

## Coming Events

- March 15-16, 2003 **Ghost Ships Festival.** Milwaukee, WI. For information contact Brendon Baillod, [brendon@baillod.com](mailto:brendon@baillod.com) or check their website, [www.ghost-ships.org](http://www.ghost-ships.org).
- April 12, 2003 **Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association Spring Meeting.** Manitowoc, WI. For information contact P. J. Creviere at 920-337-0270 or [syberdiver@aol.com](mailto:syberdiver@aol.com).
- April 25-27, 2003 **Our World Underwater.** Rosemont, Il. For information check their web site at [www.ourworldunderwater.com](http://www.ourworldunderwater.com) or email to [info@ourworldunderwater.com](mailto:info@ourworldunderwater.com).
- June 7-15, 2003 **Door County Shipwreck Survey.** WUAA will be mapping various sites in the Bailey's Harbor area. For details contact Russ Leitz, 715-258-2935 or [rleitz@vbe.com](mailto:rleitz@vbe.com).

**Wisconsin Underwater  
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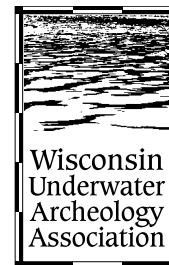
*For those interested in the study and preservation of  
Wisconsin's underwater history and cultural resources.*

# Wisconsin's UNDERWATER HERITAGE

Vol. 13 No. 1

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March 2003



## Sturgeon Bay Sub Chaser 1261, The First Ship Lost At D-Day

*Material for this story was provided by P.J. Creviere.*

The quiet waters off Sturgeon Bay's Bay Ship Building evoke thoughts of fun and adventuresome sport and commercial cruising around the lakes. But in February, 1943, a sleek gray hull slid into the waters of the bay, built for war and bound for glory.

The sub chaser *SC 1261* was fairly small as warships go, with a length of 174 feet, and a beam of 23 feet. One of over 30 of her type built at what was then known as Leathem Smith Shipyard, she lacked the creature comforts of the larger ships of the line. Drawing only 7 feet, her type of design was known for heavy rolling and was known as a "wet" boat. Her two diesel engines generated 2,800 horsepower to push the 280-ton ship at a top speed of 20 knots.

The U.S. Navy usually sent in a commissioning crew to help oversee the construction and learn the very guts of the vessel from the keel up. Part of her complement of 80 men joined her there, including Lt. Halsey V. Barrett. Noticeably absent was her captain, Lt. Com. R. F. Sewell, Jr. She was launched on February 28, 1943 and handed over to the Navy on May 1 and immediately began her trip down Lake Michigan to Chicago. Commander Sewell joined her there.

Together they continued down the Chicago River to the Mississippi and on to New Orleans where the *1261* was commissioned and armed.

The crew spent the next year training, escorting convoys across the North Atlantic and patrol duty. She and her crew chased sonar contacts, convoy stragglers and learned to do all of it in 20 foot waves. She ultimately arrived in Portsmouth, England, in March of 1944. There she became a member of PC Squadron One. Patrol duty for the sub chaser continued around England where she helped to keep a

*continued on page 4*

## Christina Nilsson Site Survey

*The Christina Nilsson will be one of the sites surveyed by the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association this summer. See page three to find out how you can participate in this project. The article on page 6 describes the site and the work that has been done so far.*

*Launching of the subchaser PC 1261 in Sturgeon Bay, February 28, 1943.*

*Photograph courtesy of Schroeder Photography.*



# Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association News

## Spring Meeting

The Spring meeting of the Association will be held on Saturday, April 12 at the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc.

In the morning, John Karl will present a brief overview of celestial navigation. Karl will include a short history of the topic and demonstrate how a ship's position can be determined from the height of the sun and stars-and how easily mistakes can be made. Navigation errors by 19th century Great Lakes captains may be of particular interest to underwater archeologists.

Karl learned to sail in a 16-foot Snipe at age seven. A year later, his study of Bowditch's *American Practical Navigator* sparked a lifelong interest in science and navigation. Karl has taught navigation in university classes, in aviation schools, and most recently aboard the three-masted schooner *Denis Sullivan*, on a passage from Milwaukee to Montreal. He has sailed in the Great Lakes, the East

Coast, the Bahamas and the Pacific. He spends much of his time building boats, repairing them, and painting seascapes in oils.

A professor emeritus at UW-Oshkosh, Karl received a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from the University of Wisconsin in 1967. In a 28-year career at Oshkosh, he taught physics and geophysics, conducted government-sponsored research, and wrote a book on digital signal processing.

A business meeting will follow the presentation. After lunch there will be a tour of the museum, including the new addition.

Directions to the museum can be found on our web site at [www.wuaa.org](http://www.wuaa.org).

For further information please contact P. J. Creviere at 920-337-0270 [syberdiver@aol.com](mailto:syberdiver@aol.com)

For information on the museum check their web site at: [www.wimaritimemuseum.org](http://www.wimaritimemuseum.org) or contact them at:

Wisconsin Maritime Museum  
75 Maritime Drive  
Manitowoc, WI  
920-684-0218

## Meeting Agenda:

- 9:30 Arrive (coffee and donuts, provided by museum and PJ).
- 9:45 Presentation (John Karl on celestial navigation).
- 11:00 Business meeting.
- 12:00 Lunch (suggestions and directions provided by PJ).
- 1:30 Museum Tour – “behind the scenes” with museum staff.
- 2:30 Tour the Museum – on your own, all new portions will be open.

## New Domain Name

The Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association has a new, simpler domain name for our web site: [www.wuaa.org](http://www.wuaa.org)

**Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage** is published quarterly by the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association, a nonprofit association of individuals and organizations interested in studying and preserving the underwater cultural resources and historical sites of Wisconsin.

In addition to publishing this newsletter, the Association also holds semiannual meetings

and provides support to members' research and publication projects. Annual membership dues are \$15. For membership information, contact the secretary or write to the address below.

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## Letter from the President

WUAA Members,

Hello from Madison! I trust this newsletter finds you happy, healthy and eagerly anticipating the 2003 dive season. As WUAA continues to plan upcoming fieldwork (details for the Christina Nilsson project follows), I'm reminded again how fortunate we are to have such tremendous shipwreck diving in Wisconsin. The sheer number of Wisconsin's Great Lakes historic shipwrecks is impressive, potentially numbering as many as 700. Add significant numbers of wrecks in the Mississippi River and the state's smaller inland waterways and the total climbs even higher.

But it is more than just the number of shipwrecks that inspires most of us to don a drysuit. The range of vessel types, genres and notable individual vessel histories infinitely enhance our diving experiences. Moreover, there are historic shipwreck sites for every level of scuba diver, as well as interesting sites for snorkelers and kayakers. A lifetime of shipwreck exploration awaits anyone wishing to take advantage of it, as many of you can attest.

Ultimately, as we all can attest, a single factor truly lies at the heart of this unique diving opportunity: unparalleled preservation. The Great Lakes' cold, fresh water continues to keep many historic shipwrecks and related artifacts virtually frozen in time. Even the scattered remains of shallow wrecks, battered mercilessly by the elements, have stories to tell and archaeological secrets to reveal. Mother Nature will, of course, inevitably claim Wisconsin's historic shipwrecks, but considering

the exceptional preservation of many sites well over 125 years old, the process is arguably slow. The larger threat, and the only one completely within our control, is human impact.

Shipwreck preservation has several forms, and organizations such as WUAA, the Great Lakes Shipwreck Research Foundation and the Great Lakes Shipwreck Preservation Society lead the way in advocating zero impact diving and observance of state and federal laws regarding shipwreck looting. This "self-policing" is essential to keeping these non-renewable resources intact for future generations to enjoy and study. Documentation is also fundamental to historic shipwreck preservation, and the groups above have all contributed to a better understanding of Great Lakes maritime history through archaeological fieldwork.

As preservation-minded divers, we are intimately familiar with the archaeological, historical and recreational value of historic shipwrecks. Yet what about those folks who do not dive? Title to Wisconsin's historic shipwrecks is held in public trust by the State of Wisconsin for the benefit of all – both divers and non-divers. Consequently, the general public should be able to share equally in the discovery, exploration and appreciation of Wisconsin's historic shipwrecks. There is a mutual benefit here. Shipwrecks are an exciting medium through which the larger story of Wisconsin's maritime history can be told, and by telling this story effectively, preservationists may garner wider public support for their efforts. This is one reason why education and outreach should be considered an important component of shipwreck preservation.

As we prepare for another dive season, I hope you will consider sharing your diving experiences and passion for maritime history with

those who do not dive (yet!). The venues are many: local history organizations, classrooms, and diving certification classes to name just a few. Some of you already give well-received presentations on a regular basis, and the WHS Maritime Preservation and Archaeology Program is also engaged in more education and outreach opportunities than ever before. This is indeed an enjoyable and effective way to share what we have had the good fortune to experience beneath Wisconsin's chilly waters. Hope to see you at the spring meeting in Manitowoc!

Best,  
Russ

## Bailey's Harbor Summer of 2003 Field Project

A WUAA 2003 summer field project will be held at Bailey's Harbor from June 7 to June 15, with the surveys of three shipwreck sections that lie to the east of the wreck site of the *Christina Nilsson*, in a lagoon shoreward of the Old Bailey's Harbor Lighthouse. The goal of the project is to do a complete field survey and site drawings of these three sites in order to determine if any of them are a part of the *Nilsson* and if not what ship(s) do they represent. As Bailey's Harbor was privy to several additional wrecks, the study of these pieces may shed some additional light and possibly identify these other wrecks; contributing to the overall understanding of the Maritime History of Bailey's Harbor.

Those interested in participating in the 2003 field survey should contact Russ Leitz by phone at 715-258-2935 or email [rleitz@vbe.com](mailto:rleitz@vbe.com).

## Sub Chaser 1261

*continued from page 1*

lookout for German submarines and E-boats or torpedo boats.

On June 6, 1944, America and her allies stormed the shores of Normandy to break down the door of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's "Atlantic Wall." The *1261* was given the task of helping to organize troop landing craft and escorting them to the beach. She was stationed at Red Sector off Utah Beach, where she spent the early morning hours of D-Day preceding the landing craft up to the beach, rescuing survivors from sinking landing craft and other casualties. At 5:34 in the morning, having just delivered landing craft into the shallows, the sub chaser

was 8,000 yards off the beachhead in 36 feet of water, when German guns zeroed in on her. Plumes of water exploded around her and the Quartermaster ran into the chart room yelling, "We've been straddled by a shore battery." Moments later, the narrow hull shook and healed over far to starboard. Barrett pulled himself out to the port wing bridge and surveyed the situation. Crewmen clung to the careening deck. The captain called to his radio-man, "Tell the Admiral we're sinking." The ship rolled on her side and her stern slid under the white caps of the English Channel, the first Allied ship sunk in the Normandy invasion.

Several months later, Leathem D. Smith, owner of the shipyard

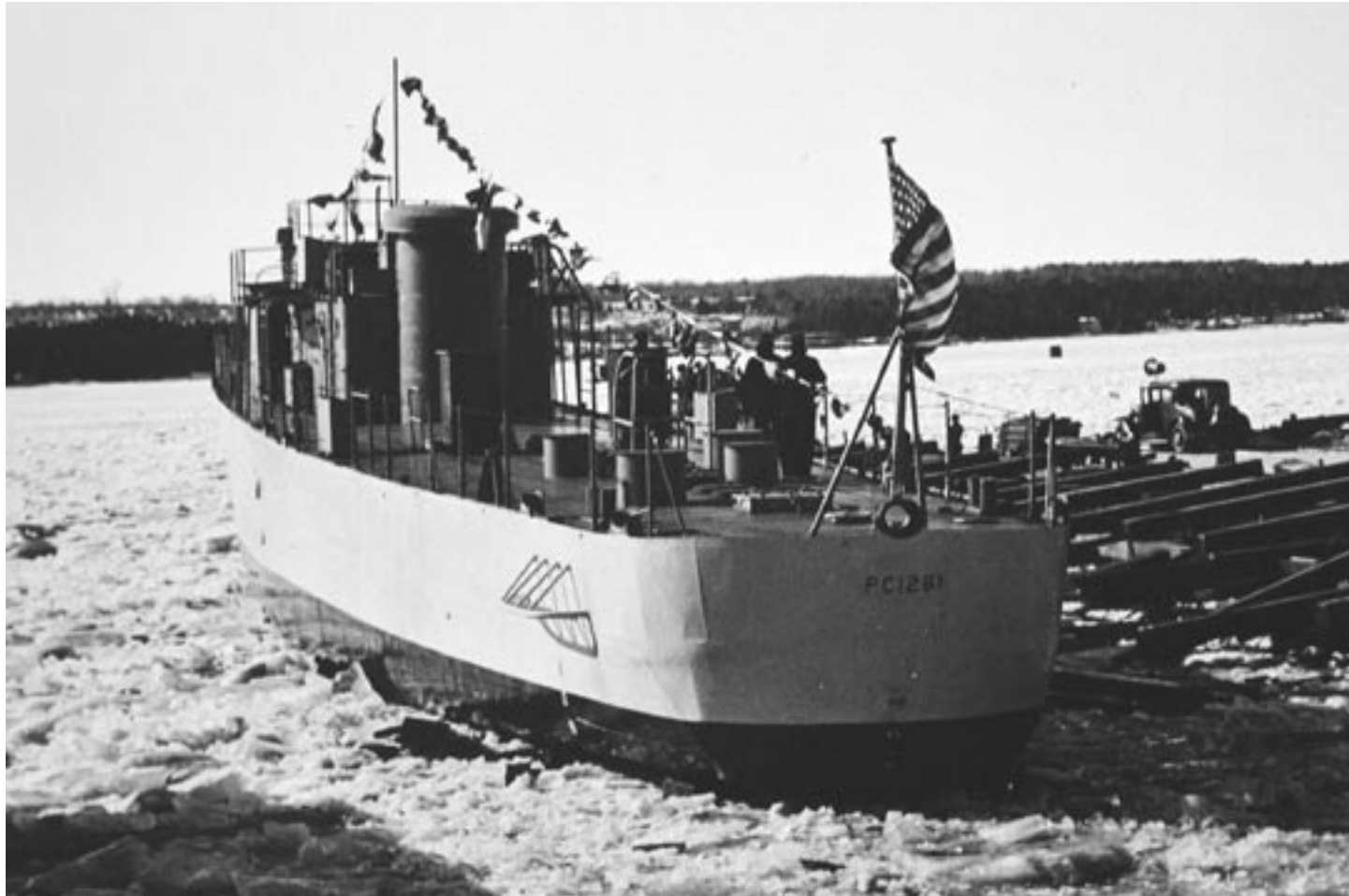
received a letter from Lt. Barrett. The SC officer explained, "At 5:34 a.m., June 6, we were leading into the beach, several LCP's (landing craft, personnel) loaded with Army forces. When we were 8,000 yards from the beach on the landing nearest to St. Vaas-La-Hougue, a German strong-point got our range and straddled us with shellfire.

"Our engine room was hit just aft of the quarterdeck. The shell apparently ricocheted through the engine room, into the magazine hold aft and exploded in the galley. We think it was about a five-inch shell."

Barrett wrote that the bow section floated for an hour and a half. "I am sad to report that we lost our engineering officer, Lt. (j.g.) Ralph Noble, and 12 members of our crew.

*Subchaser PC 1261 after launch in Sturgeon Bay, February 1943.*

*Photograph courtesy of Schroeder Photography.*



She was a good ship, and her job was successful even though she sunk toward the end of her mission. I happened to be the last person off the ship and can report that the *PC 1261* structurally survived all that could be expected of her under the circumstances."

Of the 39 or so Sub Chasers built in Sturgeon Bay during the World War II, the *1261* was the fourteenth to go to war. But the first one lost to enemy action was also the first PC built by Leathem Smith, *PC 496*. That sub chaser was escorting landing craft ashore at Bizerte, Tunisia when she was ripped apart by a torpedo from an Italian submarine, June 4, 1943.

Lt. Halsey V. Barrett survived the war and went on to an illustrative career in television. A few years ago he published a small book,

*"Experiences Aboard the First Ship Sunk In the D-Day Invasion of France,"* written while he was recovering in a hospital in England. He now lives in Bronxville, New York.

Leathem Smith, oddly enough, did die on a shipwreck. He drowned when his beloved yacht, the *Half Moon*, sank June 30, 1946, six miles off Sherwood Point, the southwestern point of the Bay of Sturgeon Bay, in Door County. He was lost with two yard supervisors Elton Washburn and Howard Hunt and Mary Loomis, his daughter's college roommate. Only his daughter, Penny Smith reached shore alive. Penny swam six miles with her roommate, wrapped in one life jacket. Half a mile from shore, Mary decided she couldn't make it and slipped out of the jacket. The *Half Moon* was later salvaged.

Oddly enough the yacht sank because the previous owner, James Roosevelt had the vessel altered so that his father, President Franklin Roosevelt, could move about better in his wheelchair. After a bulkhead was removed, the hull was susceptible to swamping. ■

## References

*Sea Classics*, January, 2001, Vol. 34, No. 1, pgs.12-17, 50-52.

*Jane's Fighting Ships of World War II*, Jane's Publishing Co. 1946/47, Studio Editions Ltd. Great Britain, p. 295.

*Port Light*, shipyard newsletter of Leathem D. Smith Shipbuilding, August 15, 1944, September 19, 1944.

*Subchaser PC 1261 after launch in Sturgeon Bay, February 1943.*

*Photograph courtesy of Schroeder Photography.*



## Christina Nilsson Site Survey

by Hank Whipple

The wreck of the *Christina Nilsson* lies south of the old Baileys Harbour Lighthouse, in about 15 feet of water. The rediscovery of the wreck occurred during a casual boat ride in the summer of 1997 by a resident of the area, who then contacted the State Underwater Archaeologist. A preliminary investigation/survey of the site with limited measuring and videotaping determined the wreck to be that of a centerboard schooner. Associated with the wreck were pieces of pig iron. Some main structural measurements were taken and this information was added to the State Historical Society's shipwreck files in order to catalogue the submerged cultural resources of the state.

Several ships have been recorded to have wrecked at Bailey's Harbor. Reference to historical documents coupled with the location of this wreck site and the type of vessel as well as the pig iron, identified the wreck to be that of the *Christina Nilsson*.

The *Nilsson* was a three-masted schooner built in 1871 by Hanson & Scove in Manitowoc. She was 139 feet long, with a beam of 26 feet and draft of 11 feet 4 inches and was

employed in the bulk cargo trade. During a blizzard on October 24, 1884, after she had transited Death's Door but was unable to enter the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal to seek shelter, she reversed her course trying to find shelter at Bailey's Harbor. Blinded by the snow she struck hard on the Outer Reef at Bailey's Harbor. Unable to extricate herself she soon became a total loss. Her cargo of 525 tons of pig iron bound from Escanaba to Chicago was eventually salvaged.

(Details on the history of the *Christina Nilsson* can be found in the May 1998 issue of *Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage*, Vol.8, No.2.)

Its close proximity to shore and shallow depth make the site accessible to divers. With the wreck's archeological potential and its vulnerability both quite high, it was deemed necessary to return to the site and record the vessel in detail.

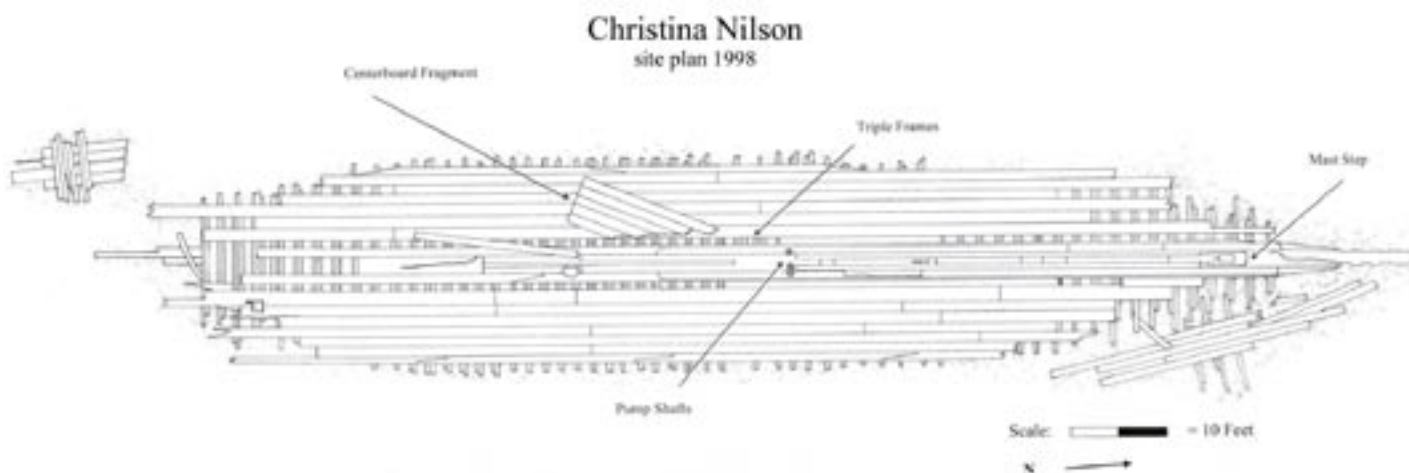
In July of 1998 a team of ten individuals comprised of State Historical Society staff and Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association volunteers assembled at the cabin of one of the volunteers in Moonlight Bay. The cabin was used

as a base of operations for the project. Once organized, a preliminary survey team went out to the wreck site to determine which research design to use. The main wreck site was located, along with several other smaller pieces of wreckage scattered in the general survey area.

It was determined that the research design of a Phase II predisturbance survey would be the most appropriate type for the main wreck site. This type of survey involved only documentation, the survey would not include any artifact collection or excavation. This decision was made by taking into consideration factors such as minimizing cost and limiting impact or disturbance on the site.

During this survey several other sections of wreckage were discovered but it was indeterminate if they were associated with the main wreck site. During the week-long project, archeologists documented the vessel through measured drawings as well as with photographs and video.

The main dive operations were conducted using the Sea Grant research vessel *R/V Orion*. A zodiac belonging to one of the volunteers





was also used to shuttle people back and forth.

Archeologists affixed a measured baseline down the centerline of the vessel, facilitated by following the keelson until aft of the centerboard. Beyond this the keelson was no longer present, but the baseline was continued out. To facilitate mapping, chord transects were set perpendicular to the baseline at approximately every 15 feet. These transects would primarily follow the frame pattern of the vessel. This divided the vessel into sections approximately 15 feet square, so there would be no confusion as to which section one was to document.

Divers were assigned a particular section. Dividing the vessel into specific sections was an easy way to ensure each section was completely documented. Also this gave the ability to set divers into different areas throughout the project so the divers did not get in each other's way.

Underwater field tasks included making measured drawings, making artistic drawings of specific sections or parts of the vessel, photography and video.

Measurements were taken either by using offsets or by trilateration. To reduce error divers documented a little of the section adjacent to the one they worked on. The slight overlap of sections provided a means to check one diver's measurements versus another's.

Drawings were looked at by the archeologists to ensure work was done properly as well as to answer any on site questions. Once a section was drawn, the divers were assigned another section. This procedure continued until the entire wreck site was completely recorded.

In addition to the drawing of the wreck the site was also documented by video and photographs. These were used to support the measured drawings, to clarify any questions and provide further detail of the wreck's diagnostics.

At the completion of the project the other smaller pieces of wreckage in the survey area were documented by video.

Individual drawings were ultimately cleaned up and taken back to Madison to be studied further. The winter was spent compiling all the individual measured drawings and putting them together on a completed site plan.

While the main portion of the wreck was documented during the 1998 campaign the other pieces of the wreck that were not documented warranted a return to the site the following field season. In addition to this, a boat surface survey the following spring revealed a substantial piece of wreckage that could possibly be associated with the main wreck site. Therefore, in July of 1999 a team of six, comprised of Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association members and Historical Society underwater archeologists, returned to Bailey's Harbor for a five day Phase II survey of the wreck site.

It was decided to not document the smaller pieces videotaped the season before. Rather, the 1999 campaign centered on two things. To document a large piece of hull structure which was possibly a side of the main wreck site and to return to the main *Nilsson* wreck site in order to obtain some finishing details.

There was no keelson assemblage for the large hull structure, so the baseline was affixed to the most continuous plank, which ran the

majority of the length of this site. Since this wreck section was not as large, transects were not needed. The structure was subdivided into specific sections and divers were assigned sections accordingly. In order to cross-check the documentation on this site, the divers were to include in their drawings the first set of frames in the adjoining sections.

Once back at field headquarters, measured field drawings were cleaned up, as well as drawn to scale, which would facilitate the subsequent drawing of the site plan. Going over the drawings at the site allowed questions to be answered by having the ability to go back to the specific section immediately. The winter was used to incorporate the findings of the field season into an overall site plan.

The success of this field project has only been possible through the collaborative efforts and equipment of the Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association. The names of the individuals who participated in year 1 were:

John Jensen, Jeff Gray, Danny Aerts, Betsy True, Tom Villand, Hank Whipple, Fil Ronca, Russ Leitz, B. Lewiski, Cathy Klecker.

The names of the individuals who participated in year 2 were:

Jeff Gray, Hank Whipple, Fil Ronca, Russ Leitz, B. Lewiski, Andy Jalbert. ■