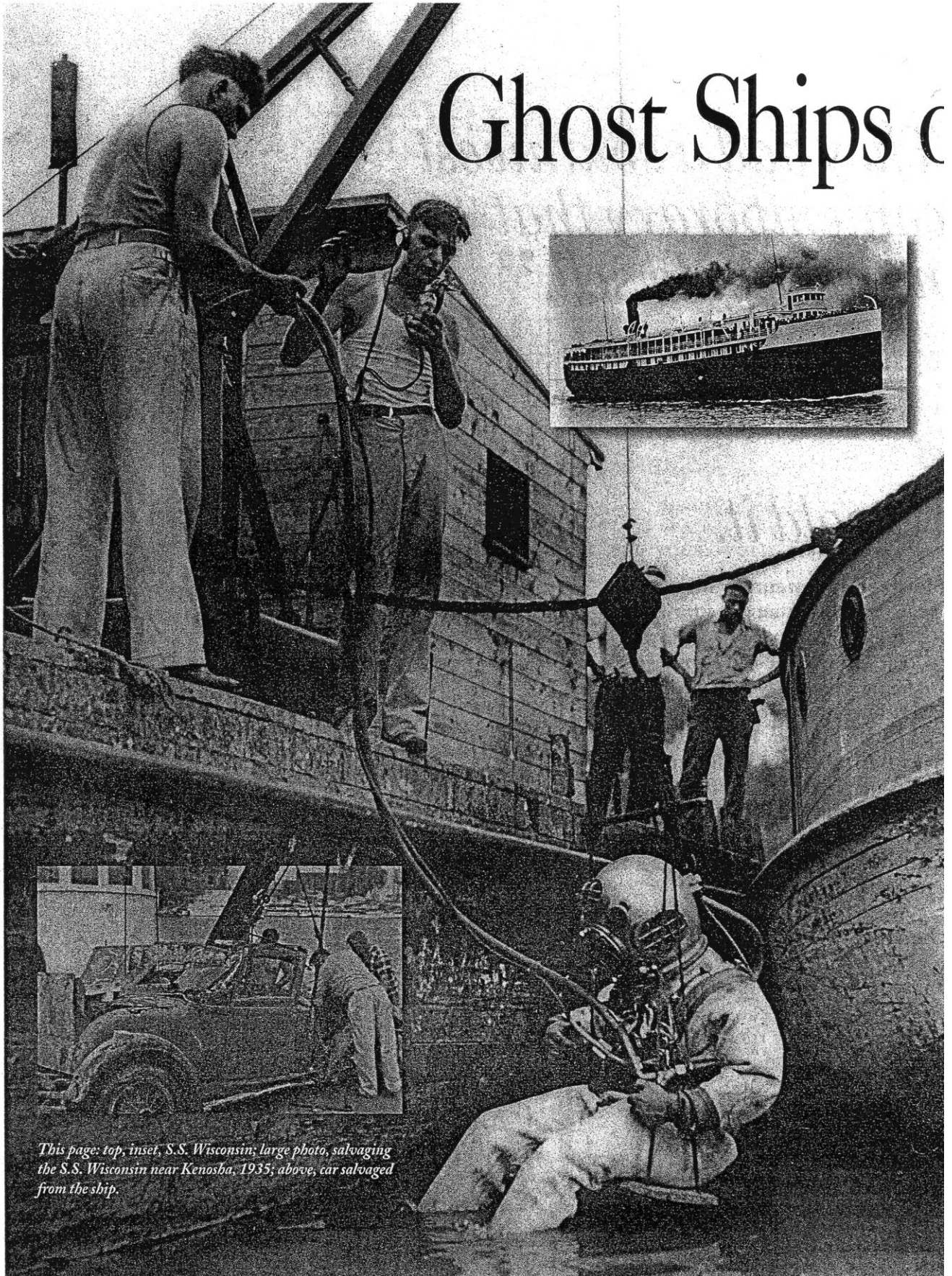


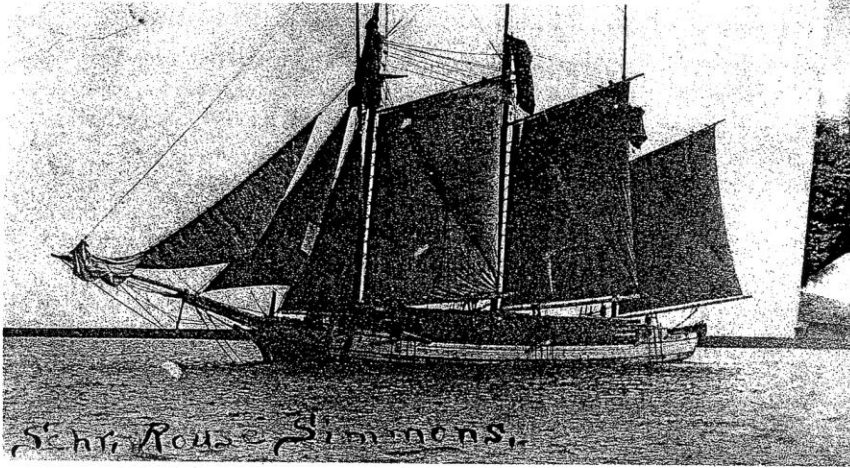
# Ghost Ships c



*This page: top, inset, S.S. Wisconsin; large photo, salvaging the S.S. Wisconsin near Kenosha, 1935; above, car salvaged from the ship.*

# Lake Michigan

BY KATHLEEN WINKLER



SOMETIMES THEY were sailing ships, their masts like needles stitching the gray sky, their sails ballooning and flapping in the howling winds. Sometimes they were steamers, boilers chugging, powerful engines driving, ramming head-on into the waves that crashed and thundered over their decks.

Sometimes passengers crowded their decks, clinging to railings. Sometimes they were cargo ships, holds filled with the goods that drove the economies of their day.

One thing they all had in common: they met their destinies in a swirl of wind and waves on Lake Michigan. And, today, they lie at the lake's bottom in a dim, light-filtered grave of sand and water.

Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes have a reputation for devouring ships. Some 6,000 of them rest, noses plowed into the sand and muck, at the

*Above: Rouse Simmons, also called The Christmas Tree Ship; anchor from the Rouse Simmons now at the Milwaukee Yacht Club, photo by Judy Jepson. Remainder of photos from the Great Lakes Marine Collection of the Milwaukee Public Library/Wisconsin Marine Historical Society. Right: S.S. Milwaukee now rests in 125 ft. of water off the Milwaukee harbor; loading railroad cars onto the ship.*

*Exclusively Yours* MAY 1998

bottoms of the five lakes. In all, more ships have gone to the bottom on the Great Lakes than on all the oceans combined. And Lake Michigan has taken more than its share.

Why have these tragedies occurred? According to Mark Gumbinger, owner of Southport Video in Kenosha, and student of Great Lakes' shipwrecks, the difference in temperatures between wind and water gives birth to great storms over the lake, especially in October and November when most shipwrecks occur.

"The lake water is 40 or 50

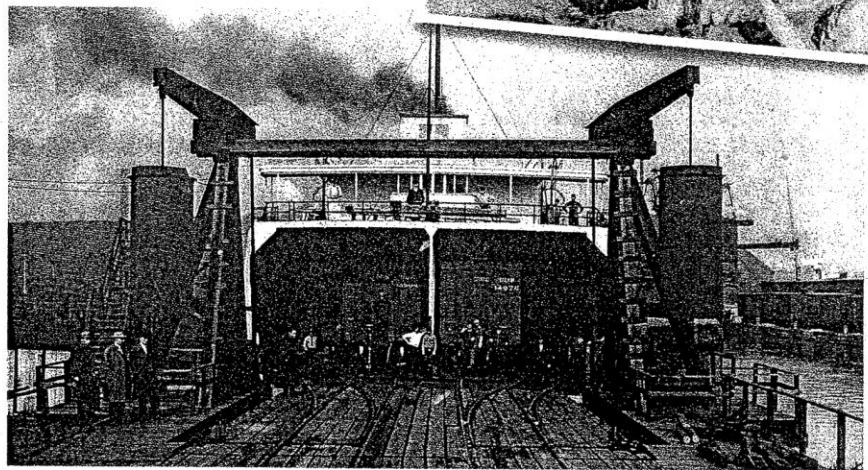
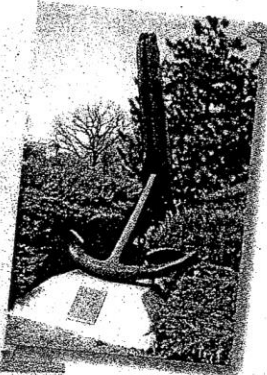
degrees; cold Arctic air masses come down from Canada," he explained. "That creates small water hurricanes over the lake." Such a combination of wind and waves can blenderize a ship in minutes.

Another factor is the degree of chop on Lake Michigan. Oceans, because they are so large, produce huge, slow-rolling waves. But inland lakes with their smaller acreage are filled with sharp, choppy waves. "They can really batter you," Gumbinger said.

**The Rouse Simmons:**

**The Christmas Tree Ship**

People have always loved their



## st Ships

Christmas trees—that was just as true in the early days of this century as today. Back in 1912, residents of Chicago had a Christmas tradition. Several weeks before the holiday they would gather on the Clark Street Bridge and watch the ships arrive carrying Christmas trees from Upper Michigan. Once docked, they would swarm aboard, snatching up their holiday tree. You could get a small tree for as little as a quarter; while one that swept the ceiling might go for a

dollar. Captain Herman Schuenemann was known as the “Christmas Tree Captain” around Chicago because he brought the best trees; in addition, his wife and daughter made wreaths to trim doors or circle gas lamps.

Schuenemann had bought his ship, the Rouse Simmons, in 1910. It wasn't new—built in 1868, it had made over 1,000 runs on Lake Michigan carrying loads of lumber to Chicago. The ship had been sunk once, re-floated and refurbished, and de-masted on another occasion. It was probably looking a bit

shabby by 1912 with patched canvas and paint peeling from the hull.

November of 1912 hadn't been a good month on Lake Michigan. Several huge storms had raked the lake; ten ships had gone down, over 400 men had been lost. It was already the 21st—most ships stopped sailing by mid-month. But Captain Schuenemann was determined to make this one last run.

The ship was filled with fresh Michigan Christmas trees stacked in the hold and lashed to the sides. Every spare inch was trimmed in green; one observer said it looked like a floating forest. The ship pulled out of Thompson, Michigan, in the early afternoon of that fateful day. It was well on its way to its destination when a fierce storm struck. The ship and its load were pelted by rain and battered by waves. The sails shredded. The trees, normally a light load, weighed more and more as they were soaked with water that froze on their branches. Two men tried to cut some of the lashed trees loose, but were swept overboard.

The rain turned to a blizzard. The ship tried desperately to make safe harbor on the Wisconsin side, but the wind blew it back out. It was seen near Kewaunee flying a distress flag; a power rescue boat set out, but was unable to reach the floundering ship. The would-be rescuers later described it as floating low in the water, the trees bristling with ice.

The Rouse Simmons was never seen again. Two weeks later a bottle washed ashore with a message saying, “Friday. Everybody goodbye. I guess we are all through. Sea washed over deck Thursday, leaking bad....God help us.” It was signed by the captain.

Fifteen years went by; another message washed ashore. It detailed the ship's location and concluded by saying that “all hands are lashed to one line. Goodbye.” It was signed by the first mate.

Legends about the ship grew—poems and newspaper stories were printed every Christmas. In 1924, the captain's wallet washed ashore preserved in a waterproof wrapping.

In 1971, a diver, looking for another ship among the 40 or 50 wrecks that lie on the bottom off Two Rivers,

*Exclusively Yours* MAY 1998

## Ghost Ships

stumbled on the wreck of the Rouse Simmons, identifying it by the nameplate and the bundles of needle-stripped trees like skeletal hands in its hold. The mystery of the Christmas Tree Ship was solved.

Today, some artifacts from the ship are housed in the Roger Street Fishing Village Museum in Two Rivers, and the Manitowoc Maritime Museum. The anchor rests at the door of the Milwaukee Yacht Club. No bodies were ever recovered, but the Captain's name is on a joint grave with his wife in Illinois, a single Christmas tree carved into the stone.

### The S.S. Milwaukee: Wreck of the Car Ferry

October of 1929 was another bad month on Lake Michigan. Weather watchers claimed they'd never seen such strong winds that lasted so long. On the morning of October 22nd, the weather was so bad that some of the crew working for Captain Robert “Heavy Weather” McKay (so nicknamed because he sailed in weather

that scared others off) were sure that their captain wouldn't take out the huge, steam-powered ferryboat carrying loaded railroad cars across the lake from Milwaukee to Grand Haven. A couple of them even went to a movie!

But the ship left Milwaukee at 3:00 in the afternoon bound for Grand Haven. Twenty-five railroad cars were lashed with chains to the four tracks inside the hold. They carried a varied load: cattle feed, salt, barley, automobiles and trucks in the latest 1929 design, bath tubs and toilets, canned vegetables and grits. An observer in a lighthouse said he saw the ship for about 10 minutes, pitching and rolling amid the waves.

The harbor officials at Grand Haven didn't worry at first when the S.S. Milwaukee didn't show up on time. The Milwaukee didn't have a wireless radio, so they assumed it had hunkered down somewhere to ride out the storm—a common practice for ships caught in bad weather. Indeed, one observer saw a ship behind Beaver Island and thought it was the Milwaukee. A search party was sent out

*Exclusively Yours* MAY 1998

the next day; the ship behind the island was a package steamer.

Three days later, on the morning of October 25th, two bodies wearing S.S. Milwaukee life vests were washed ashore. A little later a lifeboat was found near Holland, Michigan, with four bodies of crew members who died of exposure in the open boat. Other bodies were found in Racine and Kenosha, one wearing a watch that had stopped at 9:45. Wreckage and bodies were eventually found scattered all over the lake; most of the 47 crew members' bodies were never recovered.

A few weeks later a bottle with a note in it was found. The message, signed by the ship's purser read, “Ship taking on water fast...Seas are tremendous, flicker [seaman lingo for the living quarters] flooded.”

Another note signed by Captain McKay, but never authenticated, washed ashore saying, “Worst storm I've ever seen, can't stay up much longer, hole in side of boat.”

There are a couple of theories about how the S.S. Milwaukee was destroyed. It might have been a broken sea gate built to withstand waves from washing over the deck; it might have been the railroad cars raking loose and slamming into the ship's walls.

People were shocked that the Milwaukee didn't have a wireless radio. Because of that wreck a law was passed to require radios on all ships on Lake Michigan.

Divers have explored the wreck of the S.S. Milwaukee as it rests in 125 feet of water off the Milwaukee harbor. The deck is littered with twisted cattle fencing; antique autos with their canvas tops rotted off but windows intact rest inside one rail car. Bathtubs and toilet tanks are tossed like doll house furniture inside another. Yet, inside a ceiling fixture are four light bulbs, unshattered.

#### The S.S. Wisconsin:

##### Falling Stocks and a Sinking Ship

It was a bad day on Wall Street, the day of the legendary stock market crash. But the market wasn't the only thing that went under on October 29, 1929. So did the S.S. Wisconsin, a huge cargo ship that had plied the waters of Lake Michigan for 30 years.

Designed by a renowned naval

*Exclusively Yours* MAY 1998

architect and built from Swedish iron, the S.S. Wisconsin was the strongest, heaviest ship on the Great Lakes. Perhaps that's why the Captain, Dougal Morrison, decided to take it out on a run from Chicago to Milwaukee just a week after his friend, Captain Robert McKay, had gone down with his ship, the S.S. Milwaukee.

Perhaps Morrison thought his ship was bigger and heavier and it could withstand the storms that were raking Lake Michigan that fall. Perhaps, since time is money in the shipping business, he was afraid the storm would take a week to blow over and he'd lose too much time. Perhaps he was sure the vessel, which was designed to sail all winter by crushing ice in its path, could handle anything.

No one knows why he made the decision to sail, but he did. The ship left the Chicago harbor in the early evening, carrying among other things "prescription" whiskey (this was prohibition). They were just past the Illinois border when the first of many distress messages came over the wireless. The howling northeaster was flinging rain in the ship's face, towering waves battered the sides. Cargo tore loose; crates of heavy iron castings slammed into the hull. By 1:00 a.m. the ship had sprung a leak; water was knee deep in the hold. Distress messages flew. Within two hours the water was 15 feet deep and the ship lost power, listing dark and paralyzed in the pounding waves.

"Due to sink at any time now, for God's sake send help," was the last message from the ship's radio. By 4:00 the ship was listing so far over that the lifeboats on one side were useless. At 4:30 Captain Morrison gave the command to abandon ship even though help was on the way—time had run out. He dropped the anchors essentially giving up on the ship, since with anchors down it couldn't be towed. Rescue craft arrived as the crew launched lifeboats or jumped, life-vested, into the water. Many lives were saved due to the heroism of the rescuers, but 16 men died that early morning.

*Exclusively Yours* MAY 1998

By 7:00 the ship had rolled onto its side; at 7:10 it slipped, stern first, under the waves.

The S.S. Wisconsin's location was unknown for many years until a local fisherman hired a diver to find out what was tangling his nets just off Kenosha. The Wisconsin was found.

The ship lies upright. Its anchor chains stretch out into the murky water. An unbroken glass bowl and shot glass toss and roll with the underwater currents. The grill of the tractor used to move cargo about the

ship rusts on its deck.

Even this monster ship, bigger and heavier than any waves—or so it was said—had been no match for the power of Lake Michigan.

Fascinating places, these old wrecks. They belong to all of us, because according to Wisconsin state law, the wrecks are considered graves, state property, and can't be salvaged. There they lie under the waves, submerged museums of a time long gone.

Mark Gumbinger, video producer,

*Continued on page 42*