

# The CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP

By SIDNEY  
McNEILL SUTHERLAND

The Story of  
Chicago's Most  
Beautiful Tradition, Kept  
Ever Green  
on the Site of  
Its Greatest  
Tragedy

THERE is a spot in Chicago which is at once the site of the city's greatest tragedy and the scene of its most beautiful tradition. Pedestrians crossing the dilapidated structure called the Clark Street Bridge often pause at its southwestern end and gaze at the narrow, crumbling sidewalk that runs along the bank and passes for a dock. It is a melancholy place. Oil streaked water moves sluggishly, debris laden, backward from the lake; it laves the rotting piles with a foul caress and nibbles at the tilting foundations of a row of repellent red brick buildings that teeter crazily along the river edge.

Across the stream tower giant wholesale warehouses, and in the distance, east and west, are the misty outlines of many bridges.

Over everything hangs blinding, stifling bituminous smoke belched from a thousand stacks and chimneys. It drifts and writhes and envelops like a dirty shroud; it is the sooty twilight of a lazy city, a never absent testimonial to a dearth of civic self-respect. Buildings, shipping, railroads, gas plants, each is generous in its murky contribution to Chicago's noontime dusk.

And above, below, and all about are the tympanum rending noises of the waterfront. Cobblestone and switch frog, steamboat and truck backfire, elevated and surface clank, shouts and oaths and poultry pandemonium—

all the bedlam of a growing metropolis unashamed of its lusty unrestraint—echoes and reechoes along the cañon of the river.

Here it was, in the smoke and turmoil and stench, that the town huddled one early, dirty morning in June of 1915, to watch the rowboats and the divers bring up the bodies of eight hundred and twelve men and women and children, catapulted into the river when the steamboat Eastland turned on its side under the weight of a crowd of Western Electric Company employes excursion bound.

Here, too, it is that the tender saga of the town's most precious memory is told. Lips have tightened there for nearly forty years, and eyes have blinked with tears as salty as those the Eastland caused—but with this difference: smiles have trembled behind those narrowed eyes and tautened lips. And this is Chicago's loveliest romance.

In a late November day of 1884 a little schooner furled its sails at the mouth of the river, hailed a tow, and presently was lashed to the dock. It was a newer sidewalk then.



Mrs. Barbara Schuenemann in the midst of the spruce and balsam trees which her little schooner, Fearless, brings every Christmas from the Northern woods to gladden the hearts of young and old at Yuletide. Left—The Fearless at its Chicago dock.

Early passersby halted on the bridge and stared down in amazement; from jib to tiny cabin aft were piled hundreds of Christmas trees—little ones for a baby's single candle, larger ones to hold a family's gifts, and big ones to fix a Sunday school's attention.

A boy about thirteen years old was tacking up a canvas sign:

THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP.  
MY PRICES ARE THE LOWEST.  
HERMAN SCHUENEMANN.

The news ran along the town. City editors sensed a feature and reporters went down the stairs, leaped aboard, and asked the boy for Mr. Schuenemann.

The story lost nothing when they learned the lad, an orphan from Wisconsin, living with an elder brother, had conceived the idea, rented a relative's schooner and crew, and brought the vessel from the icy forests of the Michigan Peninsula laden with Christianity's most loving symbol. By Christmas the cargo was sold—the pretty idea and the modest prices had captivated the people.

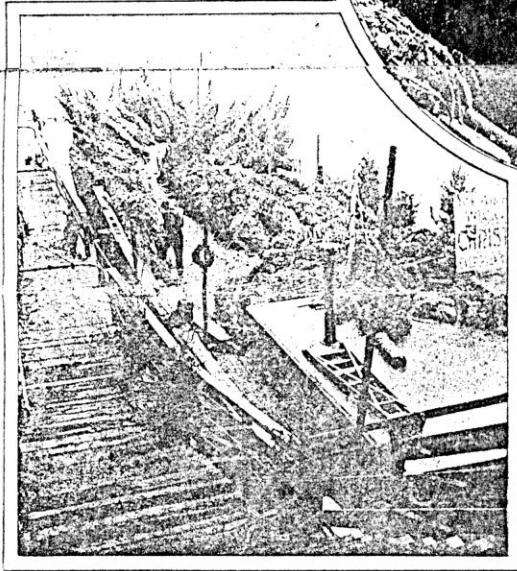
"I'll be back next year," said Herman to the last group of purchasers.

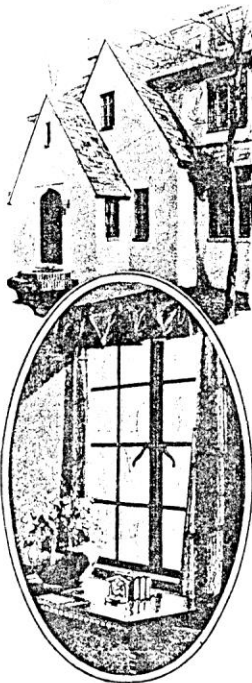
"And bring some wreaths and holly and shrubbery," a Sunday school teacher rejoined.

The following year Herman again disposed of his wares long before the profiteers around the corner on South Water Street—the city's market place—had sold theirs.

The Christmas Tree Ship became a Chicago institution. The years slid past, and every year, in November, the tree ship was towed up the river to its berth at the Clark Street Bridge. Herman grew older, as did his little customers, and men who of yore had begged the "skipper" for a baby shrub, came down the steps, shook hands with their friend, admired his new three-master, the Rouse Sim-

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)





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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE NINETEEN) mons, introduced their own babies, and bought the Christmas trees.

There was great and sincere rejoicing along the waterfront in 1897. Customers who came down to walk between the bundles and towering trees on deck were presented to a young woman, whose sparkling eyes and ruddy cheeks were a delicate accompaniment to the pealing laughter and arched chest with which the captain announced his marriage.

"This is Barbara, my wife," he said, ruddy with health and pride and happiness.

That year the customers came back, to shower gifts on the bride of their friend, and the children fetched toys, shyly and joyously showing their love for the Christmas tree man.

Babies came; first, Elsie, known thenceforth as the "Christmas Tree Ship Girl"; then, the next year, in 1900, the twins, Pearl and Hazel. Nor did the city editors forget, nor begrudge the space required by lengthening chronicles, about the Schuenemann family and their vessel.

Bulky envelopes with that name are in the "morgues" of every Chicago newspaper, attesting to the hold the story had taken on Chicago's heart. And the last story they contain brought sorrow to many a home in the city.

THE captain died as he might have wished: On November 23, 1912, in a terrible storm, the Rouse Simmons with its crew of thirteen went down off Two Rivers, Wisconsin. And from that day to this no trace of the schooner has been found! Not a spar, or a corpse, or a shred of sail ever drifted ashore.

The Middle West rose as a man to help the widow of its beloved friend. Ships were taken off regular runs, dainty yachts were unleashed and sent out across the gray waters, and prominent men persuaded Uncle Sam to lend his revenue cutters to join in the search. For a week they combed the combers—in vain.

Then reporters went to the Schuenemann home in North Clark Street, where the widow met them with a shadowy smile.

"Thank Chicago for its offer to help," she said. "But tell them we are not in need. The home is paid for; there will be a few dollars left after the debts are paid; and I have my health. We will be all right. The captain would not wish me to take charity, no matter how kindly the donors."

"But what will you do later?" the reporters asked. "Chicago wants to know your plans."

Oh, what bravery and honor and pride was there in the widow's smile!

"What will I do?" she echoed. "Why, I shall get another ship and bring the children their Christmas

trees—just as the captain would wish me to do!"

The next year Mrs. Schuenemann had the usual 20,000 trees sent down from the Manistique region by railroad, and sold them on North Clark Street, as near the bridge as she could find a vacant store. But in 1914 she chartered the Fearless, and with her eldest daughter and a crew of ten went up to the snow packed forests. She supervised the men, and the ten lumberjacks who had worked so long for the captain, and she brought down the precious cargo.

MRS. SCHUENEMANN has never missed a year with her Christmas Tree Ship. Gray haired men, some of them the pillars of Chicago's business structure, now descend the rotting stairs, go aboard, and sit in the little cabin. They talk to the wrinkled woman with the calloused palms, and with Elsie, now married, of the forty years that have passed.

The reporters, some of them new to Chicago's sweetest tradition, some of them older than the "Mrs. Captain," are always on hand to welcome the old boat.

The fir and spruce boughs and the balsam and pine bring to the smoke and stench a fragrant breath from the knife-keen air of the Upper Peninsula, where the two women have tramped far inland to find the tree treasures. The woods are thinning out now, and the good trees have to be carted for miles to the water's edge. And the sharp winds slash the face and hands more bitterly than they did when the "Mrs. Captain" was younger.

"I'm getting old and tired," the widow said last Christmas. "We haven't very much. But nobody gave us a penny, and we owe no one. Elsie and the twins got a better education than their father or I ever had. The captain would like that. And as long as my strength lasts I shall bring the Christmas Tree Ship to Chicago every year. After me, maybe my daughters, or their children when they are born and grown, will do the same. The captain would have wished it."

And when, last Christmas Eve, the widow had sold her last bit of shrubbery, and the late night murmurs of the city seemed like silence after the voices of the day, she paused beside the rail, before turning out the lights.

She peered into the dark, oil-streaked, debris-laden river creeping past, as if she wondered whether the souls of the babies who went down to their death in the Eastland were hovering about the old Christmas Tree Ship, nodding their little heads and smiling with the wraith of the kindly captain who kept faith while he lived and carried on through his good widow after he had gone away.

THE END



*The real truth about skin beauty*

THERE is more misinformation in the matter of skin beauty than in almost any other field of women's interests. It is not, as many think, the surface layer of the skin that really determines its beauty. The under layers contain all the active forces, and the whole matter of skin beauty comes down to keeping these forces functioning normally.

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