

Coming Events

- Sep. 23, 2000 **Brown and Blue Water Navies in the Civil War**, a symposium and reenactment, at the Chicago Historical Society, 1601 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60614. Contact Ms. Amy Woodward, 312-642-4600.
- Nov. 11, 2000 **Gales of November**, in Duluth, MN.
- Nov. 12, 2000 **Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association Fall Meeting**, at the Canal Park Museum in Duluth, MN. Contact Jeff Gray, 608-271-1382.

**Wisconsin Underwater
Archeological Association**

**P.O. Box 6081
Madison, WI 53716**



Wisconsin
Underwater
Archeology
Association

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

Wisconsin's UNDERWATER HERITAGE

Vol. 10 No. 2

A publication of the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association

June 2000



Also inside:

Shipwrecks in Review

by Dr. Richard Boyd
starting on page 4

The steamer Vernon at Manistee Harbor in September 1887. The tower structure behind the vessel's smoke stack rests on the harbor breakwater and is not part of the ship. Note the open gangway hatches along the side of the hull.

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon* - part 1

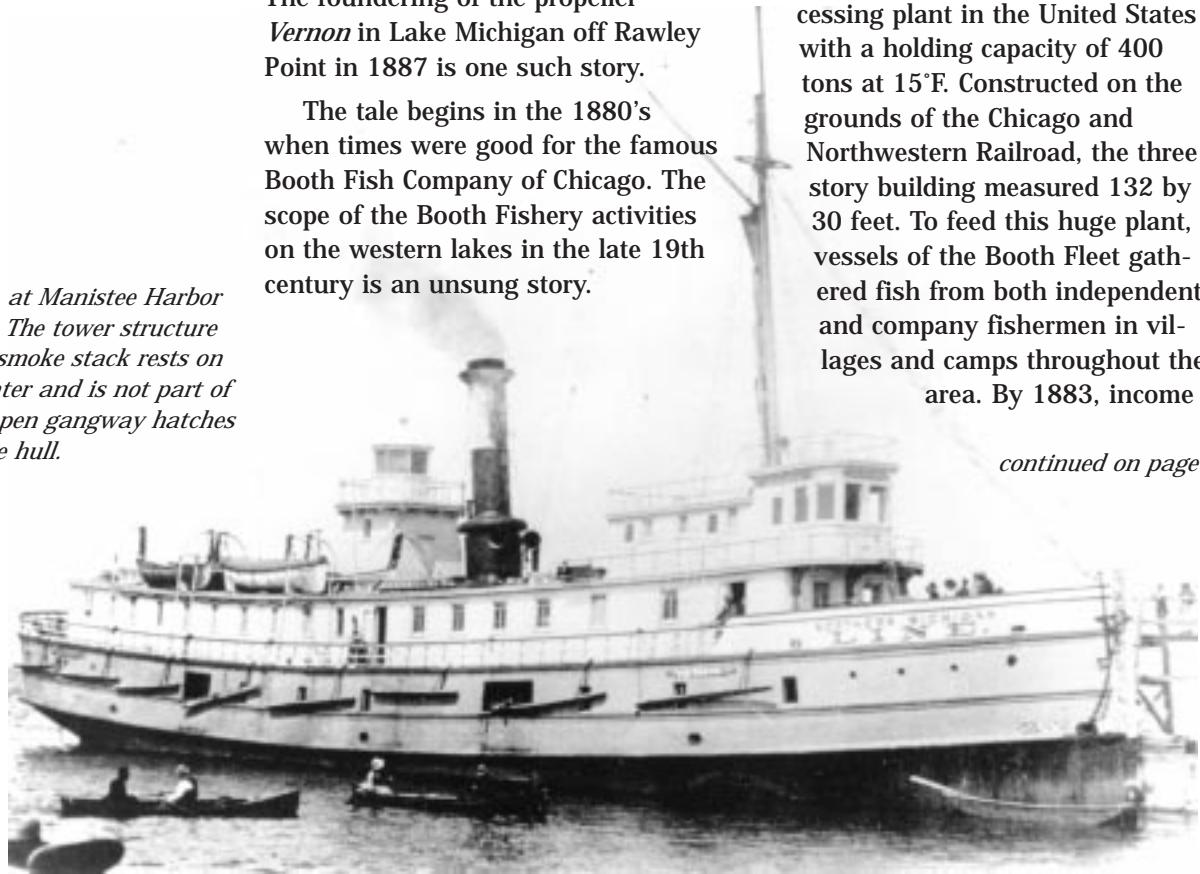
by Dr. Richard Boyd

There are many fascinating accounts of ships lost on Lake Michigan. Ghost ships such as the *Alpena*, *Chicora*, *Plymouth* and *Gucher* sank with all hands and their final resting places have never been found. On occasion, a shipwreck has been discovered by scuba divers whose explorations have revealed previously unknown facts about the loss of that vessel. Sometimes such new information actually alters the historical record of a particular shipwreck. The foundering of the propeller *Vernon* in Lake Michigan off Rawley Point in 1887 is one such story.

The tale begins in the 1880's when times were good for the famous Booth Fish Company of Chicago. The scope of the Booth Fishery activities on the western lakes in the late 19th century is an unsung story.

Throughout the region the company owned or controlled numerous ships, docks and waterfront properties, all part of its vast fish-gathering enterprise. For example, Booth owned most of St. Martin Island in northern Green Bay from which it operated a small flotilla of fishing boats. Twenty-four million pounds of fish were taken from Michigan waters in 1879 and the ubiquitous Booth Company likely gleaned the lion's share of that harvest. In Escanaba in 1881, the company built the largest fish processing plant in the United States with a holding capacity of 400 tons at 15°F. Constructed on the grounds of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, the three story building measured 132 by 30 feet. To feed this huge plant, vessels of the Booth Fleet gathered fish from both independent and company fishermen in villages and camps throughout the area. By 1883, income

continued on page 7



WUAA Activities Report

The Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association spring meeting was held at the Milwaukee Public Library, Saturday morning, March 25th. During the meeting plans were discussed for upcoming events. The WUAA Fall Meeting was set for November 12, 2000 at Canal Park Maritime Museum. The meeting will be held in conjunction with the Gales of November Conference on November 11, 2000. Look for more information on Gales of November and the Fall Meeting in the next issue of *Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage*.

Russell Leitz briefed us on the status of the Database of the *Door County Advocate* that now includes 37,000 entries. Discussion revolved around how best to make this effort available to WUAA members. Russ is also tabulating each member's interest in WUAA (from the membership forms). It was approved to print a second edition of the book *Our Four Lakes...* Much of the work is comple-

ed already and the new addition should be markedly improved.

After the business meeting adjourned, members attended the Ghost Ship Festival which was in the same building, starting after our meeting. Several WUAA members gave presentations and the WUAA display was up. The proceeds from the event were given to the State Historical Society's underwater archeology program to support its shipwreck mooring program. The Festival was a tremendous success and WUAA members are already looking forward to next year's.

As was reported earlier, the SHSW held Listening Sessions at various locations around the state. These sessions were to give the general public an opportunity to have input into the future plans of the State Historical Society. WUAA members were present at a number of meetings to express our views. Andy Jalbert and Tom Villand attended two day long,

Strategic Planning retreats put on by the State Historical Society's Division of Historic Preservation. The goal of these sessions was to help Historic Preservation develop a five-year plan. The WUAA members in attendance at both the Listening Sessions and Strategic Planning sessions made WUAA's underwater archeological and shipwreck preservation concerns known.

On April 8, 2000 WUAA and the State Historical Society held its third annual Spring Workshop. This year's workshop was "Towards an Understanding of Wooden Ships" by C. Patrick Labadie. It was held at the Inn on the Maritime Bay and at the Wisconsin Maritime Museum in Manitowoc. Thirty-seven people attended the training seminar. Everyone agreed that Pat Labadie's slide presentations and hands-on discussion in the Museum was simply Outstanding! At the workshop, Pat Labadie, Kimm Stabelfeldt, Tim Reed,

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.

President:
Jeff Gray
Madison, 608-271-1382

Vice-President
Andy Jalbert
Madison, 608-257-4840

Secretary:
Russell Leitz
Oshkosh, 920-231-9082

Treasurer:
Tom Villand
Madison, 608-221-1996

Newsletter Editor:
Danny Aerts
Middleton, 608-821-0048

Webmaster:
Brian Filkins
Hartford, 414-673-5292

Activities Coordinator:
Cathy Klecker
Marshall, 608-655-3769

Directors:
Richard Boyd
Delafield, 414-464-2092

Robert Korth
Gresham, 715-787-4444

Janet Defnet
Mukwonago, 414-363-9874

Send correspondence to:
WUAA
PO Box 6081
Madison, WI 53716
email: wuaa@mailbag.com
website:
www.mailbag.com/users/wuaa/



Bob Jaeck and Brendon Baillod received Historic Preservation awards from the State Historical Society for their efforts to preserve Wisconsin's shipwrecks.

In mid-May, with the help of WUAA sponsorship, Steve Hoyt gave the program LaSalle's Lost Ship, the La Belle. The presentation was given in three locations (Superior, Green Bay and Madison) and they were well worth attending.

Filippo Ronca, who moved back to Ontario, Canada a few weeks ago, is now diving for Parks Canada. His master's thesis is nearly complete and he plans on visiting us this summer.

The State Historical Society and University of Wisconsin Sea Grant's web page Shipwrecks of Wisconsin has many new additions (www.seagrant.wisc.edu/shipwrecks). The *Hetty Taylor* and the *Louisiana* are now featured on the Sailing Through Deaths Door page

Kimm Stabelfeldt presents a check to Jeff Gray. The proceeds from the Ghost Ships Festival will be used for the state's shipwreck mooring program.

(www.seagrant.wisc.edu/shipwrecks/michigan). A new, exciting feature has been added to the website, Real Video clips. Eight narrated video clips take visitors on underwater tours of the *Frank O'Connor*, *Niagara*, *Lucerne*, and *Pretoria*.

The State Historical Society continues to develop Wisconsin's Maritime Trails. In early May, the SHSW placed permanent mooring buoys on the *Hetty Taylor* and the *Seleh Chamberlain*. Currently, six shipwrecks (two in Lake Superior and four in Lake Michigan) are buoyed with more to come in the future.

The much-anticipated waterproof Visitor's Guides to the Shipwrecks of Lake Michigan will be completed by late June. This is a companion set to the guides for seven of Wisconsin's Lake Superior shipwrecks produced

by the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute and State Historical Society of Wisconsin in the fall of 1998. The Lake Michigan set will feature the *Niagara*, *Hetty Taylor*, *Frank O'Connor*, *Francis Hinton*, *Louisiana*, *Fleetwing*, and the shipwrecks of Pilot Island. These rugged, waterproof guides are designed to go along on dives or to be read for pleasure. The 9.5" x 6.5" slates feature site maps, schematics, diving information, vessel data and histories.

Our president, as of May 31st, is no longer a bachelor. Rumor has it that the reception was wonderful and, thanks to an active bagpipe player, lasted way past the wee hours of the morning!

Congratulations JEFF and TRINA!

Pat Labadie explains discusses wooden ship design with WUAA members at the Spring workshop in Manitowoc.





Shipwrecks in Review

by Dr. Richard Boyd

coinage to Spain. The salvage permit entitles Virginia to 25% of any treasure associated with the wrecks. Sea Hunt now believes that it has located the *Juno*. Alerted by several organizations opposed to the private salvage of historical shipwrecks, Spain initiated legal action to block any further activity by Sea Hunt. In April, a judge ruled that Spain, based on the 1763 Treaty of Paris in which that nation relinquished all North American properties east of the Mississippi, had no claim to the *La Galga*, but does indeed own the *Juno*. Spain has appealed the ruling with respect to the *La Galga*, while Sea Hunt has contested the *Juno* decision!

Elsewhere on the international scene, shipwreck politics and submerged cultural resources are again the hot topics. UNESCO recently hosted a meeting in Paris to draft a worldwide Convention on Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritages. Representatives to this draft convention included archeologists, international politicians, concerned agency bureaucrats and commercial salvagers. Opposing views were more plentiful than agreements, but at least serious talks on this complex problem have begun and will continue on a regular basis.

At the French port of Toulon, an ongoing diving project has now recovered about 115 Roman stelae, limestone slabs which bear Punic inscriptions. Over 2,000 of these second century relics were excavated from a cemetery in Carthage and shipped to France in 1874. However, the transporting warship caught fire, exploded and sank in 50 feet of water in Toulon Harbor. Many of the arti-

facts were recovered after the sinking, but a significant number were not, even though these stelae represented the largest collection of Punic inscriptions ever found. In the 1990's, amateur divers who learned about these stelae from a manuscript, persuaded the French Ministry of Culture to send an underwater archeological team to investigate the site. At this time, an estimated 400 stelae still remain submerged in the harbor sediments.

In Italy, the remains of nine Roman ships have been discovered in downtown Pisa. This famous Italian city once had two prominent harbors which were strategic Roman naval bases in the second century B.C. Part a tidal lake complex on the Auser River, one these harbors was eventually silted in and buried. As with most anchorages, some vessels were abandoned or scuttled therein, the remains of which were slowly buried by siltation. Some 2,000 years later, workmen were excavating a huge foundation pit, 150 x 300 feet, for a new building in central Pisa, when a piling bisected an ancient hull. This vessel was in outstanding shape, with its framing and planking still secured by the original copper nails. Over the next eight months, eight additional ships were uncovered, ranging in age from about 200 B.C. to the end of the Roman era in the fifth century A.D.

This remarkable find is the greatest concentration of Roman boats ever discovered in one spot. The craft all seem to be commercial or utility vessels and not warships. In fact, several still have cargo aboard. The sixth ship found had amphoras stacked in orderly rows, probably still in their original positions. These con-

Once again we review ongoing events and notable recent happenings which involve shipwrecks and related underwater archeology. While emphasis is placed upon the Great Lakes region, important discoveries or projects occurring around the globe are frequently described. Archeologically speaking, this is been a rather quiet period on the Great Lakes, whereas developments elsewhere in the world have been brisk, especially on the legal/political fronts.

Continued from the last issue of Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage.

A contentious international squabble has developed involving Spain, the State of Virginia and a salvage firm called Sea Hunt Inc. In 1996, that company obtained a permit from the Virginia Marine Resources Commission to survey areas off the coast where reportedly two Spanish ships had sunk centuries ago. These particular ships, the frigates *Juno* and *La Galga*, were supposedly carrying passengers and

ainers held residues which, when analyzed, turned out to be remnants of cherries, plums and olives. Other amphorae contained sand which led to speculation that it was mere ballast. However, later research disclosed that it was "Pozzolana" a special red sand used by Roman engineers to produce concrete that would set up underwater! Work on these boats will continue for some time.

Attracting significant attention on television and in the print media was the underwater archeological investigation at the site of the Battle of the Nile. This great naval conflict involved the fleets of Napoleon and England's Sir Horatio Nelson and its outcome essentially ended French advances in Egypt and the mid East. In early August of 1798, 13 French warships under the command of Admiral Paul Brueys d'Aigalliers had anchored in Aboukir Bay, about 15 miles east of Alexandria. Nine large vessels had moored in a north-south orientation near the Bay's western shore with four more frigates anchored inshore from this main line. Contrary to Napoleon's wishes, Brueys had selected this Bay over Alexandria Harbor because he believed that it provided better depth and greater maneuvering room for his large, cumbersome battleships. The Bay's wide mouth was thought to make any British blockade impossible.

Admiral Nelson observed that the French ships had anchored by the stern only and had widely spaced themselves so that they could swing freely with the north wind and changing tides. Moreover, he noted that Brueys had allowed a significant space between his vessels in the inshore shoals, thereby providing a channel where the smaller and faster British ships could sail behind the French line. Nelson's fleet, also 13

ships in strength, seized this opportunity to attack. Five British warships sailed between the shoals and the French warships, delivering deadly, disabling broadsides to the first three anchored vessels. At the same time, the other English ships stormed down the seaward side, splitting the French line and destroying all but two vessels which escaped. The French, expecting only a seaward attack, had never loaded their portside cannons and were essentially defenseless from an inshore assault. When the smoke cleared, the French had lost every craft except the two that had fled, 1,700 Frenchmen had died, and 3,000 had been captured. The British lost only two vessels and 218 men.

... the underwater archeological investigation at the site of the Battle of the Nile. This great naval conflict involved the fleets of Napoleon and England's Sir Horatio Nelson ...

The battle site was found back in 1983 by French diver Jacques Dumas, but recent archeological investigations have disclosed some interesting facts. The team located the remains of the *L'Orient*, Bruey's flagship, which had exploded at the height of the sea battle. Debris patterns indicated that the *L'Orient* had been decimated by two huge explosions, not one, as had previously been believed. Anchors were discovered which had been dropped by French battleships attempting to escape the British onslaught. From the position of these

anchors, it was determined that the French ships were spaced at least 400 feet apart, creating large gaps in their defense line which could not be closed when the British attacked. Information gleaned from the site suggest that Bruey initially failed to comprehend Nelson's plan of dispatching the French ships in a cross-fire instead of instigating the traditional naval one-on-one engagement. By the time he grasped Nelson's tactics, it was too late!

Interest in national underwater cultural heritage has recently developed in Argentina, a country possessing a significant coast line and archeological sites dating back at least 8,000 years. Before the opening of the Panama Canal, ships sailing from Europe to the Pacific traditionally had to circumnavigate the tip of Argentina, where the treacherous waters have claimed hundreds of vessels. While land archeology is well established within the country, underwater cultural resources have remained unexplored, considered to be too complex and expensive to survey or study. An amateur excavation of the *HMS Swift*, a British sloop sunk off Patagonia in 1770, has not only sparked interest in further work at that site, but has also blossomed into an fledgling underwater archeology program. The outstanding array of artifacts recovered from the *Swift* with only modest effort and expense has shown what can be accomplished by underwater researchers. Argentina is now organizing a nationwide effort to increase a public awareness of submerged resources and to create a scientific task force to develop a related discipline.

Way out in the Pacific Ocean at remote Pitcairn Island, Australian divers have examined the remains of the *HMS Bounty* of mutiny fame. The

continued on page 6

Shipwrecks in Review

continued from page 5

Bounty had left England in 1787 on a special mission to retrieve breadfruit plants from Tahiti and transport them to the West Indies, where they would be grown to feed slaves on plantations. Following a five month hiatus in Tahiti, British mutineers, accompanied by six Polynesian men and 19 women, seized the *Bounty* in April of 1789. Captain Bligh and 18 loyal sailors were set adrift in the ship's 23-foot launch. Bligh, in a feat of sterling seamanship, navigated 3,600 miles in the open boat to Timor in the Dutch East Indies. Meanwhile, the mutineers fled from the British Navy, eventually traveling 1,350 miles to Pitcairn Island, a tiny 2.5 square mile volcanic peak in the south Pacific.

At Pitcairn, the fugitive sailors unloaded supplies from the *Bounty* and then burned and sank the ship to avoid detection. It was 19 years before a Yankee sealing captain, Mayhew Folger, stumbled upon the island and its curious community of English-speaking natives who apparently had never seen a ship before. After some discussion, Folger realized that he had found the missing crew of the *Bounty*, although only one of the original mutineers was still alive. By this time, the other *Bounty* sailors had died or were killed in internal fighting with the Polynesians; only their progeny yet inhabited the island, as some still do this very day.

In late 1998, a group of archeologists from James Cook University in Australia undertook a three month study of the *Bounty* site. The wreck was of interest not only because the "Mutiny on the *Bounty*" is a story known worldwide, but because the vessel itself was special. The craft

had been modified to handle live botanical specimens which included installation of a sea-going greenhouse and a recycling irrigation system. The vessel had also been outfitted and provisioned for an extended stay in remote, uncharted waters. All these factors made the *Bounty* a fascinating vessel to study. On the downside, the site of the sinking in Pitcairn's only harbor had always been known and subsequently had suffered regular pilfering.

Underwater investigations disclosed several ballast mounds, a cannon and some copper sheathing. Excavations into the ballast uncovered concreted deposits containing nails, copper sheeting, cannonballs, grapeshot, musket balls and remnants of timbers and rope. The discovery of unusual iron bolts jacketed with brass demonstrated the care taken by shipwrights who sheathed the vessel with copper to prevent shipworm and barnacle damage during her extended mission. Also retrieved were a lead scupper and various copper fasteners associated with the ship's greenhouse and drainage system. Virtually no personal items were found, suggesting that all such materials had been removed prior to the scuttling. Apparently the ordnance was not essential for survival and was too heavy to remove from the ship and transport up the very steep slope from the harbor; thus it was simply abandoned. ■

Florida Canoes

More than 20 ancient Indian canoes have been found in Florida. The canoes were discovered by a group of high school students at Newnan's Lake, where the water level has dropped due to a dry spell. A team from the Florida Bureau of Archeological Research is working to document the find. The canoes are up to 22 feet long and have pointed sterns and bows. They are believed to be between 500 and 3,000 years old.

From an article in the Wisconsin State Journal, June 3, 2000.

Submerged Ancient Egyptian Cities

An international team of archeologists has found the 2,500 year-old ruins of three submerged Egyptian cities - Herakleion, Canopus and Menouthis. Among the discoveries at the site are remarkably preserved houses, temples, port infrastructure and colossal statues. The cities were probably built in the 7th or 6th century B.C. They were most likely destroyed by an earthquake in the 7th or 8th century and were later covered by the sea.

The team searched for two years off Egypt's northern coast in waters 20 to 30 feet deep, using magnetometers and other technology to map the area. The cities will be left as they are in the sea. Only smaller pieces will be retrieved for museums.

From an article in the Wisconsin State Journal, June 4, 2000.

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon*

continued from page 1

from fishing in upper Green Bay was reported to be \$1 million!

To facilitate rapid delivery of fresh fish between Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Chicago, the Booth Company needed a fast boat. In 1882, company president Alfred Booth had the 98-foot propeller *A. Booth* built in Chicago as a pleasure yacht. However, business demands supplanted recreational desires, and thus the vessel was reassigned to transport fish from Manistique (MI). The propeller was so financially successful that by 1885 Booth decided to expand that portion of the business by building a larger, faster steamer which could carry both passengers and fish over the same route. He commissioned master builder James Parker Smith of Chicago to construct the new ship. Smith had already built the *A. Booth* and several other small propellers for the fish company. While work was underway, the *A. Booth* was relocated to Lake Superior to run from Duluth to Port Arthur (Thunder Bay).

The *Vernon* is Launched

Work progressed rapidly and Booth's new vessel was launched on Monday, August 16, 1886 at the Chicago Drydock Company in front of 5,000 spectators. The final cost of the steamer was \$78,000. Her dimensions were: 177 feet in length; 26-foot beam; 18-foot depth and 700 tons gross weight. The craft had two decks, a single mast and a plain head with a rounded stern. She sported two Scotch boilers, each over six feet in diameter, which fed steam at 25-40 psi to the 565 horsepower engine. Her machinery was said to be state-of-the-art. No expense was spared in outfitting the craft to first class status, so brass hardware was used lavishly throughout the ship. For pas-

senger comfort, she was smartly adorned with 18 handsome staterooms and a large cabin lounge. The words "Steamer *Vernon*" were imprinted on every piece of fine china and silverware aboard. The propeller was reputed to be one of the most elegant vessels on the Lakes.

The new ship was named the *Vernon* and was jointly owned by Alfred Booth and his two sons, A. Edward and W. Vernon, each holding a one-third share. The latter Booth was the vessel's namesake. Her maiden voyage, with Captain E. J. Buscey in command, was intended to carry 100 passengers and 1,000 tons of freight to Manistique. However, once she was afloat, the ship exhibited some unexpected characteristics. Although the steamer was admittedly fast (15 mph), her sharp, narrow hull and extremely deep draft caused her to become unstable when carrying a full cargo! In reality, the builder had misfigured the displacement by well over three feet, so the vessel's draft when empty was what it should have been fully loaded!

Various experts on ship construction were quick to point out that the *Vernon* had excessive shear, too high a superstructure and insufficient beam for her hull length. Vesselmen expressed mixed opinions about how the ship might handle in heavy seas. Some said that she would negotiate tall waves with no trouble, whereas others felt that her narrow beam and high upper works would cause her to waddle perilously, especially if she got into the trough. Since the inordinate draft was an insolvable problem, it was proposed to relegate the steamer to Lake Superior where she would carry smaller cargoes to and from deep-water harbors.

The Chicago Tribune did not mince words regarding the perceived deficiencies of the propeller. In fact, the ship's ultimate fate was forecast shortly after her launching in a Tribune editorial: "In order to obtain great speed, her builder sacrificed buoyancy and stability, and every vesselman who saw the *Vernon* after she was launched predicted that she would sooner or later meet with disaster."

Dire predictions notwithstanding, the *Vernon* was introduced to the Chicago maritime community on August 28th by taking 150 persons for a cruise. Aboard were a number of vesselmen who were invited to evaluate the steamer and its performance. The propeller made a speedy trip from the Goodrich dock down to South Chicago and back. While en route, host Vernon Booth served a sumptuous luncheon to the guests. Apparently all the passengers were favorably impressed by the fast and sporty craft with its splendid furnishings. On September 1, the steamer was legally enrolled at the Port of Chicago, receiving official No. 151557 on Certificate No. 12.

A Troubled Tour of Duty

While the *Vernon* was undergoing sea trials, elsewhere fate was drubbing the Booth Fish Company. Up on Lake Superior on August 27, the *A. Booth* lost her way in a fog and stranded on a reef off Grand Portage. The passengers and crew clung to the overturned hull and were finally saved by the Booth tug *T. H. Camp*. A subsequent salvage attempt by Captain Byron Inman of Duluth failed when the propeller slipped off the rock into deep water. A second salvage try by Captain S. Murphy of Detroit also fell

continued on page 8

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon*

continued from page 1

short. The steamer was finally raised a year later by diver J. Q. Falcon, but the fishery suffered a \$7,000 loss in the affair. In the interim, Booth Fisheries had no choice but to promptly move the *Vernon* to Lake Superior. (Historical note: The *T. H. Camp* foundered in 1900 in the Apostles off Madeline Island in 170 feet of water where it was recently discovered by sport divers. See the articles about the *T.H. Camp* in the December 1997 and March 1998 issues of *Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage*.)

The *Vernon* was scheduled to leave for Lake Superior on Thursday, September 2, but the ship could not be readied in time. Although she was set to travel on the 3rd, Booth would not allow her to sail on Friday, since Friday departures are traditionally considered to be unlucky!

Subsequently, the propeller left for Duluth shortly after midnight on Saturday.

She began her duties on Lake Superior by cruising from Duluth to Thunder Bay. That stint lasted only one brief season, because in 1887 the *Vernon* was chartered out to tow ore scows from Lake Superior to Cleveland. This task was also short-lived because her new captain ran the tow onto a reef in the Straits of Mackinac. The towing contract was summarily cancelled and the *Vernon* was libeled for damages to the scow. As was the procedure in marine law of that time, the Court, acting through an intermediary, awarded the offending vessel to the damaged party for a set price. Thus on July 22 for \$23,350, a Mr. John Pridgeon of Detroit became the new owner of the *Vernon* ... once again a brief incident because on August 6th, Alfred Booth

bought the vessel back.

In mid-June of 1887, another momentous event in the saga of the *Vernon* occurred. Off Charlevoix, the propeller *Champlain* of the Northern Michigan Line (NML) caught fire and became an inferno within 10 minutes. The flames forced the engineering crew out of the engine room while the vessel was still cruising at full speed. The steamer's speed fanned the spreading fire, making it impossible to safely launch the life boats, a dilemma which caused many passengers to panic and jump overboard. The burning boat finally grounded about a mile offshore, but by the time rescue craft arrived, 22 people had perished and the hull had been badly incinerated.

Loss of the *Champlain* forced the Northern Michigan Line to immediately seek a new vessel. In August, the line chartered the *Vernon* from the Booth Fish Company for \$1,000 per month and placed her on the Chicago to Cheboygan (MI) run. This route demanded numerous intermediate stops wherever merchandise or travelers required transportation.

At the first of September, the *Vernon* underwent a change of command. Captain George Thorpe, who previously had been a mate on the *Champlain*, was made master of the vessel. Thorpe, a 30-year old resident of New York state, headed a distinguished and experienced crew. Both mates, John Sullivan and Larry Higgins, held captain-ratings, and both engineers had years of sea-duty, as did the steward, clerk and two cabin boys. Including the wheelmen, deck hands, cooks and firemen, the ship's crew totaled 24 persons.

Three *Vernon* crew members had actually been working aboard the

Champlain when that steamer caught fire. Steward Martin LeBeau and his brother Henry, a porter, had narrowly escaped the blaze which killed two of Martin's children. Cabin boy Roy Hazelton had also lived through the catastrophe only to join his fellow crewmen aboard another doomed vessel!

The Dark Voyage

The fatal voyage of the *Vernon* began on October 20, 1887, when she departed Chicago for Cheboygan with stops at Manitowoc, Sutton's Bay and St. Ignace. The northbound trip was uneventful. The return trip began at Mackinaw City in the Straits about 3 a.m. on October 26th when the *Vernon* cleared port in the company of the steamer *Hurd*. The two ships proceeded to Beaver Island where the *Vernon* stopped for passengers and freight while the *Hurd* headed on to Chicago. The ship departed Beaver Island the next day and by 1 p.m. had passed the village of Leland. After stops at Glen Haven and Frankfort, the ship headed out across the lake for the western shore on the evening of the 28th.

The stage was now set not only for the tragedy, but also for the development of one of several *Vernon* mysteries which remain unsolved to this very day: Exactly how many passengers were aboard the fateful steamer? In those days, the active passenger list was kept aboard the vessel itself, although records of individual departures were sometimes retained at each port. To complicate matters, itinerant persons might board or depart a boat at any port, often without record. This system made it very difficult to ascertain the precise number of passengers aboard a ship at any given time. In the case

in point, the *Vernon*'s passenger list was almost impossible to reconstruct with certainty after the calamity. Accounts indicate that at least 20 travelers were aboard, perhaps as many as 25, which would bring the estimated total of passengers and crew to anywhere from 44 to 50 individuals, although some reports cite 37 persons as the minimal number.

As the ship headed out across the lake, a northeast gale came up at about 10 p.m. The weather steadily worsened, with the wind shifting to the north where the full fetch of the lake allowed huge rollers to develop. The *Vernon* struggled onward, but

headway became progressively more difficult in the mountainous seas. Finally the immense waves swamped the steamer, filled the lower holds with water and extinguished the fires. Without power, the vessel was no match for the raging storm and it soon foundered in deep water. The sinking occurred between 3 and 4 a.m. on Saturday, October 29, at a spot due east of Rawley (Twin Rivers) Point.

The stormy sea was filled with wreckage, drifting cargo and dying castaways. This terrible event did not go "sight unseen", since other vessels were in the vicinity and passed

through the huge field of floating debris. However, not a single one stopped to help, thereby breaking a basic law of seamanship in shameful fashion. After all, failure to assist victims of a shipwreck is considered to be the cardinal sin of seafaring! The exact number of vessels which ventured upon the scene without rendering aid is unknown ... another *Vernon* mystery.

Late Saturday night, the schooner *Joseph Paige* arrived in Milwaukee and reported seeing that morning several people clinging

In Pioneers' Rest Cemetery of Two Rivers is found the mass grave of eight unclaimed victims of the Vernon disaster. The site is marked by an ornate stone monument with a nautical motif. Note that the date is technically incorrect by one day.

to the floating wreckage of a large white propeller. Likewise, the steam-barge *Superior*, under the command of Captain Moran, encountered several rafts bearing survivors who were signaling for help. Nearby was a yawl holding a woman and two men, one of whom waved his coat for assistance. Moran also saw several persons floating in life preservers next to a platform containing an inert body. The captain thought he recognized some gold scrollwork on drifting wreckage as ornamentation unique to the steamer *Vernon*.

Midday on Saturday, the schooner *William Home* passed through floating rubble where several buoyant bodies were noted, as well as a lifeless man lashed to the shattered pilothouse. The tug *Anderson* also intersected the flotsam on Saturday and Captain John Tobin observed two floating corpses who probably had died from exposure. The schooner *Blazing Star* likewise encountered the debris field, but continued on her way.

Every vessel which passed the wreck of the *Vernon* offered some excuse for not rendering aid. The schooner *Joseph Paige*'s sails had been shredded by the storm winds and the vessel supposedly could not be maneuvered. After coming upon the flotsam, the *Paige* apparently ran up a distress flag which was seen by the tug *Arctic* in Manitowoc. The tug took no action because the schooner seemed to be proceeding southward without difficulty. The *Arctic*'s captain explained that it made no sense to believe that there was a shipwreck behind a vessel displaying a distress sign. The captain of the steamer *Superior* claimed that his ship had suffered a disabled rudder and could not be steered, thus making it impossible to assist anyone. Captain



The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon*

continued from page 10

Hawkins of the *William Home* stated that the seas were too rough on Saturday morning to attempt recovery of the dead bodies seen in the debris field. Inexplicably, none of these beleaguered vessels sought shelter at nearby Manitowoc, but rather proceeded onward to Milwaukee where they finally reported the disaster.

Search and Recovery

Whereas the hapless victims received no help from adjacent ships, no aid came from shore either! One would have expected passing vessels to have immediately notified authorities of the disaster, who in turn would have telegraphed the news to rescue services along the shoreline.

Unfortunately, none of the captains who witnessed the calamity put into Manitowoc or Sheboygan to report the catastrophe. To make matters worse, it was Saturday night and all telegraph offices were closed, so no messages could be received by those who might render assistance. In fact, no one in Manitowoc or Two Rivers learned of the foundering until Sunday when the Milwaukee Sentinel arrived!

The Northern Michigan Line was also seeming lax in reacting to the loss of the *Vernon*. Clearly the company never officially authorized any sort of relief effort. Simeon Burke, part owner of NML, did not arrive in Manitowoc until Tuesday when he chartered the tug *George Pankratz*. The tug conducted a generalized search about 6 miles out into the lake. On Tuesday and Wednesday, other fishing tugs from Two Rivers scoured the area some 12 miles northeast of the harbor and eventually a total of 19 bodies were found. Captain Bickholz of Two Rivers recovered the *Vernon's* pilothouse near

Sheboygan Reef, 18 miles south of Rawley Point. The tug *Maggie Lutz* found the ship's No.1 yawl with its oars still strapped inside and two holes in the hull. The condition of this life boat was taken as testimony to the suddenness of the *Vernon's* demise.

For purposes of identification and examination, the recovered corpses were laid out in a temporary morgue at the Two Rivers fire station. There the aforementioned Mr. Burke found the body of his son, F. W. Burke, who had been the clerk on the *Vernon*. Silence gripped the assemblage as the grief-stricken father recognized the remains of his 21-year old boy. Afterwards, officials were able to identify six other crewmen including Captain Thorpe, mates Sullivan and Higgins, assistant cabin boy Charles Curtis, and attendants Martin and Henry LeBeau. Two passengers from Milwaukee, E. B. Borland and Adolph Haselbarth, were also identified. The remaining bodies were photographed by the coroner who also made detailed notes describing each person. These photos and descriptions were widely published in the news media and were also circulated on handbills to facilitate the identification and reclamation of every victim.

Perhaps the most unexpected response to the news that the *Vernon* had gone down had come from the U.S. Lifesaving Service at Two Rivers. In truth, the Lifesavers were completely unaware of the sinking until Sunday morning when they were contacted by a correspondent for the Milwaukee Sentinel. He requested that the Service immediately search for possible survivors and also recover those bodies seen by passing vessels. Captain Oliver Pilon, commander

of the station, viewed the stormy lake, and then declined to launch a surfboat. The Keeper pointed out that the storm had been so ferocious that waves crashed 15 feet over the breakwater lighthouse. He theorized that these high north winds would have carried the wreckage and bodies to the south, their exact position now unknown; thus searching around the Point would be fruitless. A southeast wind, he stated, would be needed to bring the bodies to shore. Pilon further reasoned that because almost 24 hours had passed since the foundering and the weather was still severe, no one could have possibly survived.

One Man Survives

But Captain Pilon was proven wrong! Early Monday morning, October 31, the schooner *S.B. Pomeroy* was headed from Chicago to Green Bay when she intersected a life raft drifting about 8 miles northeast of Sheboygan. Aboard that craft were two prostrate men: one was dead from exposure, but the other was still alive. That individual, Axel Stone, a 23-year old immigrant from Sweden, had been a watchman aboard the *Vernon*. Monday evening the *Pomeroy* delivered this lone survivor to Green Bay where he was interviewed by newspapermen. Although Stone had been in the USA for only a year and his English was imperfect, he vividly related a shocking tale of death resulting from maritime negligence.

Stone reported that the *Vernon* had been so heavily loaded between decks that less than six inches of freeboard remained above the side-loading gangway hatches. He stated decisively that it was the heaviest load he had ever seen on the steamer. The cargo consisted of 400 boxes of fish, 90 tons of pig iron, numerous

barrels of apples and potatoes, bundles of barrel staves, plus much general merchandise. These materials were packed so tightly that no fore-to-aft passageway remained on the main deck, which was a violation of maritime safety regulations. To make matters worse, the voluminous cargo precluded closing the upper half of the forward gangway hatches which were top-hinged and needed clearance to swing shut.

Stone was on deck watch until midnight and noticed the seas steadily increasing during that time. Water was entering the main deck through the open hatchways and flowing into the lower holds. Before going off duty, Stone went into the firehold to assess the situation. There he found the engine room crew waist-deep in water with the pumps running full throttle to remove it. Stone expressed doubt that the syphons could keep ahead of the inflow and the firemen concurred, but after some time the water level seemed to be stabilizing or dropping. The crew noted that at least the rear gangways were tightly sealed and showed no significant leakage.

Before retiring, Stone sought out Captain Thorpe and suggested that some cargo be jettisoned so that the forward hatches could be closed. Thorpe told Stone to "Go to Hell" and that everything was under control. He further proclaimed that the vessel would be safe in Manitowoc Harbor by 2 a.m. Unconvinced, Stone retired to his quarters. About 3 a.m., the young man was thrown out of his bunk when an immense wave laid the vessel on its beam ends. Hearing crunching sounds and erratic activity on deck, Stone opened his cabin door to be greeted by a flood of water. He forced the door shut, grabbed his warmest clothes and a life preserver, and jumped through the cabin win-

dow into the raging lake.

As Stone had feared, the ship lay in the trough of the sea and was rapidly sinking. As the *Vernon* submerged, it was apparent that only one of four lifeboats had been launched. Part of the upper works bobbed to the surface with several people clinging to it, but that structure soon disintegrated and the victims vanished. Stone also witnessed several imperiled persons being ripped from their life preservers by the giant rollers. He eventually spotted a life raft about 1/4-mile away and swam to it. Aboard this craft were seven other crew members: the cook, two firemen, a coal-passenger, an engineer and two deckhands. From the firemen, Stone learned details about the *Vernon's* last moments: the storm had battered the aft gangway hatches open, flooded the engine room, and put out the fires. Without steam, the machinery soon failed and the vessel lay helpless in the trough of the waves. Her final plunge came swiftly.

Temporarily safe upon the raft, Stone donned the clothing he had salvaged from his cabin. Fully dressed, he was protected from the hostile conditions by underwear, breeches, blouse, heavy shirt, coat and shoes; these extra clothes probably saved his life. Many of the castaways did not have the time or foresight to procure adequate clothing.

As the life raft drifted before the tempest, the survivors could clearly see the lights of Manitowoc only 12 miles away. Huge waves crashed over the raft and the icy spray quickly froze in the piercing winds. One by one the castaways succumbed to the frigid conditions and were swept away by the relentless surges. By dawn on Sunday, only Stone and the lifeless body of a fireman remained upon the raft. Stone, who was in excellent physical condition, tried to

keep active by rowing the raft toward shore and safe harbor. After this failed due to strong offshore winds, he crawled around the platform for hours to retain consciousness.

Stone said that during this ordeal many vessels came upon the drifting wreckage. Some craft passed so close that the faces of persons on deck could be discerned, yet none attempted to help. At this point, Stone had nearly given up hope of rescue. Finally, around 4 a.m. on Monday morning, the *Pomeroy* arrived on the scene and actually bumped the raft. Stone called out and was heard by the *Pomeroy's* deck watchman. A yawl was lowered and after 30 minutes of searching the dark waters, Stone was found ... thus the sole survivor of the *Vernon* was rescued and taken to Green Bay. □

*The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon* - Part 2 will be in the next issue of Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage.*