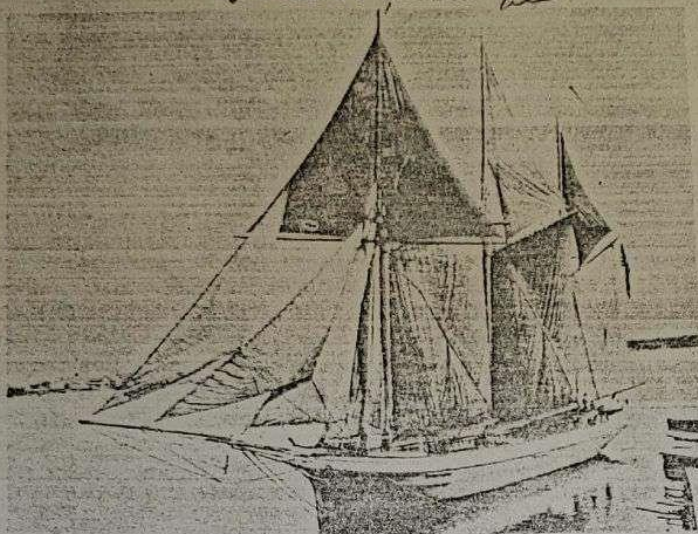


Christmas Trees In The Spring

By John F. Miller *ds*



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At Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1868, a three masted schooner was built and listed as #110087:GT 205,NT 119; L. 123'5" x B. 27'6" x D. 8'4" and named the ROUSE SIMMONS.

After forty-five years of profitable service, handling various types of cargo, mostly on Lake Michigan, she was finally owned and skippered by Captain Herman Schunemann of Chicago, and used by him to haul Christmas trees from the North woods to the Chicago area.

The novelty of buying Christmas trees direct from the schooner deck at the Clark Street dock in Chicago appealed to many residents and created a lot of publicity for the Captain, as well as a good profit.

On the evening of November 25, 1918, the well-known Christmas Tree Ship, fully loaded above her bulwarks, sailed out of Manistique, bound for Chicago, three hundred miles south. A Captain friend of Skipper Schunemann coming into Manistique, remarked to his men that "Captain Schunemann must be in a hurry to get those trees into Chicago to start out in such rough weather."

The winds gained in strength in addition to heavy snow and freezing temperatures. The Coast Guard at Sheboygan, Wisconsin, went out into the gale, but due to the severe snow storm they never sighted the schooner.

The fate of the gallant schooner was confirmed the following spring when fishermen in the area found their nets clogged with balsam and spruce. In addition, a corked bottle was found near Sheboygan with a note signed by Captain Schunemann stating he had lost two crew members and their small boat, and had given up hope of survival.

Thus ended the career of another one of the wonderful sailing ships of that era.

50 Years Ago Today Christmas Tree Ship Sank



Herman Schuenemann, master of the Christmas tree ship.

FIFTY years ago today, the Rouse Simmons, a three-masted schooner known as "Chicago's Christmas tree ship," sank in a gale off Kewaunee, Wis. Its owner Herman Schuenemann and his crew of 15 seamen-woodchoppers were lost.

Since the early 1880s, the Schuenemann family had brought Christmas trees to Chicago via schooner from the upper peninsula of Michigan. The arrival of the ship, with its trees lashed to its masts, was a happy, traditional occasion, marking the start of the yule season.

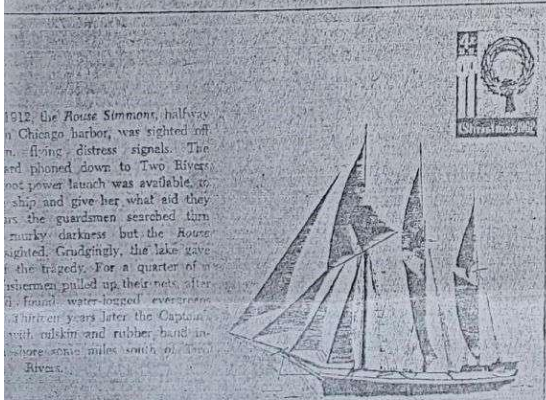
Theodore S. Charney (left), a Chicago historian, is writing a book on the ship's saga. The pictures shown here were collected by him for the book. The Rouse Simmons as it appeared in 1911 at the Clark St. bridge is shown above.



ABOVE: After the tragedy, Schuenemann's widow Barbara and her three daughters carried on the Christmas tree business for 20 years, first by schooner, then by rail, until Mrs. Schuenemann died in 1933. A Christmas tree is carved on the couple's headstone in Aeneas Park cemetery, 7800 Irving Park Rd.



RIGHT: Elsie Schuenemann, Herman's daughter, well known to Chicagoans for her making of Christmas wreaths aboard the ship, after it would dock here.



1912, the Rouse Simmons, halfway in Chicago harbor, was sighted off the pier, flying distress signals. The red light was down to Two Rivers, Wis., and power launch was available to the ship and give her what aid they could. The guardsmen searched thru the murky darkness but the Rouse was not sighted. Gradually, the lake gave up the tragedy. For a quarter of a century fishermen pulled up their nets, after 13 years, they found water-logged evergreens. Thirteen years later the Captain, with rubbin and rubber band in his hand, reported some miles south of Two Rivers.

The Loss of the "Rouse Simmons" - Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship

Charts published by Charney to mark the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the ship.

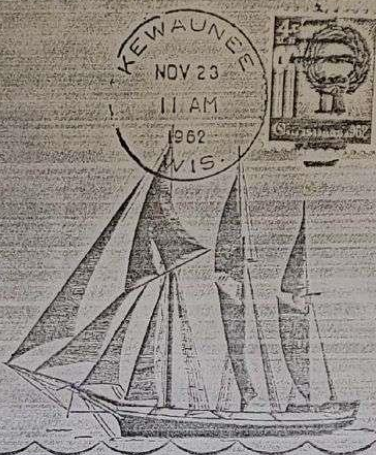
On November 23, 1912, the *Rouse Simmons* left Thompson, Michigan, late in the day in a rising gale. As the tug pulled the three-masted ship into the lake, the people on shore looked fearfully at the dark weather in the skies and feared for the safety of ship, captain and crew. That night heavy seas closed in upon the brave craft as she made her tortuous way south bearing her cargo of Christmas cheer.

Annually for twenty years the inhabitants of Thompson looked forward to the coming of the ship and then fell in with her crew, gathering the evergreens and loading the cargo. The Christmas tree operations at Thompson were a source of revenue to many folks in the area. Into the cut-over lands in Schoolcraft County the men fanned out, set up camps and butchered the evergreens of saleable size and condition.



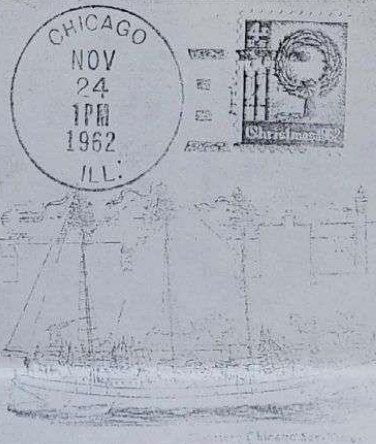
50th Anniversary - The Loss of the "Rouse Simmons" - Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship

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50th Anniversary - The Loss of the "Rouse Simmons" - Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship

On November 24, 1912, the arrival of the *Rouse Simmons* with a cargo of evergreens, was anticipated in Chicago harbor. The expected ship never arrived, for her last port was a clearance. The passing of the *Rouse Simmons* heralded the end of an era and symbolized the passing of the sailing schooner from the Great Lakes. These valiant 19th ships had carried the commerce of the lakes for more than a half century but a changing world retired them into useless obsolence. The familiar sight of the "Christmas Tree Ship" in Chicago Harbor, with its crew looked to its mast, passed into history.



50th Anniversary - The Loss of the "Rouse Simmons" - Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship

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In the years following the Civil War, Chicago harbor vied with the great ports of the seven seas in ship arrivals and clearances, for the city on Lake Michigan was the greatest grain and lumber shipping center of the world. From the prairies of the great Middle West, bread-basket of the world, came the golden grain for re-shipment eastward to feed the hungry mouths of the industrial Atlantic seaboard and even to the European continent beyond. From the "inexhaustible" primeval forests of Michigan's dual peninsulas, where the greatest lumbering operations in history were taking place, came schooner loads of finished lumber for trans-shipment westward to the treeless plains then rapidly opening up to settlement thru the magic of the Homestead Act. Chicago was the hub of these great pipelines of supply and demand and her harbor was cluttered with marine activity almost wholly restricted to sail craft.

One of these ships was the *Rouse Simmons*, a fine three-masted schooner, Milwaukee built in 1868. Slightly more than 200 tons burthen, the vessel's hull measured 125 feet in length and 27 feet across her beam, about the average for a "fore and after" laker. Her hold measured slightly more than 8 feet, governed by the depth of navigable rivers, harbors and channels of that day. The vessel was built by Kenosha shipping interests and named for a local merchant. In her first five years of service the *Rouse Simmons* plied between Manistee and Chicago, her hold filled with scantling and her deck piled high with joist, basic products of the lumber industry.

In 1873, the *Rouse Simmons* came into the hands of Charles H. Hackley of Muskegon and remained part of his fleet for a quarter of a century. During her career in and out of Chicago harbor, the vessel was credited with more than a thousand cargoes and her experiences were those of the average lake sailing schooner. Several times she left her cat-head and jibboom on one or another of Chicago's bridges. In a fog-bound collision with another schooner, she narrowly escaped her own destruction. Waterspouts, storms and squalls tore her sail-cloth, rigging and ratlines, broke her spars and tackle. Once she sank in Traverse Bay area but was raised, refitted and sailed again. Another time the vessel was dismantled in a violent storm and left helpless in mid-lake.

When the forests of Michigan ran out Hackley sold his fleet and while other lumber barons ran off to greener fields he stayed behind in Muskegon to rebuild the fortunes of the once great sawdust city. Hackley left behind schools, a library, an art gallery and a public park well stocked with meaningful statuary, and one would like to think some of these benefits were paid for out of the *Rouse Simmons*' earnings.

In the declining years of her maritime career the *Rouse Simmons* was owned by mariners, that is, captains who owned their ship. In a sense she was a tramp, picking up a cargo of lumber, logs or cedar posts as opportunity afforded.

Since the early 1880's the Schuenemann family brought Christmas trees into Chicago annually by sailing schooner on the closing voyage of the sailing season. In 1898, August, nicknamed "Christmas Tree Schuenemann," lost his life and a cargo of evergreens off Glen-coe, Illinois, in a small schooner. Nothing daunted, Herman, his brother took over the trade and year after

year a Schuenemann ship would tie up in Chicago harbor with a load of Yuletide cheer. In 1910, Herman bought an interest in the *Rouse Simmons* and the doughty craft became "Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship."

In early October of 1912, the *Rouse Simmons* cleared Chicago for the last time and made her way to Thompson in Michigan's upper peninsula. There her crew of seaman and woodchoppers went into the back country to gather her cargo.

Annually for twenty years the inhabitants of Thompson looked forward to the coming of the ship and then fell in with her crew, gathering the evergreens and loading the cargo. The Christmas tree operations at Thompson were a source of revenue to many folks in the area. Into the cut-over lands in Schoolcraft County the men fanned out, set up camps and butchered the evergreens of saleable size and condition.

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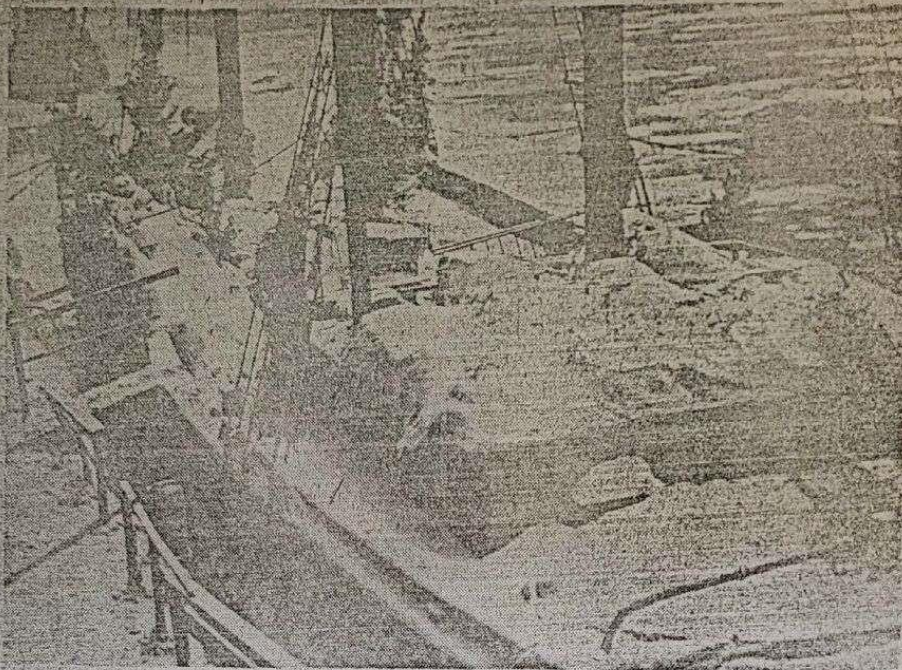
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Following the tragedy the distaff side of the family took over the business. Captain Herman's widow, Barbara and her three daughters continued to bring evergreens into Chicago for another twenty years, first by sailing schooner, then by rail. In a changing world, in 1933, Barbara passed away and the family enterprise died with her. Barbara's grave is in Acacia cemetery and sharing her headstone is the Captain's name and between the two is graven the figure of an evergreen tree.

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Theodore S. Charney

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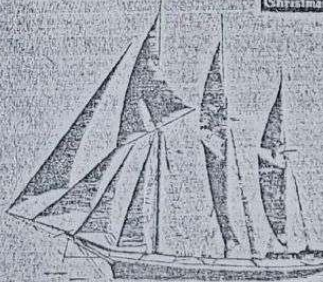
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50th Anniversary - The Loss of the "Rouse Simmons" - Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship

One of a set of cachets published by Charrney to mark the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the ship.

PICTURE PAGE - CHICAGO DAILY NEWS / NOVEMBER 23, 1962

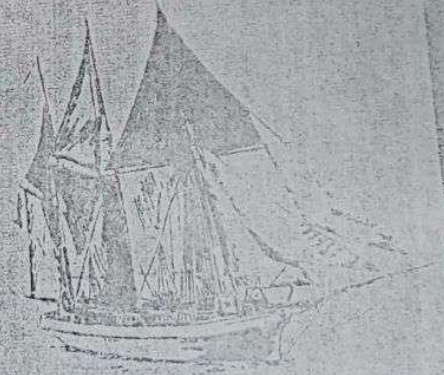


ABOVE: After the tragedy, Schuenemann's widow Barbara and three daughters carried the Christmas tree home for 20 years. Her schooner, then by the Mrs. Schuenemann in 1933. A Christmas tree carved on the headstone in Arcadia cemetery, 7800 Irving Rd.

RIGHT: Elsie Schuenemann, Herman's daughter, well known to Chicago for her making of Christmas wreaths aboard the ship, after it was salvaged here.

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In the years following the Civil War, Chicago harbor vied with the great ports of the seven seas in ship arrivals and clearances, for the city on Lake Michigan was the greatest grain and lumber shipping center of the world. From the prairies of the great Middle West, bread-basket of the world, came the golden grain for re-shipment eastward to feed the hungry mouths of the industrial Atlantic seaboard and even to the European continent beyond. From the "inexhaustible" primeval forests of Michigan's dual peninsulas, where the greatest lumbering operations in history were taking place, came schooner loads of finished lumber for trans-shipment westward to the treeless plains then rapidly opening up to settlement thru the magic of the Homestead Act. Chicago was the hub of these great pipelines of supply and demand and her harbor was cluttered with marine activity almost wholly restricted to sail craft.



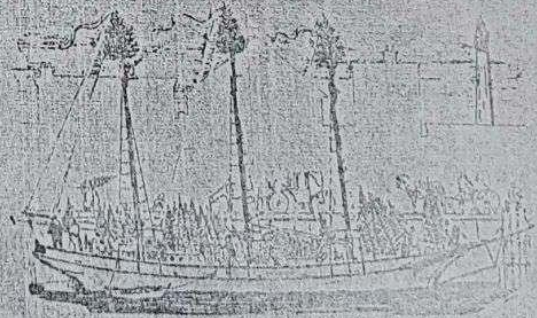
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