

WHEN THEN WAS NOW

Tragic Voyage

Death Wins The Christmas Tree Race

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It was one of those vicious November storms that periodically rip out of the north to attack the Great Lakes with howling winds and heavy water-laden snow.

Sailing craft still reigned supreme but a skipper would have to be foolhardy as well as bold to venture forth on those seas on that blustery night. The captain of the U.S. Life Saving station in Sheboygan reported breakers 40 feet high crashing over the seawall and he said later that he had never seen larger waves at the entrance of the Sheboygan harbor.

About 30 miles north of the city however, one ship was trying to weather the storm — and her time was running out.

The schooner Rouse Simmons had left Manistique in the teeth of the gale and was running with the wind at full sail. The fateful voyage was commenced exactly 65 years ago today—Nov. 22, 1912.

The Simmons was known as the Christmas Tree ship. She was the last of a fleet whose owners found a lucrative business cutting the six to eight-foot high pine and balsam trees left behind when the lumber barons abandoned Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Michigan Trees For Chicago

Every year shortly before Thanksgiving, the enterprising captains would load their ships with greenery and try to beat the winter storms south to the lower ports. There the city folk would be in a generous holiday mood and the fragrant cargo would be snapped up shortly after the ship docked.

The supply of trees on the Peninsula gradually dwindled though, and so did the size of the Christmas tree fleet. Only the stubborn Dutch captain Herman Schuenemann and his aging, but graceful three-masted schooner, the Rouse Simmons, survived the economic disasters. They would, Capt. Schuenemann knew, survive this too.

The storm that blasted Lake Michigan that day may have equalled the one recently which sank the



Capt. Schuenemann

ore carrier Edmund Fitzgerald in Lake Superior. That ship, which carried a crew of 29, was 729 feet in length. By contrast, Capt. Schuenemann's ship, built in 1868, was only 123 feet in length and carried a crew of 16.

A Sheboygan mariner once had part ownership of the Simmons. Capt. Gus Larson bought an interest in her in 1909, and the ship spent that winter moored just west of the Eighth Street bridge.

Normally Capt. Schuenemann would not have needed a crew of 16, but the Christmas tree venture required the help of extra hands. The men were sent sloggling into the forests with axe and saw to cut the trees and drag them back to the waiting ship.

The cargo wasn't exactly designed for the vessel, but Capt. Schuenemann could get them aboard—all 27,000 of them. After dropping as many as possible into the hold, he stacked them on the deck, loading so many that the booms for the sails had to rest on lumber crutches 10 feet above their regular saddles.

"Trees were piled so high above the bulwarks that the ship looked like a haymow with the roof off," one mariner recalled years later.

Capt. Schuenemann had been making his way to Chicago with such loads for 25 years. Danger was always a part of the voyage, because if the winter storms did catch up with them, the blowing ice and snow could swiftly turn the ship and her soft absorbent cargo into a huge top-heavy iceberg.

A Heritage Of Tragedy

The hard-headed old captain was not unaware of the risk. He had started the Christmas tree run years earlier with his brother August. One year when Capt. Herman didn't make the voyage, his brother and the four-man crew were caught in one of the notorious November storms. Their ship went down and they all perished.

This day, the captain's mind was on speed. He wanted to get that load down to Chicago, and he felt the Simmons was hardy enough to ride the crest of the gale.

Another skipper, a Capt. Hanson, was also in the Manistique harbor aboard his schooner, the Butcher Boy. His comment upon seeing the Sim-

The story of the Christmas Tree Ship will be the subject of a special television show on Thanksgiving day. The program, to be seen locally at 7:30 p.m. on Channel 4, will feature film footage of the wreckage of the Rouse Simmons recovered in 1971 and interviews with people who remember the captain and his ship. The 'Today' show also had a feature on Friday about the incident.

mons leave the harbor was apparently noticed by someone who recorded it for posterity. There are several versions of what he said.

The Door County Advocate recounted the adventure in 1927 and it quoted Capt. Hanson as saying something to the effect of, "Capt. Schuenemann must be in a great hurry to get those Christmas trees to market, and it would be lucky if the schooner weathered the gale."

Years later, another writer doing a partially fictionalized account of the trip, apparently felt Hanson's comment a bit too mundane to express the real feeling of the drama.

So Dwight Boyer in his book "Great Stories of the Great Lakes", put it this way: "Mother of God, look!" he (Hanson) screamed above the howling of the wind. "That crazy Dutchman's going out in this, an' him with every inch of canvas up!"

Under the circumstances, it would seem likely that Boyer's version was closer to the fact, but that's speculation too.

There is general agreement however that Capt. Hanson had the last real contact with the ill-fated Simmons and her luckless crew.