

The CHRISTMAS-TREE SHIP

BY JACK and JILL

Eighty years ago, two brothers, Hermann and August Schünemann, lived in the far north village of Manistique, Michigan. They were lumberjacks and they had a problem. The forest where they worked was full of sturdy young evergreens, but there were too many of them. The brothers knew the spruce trees should be thinned out to benefit the forest. The trouble was that the lumber would be young and green, and what would it be good for?

Hermann and August were walking through the woods one November morning in 1887. They were discussing the matter again, and trying to decide what to do. The first snow had fallen the night before and the branches of the dark green spruces looked as if they'd been sprinkled with sugar.

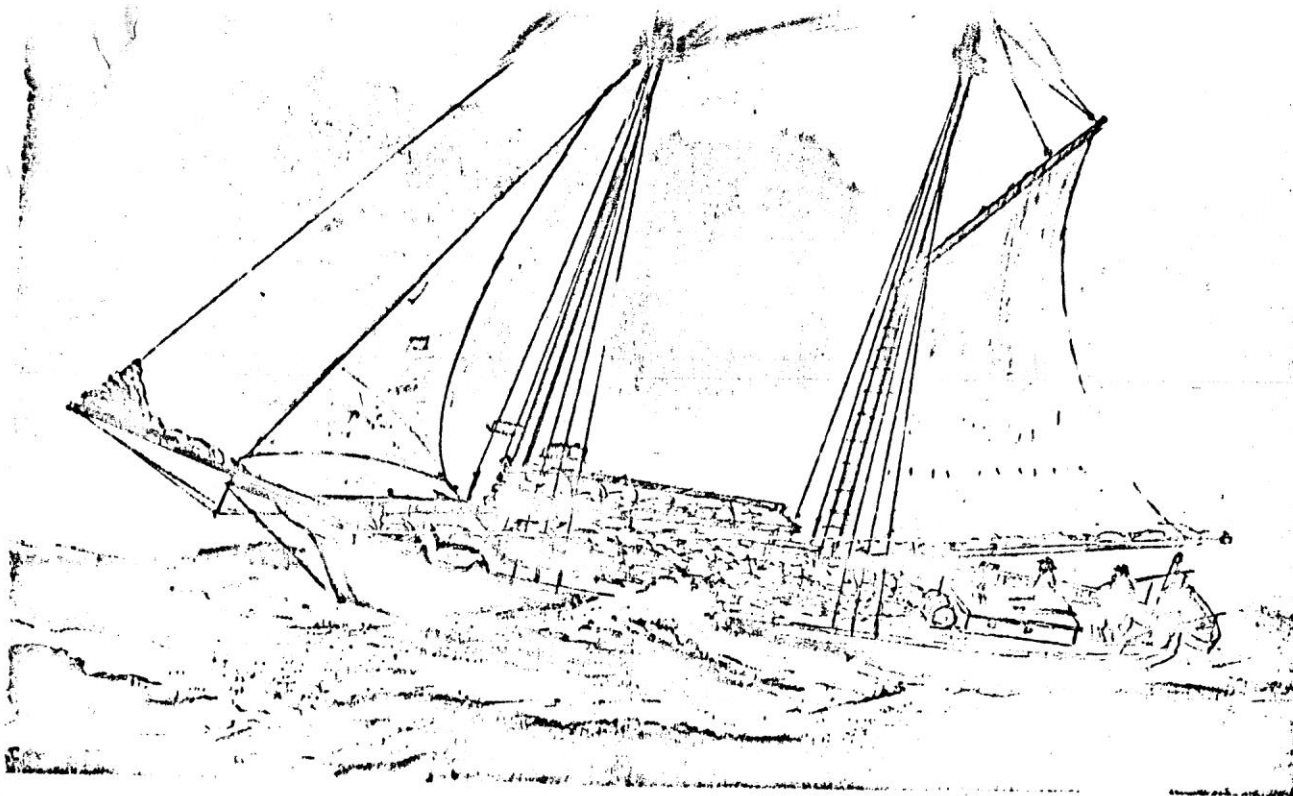
"They're regular *Weihnachtsbaum* (Christmas trees)," said August, and he touched a frosted bough with

affection. "All they need to make them perfect is candles."

"*Weihnachtsbaum!*" Hermann exclaimed. "Gus, I think you've hit on a solution!"

Excitedly, he explained. The city of Chicago was full of Germans, and without doubt many of them clung to the old and cherished customs of their fatherland. Surely they would be happy to buy Christmas trees and the Schünemanns would be happy to supply them! They could carry the trees to Chicago aboard Hermann's schooner, the *Rouse Simmons*. The very idea pleased Hermann.

August was doubtful. He and Hermann were good sailors, but Chicago was four hundred miles away and Lake Michigan was unpredictable. It could kick up a lot of rough water in the late fall. Besides, assuming they got their cargo through safely, how would the people of Chicago know they had arrived?



ART BY LEONARD VOSBURGH

"The Chicago waterfront is a busy place," Hermann said. "The news will get around."

They chose the trees carefully, and cut some of every size. Little trees for tables. Middle-sized trees for houses. Tall trees for churches and hotels. When they were all loaded on board the *Rouse Simmons*, their sharp clean scent perfumed the air.

The brothers sailed the ship the hazardous four-hundred-mile voyage to Chicago with little difficulty. Two weeks before Christmas 1887, the *Rouse Simmons* was tied up beside a dock behind the old red brick warehouses near the Clark Street bridge.

As Hermann had predicted, news of the trees' arrival got around. Sooner than they had dared dream, every spruce had been sold. Everyone who bought one of the trees thanked the brothers for remembering about the Christmas trees in Germany.

"Be sure to bring the Christmas-tree ship back again next year," they said. "We'll be looking for it!"

The next year, and the year after, the brothers sailed the Christmas-tree ship to Chicago. The demand for trees grew with every season, and soon each brother had a ship to command. But in 1898, tragedy struck. August had set sail for Chicago when a violent storm arose on the lake. The ship sank, and August and his crew were lost. Hermann managed to get through the storm, only to learn of the loss of his brother. He found it very hard to say "*Fröhliche Weihnachten*" (Merry Christmas) to the customers who bought his trees that year.

It was a saddened Hermann who sailed for home. But he returned the next year and for eleven years thereafter. He and his crew sailed through many storms. Then, early in December, 1912, they set out once again. Before long they were struggling



"Fröhliche Weihnächten,"
Mrs. Schünemann said.

against snow, heavy seas, and strong head winds. The *Rouse Simmons* was battling a raging storm.

In Chicago, people came daily to the Clark Street bridge to look at the empty dock. "Where is the Christmas-tree ship?" they asked each other. "Captain Schünemann has never been this late before."

On December 13, a man who was walking on the beach at Sheboygan, Wisconsin, picked up a bottle with a paper inside. The page, torn from a ship's logbook, bore a scrawled message:

Friday, December 6—everybody, good-bye. I guess we are all through. Sea washed over our deckload yesterday. Leaking bad. God help us.

Hermann Schünemann

That year, there was no Christmas-tree ship at the Clark Street dock, and the people of Chicago said sadly that there never would be again.

But they were wrong. In December of 1913, another schooner loaded with Christmas trees was there. Hermann Schünemann's wife and daughters had brought it down from northern Michigan. Mrs. Schünemann, herself, had gone into the forest with the woodcutters and selected the trees.

"Hermann would not want me to disappoint the people of Chicago," she said.

And so, for twenty more seasons, Mrs. Schünemann brought her cargo of trees down Lake Michigan to the people of Chicago.

Even though the Christmas-tree ship comes no more to its dock near the Clark Street bridge, the ship and the Schünemanns have never been forgotten. They are part of a unique Christmas legend that is told and retold in Chicago every year when the season is near. 