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THE LORE OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP by Warren Downs

(Earthwatch/Wisconsin is a service of the Sea Grant Program and the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin.)

Christmas trees are firmly rooted in America's celebration of Christmas. Across the nation, some 40 million young evergreens bring to homes, offices, taverns and other human abodes a touch of the holiday spirit.

In the last century, New England forests provided many of these cherished tannenbaums, a tradition of German heritage. But certain other Christmas trees were once especially prized in the Great Lakes region. These were trees cut from northern forests and shipped by boat to coastal cities around the lakes. This seasonal traffic on the lakes existed up until the 1930s and now is a part of Great Lakes shipping lore.

August Scheunemann and his brother Herman were among the first to ship Christmas trees on Lake Michigan. In 1887, they lashed a load of evergreens to their sailing schooner and set out from Manistique, Mich. After sailing nearly 300 miles to the south, they tied up on the Chicago River. There, in the heart of The Windy City, they sold their trees for about 50 cents apiece.

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add one -- Christmas tree ship

The two brothers continued this profitable seasonal enterprise for the next 11 years. Then tragedy struck. In 1898, August Scheunemann, his crew and their ship laden with trees disappeared forever in a December storm on Lake Michigan.

Herman continued the Christmas tree business alone. In time, the arrival of the ship of trees and "the Captain," as Herman came to be called, was something of a holiday tradition in the big city, according to Walter Hirthe, a Marquette University engineer and a historian of Great Lakes shipping.

"He must have had a good business, because he even took electric lights to light up his trees in Chicago," Hirthe said. "There are indications that he also sold venison from deer taken in the northern woods."

But then tragedy struck down "Captain" Herman as it had his older brother. In 1912, Herman's ship, the ROUSE SIMMONS, sank with a full load of trees in a November storm on Lake Michigan. Herman Scheunemann, his crew and several lumbermen passengers all perished.

When "the Christmas tree ship" failed to appear, Chicago newspapers sounded the alarm. Many boats set forth in an unsuccessful search for the ship.

Despite this second loss in the Scheunemann family, Herman's widow carried on the family trade until the 1930s.

In 1975, divers located the ROUSE SIMMONS off Point Beach State Park, just north of Two Rivers, Wis.

"It lay in 110 feet of water, all entangled with fishing nets and lures that had caught on it over the years," said Hirthe.

Divers have retrieved several trees from the wreck. The trees no longer have needles, but are otherwise intact.

"They also brought up a light bulb -- probably part of a string of lights Herman planned to use at the Chicago dock," Hirthe said. "They applied a very low voltage to the bulb and found it still worked."

That a forward-looking invention like the electric light should be found on an old-fashioned sailing schooner intrigues the Marquette University engineer.

Today, the transport of Christmas trees has caught up with the light bulb. Trees are now trussed up and carried by truck. But no matter how transported, the tannenbaum remains a Yuletide tradition -- one the Scheunemann brothers gave their lives on Lake Michigan to serve.

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