

Wisconsin's

Underwater Heritage

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Program announced for fall meeting on Oct. 2 in Manitowoc

The Manitowoc Maritime Museum will be the site of the annual fall meeting of the Wisconsin Underwater Archaeological Association on Saturday, Oct. 2, 1993.

The business meeting portion of the program will begin at 9:30 a.m. at the museum (call 1-800-236-5739 for directions or a map). In addition to the election of officers for 1993-94, there will be also a discussion of WUAA work on the stone ships in Sturgeon Bay, the Lottie Cooper in Sheboygan, and this summer's remote sensing seminar.

Following the business meeting, there will be a roundtable discussion on the State Historical Society's Niagara project beginning at 11 a.m. Al Brown will show a video of the mapping project and WUAA members will discuss their experiences.

After a lunch break from noon to 1 p.m., Harry Alden of the U.S. Forest Service Lab

in Madison will give a slide presentation on a preservation project involving artifacts and remains of an 18th century sailing brig. The work was done for the State of Delaware on a vessel of either Dutch or British origin.

Following the preservation presentation, there will be a program on either the formation of Michigan's newest underwater preserve in the Keweenaw Peninsula or the Lake Michigan wrecks off the Manitowoc-Two Rivers area beginning at 2 p.m. Following the program, there will be an optional tour of the maritime museum beginning at 3 p.m. (cost: \$4.50).

Members wishing to have additional items included in either the business or program portions of the meeting are encouraged to contact Tom Villand at 608-221-1996, or Bob O'Donnell at 1-800-236-5739, prior to the meeting.

Early winter can take a toll on Great Lakes sailors

By GEORGE VUKELICH

(Editor's note: this story of the perils of working on a Great Lakes ship in the early winter is reprinted from the Nov. 13 issue of Isthmus, a weekly newspaper based in Madison).

We were up in Door County last weekend. As we drove the little beach road to the Kellman cottage, you could see the beach had been hit by "some kind of weather" as old Petersen, the Able-Bodied Deckhand aboard the ore carrier Norman B. Ream, used to say.

Petersen was an old-timer from Ashland who had spent—“misspent” he would say—a long life sailing the Great Lakes. He said when it got to be November it was time to get off the water and just stay on the shore until the following spring.

The boats kept sailing until the locks at the Soo closed for the winter—usually in December—but Petersen said when it got to be November he always packed it in and got the hell off the water. He knew that Novem-

ber is the season of big storms on these inland seas.

The sailing can get dangerous, securing the hatches on the open deck as the ore carrier left Two Harbors far behind schedule, because loading the ore had taken 30 hours.

During loading, the ore-filled rail cars were pushed out onto a high trestle above the loading dock. The gondola cars were tipped, and their contents cascaded down the steel chutes into the open hatches of the ship. Gravity did the heavy work.

In ice-cold weather, the ore froze in the cars and, defying gravity, even in the chutes. Then men with welding torches heated the immobile mass thawing it so it loosened, slid and flowed into the cargo holds for a while and then froze and stopped again.

And then flames flared again and the flow would start. Progress came in fits and starts. Petersen said it was like trying to melt down a glacier with a box of farmer matches.

Bad as that was, you could take it because

you were tied tight to the dock. And the only work the deckhands did was go down periodically to shift the mooring lines—wire cables, actually—from one deadman to another as cargo holds were filled and the boat was moved into a new position under the chutes to fill the other holds.

You had to watch your footing on the icy spots, but the only danger that deckhands really worried about during loading was a wire snapping and snaking, and slashing around like a steel whip. There were horror stories about deckhands being killed, decapitated by the whipping wires. You could see that was a distinct possibility.

Deckhands always got themselves behind the steel superstructure of the trestle as quickly as they could once they slipped the loop of the wire over the deadman. The hands would then signal to the man at the rail far above on the dock, and as he relayed the signal to the winchman, the deckhands headed for cover. Some ran.

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A sailor's tale about early winter on the lakes

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Winching was the critical time. If the wire was going to snap, usually it would be when the slack was taken up and the wire tightened so the ship could be moved by the winching. The load on the braided cable was tremendous.

The deckhands always thought the wire were more likely to snap in the freezing cold, but had no facts or figures to prove it. It just felt that way.

It felt that way especially if you were loading at night and you were down on the dock alone in the darkness, hoping that the could see your signals up above. You sure as hell were having trouble seeing theirs down here. You were also having trouble seeing the wire.

In the darkness, you mostly listened very hard, and you could hear the wire tightening under the strain. If it snapped, that *ping!* might be the last thing you heard.

"Just you and the wire down there," Petersen used to chuckle. "Like watching a cobra." Petersen also said decking was a young man's game because only the young were dumb enough to do it. At sea, out on the

open water, the November weather was a bigger danger than the wires had been.

Especially the winter storms that rolled the seas right over the hatchcovers. The ore boat was 700 feet long but was helpless as a stick in those seas. Those seas that claimed the Edmund Fitzgerald, and before the Fitzgerald thousands and thousands of boats, ships and vessels of every kind.

Some Great Lakes histories say at least 8,000 ships at least have been lost out there. Some say more.

Starting in November, Petersen said, the odds go up. So in November he left, and the young men who too dumb to believe the odds drank to him.

"The Good Lord," Dynie Mansfield would tell us later, "watches over the dumb ones."

There were piles along the shoulders of the beach road to Kellman's. In some sections, there was sand on both sides of the road.

The sand had obviously blocked the road not too long ago. You could see where a plow had come through and pushed the sand back on the lakeside.

The lake was deceptive now. Quiet, placid

as a well-fed animal. But what kind of ferocious sea had been running during the storm that brought the sand up here.

The next morning was not placid. I pulled the woolen cap down over my ears and the collar of my jacket up over my ears and set off for the lighthouse a mile to the north.

The waves of winter rolled in, gray, whitecapped, noisy, the spray in the air like buckshot. Herring gulls glided above the beach without moving a muscle.

There was no other human on the beach this morning. The light snow of the night remained, untracked except for the print of gull feet.

The sand was hard in some places, unyielding as the season that was coming. Looking back, my tracks just stopped. I had vanished into thin, cold air.

I could hear engines thumping beyond the horizon. Gales howling. Winches straining, and old Petersen chuckling about all the dumb ones. *George Vukelich writes a regular column called the North Country Notebook, and reads selections from it on Sundays at 11:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).*

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For those interested in studying and preserving Wisconsin's underwater history