

Safeguarding Great Lakes ghosts



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As a boater cruising the sparkling blue waters of the Great Lakes, you see little to remind you of the mysteries, the dramas and the ghosts that rest in placid gloom beneath your boat. But knowing some of the history can double the fascination for both boaters and scuba divers.

More than 5,000 shipwrecks have been authenticated in these lakes. Most are believed to have happened during October and November storms and before the advent of modern navigational equipment. They are underwater time capsules of the days preceding rail and auto travel, when the lakes were Michigan's great highway.

In recent years Michigan has set aside (so far) seven bottomland preserves to safeguard these ghostly moments in time (see information about the areas and tourist accommodations at the close of this story). As of now, less than half the wrecks have been located and explored. Although well-preserved in the cold fresh water, many have been stripped of marine gear and other historical artifacts. Some wooden hulls have been removed to make furniture.

To prevent such atrocities, Michigan passed Public Act 184 of 1980, providing for bottomland preserves and preventing the stripping of shipwrecks.

Says Tom Graf, water quality specialist with the Department of Natural Resources, "The law forbids the removal of artifacts without a permit. The divers' ethic is changing dramatically -- from finder's keepers to leave it alone and observe it in place. If all the items are right out on the deck -- shoes, plates in the galley and pots and pans -- they add to the diving experience."

Each wreck has its own story, although many are lost to history. On a lovely evening in August of 1865, the passenger steamer *Pewabic* was down-bound in Lake Huron, headed for Cleveland. Passengers were relaxing in stained glass salons furnished with marble-topped rosewood tables.

The passengers aboard her sister ship, the *Meteor*, were dancing to the ship's band as she approached the *Pewabic* from the south, not many hours out of Detroit.

"It was just beginning to get dark when I saw the lights of the *Meteor* approaching us," reads the account of *Pewabic* Captain George Perry McKay. "I gave orders to stop the starboard engine and hold the steering wheel hard. We shifted wheels three times to clear the *Meteor*. Then came the crash. The *Meteor* didn't sink. The *Pewabic* did."

Children and grownups struggled to hold onto wreckage until the survivors were rescued at dawn. Altogether, 125 were killed. It was the Great Lakes' seventh worst disaster.

Today the *Pewabic* rests on the lake bottom, six and a half miles east of the Alpena County shoreline. She lies, intact and upright, 165 feet underwater in the 288 square-mile Thunder Bay Great Lakes State Bottomland Preserve between South Point and Middle Island.

The area, noted for its unpredictable and temperate nature, is known as "shipwreck alley." More than 100 major wrecks lie in this treacherous shoal-haunted stretch of water. Every local boater is aware of the snaggle-toothed rock reefs surrounding Middle Island at the north. A sheer rock wall under the waters along Thunder Bay Island has left ships' wreckage scattered along its base.

It was in the Straits of Mackinac that the brigantine *Sandusky* met her fate. She was built in 1848 in Sandusky, Ohio. She is 110 feet long, has two masts and a scroll figurehead. She left Chicago on Sept. 16, 1866 and took seven men with her when she went down two days later in a violent gale west of what is now the Big Mac Bridge.

After her discovery by a sport diver in recent years, the *Sandusky* suffered the illegal stripping of her dishes, tools, belaying pins and other artifacts. Still, divers today can explore her well-preserved interior and observe her broken masts.

She is part of the Straits of Mackinac Underwater Preserve. It covers 148 square miles of the waters connecting Lakes Michigan and Huron at the top of Michigan's mitten. It extends to the western shores of Mackinac and Bois Blanc Islands. The area is believed to contain more wrecks per square mile than any other in the lakes. Its shoals and reefs forced navigators to steer a tight course amid merging currents and wind forces.

Two shipwrecks with dramatic stories rest in the Thumb Area Bottomland Preserve, a 276-square-mile graveyard stretching northward from the shores near Harbor Beach to Pointe aux Barques.

The first is the *R. G. Coburn*, a passenger propeller that foundered six miles off Harbor Beach in 1871. A heavy October gale tore off her rudder in the trough of the sea.

In true seafaring tradition, her captain stood with his hand on the rail and went down with his ship. He was among 15 crew members and 16 passengers who lost their lives. She

sits intact now in 22 fathoms of Lake Huron.

A violent November storm in 1966 conquered the *Daniel F. Morrell*, an aging 603-foot lake freighter on her last voyage of the season. She was blown sideways in the waves, broke in two and foundered off the Thumb.

The only survivor was a young wheelhouse hand named Dennis Hale. He recalled clinging to the ship's front half while the rear, its engines churning uncontrolled, repeatedly rammed the front half, throwing crewmen into frigid water. Hale clung to an icy raft for 36 hours while, one by one, his companions dropped off and died. The ship now rests in peace, just beyond the perimeter of the Thumb Area Preserve.

A buoy marks the location of the mystery schooner *Dreadnaught* at the Alger Underwater Preserve. It's on the South Shore of Lake Superior near Munising in the Upper Peninsula. This 113-square-mile preserve surrounds Grand Island and borders on Pictured Rocks Natural Lakeshore.

The *Dreadnaught* is a 150-foot, 500-ton ore carrier that went down in (they think) the 1880's. She sank in 30 feet of water in Murray Bay, carrying a cargo of iron ore.

One theory of her demise is that

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