



What was the name of the master of the Christmas Tree Ship, of Chicago legend? — Mrs. D.L., Wilmette

Capt. Herman Schuenemann. And a check of our files shows it has been 25 years since this legend was printed; so if you and everyone else will gather 'round we will tell it again.

Once upon a time, there was this huge, hearty, lakefaring man, Herman Schuenemann, as merry and warm a man as Santa Claus himself. And every year he would bring to Chicago from the Far North, Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a shipload of bright, tangy balsams and tall thick pines to help the city — particularly the poor — have a merry Christmas: as many as 50,000 trees in the holds and lashed to the deck, all still fragrant and icy cold as they would arrive at the ship's dock at the Clark St. bridge, where they were sold. All Capt. Herman tried to do was meet expenses. The trees were sold for a pittance — and



Capt. Schuenemann

any waif or family that looked unable to afford even the pittance got one free.

But in November, 1898, Capt. Herman had just been married; so he let his brother August make the annual Christmas tree voyage in his ship, actually named the Thal, but known throughout the city as the Christmas Tree Ship. And off Highland Park, the Thal ran into a storm and sank, with August and all hands lost. Nevertheless, the next year, Herman put aside his grief and resumed making the voyage, this time in a new Christmas Tree Ship, the three-masted schooner Rouse Simmons. And he continued doing this until 1912 — when tragedy again struck. On Nov. 21, even into the teeth of a making gale, he took the Simmons out of Thompson Harbor, Mich. — for if he waited any longer, thousands of Chicagoans would not have the Christmas trees to which they so eagerly looked forward. But as the ship proceeded, one of the worst storms in Lake Michigan history developed. Mad winds and a blind welter of blizzard and crashing water. At dawn, Nov. 26, the Simmons was seen for the last time, off Sturgeon Bay, Wis., by the Coast Guard. She was flying distress signals. Her sails were streaming tatters. Hull and rigging were thick with ice. And she labored deep in the water. But the pounding surf made it impossible to reach her. And then visibility became zero — and she vanished.

On Dec. 5, a fishing vessel reported seeing a "floating forest" north of Manitowoc, Wis. And a note in a bottle was found on a beach near Manitowoc: "Good-by everybody. . . . God help us. Herman Schuenemann." Still, neither the ship's wreckage nor the bodies of Capt. Schuenemann and any other member of the 14-man crew ever were found. And hence the legend: That on stormy nights in December, Capt. Schuenemann and the Christmas Tree Ship still sail Lake Michigan. For how else, the legend goes, could the tossing waves be stained with that deep, pine-tree green in winter?

