

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**, DECC in Duluth, MN. Contact Mary George at 218-727-2497, email novembergales@lsmma.com, or check the web site at www.lsmma.com/gales2000.htm.
- Nov. 12, 2000 **Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association Fall Meeting**, at the Canal Park Museum in Duluth, MN. Meet at 10:00 am. Contact Jeff Gray, 608-271-1382.

**Wisconsin Underwater
Archeological Association**

P.O. Box 6081

Madison, WI 53716



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

Wisconsin's UNDERWATER HERITAGE

Vol.10 No. 3

A publication of the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association

September 2000



The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon* - part 2

Inside, page 4:

by Dr. Richard Boyd

**It Grows in Trees:
Wisconsin Lumber
Industry - part 2**
by Jeff Gray

Part 1 of this story, describing the sinking of the *Vernon* on Oct.29, 1887 and the survival of Axel Stone, appeared in the June 2000 issue of

Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage.

Investigations, Accusations and Denials

In Green Bay on Tuesday, a coroner's jury was convened by Judge Bromley on the matter of the dead fireman recovered with Axel Stone. As was the procedure for such maritime hearings, the jury could render opinions on any circumstance pertinent to the disaster. This particular panel ruled that the death of the sailor was accidental due to shipwreck and subsequent exposure. They also issued a strong condemnation of the steamboat inspector who had certified the life preservers aboard the *Vernon* and recommended that he be arrested for dereliction of duty. The jury believed that maritime regulations of that day required

continued on page 7

MUSEUM
SOUTH
SIDE.

KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
KOHL & MIDDLETON'S

SOUTH
SIDE
MUSEUM

Beginning To-morrow, Monday, November 7.

FOUND FLOATING WITH A CORPSE.
SAVED FROM A GRAVE 'NEATH THE WAVES.



SAILOR AXEL STONE
The Only Survivor
of the
LOST STEAMER
"VERNON!"



Discovery of Axel Stone and His Dead Mate.
THE ONLY ONE SAVED FROM

THE WRECK OF THE VERNON
Fifty Hours of Suffering and Peril on a Raft.
He tells the Thrilling Story of the Great Disaster. See his interesting Relics of the Wreck.

Theater No. 1—Wallace's "PATA MOEGANA."
Theater No. 2—The Vision of "ROGER AND I."
Theater No. 3—Hasegawa Sam's Royal Japanese Troupe.

This advertisement appeared in the entertainment section of the Chicago Tribune on November 6, 1887, a week after the Vernon calamity. Axel Stone was apparently healthy enough at that time to make personal appearances on stage!



Diver exploring the Niagra.

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/

Activities Report

Fall Meeting

The fall business meeting of the Wisconsin Underwater Archeology Association will take place in Duluth on Sunday, November 12, 2000. We will meet at 10:00 a.m. at the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center at Canal Park. Call Jeff Gray at 608-271-1382 for details.

Gales of November

This is the same weekend as the Gales of November Conference, which will take place at the DECC in Duluth on Saturday, November 11. The day program for Gales will be from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and the dinner program will run from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. The dinner speaker will be Captain Jimmie Hobough, USCG retired, the captain of the *Woodrush* in 1975 and 1976. For more Gales information email novembergales@lsmma.com, call Mary George at 218-727-2497 or check their page on the Lake Superior Maritime Museum Association web site at www.lsmma.com/gales2000.htm.

Also, Gordon Lightfoot will be performing Sunday evening at the DECC Auditorium in Duluth.

Open House

During the weekend of August 19 the University of Wisconsin held a campus-wide open house for the general public. Heather Cain and Tom Villand represented WUAA and the SHSW. We had two tables featuring WUAA's display, brochures, newsletters and Al Brown's video showing Lake Michigan wrecks. By far the most common question was, "do you know Dick Boyd"? This was usually followed by a conversation about the good old days of diving.

Field School

East Carolina University is currently conducting an underwater archeology field school in Door County. The school started September 11 and will run for three weeks. The school gives students the opportunity to work with professional archeologists, gaining experience in documenting historical shipwrecks using techniques similar to those WUAA members have experienced ... triangulation, scale drawing, photography and video.

The sites they are studying are probably familiar to WUAA members. The first wreck they will document is the 300-foot steamer *City of Glasgow*, which ended its life as a stonebarge. It is located off the east side of the peninsula in Lake Michigan. The students will next map the two small scow-schooners located in Fish Creek. If time permits they may continue some of the mapping WUAA has done at the Leathem and Smith Quarry site.

Starting September 11 and running for three weeks, progress of the field school team can be viewed on the web site www.shsw.wisc.edu/shipwrecks/notes. They will be posting "Notes From the Field 2000; Underwater Archeologists in Action". Notes from the field is part of a grant from the National Sea grant program to develop a program called "History Beneath the Waves, Learning from Wisconsin's Shipwrecks". This program will support two projects, one of which is the notes program. The other program will develop an interactive CD-ROM to be used in museums and visitor centers.

Lake Michigan Guides

Last year the University of Wisconsin Sea grant Institute and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin produced a set of seven waterproof dive guides for shipwrecks in the Apostle Islands' area. Now there is available a set of seven guides for Lake Michigan wrecks, the *Niagra*, *Frank O'Connor*, *Louisiana*, *Hetty Taylor*, *Francis Hinton*, *Fleetwing* and the Pilot Island wrecks. To find out more about the seven wrecks visit the website called Wisconsin Great Lake Shipwrecks at www.sea.grant.wisc.edu/shipwrecks. The guides can be purchased for \$25 through the SHSW by calling 608-271-8172. They are also available in dive shops around the state. Guides for the Lake Superior wrecks *Lucerne*, *Noquebay*, *Sevona*, *Pretoria*, *Coffinberry*, *Ottawa* and *Fedora* are also still available.

Schooner Launch

On June 22 the Wisconsin Lake Schooner Education Association launched the *Denis Sullivan*. Crews then began stepping the ship's three masts and completing work on the rigging and the interior. The official commissioning ceremony was to be held on September 8. During the winter the ship will be relocated to the Bahamas.

It Grows in Trees: Wisconsin Lumber Industry - part 2

by Jeff Gray

Part 1 of this story appeared in the March 2000 issue of Wisconsin's Underwater Heritage.

In 1852, a Wisconsin Congressman spoke of the north woods as "interminable forests of pine sufficient to supply all the wants of the citizens ... for all time to come." Two decades later, the words of a Chicago journalist indicated no foreseeable end, "Will our pine timber soon be exhausted? We say no. None of our generation will see our pine forests decimated." Others managed to see the inevitable deple-

tion of the resource. A Canadian lumberman wrote in 1876 that the lumber barons were "not only burning the candle at both ends ... but cutting it in two, and setting the match to the four ends to enable them to double the process of exhaustion."

This is the second of a series of articles on lumber industry in Wisconsin. Divers in Wisconsin frequently encounter slabwood, logs, timber, lumber, tools, docks and other physical remains associated with the lumber industry. These artifacts serve

as important reminders to an industry that played a crucial role in the development of Wisconsin and the region. Today, underwater archeological sites throughout the state take us back to a time when the ring of loggers' axes and the hum of whirling saws echoed across the landscape.

Great Lakes' sawmills produced over 2.75 billion board feet of pine in 1869, 5 billion board feet in 1879 and over 7 billion board feet in 1889, an onslaught that not even the vast woods of the Great Lakes could sustain. Spoiled by the yields of virgin forests, initial waves of lumbering regularly bypassed pines three feet in diameter; in closing years mills were using logs as little as six inches. As time passed, smaller and smaller trees fell and loggers became less discriminative in species selection. Soon nothing remained, and in many places forests became wasteland. Observing the altered landscapes, the *Daily State Gazette*, commented in 1871 that "nothing deforms the face of nature so swiftly as a lumbering community."

Lumber production in the Great Lakes during the nineteenth century was both mammoth and profitable. But where was this wood going? What was it being used for? The answers are everywhere and everything, from farm to city, from ships to railroads. By the late 1880s, North America had laid almost 160,000 miles of railroad, each mile required 2,500 eight-foot rail road ties, which needed replacement at least once a decade. Great Lakes' cities were literally built during this period. An eight room house



Divers in Wisconsin frequently encounter logs and slabwood encountered underwater.

required roughly 20,000 board feet of lumber; meaning 1.3 billion board feet would have been required to house the city of Chicago in single family dwellings in 1870. The population consumed oceans of cord wood for heating (fuel), while early steamers burned up to 300 cords per trip.

A Peninsula of Wood

Door County has unmistakable and not easily destroyed landscape beauty. It is wild and as yet unspoiled, with alternating interests of woodland and cliff; bay and land ... the shore with its many graceful indentations is a never-ending delight. It sweeps from point to point, here a beach of fine sand, there of gravel, then, in contrast, precipitous limestone bluffs rising to a height of a hundred feet or more and covered with a heavy growth of native trees. ... Extensive forests of pine, cedar, balsam, maple basswood, and birch, covering large tracts.

John Nolen *Report to State parks of Wisconsin.*

In 1835, Increase Claflin established a trading post at what later became Little Sturgeon, and Claflin became the Door Peninsula's first white settler. Although he only stayed a short time, others followed his lead and set up homesteads on the protected bay. Over the next several decades, modest pursuits in fur trading, fishing and farming characterized the village's economy. However, the arrival of Freeland Gardner in 1854 transformed the sleepy village into a prosperous commercial center. Claflin may have founded the settlement of Little Sturgeon, but Gardner built it into a thriving commercial center.

Born in Elbridge, New York in 1817, Gardner moved from New York to Kenosha, Wisconsin at age 27, where he operated a dry goods business. He later relocated to Chicago to

run a lumber handling facility. Around 1850, Gardner established a lumber mill in Pensaukee, Wisconsin. Seven years later, the enterprise included a steam and water mill, a large boardinghouse, and a dock for small steamers. Moving to Little Sturgeon in 1854, Gardner purchased Increase Claflin's old homestead. By the fall of 1856, Gardner constructed a large lumber mill in Little Sturgeon capable of cutting long timbers for bridges and vessels. The following year, Gardner improved the mill by installing a larger engine, which enabled the facility to produce 4 million board feet of lumber. Later he added a lath mill, shingle mill and a circular saw.

It did not take long for Gardner to expand his operations in Little Sturgeon. Soon a gristmill, boardinghouses, a general store, and rail extension from the mill to the bay's docks all operated in the village. These developments marked the beginning of a period in Door County's history dubbed "The Golden Age of Little Sturgeon."

Logs into Ships

On July 3, 1866, as part of the Independence Day celebration, the rebuilt vessel *F.B. Gardner* slid into the waters of Little Sturgeon Bay. Over the previous winter and spring, crews lengthened the vessel 60 feet and converted it from a brig to a barque. This was the first vessel launched in Little Sturgeon. Gardner had obtained the services of Thomas Spear to manage the shipbuilding operations. Spear's sons, an expert caulker and a carpenter helped run the yard. Later in 1866, Spear rebuilt the steamer *Union* and built the 92-foot *John Spry*. Supplied with timber felled from Gardner's lumber camps and towed to his lumber mill, the shipyard built or rebuilt a total of ten vessels, plus an unknown num-

ber of scows and barges, over its nine-year tenure. All but two of the ten served in his fleet. Employing up to 60 workers, the yard remained the largest shipbuilding facility to operate in Door County before the twentieth century.

In 1868, Gardner sold his Little Sturgeon holdings to Erastus Baily and Tristram Vincent, for an estimated \$100,000. Despite reports of favorable business and relations, Baily and Vincent ended their operation in Little Sturgeon in the fall of 1869, selling the facilities back to Gardner, who ably took over and shipped out in excess of 5 million board feet, 8 million cut shingles and 150 cords of wood that year.

In 1857, a fire swept through Gardner's mill devouring 250,000 board feet of lumber, and causing \$65,000 worth of damage. Gardner had no insurance, but managed to rebuild the following year cutting 1 million board feet with 50 men. These types of disasters were not uncommon in the world built of wood.

On October 8, 1871, after a winter with little snow and a long dry summer, devastating fires swept across the west shore of Green Bay and the southern half of Door County. Known as the Peshtigo Fire, it was the deadliest in American history. With more than one million acres and 1,200 people devoured by the flames, the inferno wreaked more damage than the Great Chicago Fire that occurred the same night. Just south of Little Sturgeon sat Williamsonville, a small lumbering village of 76 people. The blaze completely destroyed the settlement, claiming every building and 59 residents. The fire advanced to Little Sturgeon, where Gardner's laborers met it head on and battled the blaze with the bay's water. "The fire had

It Grows in Trees: Wisconsin Lumber Industry - part 2

continued from page 5

come within a stone throw of the hamlet," wrote the *State Gazette*, "and when the scattering little population had made ready to plunge into the protecting shallows of the Bay, the flames were whirled off to the northward, and the town was saved."

Little Sturgeon thrived in the wake of the disasters. After the fire, the *Green Bay Advocate* wrote that Little Sturgeon had "the finest dock and sawmill left standing on the peninsula. It ... has expended \$100,000 on piers, mills, shops, shipyards, store rooms, and tenement houses." Business at the mill continued to boom, and in 1872 it produced 7 million board feet of lumber, and over 7 million shingles.

Feeding off the huge demand created by the Chicago, Peshtigo and Michigan fires of 1871, lumber concerns enjoyed a major market boom. However, a market collapse followed, compounded by the Panic of 1873, causing many companies to fail. Gardner, also facing personal financial troubles, sold his entire Little Sturgeon holding to Spear for \$26,000 in November 1875. Cutting pine along the Peshtigo River and rafting it across Green Bay to Little Sturgeon, Spear's mill prospered. In 1876 the *Door County Advocate* reported:

Boards drop from the saw logs like shingles from a machine, and the men whose duty it is to "clear the saw" don't loaf worth a cent. The amount of lumber turned out will average 65,000 feet a day in addition to the cants prepared for shingle bolts. The shingle machine ... is managed by one of the best shingle sawyers in the West. The average drop is about 100,000 shingle a day. ...

Spear had the operation running more efficiently than ever, and cut over 13 million board feet of lumber in 1876, with over 1 million board feet shipped directly to Europe. Aside from distant markets, the forests supplied Little Sturgeon's other industries. Spear used lumber for his ship yard. The town's lime kiln burned acres of cord wood, and mountains of saw dust provided crucial insulation for ice harvested by the A.S. Piper Co.

After escaping the flames of the Peshtigo Fire and the depression of 1873, the sawmill ran out of luck on February 22, 1877. Just north of the mill, smoke billowed from the blacksmith shop, and flames quickly engulfed the building. A strong wind pushed the blaze across the village. The mill and its contents were completely destroyed. This \$30,000 loss, with only a third insured, proved more than Spear could endure and he sold his holdings, ending Little Sturgeon's lumbering era. William Anger, who ran the lime kilns, purchased Spear's interests, and soon sold the land to the A.S. Piper & Co. for their ice business.

Reference:

Gray, J.J., Fueling the Fire:
Underwater Archeological Report
on the Claflin Point Wreck, State
Historical Society of Wisconsin,
Madison, 1998.

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller Vernon

continued from page 1

that commercially-rated life jackets must contain cork blocks, whereas those recovered from Stone's raft had been filled with stalks of a sea rush called "tule". These "Leduc's Tule Life Preservers" were demonstrated to soak up water and lose buoyancy within 15 minutes.

When confronted with the jury's indictment, the steamboat inspector in question, Captain Cyrus Sinclair of Chicago, scoffed at the charges and retorted that the citizens of Wisconsin did not understand the regulation regarding commercial life preservers. He explained that 19 different brands of life jackets with a variety of internal fillers were presently approved for use on commercial boats. If cork block was the preferred filler, that was a simple matter of tradition, not regulation! Then, in a typical bureaucratic pass-the-buck, Sinclair quipped that the Supervising Inspector based in California had approved the "Tule Life Preservers", and no local inspector could override his decision. Perhaps it should be noted that both the sea rush filler and the "Tule Life Preservers" were products from California.

Examinations of "Tule Life Preservers" were also made by Captain Pilon at Two Rivers. The Lifesavers patrolling the beach had recovered many soggy life preservers with the name "*Vernon*" stenciled on them. These jackets were literally in water-logged condition, said to weigh over 30 pounds each. Pilon showed a *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter that many of these were filled with sea rush stems or chipped cork material which provided only minimal buoyancy. Such filler also contributed to an exceedingly poor fit, and Pilon suggested that these life jackets could slip, shift or ride up, thereby allowing the wearer to submerge. He pointed out that the straps of several recovered preservers were knotted tightly together, probable evidence that they had been worn by victims who had slipped out of the ill-fitting devices!

Following the Green Bay hearing, Stone took a train to Chicago to be treated at the Mariners' Hospital for hypothermic injuries. While awaiting the train and again after boarding it, he was beset by curiosity seekers who wanted to see him and hear a first-

hand account of his ordeal. At a Milwaukee stopover, Stone repeated his story to reporters who grilled him on the details. Again his account clearly suggested negligence on the part of the captain by overloading the vessel and leaving the gangways open during the storm. Stone amplified the matter by stating that Captain Thorpe had been drunk. He claimed that the captain had been constantly nipping from a whiskey flask and was obviously intoxicated at the time of the sinking. In addition, he had previously overheard the second mate tell Thorpe: "Sober up, you drunken beast, and take care of this boat and the people". Thorpe had retorted: "Go to Hell!"

Stone's accusations were backed up by Edgar A. Hall, brother of the second engineer, who relayed that his brother had seen Thorpe display a fit of "delirium tremens" (the DT's) on the *Vernon's* pilothouse. Hall described Thorpe as a known heavy drinker, and named witnesses who had seen him drunk while on duty. He asserted that the Northern Michigan Line must have been aware of this situation.

These claims were hotly refuted to reporters by P. J. Klein, part-owner of the transportation

continued on page 8



Most fine china aboard the Vernon was imprinted with the words "Steamer Vernon" in royal purple block lettering or in gold script. After enhancement with carbon dust, these words can still be read even after a century underwater. Likewise, all silverware on the ship was stamped "Vernon".

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon*

continued from page 1

company. He countered Stone's charges with the names of individuals who would testify to Thorpe's good character and general sobriety. Notably, most of these people were employees of the NML. Klein reaffirmed his personal belief that Thorpe would not have overloaded the *Vernon* or leave her gangway hatches open.

Likewise, S. S. Burke of the NML assailed Stone's charges by identifying a witness at Glen Haven who had talked at length with Captain Thorpe before the *Vernon's* final departure. This person vowed that Thorpe was not drunk at that time. Furthermore, Burke reminded reporters that he never would have entrusted the life of his son, the *Vernon's* clerk, to a drunkard. These rebuttals were apparently accepted and supported by other members of the maritime community who doubted Stone's story and could not believe that Thorpe was a callous and irresponsible master. However, the *Chicago Tribune* reported interviewing some 20 persons who corroborated the assertion that Thorpe was indeed a heavy drinker and likely alcoholic.

At this same time, much controversy arose over the seaworthiness of the ship itself. Captain Seymour, a former partner of P. J. Klein publicly denigrated the vessel by saying: "She was made for speed and was practically a failure in that she drew more water than her designer had intended. She was long and narrow and sharp, and while she had plenty of speed, was not built to carry too heavy a cargo. Her build was such that she could not be handled very well in a heavy storm."

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the *Vernon* was reputed to be a "cranky" vessel, that is, one which would become unstable in a storm and was generally difficult to keep operat-

ing. In fact, it was claimed that the ship had eight different engineers within a three month period. This rapid change of personnel was prompted by frustration over the ship's unreliable machinery which continually broke down. It was also rumored that Captain John Sullivan, the ship's first mate, had threatened to quit because he feared that the propeller might one day founder.

The vessel also had its staunch supporters. Notably among them was John Prindiville, one of the most prominent vesselmen in Chicago, sometimes characterized as "the Stonewall Jackson of Chicago marine commerce". He described the *Vernon* as a "good and seaworthy vessel" and rebuked the idea that it could not retain personnel. Prindiville reminded would-be critics that his son was one of only three captains who had commanded the *Vernon*; he strongly asserted that his boy would have never remained on a jinxed boat. He further alleged that the *Vernon* held an A-1 insurance rating with Inland Lloyds, and that all life preservers aboard the steamer contained cork block.

It should be noted that Prindiville probably had some vested interests in the *Vernon*. The propeller's insurance had been brokered by him for the Chicago in-hull insurance pool. Prindiville's brother-in-law had been the ship's first mate, and his son had been her captain. In fact, it was Prindiville's son who was in command when the ship ran her tow on a reef in the Straits of Mackinac, resulting in the aforementioned libel action against the steamer.

Prindiville was simply mistaken about certain other matters such as the insurance rating with Lloyd's. W. W.

Bates of Buffalo, commissioner for Inland Lloyds, explained that the *Vernon* did not hold the highest rating, but because of its excessive draft and deficient hauling capacity, was insured for only \$38,000 of its \$65,000 total value. The terms of the policy also restricted the tonnage permitted on the craft. Lastly, Prindiville was proven wrong about the quality of the life preservers.

At Two Rivers, another coroner's inquest was convened on the matter of the bodies recovered after the disaster; the jury issued its report on November 7, 1887. The document was signed by Louis Zander, Peter Rau, Constant Zimmer, Henry Popper, Evan Evans, and J. N. Simonis. It determined that all the deceased were from the *Vernon* and had died from drowning and exposure. The identities of 14 corpses were confirmed, but five males were never identified and three other bodies were never claimed. These eight were eventually buried in the Pioneers' Rest Cemetery in Two Rivers where a prominent monument now marks their grave site. The expense of this interment was borne by P. J. Klein of the NML. Additional bodies were recovered as time passed; 29 persons had by found by November 10th.

The two most noteworthy elements of the inquest report reflected upon the cause of the foundering and its immediate aftermath. First, the group declined to issue any statement regarding the seaworthiness of the *Vernon*, its construction or the conduct of the captain and crew. Remarkably, the report did not fault Captain Thorpe in any way or even acknowledge Stone's claims! Secondly, the jury publicly excoriated the masters of every vessel which had passed the dead and dying castaways without rendering

aid. Although the master of each ship had tendered some excuse for not helping, the panel pointed out that shelter had been available to them at nearby Manitowoc where the shipwreck could have been promptly reported. This would have hastened the news to the Lifesavers as well as to local fishing captains who would have readily braved the weather to search for victims. The report tersely concluded: "Therefore, we hold these captains deserving of the execration of all brave sailors, and the reproach of humane men everywhere."

The jury debated the matter of the life preservers, but delivered no written conclusion. Because some of the bodies had been buoyed up by the questionable "Tule Life Preservers", the panel was not convinced of their total unreliability. No opinion was rendered despite reports that the Leduc Jackets had completely slipped off certain victims, floated others face down, or even inverted some individuals!

The Chicago Tribune interviewed marine chandlery operators throughout the Windy City on the matter of "Leduc's Tule Life Preservers". Only one supplier praised the device; all others ridiculed the product and refused to sell it, describing the jacket as unsafe and unreliable. Not surprisingly, the single supplier who praised it was also Leduc's licensed agent in Chicago. Alfred Booth, the actual owner of the *Vernon* received considerable criticism for the substandard life preservers on his ship. In his defense, Booth produced a bill of sale for 100 cork block preservers, the best money could buy, which had been purchased for the steamer. How the second-rate jackets came to be aboard the vessel remains unknown to this day ... a further *Vernon* mystery.

A Lingering Aftermath

The coroner's report released at Two Rivers definitely gave the maritime fellowship a "black-eye" by insinuating that cowardice had likely pre-

ailed during the *Vernon* affair, causing a basic law of seafaring to be broken. The tragedy was not quickly forgotten in certain localities. For example, the community of Beaver Island had lost six prominent citizens in the sinking, including five members of the well-known Gallagher family. Also lost was Hannah Maria Malloy who was on her way to Chicago to be married. A seventh potential victim, Hugh Connahan, cancelled his trip at the last minute.

Many historical events of Beaver Island have been recounted in sea chanties written by local citizens; one such chantey by Frank McCauley was entitled the "Ill-Fated *Vernon*". Its last stanza reflects the feelings of Beaver Islanders about the disaster and the failure of mariners to render aid:

"Oh, who was this unknown wretch
that saw his fellow man,
Fighting for life in the water and
would not lend a hand
To save them from this cruel fate? No
pity did he feel,
This base and cruel man whose heart
was hard as steel."

continued on page 10



Among Vernon's general merchandise cargo were hundreds of wooden pitchers in two sizes, 3 and 5-inch diameter, each fitted with an individual wooden funnel. These were probably used for dispensing household lamp oil, as intimated by the octagonal-shape of the funnel's stem. Such stems would self-vent air, allowing oil to be poured smoothly without spillage into lamps with small filling apertures. Since production of octagonal stems would require extra machining, some useful function is indicated by their presence.

Photograph by P. Richard Eells

The Dark Voyage of the Propeller *Vernon*

continued from page 10

The saga of the *Vernon* has lingered for decades in maritime lore and has even crept into the history of other lake vessels. In 1995, an article appeared in *Inland Seas* about the *Lyman M. Davis*, perhaps the last sailing vessel on the Great Lakes in the 1930's. That essay stated that in 1887 the *Davis* had picked up six survivors of the *Vernon* disaster, two adrift on wreckage and four from a lifeboat. The six were identified as wheelmen Ambrose Widfield and Levi Girardin, plus passengers Vilas Brown, Aaron Hullard, Mrs. Jephtha Van Kleek and her daughter, Alwilda. These survivors were fed, recuperated and delivered safely to Kewaunee two days after their rescue.

Of course, this tale is false for various reasons. First, the date was given as October 11, which was weeks before the actual sinking. Secondly, no person cited in the *Davis* affair is known to have been on the *Vernon*. Lastly, no survivors other than Axel Stone were rescued. If six other castaways had been saved and taken to Kewaunee, this fact surely would have been known by the time of the inquest at Two Rivers, since Kewaunee is only 25 miles north of that city.

Nonetheless, several aspects of the *Davis* story bear remarkable similarity to actual events in the *Vernon* calamity. For example, the two wheelmen in the *Davis* story were supposedly found with one sailor attempting to stay conscious by playing dice on the prostrate body of the other. Likewise, Axel Stone attempted to stay awake by crawling around his raft, circling his dead companion as he did so. The sailors rescued by the *Davis* were found rafting upon the *Vernon's* upturned pilothouse; this agrees with reports from the actual wreck site

where victims were seen floating on the vessel's upper works. The individuals in the *Davis* version stated that both a steamer and a schooner went by without rendering aid, and that schooner was identified as the *Blazing Star*, a vessel known to have passed the *Vernon* wreck site! These events plucked from the history of the *Lyman M. Davis* are all consistent with those which really occurred during the loss of the *Vernon*, even though that schooner took no part in the *Vernon* affair.

How this fallacious *Vernon* rescue story became injected into the history of the *Lyman M. Davis* is uncertain. One can only surmise that after the disaster, many owners and captains of lake vessels suffered vicarious guilt pangs, painfully aware that fellow mariners had violated a cardinal rule of seafaring. Therefore, anything in a vessel's history indicating that it had performed some positive action during the *Vernon* calamity would be both laudable and cathartic. Perhaps the *Lyman M. Davis* was involved in some unrelated rescues which were commingled over time into a single recollection and whimsically ascribed to the unfortunate *Vernon* matter.

A darkside possibility also exists. If the *Lyman M. Davis* did indeed trek across Lake Michigan from Muskegon to Kewaunee at the end of October, 1887, her course might have crossed the *Vernon* wreck site. Perhaps the *Davis* was also one of those vessels which refused to provide assistance. The exact number and identity of those ships which passed the debris field without helping is not known. Obviously, such incompetent or cowardly conduct would not be readily admitted or fondly remembered in future years. In fact, a totally opposite

behavior might be falsely claimed by those persons involved. Over time such fantasy might give rise to a fabricated rescue story.

And as a final possible explanation, perhaps some unknown, accidental quirk, or mere coincidence promulgated the *Vernon* anecdote into the history of the *Lyman M. Davis*. After all, who can account for the propagation and persistence of some "sea stories"?

Diving Vindicates Stone

The history books remained closed on the story of the *Vernon* for over 80 years. Then, in 1969, the shipwreck was located by Kent Bellrichard, a well-known Milwaukee diver. The *Vernon* rests in 215 feet of water about six miles due east of Rawley Point Lighthouse. Discovery dives by Bellrichard's crew and numerous dives in the 1970's by the author and his associates, disclosed some interesting facts. During the sinking, expanding air blew the wooden superstructure off the vessel exposing the entire weather deck, but the rest of the hull is in excellent condition. The ship sits with a 40-degree list to starboard which is so extreme that the gangway hatches on that side are almost touching the lake floor. Extruded freight and ship parts litter the bottom around the hull.

As exploration progressed, the truthfulness of Axel Stone quickly became apparent. The top half of the forward gangway hatches were latched open just as he described and remain so to this very day! The decks inside these hatches are still crammed with cargo, although much of it has shifted into giant piles against the starboard side. As reported by Stone, the fore to aft passageways on both sides of the

engine room are blocked with barrel staves. To enter the engine compartment, a diver must swim through a rear skylight because the access doors are blocked by staves. There seems no doubt that the vessel was dangerously overloaded and that the captain's poor judgment contributed to the loss of the steamer.

Observations during dives also confirmed how the *Vernon* met her demise. The firemen had told Stone that the storm smashed open the rear gangway hatches, resulting in massive flooding. Those hatches are presently open on both sides of the wreck. If escaping air had forced them open as the craft sank, then the hatches should have been blown outward and dislodged, but there is no evidence of this. Consequently, the firemen's description of the sinking seems the most likely scenario.

Shortly after the *Vernon's* launching and its instability was discovered, the *Chicago Tribune* speculated that if the craft were ever overloaded and that cargo suddenly shifted, the consequences might be disastrous. As part of the large fish cargo, the propeller carried numerous metal-lined carts, each about the size of a small dumpster. These boxes were mounted on casters which made them highly mobile. In the storm, these carts no doubt could have become very effective battering rams. While it is not known how these containers were secured aboard ship, or if they really did break free during the gale, visual evidence suggests that they did. Today they rest against the aft starboard side of the main deck in a scattered array. A tangled stack also occludes the open starboard gangway, while others are strewn about the lakebed outside the hatchway. It's quite possible that during the tempest, careening carts below deck could have contributed to the failure of the aft gangway hatches.

This supposition is completely consistent with what is seen today! In the 1970's, one of these carts was raised and examined. The tightly sealed box weighed hundreds of pounds and was still full of lake herring, well preserved by the icy water at depth.

The underwater scene suggests that Captain Thorpe may have been even more reckless than Stone reported. Both the aft and forward lower holds of the vessel are filled with cargo. The total weight likely exceeded the 800 tons established by Inland Lloyds as the upper limit for the vessel. Terms of the craft's insurance mandated that little or no material should be carried in the aft hold, owing to the *Vernon's* already excessive draft. The large cargo in the lower holds certainly added to the ship's general instability.

In light of the evidence disclosed by diving, Captain Thorpe's incredibly poor judgment and callous disregard for the safety of his vessel and passengers can no longer be disputed. Thus the possibility that he was also intoxicated seems quite likely. Every underwater revelation confirmed that Stone told the exact truth about conditions aboard the *Vernon* at the time of her loss, so there seems to be little reason to doubt his evaluation of Thorpe's condition. In today's vernacular ... Axel Stone apparently told it like it was!

This begs the question: "What became of Axel Stone?" Some reports said that he entered the Mariners' Hospital in Chicago and then died shortly thereafter. This has never been verified. However, soon after the disaster, Stone appeared at the South Side Museum in Chicago where he gave several performances depicting the loss of the *Vernon* to paid audiences. This show was advertised in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Inter-Ocean* on November 6, 1887. Since this was

only a week after the tragedy, Stone could not have been incapacitated at that time. Nonetheless, his exact fate remains the last *Vernon* mystery.

A final thought: Although the *Vernon* rests in over 200 feet of water, she has been visited by many sport divers over the years. Most divers have treated the wreck as the historical grave site it is, but a few thoughtless visitors were strictly souvenir hunters. Since such activity is now illegal, hopefully future explorers will give the wreck the respect it deserves!

Selected References

- Hendrix, Glen A., 1980, Songs of Beaver Island, *Journal of Beaver Island History* 2: 59-111.
- Hirthe, Walter H. and Bellrichard, Kent G., 1979, The Tragic Loss of the Propeller *Vernon*, *Anchor News*, 10(4): 52-60.
- Palmer, Richard F., 1995, The Last of the Great Lakes Schooners: The Lyman M. Davis, *Inland Seas*, 50 (1): 2-15.
- Pitz, Herbert, 1925, Lake Michigan Disasters, Manitowoc Maritime Museum,.
- Newspapers:
- Chicago Tribune*: 1 Nov 1887; 2 Nov 1887; 3 Nov 1887; 4 Nov 1887; 5 Nov 1887; 6 Nov 1887.
- Chicago Inter-Ocean*: 4 Nov 1887; 7 Nov 1887.
- Green Bay Advocate: 3 Nov 1887.
- Kewaunee Enterprise: 4 Nov 1887.
- Milwaukee Sentinel: 30 Oct 1887, 31 Oct 1887; 1 Nov 1887; 2 Nov 1887; 4 Nov 1887; 6 Nov 1887.