

STREET SCENE

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Thrill of the hunt . . .



By Pat Schulte
special writer

The vast waters of the Great Lakes offer many things for many people. From recreation to industry, we all benefit in one way or another from the world's largest freshwater reservoir.

To several area residents, the Great Lakes represent much more than just a haven for sportfishing. To them, the waters hold historic tales of daring and adventurous people who, challenged the sometimes deadly waters.

Undersea Research Associates, based in Canton Township, is a nonprofit organization that researches, locates and documents Great Lakes shipwrecks. The group is led by David Trotter. An employee of the Ford Motor Co., during the week, come summer, his weekends are spent on the waters of Lakes Huron and Erie in a never-ending search for missing shipwrecks.

"It's been a progressive effect on my diving," said Trotter, who's been diving for 25 years, the last 15 of which have been devoted to

Great Lakes shipwrecks. "The interest in descending on something that no one has ever seen before is tremendous."

Trotter and his associates have found more than 40 "virgin" (they are the first to discover them) shipwrecks and have dove down to 20 of them.

UTILIZING WHAT is known as a side scan sonar, the research team painstakingly charts the bottom of the lake, looking for abnormalities that may or may not turn out to be a sunken ship.

But even before they hit the water, a lot of research has been done in libraries, piecing together information to get a general idea where the vessel went down.

"We begin with library research on the wreck," said Dr. Werner H. Wahl of Bloomfield Hills, affectionately known as Doc within the group. "Utilizing all kinds of books, maritime records and even old newspaper articles, we try to find out who was on it, where it was going and what it was carrying."

And one very important aspect

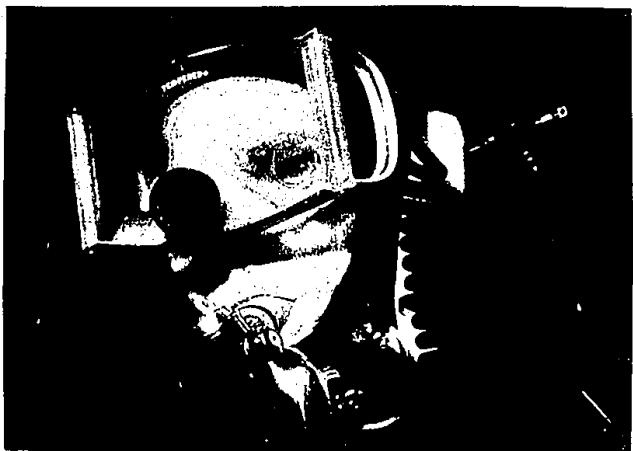
of the team to note right off the bat is that they are not a salvage team — what's on the bottom is left on the bottom.

"Removing artifacts has never been an interest of mine," said Trotter, speaking for the whole group. "We feel this is right for maritime history. An artifact removed from a ship is out of place somewhere else."

During the building of many Midwestern cities, there were as many as 4,000 ships on the Great Lakes, hauling everything from commodities, packaged goods and building materials to the people who did the work.

ACCORDING TO Trotter, the wrecks that went down in shallow water back then were salvaged, the deep water ones were let go. All of the ships then were made of wood planking, so with the freezing and thawing of the Great Lakes, the ships in shallow water were ripped apart.

As a result, it's the deep water wrecks that Trotter and his men look for.



RUDY WHITWORTH

A find like the figurehead on the bow of a Great Trotter of Undersea Research Associates to Lakes' shipwreck is good reason for David smile.

"Unlike the old salt water wrecks, fresh water wrecks lie in a remarkable state of preservation," he said. "They're phenomenal time capsules."

The most interesting wreck the research team has explored is that of the Hunter Savidge. Without warning, a Lake Huron whirlwind squall struck the masted schooner at 4 p.m. Aug. 20, 1899.

"In a terrifying 10 seconds, the ship was spun around and capsized, trapping the captain's wife and the wife and daughter of the owner in the cabin of the ship as she went down," Trotter said.

What made the wreck just a bit more interesting to the men who found it on Nov. 8, 1988, was discovering that some of the descendants of the captain and the owner were still living in the Sebewaing

area. As a result, they put together a special presentation for the families.

While the team hasn't come across something like a sea monster, they have come across some pretty startling things in the murky depths of the lakes.

"ON THE WRECK of the 25-foot steamer Kamloops (that went down in 1927 in the icy waters near Isle Royale in Lake Superior) we were diving on the ship and I entered the engine room," Trotter said. "There I found that the engineer was still on duty."

"David and I go down 130 feet, sometimes over 200, along a line and into complete darkness," said Wahl, who has a doctoral degree in nuclear chemistry. "The line is grappled into something and until you reach the bottom, you really

have no idea what you're tied into."

Once on the wreck, in which the diver sometimes have only 18-20 inches of visibility, they begin to take pictures. Not of each other next to the anchor or something, but they creep along the hull taking what amounts to a mosaic of photographs.

"Due to limited visibility, because of silt, a wide-angle lens can be blurry," said Rudy Whitworth of Westland, an engineer with Ford who has been with Trotter and Wahl since 1978. "We utilized macro photography due to the sharpness of definition it has when photographing something many times from as little as 20 inches or less away."

The photographs are then given to Great Lakes marine artist Robert McGreevy. "The wreck looks like a lumber yard on the bottom. It becomes a real detective story."

McGreevy STARTS with a pencil sketch, then uses lays (transparent film over the original) to apply more information. The finished product, which takes six months to complete, is done with pen and ink.

When something made of wood has been underwater, sometimes for close to 100 years, some of the information important to the drawing can be missing. McGreevy avoids filling in those blanks.

"I scrupulously avoid ad-libbing," he said. "If we can't find it, we leave it blank until we find it. And sometimes, by looking at old photographs or paintings, I can give the guys an idea of what should be there and they'll look for it and eventually find it."

From the research to the hunt to the discovery and final drawing, all that's left is to present the findings to the public. Trotter puts together what he calls "multi-media" programs, slide shows set to music and narrated by himself.

He's done hundreds of the shows, mostly for libraries and historical societies.

For a bit of ecstasy . . .

By Pat Schulte
special writer

The crew of Undersea Research Associates spends thousands of hours on the waters of Lakes Huron and Erie in search of missing shipwrecks.

The most important feature on board their 28-foot boat is the Klein side-scan sonar. With this piece of equipment, they can get an accurate picture of the lake's bottom.

Nicknamed the "Fish," the unit sends out sound waves that bounce off the bottom as it is actually dragged 600 feet behind the boat. The incoming information is delivered via a cable to another unit that records the topography of the lake bottom.

And once the dry land research as to the whereabouts of a wreck is done, the tedious and seemingly never-ending search is on.

"It's like plowing a field," said Dr. Werner H. Wahl whose library research lends itself to developing a

grid-like pattern for the boat to follow. "Back and forth and back and forth."

The team leaves port from Port Sanilac with 36 hours of fuel. If the weather is right, they'll search for 24 hours straight.

"We've covered as much as 50 square miles and as little as one square mile," said David Trotter.

Then, like a lightning bolt, it hits. "All of a sudden somebody yells bingo and everybody drops what they're doing and runs to the sonar of the search," said David Trotter. "In the intrigue of the search, we spend a lot of time and frustration for a couple of minutes of ecstasy."

Once they confirm that the item on the screen may be a shipwreck, the team gets into their diving gear and heads down a grappling line into the dark waters of the lake.

"In 170 feet of water, you sometimes can't see three feet," said Trotter. "On good days, you can see 10 feet."

This is where the danger comes

into play for these adventurers. Sometimes, Trotter and his colleagues have to dive close to 200 feet, occasionally deeper, in order to reach a wreck.

"We have gone down as deep as 230 feet which is risky," Trotter said. "At depths like that, there is a very thin edge between disaster and safety."

One thing that has an adverse effect on the divers at those depths is what's known as nitrogen narcosis or "Martini's Law."

"The pressure at depths over the port diving level (130 feet max) creates mental impairment," Trotter said. "And the deeper you go, the worse it gets."

One hundred feet is equal to having one martini and every 33 feet thereafter is equal to one more. So at 230 feet, the diver has five martinis worth of impairment to deal with.

"That doesn't mean that we're looking out for trouble," Trotter said. "You just have to understand the risks the deeper you go."



DAVID TROTTER

Rudy Whitworth explores the carvings on the bow of a shipwreck discovered by Undersea Research Associates.

Artist's touch give shipwrecks a new life

By Pat Schulte
special writer

Of all the members of Undersea Research Associates, Great Lakes marine artist Robert McGreevy's background in ships may date back the farthest.

Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, McGreevy grew up in the shadows of the Harland & Wolff Shipyard. Many of the homes in his neighborhood were built from scraps from the shipyard and his father, grandfather and uncle literally worked their fingers to the bone in the shipyard.

"When my grandfather retired, I don't think that he had a complete finger on either hand," said the Grosse Pointe Woods resident.

It was at Harland and Wolffs that members of the McGreevy family worked on the first of two classic maritime disasters — the Titanic. If it hadn't been McGreevy said, "it would still be the most beautiful ship ever built." His latest work of art is on the Titanic. It debuted Aug. 1.

When McGreevy immigrated to the United States, his father and uncle were recruited to work for the Great Lakes Engineering Works in River Rouge. Ironically, they came over to work on a new Great Lakes super freighter, the Edmund Fitzgerald. His uncle sailed on the "Big Fitz" for a number of years.

"I guess it was just fate that they were involved with

two of the greatest shipwrecks of all time," said McGreevy. "Luck of the Irish, I don't know. I guess I've never been able to come up with a snappy answer."

McGreevy's WATER color print of the Edmund Fitzgerald remains as one of his most popular.

McGreevy has worked with Undersea Research Associates for about 10 years. When he's not re-creating what things look like on the bottom of a lake, he's designing stuff for Chrysler Corp. As an industrial sculptor, one of McGreevy's creations was the ram's head for the hood of Dodge trucks.

Much of painting and drawing he does is in a setting that definitely lends itself to what he's putting on the canvas. His studio is in a home that sits on top of a 100-foot bluff overlooking the Thumb Shipwreck Preserve on Lake Huron.

"On an especially rough day, I can picture the ships, taking waves over the pilot house and get a real feeling for why so many ships sank in this area," he said.

When he was doing his artwork in his Grosse Pointe Woods home, McGreevy couldn't get a feel for what the ships had to go through in rough waters. Now, with his second home and studio just north of Port Sanilac, the dangers of the Great Lakes are reflected in his work.

WORKING WITH David Trotter to create a picture of something underneath the water is a bit different than painting ships while they're sailing. Like Trotter,

McGreevy does his homework before the divers bring back the photographs.

"Say, if they've found an 1800s steamer, I'll do as much research as possible on that class of ship so I can give the divers an idea of what to look for," he said. "I'll make a rough drawing ahead of time on what's supposed to be there — certain things that have to be in certain places."

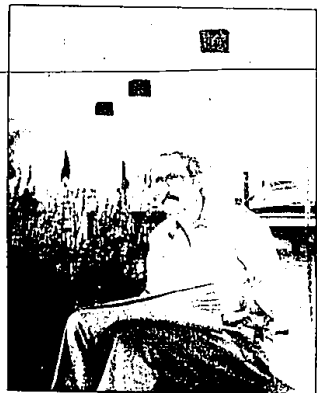
"And sometimes I even go out on the boat and interview the divers when they come up from the wreck."

McGreevy's next big adventure in painting is a ship called the Atlantic, a steamer that carried immigrants between Buffalo and Detroit. If the name of the ship sounds familiar, that's because it's the same boat that a California salvage company found in the Canadian waters of Lake Ontario.

The painting, in which McGreevy took an old painting (there are no known photographs of the Atlantic) and actually turned the ship, will feature the Atlantic passing in front of Detroit's Michigan Central Railroad docks.

From a boy growing up in the shadows of a shipyard, McGreevy has parlayed his love of the big ships and his talent for art into being one of the premiere Great Lakes marine artists.

"It is doing something that you feel has some sort of historical impact," he said. "By doing it accurately, we clear up a lot of misconceptions about a wreck and set the record straight for future historians."



BILL HANSEN

Robert McGreevy has parlayed his love of the big ships and talent for art into being one of the premiere Great Lakes marine artists.