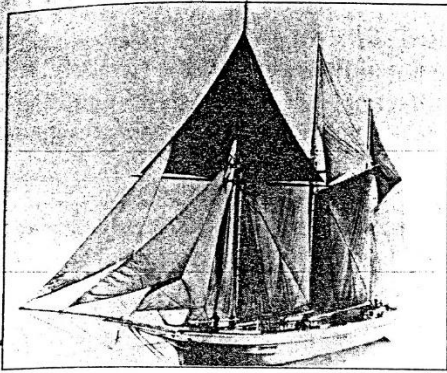


1991

# Christmas Tree Ship



Rouse Simmons

During the summer of 1832 the Black Hawk conflict, in the Wisconsin Territory, ended at the Bad Axe river. The Illinois Militia, upon returning to their homes, told families and friends of the resources they saw as they marched through an uninhabited wilderness. They told of the far-reaching forests, rivers, lakes, wild game and the rich prairies. They described what they saw as a land of opportunity and a new life. News of the exciting Wisconsin Territory also spread to the eastern states and people in several small communities made plans to explore this new frontier.

In 1834, exploration parties traveled west in search of places for future settlements. One such group was the Western Emigration Company of Hannibal, New York. They founded a village at Pike Creek, now Kenosha, in June, 1835. The pioneer group dreamed that this new home might bring them riches when its growth and increased trade made it a known Great Lakes port.

Sailing ships became profitable ventures. Passengers, household goods and provisions for frontier communities were transported. A fleet of some forty sailing vessels, plying from Buffalo and Detroit, brought eager settlers to a new land and new homes.

The promising Great Lakes Waterway found ships on their return trip eastward carrying cargoes of lumber, shingles, wheat, fish, fur and other commodities. Easterners welcomed these products which were shipped from Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan ports.

In the years following the Civil War, Kenosha's harbor was a busy port. In 1874, about 330 vessels with crews totaling 1,560 men, cleared her docks. Twelve of the vessels were owned or partly owned by Kenoshans. The ports on the west shore of Lake Michigan were said to be the greatest shipping areas of grain and lumber in the world. This was the golden era when "Wheat was King" and in great demand in eastern markets.

From the seemingly inexhaustible primeval forests of Wisconsin and Michigan, where the greatest lumbering operations in history were taking place, came schooner loads of finished lumber, which were then trans-shipped by rail to the treeless plains which had

been opened up to settlers by the magic of the Homestead Act.

Three Kenosha citizens with a vision of the future saw the great potential in getting into the profitable shipping business and increasing the economic development of a growing Kenosha. They decided to build a suitable schooner primarily for transporting lumber. In 1868, R. B. Towsley, with shipping and business acumen, and Capt. Alfred Ackerman, who had an excellent record of seamanship and lake port knowledge, planned to build a three-masted lake schooner. Rouse Simmons was not a partner, but he helped finance the building of the ship. It was christened in his honor.

The "Rouse Simmons" was built in Milwaukee. The 200-ton vessel was 125 feet in length and had a beam of 27 feet. Capt. Ackerman was proud of his new vessel and immediately contracted to ply between Manistee, Michigan and Chicago, with lumber as the main cargo. Kenosha was her home port.

Lumber shipping proved to be successful, and in 1873 Towsley and Ackerman sold the ship to Charles H. Hackley, one of the forty millionaire lumber barons of Michigan. Capt. Ackerman then retired to Twin Lakes, in Kenosha County. From 1873 to 1893 the Simmons plied between Muskegon and Chicago, carrying more than one thousand loads of timber and cargo.

As the forest resources of marketable timber declined, there was less need for cargo ships. Hackley sold the Simmons in 1893 to John Leonard, representing Chicago interests. Later it passed on to a succession of captains who picked up tramp cargos around the lake.

Hackley became a philanthropist, giving his city of Muskegon a library, an art center, statuary, and other gifts, in gratitude to the city that helped make him a millionaire.

Of special interest is the fact that Hackley commissioned sculptor C. H. Niehaus to do a Lincoln statue for a Muskegon park. A duplicate statue, by Niehaus, is in Kenosha's Gilbert Simmons Library Park. It was given by Orla M. Calkins to the city in 1909. Hackley had spent his childhood in Kenosha and apparently was still interested in it when he suggested this statue to Calkins.

Later, the ship was acquired by Capt. M. V. Bonnar of St. James, Beaver Island. It continued to tramp around the lake picking up cargo at various ports. During the early 1890s two brothers, Capt. August and Capt. Herman Schuenemann were sailing the Great Lakes, often taking cargos to Chicago. Capt. August discovered that if he carried a shipload of Christmas trees from Michigan to Chicago on the last trip in November, it would be a profitable run. He became known as Christmas Tree Schuenemann. In the autumn of 1893 Capt. August lost his cargo and his life when his schooner, Thai, sank off Glencoe, Illinois.

The following year, in 1894, his brother, Capt. Herman, took over the trade and in 1910 he acquired an interest in the Simmons. Under Capt. Herman the ship was a vagabond, wandering around the lake wherever a cargo of lumber, logs or cedar posts took her. The Captain spent most of the shipping season in this haphazard encounter, but in the fall he set sail for the Upper Michigan Peninsula to the Port of Thompson to collect evergreens. Here the Simmons was transformed from a tramp schooner to a Christmas Tree Ship.

Chicago's Yuletide season began when the Christmas Tree Ship arrived with evergreens lashed to her masts and rigging. Her hold held thousands of young pines and balsams from northern Michigan. Residents would travel out of their way to see the ship in the Chicago River. Children, especially, were anxious to see the ship that brought Christmas trees from the far north.

Her skipper would welcome throngs of Chicagoans aboard almost as soon as the ship's moorings were secure. The choicest trees were the first to be sold. Whole families would hurry to the dock to get the pick of the crop. Many wandered on deck to watch the captain's daughter, Elsie, weave pine branches into wreathes, which were also for sale.

Personal memories of the Christmas Tree Ship go back to December 1911, when my father operated a small grocery store in Chicago. Just before the Christmas season, he took me to the Clark Street bridge to see the schooner and to order trees to sell during the holidays.

I still recall the old three-master with its rigging and trees lashed to the masts, and the wintery smell of pine from the Michigan woods. My father greeted the Captain in German and we were given a tour of the upper deck and living quarters. Some 50,000 trees were stacked on the ship and dock. It was a novelty for eager customers to buy trees directly from the ship's berth.

After my father placed his order for trees, the Captain invited our family and another German family, by the name of Luehrs, for a Christmas dinner. As I remember there was lots of conversation in German and stories by the Captain relating to his sailing

experiences. The main dinner course was venison and a bear roast. My sister, Ella, who was then one year old, attracted the attention of Elsie, who wanted to be the baby sitter. The gathering at Yuletide was a joyful, old-fashioned family get-together and a Christmas I will always remember.

The fall of 1912 was to be a fateful one for the Rouse Simmons. In October she set sail from Chicago for the 300-mile voyage to Thompson harbor near Manistique, Michigan. As soon as the ship docked, Capt. Schuenemann and his crew of sailors and woodcutters began roaming the back country for suitable trees. Local residents helped cut, haul and load trees aboard the deck and in the hold. Every available space from keel to deck beams, from bow to stern was used for the fragrant cargo.

On November 22, a tug pulled the heavy-laden Christmas Tree Ship out of the harbor. The people on shore waved goodbye. Some expressed fear for the safety of the vessel and her crew. The sky was grey. The wind was rising and the gale intensified. As the temperature dropped below freezing, a heavy snow swept the lake. The crew of the tug, Burger, heading for port with the schooner Dutch Boy in tow, reported seeing the Christmas Tree Ship aiming for open water. They concluded that Capt. Schuenemann preferred to face the fury of the lake rather than risk being blown aground on the rugged shore.

The next day the crew at the Kewaunee Coast Guard Station sighted the ship flying distress signals. They telephoned the nearby Two Rivers station, where the 34-foot power boat, Tuscarora, was based. The Tuscarora searched the heaving lake for the troubled ship. Then, during a lull in the storm, the coast guardsmen caught a glimpse of the distressed ship. Her hull was ice-coated and her sails in tatters. With this new sighting the men turned their launch toward the stricken ship, but before the Tuscarora had covered half the distance, the Rouse Simmons was suddenly engulfed by a curtain of blinding snow. Guardsmen searched for many hours before giving up. The storm had finally swamped the ice-coated vessel and it sank somewhere near Two Rivers Point.

A corked bottle found near Sheboygan after the storm carried a note from Schuenemann: "Everybody good-by. I guess we are thru. Leaking bad. Endwald and Steve fell overboard. God help us".

Further evidence of the ship's fate continued to appear for twenty-five years. After every heavy storm, fishermen from Two Rivers reported that their nets were fouled by water-logged evergreen trees. Schuenemann's wallet, still intact with oilskin wrapping, and secured by a rubber band, was found on the beach south of Two Rivers in 1925, thirteen years after its owner's demise.

When the loss of the schooner's crew became known, it was a sad day for friends who knew the Schuenemanns. Our family visited Mrs. Schuenemann and the daughters at their home on Clark Street to offer our condolences.

The many Chicagoans who waited in vain for the appearance of the Christmas Tree Ship had to buy their trees from other sources that year, but in later years they could buy trees from the Captain's widow, Barbara, and her three daughters. She was known as the Christmas Tree Lady.

For twenty years they imported the trees, first by boat and later by rail, until Mrs. Schuenemann's death in 1933. She was buried in Acacia Cemetery, 7800 Irving Park Road, Chicago. The Captain's name appears with hers on the headstone, and between the two names is carved the figure of an evergreen tree.

The legend of the Rouse Simmons was enriched by a news feature in the Milwaukee Journal, December 5, 1971. The exact location of the schooner was discovered.

On October 30, 1971, a scuba diver, Kent Bellrichard of Milwaukee, while diving for the Vernon which sank in 1887, discovered another wreck — the Rouse Simmons. He was the first man to see the ship since it disappeared with a crew of eight men that stormy day in November, 1912. Bellrichard had borrowed a boat with highly sophisticated sonar equipment from John Steele, Board Chairman of the First National Bank of Waukegan, Illinois. Steele enjoys diving as a hobby. When Bellrichard decided to hunt for the Vernon he used the sonar transducer. No targets showed as he drifted northwest, but suddenly he received a signal. After two hours of trying to get grappling hooks to hold, he was ready to go down.

Diving into the cold depths of the lake, he was able to identify the wreck as a schooner. Unfortunately his light went out. The weather was adverse. He decided that one dive that day was enough.

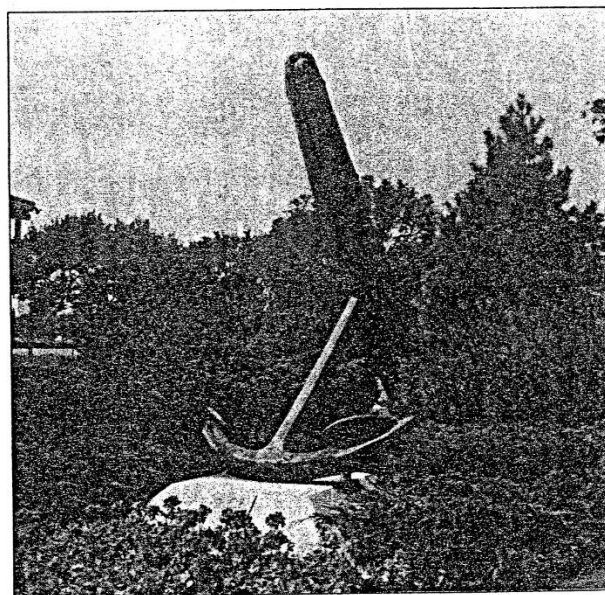
Since, Bellrichard and John Steele have made additional dives. When they discovered the schooner's name, Rouse Simmons, on the quarterboards, it verified that the Christmas Tree Ship had at last been found. Still crowded in its hold and on deck were the remains of hundreds of Christmas trees. The divers brought up several trees, a china bowl, with letters R.S., and a hand-cranked foghorn.

After lying on the bottom of Lake Michigan for 59 years, two Christmas Trees, minus their needles, arrived in Milwaukee. One tree was put on display in the lobby of the Marine National Exchange Bank. During the Christmas holidays the tree and an oil painting of the schooner were viewed by throngs of Milwaukeeans. Since 1968, the Marine Bank has had a reproduction of the painting on its checks.

Since Kenosha people, Capt. Ackerman, (first

captain to sail the schooner), Towsley and Rouse Simmons, were involved in building and financing the ship, it was of interest to the Kenosha County Historical Society to learn everything possible about the discovery. During the Christmas week of 1971, the President of the Marine Bank, C. Geilfuss, invited a small group, including the writer, to a lunch and to view the underwater movie of the ill-fated vessel. Another guest was Theodore S. Charney of Chicago, who was writing a book about the Rouse Simmons. The movies taken by Bellrichard were very impressive, and the most thrilling part was when the divers passed the bow and the words Rouse Simmons were still visible. Also shown were the divers bringing up the Christmas trees from 160 feet of water. A foghorn and other salvaged objects were viewed by the group at the bank's conference room.

Later dives by Steele and Bellrichard brought up the schooner's huge anchor. It is displayed at the entrance of the Milwaukee Yacht Club, not far from the ship's birthplace. Salvaged artifacts from the Simmons are on display at the Living Lakes Exposition at Algoma, Wisconsin.



The anchor from the Rouse Simmons is at the entrance of the Milwaukee Yacht Club.

Historians have viewed the Rouse Simmons as a symbol. She was neither the first nor the last sailing vessel on Lake Michigan, but her 44-year career spanned parts of two eras: the heyday of lake schooners and the period of decline. These valiant little ships had carried the commerce of the Great Lakes for more than half a century, but a changing world retired them into obsolescence. The familiar sight of the Christmas Tree Ship in the Chicago Harbor, with fir trees lashed to her mast, has passed into history, but the legend of the Rouse Simmons will be retold each year during the Christmas season.