



*One of the best-known of Wisconsin-built Great Lakes sailing vessels was the three-masted schooner, Rouse Simmons. She achieved a prominent place in the lore of Great Lakes sailing because of a Christmas-season tragedy in 1912.*

## **Wisconsin Ranks Second In Yule Tree Production**

The marketing of Christmas trees has come a long way since the days when you went into the forest to cut your own or bought from individual entrepreneurs like the captain of the *Rouse Simmons*.

Today, Christmas trees are a large, organized, \$15 to \$20 million industry in Wisconsin, which is the second largest tree producer in the country. Only Michigan tops Wisconsin's volume.

About 400 Christmas tree growers harvest between four and a half and five million trees a year out of the thirty-five million sold in the United States yearly. That crop consists mostly of Scotch pine, with some balsam.

The members of the Wisconsin Christmas Tree Producers Association range from farmers with a few acres of spare land to put into trees and city folk with recreation property to full-scale tree plantation owners.

Much encouragement for the

industry comes from the Department of Natural Resources which promotes tree growing as a conservation measure. It takes eight to ten years for a seedling to develop into a marketable tree.

Most trees reach retail lots by rail and truck by the first week in December. Harvesting starts the first week in November, peaking in the middle of that month.

Throughout the country, the largest share of trees comes from plantations — 27 to 28 million of the total number cut. The rest are weeded from natural timber stands. Just fifteen or twenty years ago, this situation was reversed. The majority of trees used to come from natural growths.

In 1966, the National Christmas Tree Association moved its headquarters to Milwaukee from Pennsylvania. Thirty-four hundred growers throughout the U.S. belong to that group.

*Turn to Page 8*

# **Sailing S Beco**

When the *Rouse Simmons* was launched from the Allan, McClelland & Company shipyards in Milwaukee three years after the Civil War, she was just an ordinary schooner, built to ply the Great Lakes cargo trade.

For 44 years, she was just one of many sailing ships that delivered goods to the ports of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois. But after that, she became one of the best known of her breed because of a Christmas-season tragedy in 1912.

One of the last cargo sailing ships, she was bound for Chicago with a load of Christmas trees when she went down with all hands about November 23 off Two Rivers.

That's a bare recounting of the end of a story that began in 1887. That was the year a cargo ship captain, August Schuenemann, first thought of bringing a cargo of pines and balsam from the cutover forests of Upper Michigan to sell at the Clark Street Bridge in Chicago. He turned such a handsome profit, he thereafter scheduled a Christmas tree trip on his yearly log.

Soon after, his brother, Herman, joined the business of hauling logs and cedar posts, and when August was drowned in

*Wisconsin Then and Now* is published monthly by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison 53706, and distributed to Society members. Single copies are available for 25c. Wisconsin newspapers may reprint any article provided credit is given to the State Historical Society and *Wisconsin Then and Now*. For membership information, write the membership secretary. Address all other inquiries to the editor. Second class postage paid at Madison.

# Ship Won Place in History Use of Christmas Tragedy

1898 off Glencoe, Illinois, Herman carried on the trade and the tradition of carrying a yearly Yule cargo to Clark Street. Buying a tree from Schuenemann became a Christmas tradition for many Chicagoans.

In 1910 when Herman Schuenemann bought the *Rouse Simmons* — named for a Kenosha merchant whose brother founded the Simmons mattress company — she was a veteran of the lumber trade and one of the last sailing vessels hauling trees from the Northwoods to Lake Michigan ports.

The 41-year-old captain liked to deliver his Christmas load by Thanksgiving so by November 22, 1912, the hold of his 127 by 27 foot ship was loaded with thousands of trees — mostly small, family-sized ones but some larger for hotels and businesses. Many more were lashed to the deck.

Even though the weather was stormy and the forecasts bleak, Schuenemann, anxious to keep to his schedule, sailed out of Thompson, a few miles west of Manistique, Michigan, with a crew of seven and about a dozen lumberjacks bound for a holiday sojourn in Chicago.

Shortly after she left port, the *Rouse Simmons* was passed by a steam tug pulling another sailing ship into Manistique to escape the storm.

"That crazy Dutchman's going out in this," the tug's captain yelled to his crew. "And him with every inch of canvas up!"

It must have soon been apparent to even as good a sailor as Schuenemann that he should have stayed in port. Sailing before what was developing into a gale, the *Simmons* made 100

miles in one day.

Many believe the captain decided to try for Bailey's Harbor in Door County to ride out the storm. But a change in wind blew the ship away from shore.

The storm rapidly developed into a blizzard; the winds stirred up deck-washing waves. And the temperature dropped. Very soon, the water splashing over the trees on deck was turning into ice, adding tons to the cargo's weight.

The buffeted ship was next sighted off Kewaunee, still heading south, with distress signals flying. A Coast Guard power launch was dispatched from Two Rivers.

For five hours, the rescue boat plowed through the blizzard and the high waves before getting a glimpse of the doomed ship during a momentary lull in the storm. She was in the distance, sitting low in the water with waves washing the decks, her sails in ribbons, and ice covering the hull and rigging.

Then the storm closed in again, and the ship was lost in the swirling blizzard. Though they continued searching, the rescuers never saw her again.

But she was heard of indirectly afterwards. Several weeks after she went down, a message in a sealed bottle was picked up on the shore:

"Friday. Everybody goodby. I guess we are all through. Sea washed over our deck load Thursday. Leaking bad. Ingvald and Steve fell overboard Thursday. God help us."

It was written on a page from the ship's log and signed Herman Schuenemann.

For some reason, the authenticity of this message was doubted as was another bottled note that

bobbed to shore 15 years later. It was signed by Nelson, the first mate: "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 off shore. All hands lashed to one line. Goodby."

A genuine relic was found near Two Rivers on April 23, 1924 — Capt. Schuenemann's wallet wrapped in a waterproof packet washed ashore with some papers still legible. And fishermen in the area often hauled in soggy Christmas trees in their nets for 25 years after the *Simmons* was lost.

Unlike the hundreds of other ships that were lost over the years in the Great Lakes, the *Simmons* was not forgotten.

The captain's widow continued to sell Christmas trees in Chicago until her death in 1933. The poignant drama of a ship lost on such a festive mission was frequently retold over the years in newspapers and magazines during the Christmas season. And when the Marine National Exchange Bank in Milwaukee decided to decorate its checks with a nautical theme, it commissioned a painting of the *Rouse Simmons*.

Two years ago, the *Rouse Simmons* made headlines again. A Milwaukee diver, Kent Bellrichard, pursuing his hobby of wreck hunting, found the famed schooner in October, 1971 nearly 180 feet down in Lake Michigan off Two Rivers.

Several weeks later, he visited the wreck again with John R. Steele, board chairman of the First National Bank of Waukegan, another diving hobbyist. The two men filmed the *Rouse Simmons*, and brought up some remains from the ship's hold. One was a china bowl with the letters "RS". Another was the ship's hand-cranked fog horn.

And they hauled up two of the ship's cargo of trees — after all that time, nothing but trunks and bare branches, stark relics of a Christmas tragedy fifty-nine years before.

