had a view that extended nearly to Kewaunee. There was no sight of the Simmons.

In the days that followed, the two Sheboygan newspapers, The Press and the Daily Journal, had a few paragraphs here and there about the fact that the Simmons was overdue, but there were no blaring headlines about the apparent tragedy. The papers were involved in a bitter feud at the time over the operation of the city water works, and there was room for little else on the front page.

The first front page article appeared in The Press on Dec. 6 — a full 13 days after the ship set sail.

But Sheboygan was slated to have an involvement in a bizarre chapter of the misfortune.

On the 13th of December, Chicago newspapers reported erroneously that Capt. Schuenemann's body

had been found in the lake off of Sheboygan, and that a bottle with a last message from one of the crewmen had also floated ashore.

Rumors Irk Sheboygan Editors

This story didn't sit well with the Sheboygan newspaper editors, and they let it be known. The headline in The Press that day read: "Wild Rumor Says Body From Schooner Simmons Found Here," and another headline underneath added, "Chicago Newspapers This Afternoon Print Fake That Has No Foundation in Fact."

It was a story, not an editorial, but it told the world how The Sheboygan Press viewed the matter.

Solid evidence of the fate of Simmons came the next spring when commercial fishermen north of Sheboygan complained bitterly. Their nets were being clogged with thousands of Christmas trees that were floating ashore.

That left little doubt that the hardy captain and his crew now reposed in a cold, dark grave, but the chilled waters which had taken Schuenemann's life ironically preserved a bit of it too.

Twelve years passed, and then someone found a wallet in the lake just north of Sheboygan. There was a rubber band around it and inside there were newspaper clippings still legible after years of exposure. It was Capt. Schuenemann's wallet and the clippings were newspaper accounts of his fabled Christmas tree voyages.

There was another note-in-a-bottle incident too, and this one was apparently no hoax.

In April, 1927, a full 15 years after the Christmas tree ship disappeared, a bottle with a note inside washed ashore in Sheboygan. It was a chilling memoir of the terrifying final moments aboard the Rouse Simmons.

The note, penned by a Capt. Nelson who was also aboard said: "These lines were written at 10:30 p.m. Schooner R.S. ready to go down about 20 miles southeast of Two Rivers Point, between 15 and 20 miles offshore. All hands lashed to one line. Good-bye."



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