

The Christmas Tree Ship: Captain Herman S. Schuenemann and
the Schooner, *Rouse Simmons*, in the Records of the
National Archives-Great Lakes Region, Chicago.

On a drizzly, overcast day in late October 1971, Milwaukee scuba diver Kent Bellrichard, was surveying the bottom of Lake Michigan with sonar off of Two Rivers, Wisconsin. Bellrichard was searching for the elusive *Rouse Simmons*, a 205 ton, three-masted schooner that 59 years before had disappeared beneath the waves in a winter gale. Bellrichard's sonar made a promising contact, and he descended to what appeared to be a well preserved wreck, resting in an upright position on the lake bed, in about 170 feet of water. Upon reaching the wreck, his jury rigged dive light promptly malfunctioned, leaving him enclosed in murky darkness. With what little ambient light was available, Bellrichard quickly surveyed the wreckage and believed that he had indeed discovered the *Rouse Simmons*. When he surfaced, Bellrichard lay in his boat and yelled for joy. Bellrichard's discovery thus ended a mystery that surrounded the fate of one of the most legendary ships, and much-loved captains, to sail Lake Michigan's waters.

The microfilmed and original records held in the National Archives and Records Administration-Great Lakes Region in Chicago document the birth, life, and death of not only the legendary schooner, *Rouse Simmons*, but also its enigmatic and kind-hearted captain, Herman S. Schuenemann. The saga of the *Rouse Simmons* is a microcosm of Great Lakes maritime history that is available to researchers who visit the Great Lakes Region.

The Records of the Federal Census Bureau (Record Group 29), for 1870, reveal that Wisconsin native Schuenemann was born about 1865, into the middle of a growing family of six children in the predominantly German community of Ahnapee, now

present-day Algoma, on the shores of Lake Michigan. The oldest son, August, born in 1853, was the first of the children to make his living on the lake. Herman, however, soon followed in his brother's footsteps.

In 1868, three years after Herman's birth, the age of sail on Lake Michigan reached its zenith when over 1800 sailing vessels operated on the lake. After that year, the number of sailing ships began to decline until they had disappeared almost completely by the late 1920s. The dominant sail-powered vessel on Lake Michigan was the sturdy schooner designed to haul heavy loads out of, and into, shallow harbors. The principal cargo for most schooners on Lake Michigan was lumber, which fed the high demand for building materials in the growing urban areas such as Chicago and Milwaukee.

The 1868 peak in sailing ships on Lake Michigan also marked the same year the schooner *Rouse Simmons* was finished and launched from Milwaukee's shipyards. The ship, documented in the Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (Record Group 41), was built by the firm of Allan, McClelland, and Company, one of Milwaukee's preeminent shipbuilding firms.

Sleek and sturdy, the 123 foot *Rouse Simmons* was licensed and enrolled on August 27, 1868, at the Port of Milwaukee. The vessel's managing owner was Royal B. Towslee of Kenosha, and its first master was Alfred Ackerman. The *Rouse Simmons* was named after a well-known Kenosha merchant of the same name, and whose brother, Zalmon Simmons, soon gained fame for his family's burgeoning mattress company.

In the early 1870s, the *Rouse Simmons* joined the sizeable shipping fleet of wealthy lumber magnet and philanthropist, Charles H. Hackley, of Muskegon, Michigan.

Hackley's lumber operations stretched to all corners of Lake Michigan's coastline. The *Rouse Simmons* was a workhorse in Hackley's fleet for approximately 20 years where it hauled loads of lumber from company mills to the various markets around the lake. A survey of entrances and clearances from the Records of the U. S. Customs Service (Record Group 36), for the port of Grand Haven, Michigan, for August 1883, show that the *Rouse Simmons* was making almost weekly runs from Grand Haven, most likely with loads of lumber, for the port of Chicago.

Additionally, Grand Haven's monthly report on entrances and clearances for August 1883, revealed the continued dominance of the sailing ships even at that late date. Of the 458 ships that entered the port for the month, 269 of the vessels were sailing ships, while the remaining 189 were steam-powered. Following its service with Hackley's fleet, the *Rouse Simmons* changed numerous owners and captains before Schuenemann assumed an interest in the vessel at the beginning of the 20th century.

Over the years, Schuenemann commanded several schooners that carried Christmas trees to Chicago. Prior to captaining the *Rouse Simmons*, some of his other vessels were the *George Wrenn*, the *Bertha Barnes*, and the *Mary Collins*. Like many other merchants, Schuenemann could not afford to purchase a schooner outright. It was a common practice for two or more businessmen, or lake captains, to form a partnership and purchase shares in a vessel. In 1910, Schuenemann purchased a partial interest in the *Rouse Simmons*. By 1912, Schuenemann's financial interest in the *Rouse Simmons* amounted to 1/8 of the ship, while Captain Charles Nelson of Chicago, who later accompanied Schuenemann on the fateful November trip, owned another 1/8 share, and a Mannes J. Bonner of St. James, Michigan, held a commanding 3/4 interest in the vessel.

By the early 1890s, Schuenemann lived in Chicago, and his career as a local merchant and lake captain were well established. On April 9, 1891, he married German born Barbara Schindel. The 1900 Federal census indicates that Barbara and Herman Schuenemann had three daughters during the 1890s: Elsie born in January 1892, and in October 1898, twins Hazel and Pearl. Barbara learned that being the wife of a lake captain took special qualities. She also realized, as did most wives whose husbands made their living on the Great Lakes, that it was not a matter of if catastrophe would strike, but when.

The Schuenemann's holiday season was tragically marred on November 9, 1898, just one month after the birth of twins Hazel and Pearl, when older brother, August, died while sailing the *S. Thal*, a recently acquired schooner. The *S. Thal*, a small, two-masted schooner weighing 52 tons, and built in 1867 in Milwaukee, was nearing Chicago with a load of Christmas trees. The ship was caught in a storm near Glencoe, along Illinois' northern shoreline. During the night, the vessel broke up and all hands were lost. While the Schuenemann family was devastated, Herman decided to continue the family tradition of making late-season Christmas trees runs.

Records of the District Courts of the United States, for Milwaukee (Record Group 21), suggest that August came to the *S. Thal* just weeks before when it was sold at auction by U. S. Marshals to pay fees owed to Otto Parker, the vessel's 19-year-old cook. Parker sued the vessel's previous owner, William Robertson, in Admiralty Court over Robertson's refusal to pay Parker the remaining \$60.00 owed for his services as cook aboard the tiny vessel. In September 1898, United States District Court Judge William

H. Seaman decided the case in favor of the young cook, and the vessel was sold to pay the debt.

By the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, the popular German tradition of decorating an evergreen tree in the home was widely practiced, and demand for Christmas trees was great. It was not uncommon for a handful of lake schooners to make late-season runs from northern Michigan and Wisconsin, before the worst storms and ice made lake travel too hazardous, loaded with thousands of Christmas trees for Chicago busy waterfront markets. Estimates of the number of Christmas schooners vary, but perhaps up to two dozen vessels in any season delivered evergreens to markets in Great Lakes states.

In Chicago, most vessels, including the *Rouse Simmons*, sold the trees directly from their berths along the Chicago River's Clark Street docks. Electric lights were strung from the schooner's bow to stern, and customers were invited to board the ship to choose their tree. In addition to selling Christmas trees, many boats, including Schuenemann's, made and sold wreaths, garland, and other holiday decorations. Barbara Schuenemann, along with her three daughters, participated in making and selling these items as part of the family's holiday trade.

Throughout the year, and especially during the late winter months of December, January, and March, when the Great Lakes were impassable because of ice and storms, many lake boat captains supplemented their incomes in other ways. As a small businessman and merchant, Schuenemann not only made his living sailing schooners on the lake, but he also owned businesses which in 1906 included a saloon. In these business endeavors, Schuenemann did not always meet with success, and on January 4,

1907, he petitioned for bankruptcy in the U. S. District Court in Chicago. Listed as a saloon keeper, Schuenemann's debts to his creditors amounted to over \$1,300 which he was unable to satisfy. This financial setback, however, did not appear to interfere with his other role as a lake captain.

At some stage of his long career as a late season tree captain, Herman Schuenemann was given the title of Captain Santa. The affectionate title was bestowed by Chicago's local newspapers and by the city's grateful residents. Schuenemann's profits from selling Christmas trees had never made the family wealthy, but his reputation for generosity was well established, and he delighted in presenting trees to many of the city's needy residents. Schuenemann enjoyed the nickname and proudly kept newspaper clippings about his role as Captain Santa in his oilskin wallet.

By November 1912, Schuenemann was a veteran schooner master who had hauled Christmas trees to Chicago for almost three decades. While Schuenemann was in his prime as a lake captain, the same could not be said for the *Rouse Simmons*. The once sleek sailing vessel was now forty-four years old, and long past its premium sailing days. Time, the elements, and hundreds of heavy loads of lumber had taken their toll on the vessel's physical condition.

Following the schooner's loss, the vessel's sailing condition came under scrutiny. One of the legends associated with the disaster was that prior to its departure from Thompson, rats living aboard the now dilapidated ship were seen making their way to dry land, as if they had a premonition of the ship's doom.

In addition to fleeing rats, some of the crew were rumored to have deserted the ship prior to its departure. There is some disagreement over the exact number and the

identities of the crew members aboard the *Rouse Simmons*, but newspaper accounts following the tragedy provide evidence that those aboard the vessel included Captain Schuenemann, Captain Charles Nelson, who was part owner of the schooner, and approximately 9-10 other sailors. Some estimates place the number of men aboard the ship as high as 23, when it was said that a party of lumberjacks had secured their passage back to Chicago.

On Thursday, November 21, 1912, the *Rouse Simmons*, heavily laden with between 3,000 and 5,000 Christmas trees which filled the ship's cargo hold and covered its deck, left Thompson's dock. Some eyewitnesses to the *Rouse Simmons*' departure claimed the ship looked like a floating forest. Schuenemann's departure, however, also heralded the beginnings of a terrific winter storm on the lake that sent several other ships to the bottom, including the schooners *South Shore*, *Three Sisters*, and *Two Brothers*.

What happened after the *Rouse Simmons* departed the tiny harbor at Thompson with its heavy load of trees is unknown, but Life Saving Station logs from Records of the U. S. Coast Guard (Record Group 26) testify that at 2:50 PM on Saturday, November 23, 1912, a surfman at the Life Saving Station in Kewaunee, Wisconsin, alerted the Station Keeper, Captain Nelson Craite, that a schooner (the *Rouse Simmons*' identity was unknown) was sighted headed south flying its flag at half mast, a universal sign of distress. In his remarks on the incident, Craite wrote, "I immediately took the Glasses, and made out that there was a distress signal. The schooner was between 5 and 6 miles E.S.E. and blowing a Gale from the N.W." Craite attempted to locate a gas tug boat to assist the schooner, but the vessel had left earlier in the day. After a few minutes, the Life Saving crew at Kewaunee lost sight of the schooner.

At 3:10 PM., Craite telephoned Station Keeper Captain George E. Sogge, at Two Rivers, the next Station further south. Craite informed Sogge that a schooner was headed south flying its flag at half mast. Sogge immediately ordered the Two Rivers' surfmen to launch the Station's powerboat. Shortly thereafter, it reached the schooner's approximate position, but darkness, heavy snow, and mist obscured any trace of the *Rouse Simmons* and its crew. The schooner had vanished.

Barbara Schuenemann and her daughters were concerned when the *Rouse Simmons* failed to arrive on schedule. It was not uncommon for schooners to pull into a safe harbor to ride out a storm, and arrive days later at their destination. The family's worst fears were confirmed; however, when days later still no word of the vessel had been received. Over the next weeks and months remnants of Christmas trees began washing ashore along the Wisconsin shoreline. Astonishingly, the lake continued to give up clues long after the vessel's loss, when in 1924, some fishermen in Wisconsin hauled in their nets and discovered a wallet wrapped in waterproof oilskin. Inside were the pristine contents that identified its owner as Herman Schuenemann, the captain of the *Rouse Simmons*. The wallet was returned to the family.

What caused the disaster that befell the *Rouse Simmons*? There are several theories, but most likely a combination of circumstances, or events, including the possibility that the vessel lost its ship's wheel in the storm, combined with the vessel's poor physical condition, heavy icing and snow on the vessel's exterior and load, plus a load of 3,000-5,000 evergreen trees, which combined together, drove the ship under in the heavy seas.

A recent underwater archaeological survey conducted in July and August 2006, by the Wisconsin Historical Society, discovered that the *Rouse Simmons*' anchor chain, masts, and spar were all lying forward beyond the bow, or front, of the wreck. The location of these items suggested that the schooner's weight was in the bow causing it to nose dive into the heavy seas and floundered. Another explanation may be that the masts, rigging, and chains were all shoved forward when the vessel dove into the lake bed during its descent to the bottom.

Following the tragedy, Barbara and her daughters continued the family's Christmas tree business. Newspaper accounts suggest that Barbara and her daughters used schooners for several more years to bring trees to Chicago. Later, the women brought the evergreen trees to Chicago by train, and then sold them from the deck of a docked schooner. The family's Christmas tree business continued well into the late 1920s and only ended with Barbara's death in 1933.

The loss of the *Rouse Simmons*, however, signaled the beginning of the end for schooners hauling loads of evergreen trees to Chicago. By the early 1920s, the practice of bringing trees to Chicago via schooner had almost completely ceased. Just a few years later, the majority of the once proud schooners lay leaking and decaying, moored in their berths around the lake.

Barbara Schuenemann died in Chicago on June 15, 1933. Eldest daughter Elsie married Arthur E. Roberts. She died on January 31, 1950. Twin Hazel married Clarence Gronemann, and Pearl married William H. Ehling. The sisters died on January 4, 1969, and July 6, 1991, respectively. Descendants of the Schuenemann family still reside in the Chicago area.

Over the years the schooner's disappearance spawned legends and tales that grew ever larger with the passage of time. Some Lake Michigan mariners claimed to have spotted the *Rouse Simmons* appearing out of nowhere. Visitors to the gravesite of Barbara Schuenemann in Chicago's Acacia Park Cemetery claim there is the scent of evergreens present in the air.

Today, the legend of Captain Schuenemann and the Christmas Tree Ship appeals to a large and varied audience, but children seem most attracted to the story. Perhaps the allure of a heart-warming story mixed with shipwrecks, Christmas, ghosts, and Lake Michigan's many mysteries, prove irresistible to children of all ages. At least four histories, two documentaries, and several plays, musicals, and folk songs have been written or produced about the legendary ship, and its captain and crew.

Each year in early December, the final voyage of Captain Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons* is commemorated by the U. S. Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw*, which makes the journey from northern Michigan to deliver a symbolic load of Christmas trees to Chicago's disadvantaged. Captain Schuenemann and the crew of the *Rouse Simmons* would be proud.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary sources that document Captain Herman Schuenemann, the *Rouse Simmons*, the *S. Thal*, and other events mentioned in this article include the original and microfilmed records listed below. For more information about records that document Great Lakes maritime history contact: National Archives and Records Administration-Great Lakes Region, 7358 South Pulaski Road, Chicago, IL, 60629, Ph. (773) 948-9001, Fax. (773) 948-9050, E-mail: chicago.archives@nara.gov.

Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States are arranged by the geographical location of the court. These records often are overlooked by researchers when considering maritime history resources. Admiralty, bankruptcy, civil, and criminal records, however, include dockets and case files with detailed information relating to accidents, death, wrecks, seizures, prize cases, and other maritime related events.

U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Chicago

- Bankruptcy Case 14221, *Herman E. Schuenemann*, January 7, 1907. Schuenemann filed bankruptcy as a saloon keeper.
- Bankruptcy Docket, Vol. 25, Page 22, Case 14221, *Herman E. Schuenemann*, January 7, 1907.

U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

- Admiralty Case J502, *Otto Parker vs. The Schooner S. Thal*, August-September 1898. Admiralty case over wage dispute earned by Parker as a cook on the *S. Thal*. The *S. Thal*, captained by August Schuenemann, brother of Herman, sank two months later with all hands carrying Christmas trees to Chicago.
- Admiralty Docket, Vol. J, *Otto Parker vs. The Schooner S. Thal*, August-September 1898. Detailed docket entry for Case J502. Pages 502-505.

Record Group 26, Records of the U. S. Coast Guard for the Chicago and Cleveland Districts provide information on marine casualties, rescues, and rescue attempts that occurred on the Great Lakes. One of the Great Lakes Region's most valuable series of records for documenting maritime history on the Great Lakes is the Life Saving Station Logs. These logs not only document the often mundane day-to-day operations of the stations, but included are descriptions of the arduous training, backbreaking work, and the horrific accounts of the crews who often risked, and gave,

their lives in saving sailors or passengers from the lake. A complete list of Life Saving Station Logs for the Chicago and Cleveland Districts can be found on the National Archives-Great Lakes Region's web site at: <http://www.archives.gov/great-lakes/chicago/finding-aids/life-saving-station-logs.html>.

Life Saving Station Logs, Chicago District

- Life Saving Station Log, Kewaunee, Wisconsin, log entry for November 23, 1912 describing sighting the *Rouse Simmons* and reporting her distress to the crew at Two Rivers, Wisconsin, Life Saving Station.
- Life Saving Station Log, Two Rivers, Wisconsin, log entry for November 23, 1912 describing the abortive rescue attempt for the *Rouse Simmons*.

Record Group 29, Records of the Bureau of the Census, Population

Schedules, provide a snapshot of an individual's household at a particular moment in time. The records are arranged by the state and then by enumeration district.

Microfilm Census, Federal Population Schedules, Illinois, Cook County:

- 1900 entry for Herman Schuenemann (Twelfth Census, ED 659, Sheet 1, Line 3). Microfilm Publication T623, Roll 271.
- 1910 entry for Herman Schuenemann (Thirteenth Census, ED 982, Sheet 2, Line 63). Microfilm Publication T624, Roll 266.

Record Group 36, Records of the U. S. Customs Service, document the entrances and clearances of vessels at ports, taxes and duties collected, wrecks, seizures, and the shipment of goods on the Great Lakes. The records are arranged by the port or collection district.

Grand Haven, Michigan

- Entrances/Clearances, August 1882-April 1890 Vol.18 (Entrances) and Vol. 19 (Clearances).

Record Group 41, Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and

Navigation document the licensing and enrollment of vessels, ships' masters or captains, and engineers, that sailed on the Great Lakes. These records are arranged by the vessel's home port.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

- Licenses of Enrolled Vessels, 1853-1912. License of Enrolled Vessel for *Rouse Simmons*, August 27, 1868. Vol. 87. Page: 349.
- Licenses of Enrolled Vessels, 1853-1912. License of Enrolled Vessel for *Rouse Simmons*, July 3, 1871. Vol. 69. Page 99.
- Licenses of Enrolled Vessels, 1853-1912. License of Enrolled Vessel for *S. Thal*, October 19, 1891. Vol. 33. Page 391.

Secondary Sources

Anyone interested in the history of schooners and their role in Lakes Michigan's maritime history should begin with Professor Theodore J. Karamanski's thorough *Schooner Passage: Sailing Ships and the Lake Michigan Frontier* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). Karamanski, a history professor at Chicago's Loyola University, provides a comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the schooner industry on Lake Michigan.

The tragic, yet heartening, holiday tale of Captain Herman Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons* is relatively unknown outside of the communities that dot Lake Michigan's coast. However, the story's appeal is yearly gaining a wider audience.

Wisconsin author and historian, Rochelle Pennington, has written an exhaustive, yet appealing history of the Christmas Tree Ship, *The Historic Christmas Tree Ship: A True Story of Faith, Hope and Love* (West Bend, WI: Pathways Press, 2004), that includes a wealth of photographs, newspaper clippings, and information on the legendary vessel and the Schuenemann family. Pennington's work on the *Rouse Simmons* also includes a popular children's book, *The Christmas Tree Ship: The Story of Captain Santa* (Woodruff, WI: The Guest Cottage, Inc., 2002).

The often un-heralded contributions made by the brave individuals who manned the Life Saving Stations that dotted the Great Lakes coastline are documented in noted Great Lakes historian, Frederick Stonehouse's *Wreck Ashore: The United States Life-Saving Service on the Great Lakes* (Duluth, MN: Lake Superior Port Cities, Inc., 1994).

For those interested in driving Lake Michigan's scenic coastline in search of sites related to the story, one should not miss the recently dedicated marker in tiny, picturesque, Thompson, Michigan, commemorating the *Rouse Simmons*' last port of call.

In Wisconsin, Christmas Tree Ship Point in Captain Schuenemann's home town of Algoma is worthy of a visit. The marker was erected to pay tribute to all of the schooners and their crews who delivered Christmas trees. The Roger's Street Fishing Village Museum in Two Rivers includes several artifacts recovered from the *Rouse Simmons*, along with the ship's wheel. The Life Saving Stations in Two Rivers and Kewaunee, while inactive, remain much as they did during the time when schooners ruled Lake Michigan. The Milwaukee Yacht Club is home to the *Rouse Simmons*' anchor.

Online resources regarding Captain Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons* are numerous. Among the best is Frederick Neuschel's tribute to Lake Michigan's Christmas tree ships and their captains at <http://christmastreeship.homestead.com/>. Wisconsin's Great Lakes Shipwrecks web site provides a shipwreck database and underwater video of the *Rouse Simmons*' wreckage at <http://www.wisconsinshipwrecks.org/>. The holdings of the Milwaukee Public Library's and Wisconsin Marine Historical Society's joint collection provide a searchable online database at <http://www.wmhs.org/html/>. The database relates to a large series of ship files held by the respective institutions. The Chicago History Museum's Chicago Daily News Collection of photographs is available through the Library of Congress home page at <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcop/ichihtml/cdnhome.html>. The online collection provides several images relating to Captain Schuenemann, his family, and schooners. Pier Wisconsin's Floating Classroom offers educators and students an excellent review of the *Rouse Simmons* story along with classroom activities at http://voyage.pierwisconsin.org/classroom/topics/rouse_simmons.php. Finally, the Wisconsin Historical Society, which surveyed the *Rouse Simmons*' wreckage in the summer of 2006, highlights their research on the schooner at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/>.

Photographs, and other records relating to the *Rouse Simmons*, are housed in several libraries, and historical and maritime societies around Lakes Michigan including the Chicago History Museum, Chicago Maritime Society, the Milwaukee Public Library and Wisconsin Marine Historical Society, and the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc.

Artistic depictions of the *Rouse Simmons* are found in traditional paintings and music. The Clipper Ship Gallery in La Grange, Illinois, holds the rights to the late artist Charles Vickery's magnificent artwork of the *Rouse Simmons*. Additional images of the *Rouse Simmons* can be seen on the Clipper Ship Gallery's home page at <http://www.charlesvickery.com/>. Lee Murdock and Carl Behrend, prominent Great Lakes folk singers, write and perform music about the legendary vessel.

Lastly, the most recent documentary on the *Rouse Simmons* is The Weather Channel's 2004 hour-long production, *The Christmas Tree Ship: A Holiday Storm Story*. The channel airs this special episode of its popular *Storm Stories* series throughout the holiday season and on Christmas night.