



Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with their family at Christmas.

## The Christmas Tree Ship and Captain Santa

A GREAT LAKES LEGEND BRINGS TRADITION AND JOY TO EARLY CHICAGO



Glass Santa ornaments

THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP STORY IS PART OF THE QUINTESSENTIALLY AMERICAN STORY OF EXPLORATION, ENTERPRISE, TRAGEDY AND COURAGE, AND ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OVER UNCHARTED WATERS AND UNTRAVELED LANDS. THE SCHOONERS VOYAGING ON THE GREAT LAKES WERE PART OF FORGING A NATION.

PRINCE ALBERT of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, husband and consort of Queen Victoria, introduced many Germanic customs and manners into the royal household and English life. But one tradition of his early life became a cherished part of Christmas in the British Isles. On December 23, 1848, the cover of *London Illustrated*

News featured an engraving of Queen Victoria, the Prince, and their five children at Windsor Castle gathered around a lavishly decorated pine tree. Around the base of the tree can be seen a collection of beautiful toys. While decorating with pine boughs and garlands had become quite commonplace at the Christmas season, featuring the Royal Family with their Christmas tree would popularize a tradition that would spread around the world, especially into the far-flung British empire.

In the New World, it was German immigrants, not princes, but ordinary folk for whom the Christmas tree represented centuries of family tradition, giving them stability in the challenging environment in which they found themselves.

*“O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, Wie treu sind deine blätter”*

The folk melody to which Ernst Anschütz wrote his famous verses in 1824 would reach across land and sea, even to the growing towns, wide prairies, and thick forests around and beyond the great lakes. Those forests provided the lumber to build the homes, commercial establishments, schools, and churches that were the communal security for those early settlers. With a high demand for building materials, especially in Milwaukee and Chicago, the mid-to-late 19th century saw the height of the age of sail on Lake Michigan, when more than 1,800 sailing vessels plied the lake, most of them sturdy schooners



built to haul heavy loads into and out of shallow harbors.

In November, before the lakes became too treacherous with gale force winds and ice storms, many of the schooners would make their last sailing laden with the lush pines of these northern forests. There was a growing demand for “Christmas trees” as the continental European emigrants continued to swell the populations of mid-western communities. By 1870, Christmas Day had been declared a Federal holiday.

#### OF CAPTAINS AND CREW

Into this world created by hardship and sacrifice were born the children who would become the captains and crew members for the grueling life and often fatal endings on a Great Lakes sailing vessel. One of these children was Herman E. Schuenemann, born about 1865 into a German family, in the Door County lakefront town of Ahnapee, present-day Algoma. One of six children, his older brother August, who was born in 1853, made his living on the lake and Herman followed in his footsteps, sailing to become one of the legendary figures of Great Lakes maritime history.

Three years after Herman Schuenemann's birth, a sleek and sturdy 123-foot sailing ship was launched from the shipyard of Allan, McClelland and Company, one of Milwaukee's pre-eminent shipbuilding firms. Licensed and enrolled at the Port of Milwaukee on August 27, 1868, the *Rouse*

*Simmons* was named after a well-known Kenosha merchant of the same name. One of his brothers was Zalmon Simmons, who would make his own name founding a successful mattress company. The *Rouse Simmons* managing owner was Royal B. Townlee of Kenosha, but the vessel soon joined the fleet of wealthy lumber magnate and philanthropist Charles H. Hackley of Muskegon, Michigan. His lumber operations stretched to all the coastlines of Lake Michigan, and for 20 years, the *Rouse Simmons* was one of the workhorses of his fleet hauling loads of lumber from one port to another. Extant records show that by the 1880s, the vessel was making weekly crossings from Grand Haven to the Port of Chicago. Sleek when it was launched—was it by now a grimy hauler of lumber, and perhaps, Christmas trees for sale on the waterfront at Chicago?

#### A DANGEROUS VOCATION

At some point in his youth, Herman Schuenemann came to Chicago where he forged a life as a merchant and Great Lakes captain. On April 9, 1891, he married German-born Barbara Schindel, and the 1900 federal census shows them with three daughters; Elsie, born in January 1892, and in October 1898, twins Hazel and Pearl. Barbara, like many wives of lake captains, was fatalistic: Not if catastrophe would strike, but when. (The Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum believes that some 6,000 ships and 30,000 lives have been lost

on all the lakes, but how many others through pre-settlement times count these magnificent and yet malevolent waters as their graves?)

Chicago's waterfront markets were crowded in the weeks before Christmas when up to two dozen schooners were plying the shores of Lake Michigan, their decks laden with freshly harvested trees and pine boughs. Mostly the trees were sold directly from their berths along the Chicago River's Clark Street docks where electric lights were strung from bow to stern and customers went on board to choose their trees. Many boat operators, including Herman Schuenemann, made wreaths, garlands, and other holiday decorations, and his wife and daughters also helped with this, adding to the successful holiday trade.

#### A GENEROUS AVOCATION

The family never became wealthy from the Christmas tree business, but Captain Schuenemann's generosity was known far and wide as he gave Christmas trees away to needy residents. Noted by the newspapers and grateful residents for the joy he brought to so many, he was affectionately dubbed Captain Santa. Pleased and proud of the recognition, he kept his newspaper clippings in his oilskin wrapped wallet.

Given the seasonal aspect of sailing the treacherous Great Lakes, many captains had shore-based businesses to supplement their income, and Herman Schuenemann was one of them, a saloon



Captain Herman E. Schuenemann (center) is one of the legendary figures of Great Lakes maritime history.

A Victorian-era wax-faced tree topper.

Kugel glass ornaments made in the early 1800s.





The deck of the *Rouse Simmons*.

## HOW THE *ROUSE SIMMONS* WAS FOUND

Once the broken branches of the Christmas trees began washing up on shore, there was no doubt that the once-beautiful ship lay on the floor of Lake Michigan. There was another poignant clue, when in 1924, some fisherman netted Captain Santa's oilskin wrapped wallet, which they returned to the Schuenemann family.

Legends followed the ship through the years, some sailors claiming they had seen her in the mists. It was said that occasionally an aroma of Christmas trees surrounded Barbara Schuenemann's grave in Acacia Park Cemetery.

In 1971, a Milwaukee scuba diver, Gordon Kent Bellrichard, had been alerted by fisherman that their nets were frequently snagging in an area off of Two Rivers, Wisconsin. Initially Bellrichard, using sonar, was searching for the *Vernon*, a 700-ton steamer that sank during an October 1887 storm. His sonar made a promising contact, and he descended to what appeared to be a well-preserved wreck, resting 172 feet down, upright, on the lake bed.

Reaching the wreck, his dive-light malfunctioned, and in murky darkness he surveyed the wreck by feeling along its hull. Bellrichard quickly realized that this was not the larger, propeller-driven *Vernon*, but the wreck of the beloved and legendary *Rouse Simmons*.

Surfacing, he lay in his boat overcome with joy. He had found the grave of the most famous Christmas tree ship, and its skipper Captain Santa, lost on that fateful voyage in November, 1912. In the ensuing years, dives have been made around the wreck, and many artifacts have been brought to the surface. Some Christmas trees were fully preserved in the cold water of the lake bed. Wisconsin's Great Lakes Shipwrecks website provides a shipwreck database, and an underwater video of the *Rouse Simmons* wreckage. Books, songs, poems, paintings, and television programs have commemorated the courageous lives of the Christmas tree ship captains, and especially Captain Santa.

One of the most dedicated *Rouse Simmons* historians is Rochelle Pennington, a Great Lakes authority. Last November, she was the first speaker in the monthly Maritime Speakers Series at the Door County Maritime Museum, recalling the story of the legendary ship. Her books include "The Christmas Tree Ship: The Story of Captain Santa" written for all ages. Her follow-up book is a documentary "The Historic Christmas Ship: A True Story of Faith, Hope and Love". The audience was able to view a collection of memorabilia from the ship.

Many Wisconsin maritime institutions have memorabilia from the *Rouse Simmons*. And now, each year, in early December, the ship's final voyage is commemorated when the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Mackinaw makes the journey from Northern Michigan with a symbolic load of Christmas trees for Chicago's disadvantaged. Captain Schuenemann and his family and crew would be proud.



being among his endeavors. But this wasn't so successful, and in 1906 he was forced to petition for bankruptcy, owing creditors over \$1,300, which he did not have. He must have industriously come out of his difficulties, and by 1910, he was finally able to purchase a partial interest in the vessel named *Rouse Simmons*. By 1912, he owned a one-eighth share in the now much dilapidated ship, with Captain Charles Nelson of Chicago owning another one-eighth share. The major owner was businessman Mannes J. Bonner of St. James, Michigan.

On Friday, November 22, 1912, with three decades of sailing experience, Captain Schuenemann, and his co-owner Captain Nelson, left port at Thompson, Michigan, hoping to beat a tremendous winter storm which was brewing and in which several ships were lost. The hold and decks of the *Rouse Simmons* carried between three and five thousand Christmas trees. But sailor's superstitions preceded the departure and several refused to board ship. First, it was reported that rats had been seen leaving the old ship, a bad omen; and the 22nd was a Friday, an unlucky day to sail. Their places were taken by lumbermen who wanted a passage to Chicago. It was never certain how many men were on board the ship.

## A FLOATING FOREST

There were eyewitnesses to the departure who claimed that the schooner looked like a floating forest as she left the tiny harbor for the southwesterly crossing to Chicago. Captain Schuenemann traditionally lashed a tree to the



The *Rouse Simmons* in 1908.





Beautiful Christmas cards printed in Germany in the early 1900s. Postcards and ornaments courtesy of Paris Market Antiques in the Ice House Mall.



A modern day Rouse Simmons—the Coast Guard Cutter Mackinaw WLBB-30 docked at Navy Pier.

## A CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP FOR 2018

In 2000, the United States Coast Guard Cutter Mackinaw WAGB-83 based in Cheboygan, Michigan, renewed a tradition when it memorialized the crossing of Lake Michigan in late November by steamships and schooners, laden with Christmas trees from the Northern forests, and destined to be distributed among the needy of Chicago. They especially commemorated the *Rouse Simmons* and her famous Captain Herman Schuenemann, "Captain Santa". The Mackinaw WAGB-83, the icebreaker dubbed the "Queen of the Great Lakes" now rests at Chief Wawatami railroad dock in her namesake port Mackinaw City. She is open to the public as the Icebreaker Mackinaw Maritime Museum.

The day that she was decommissioned, June 10, 2006, her successor and namesake the United States Coast Guard Mackinaw Cutter WLBB-30, home port of Cheboygan, Michigan, was commissioned. To this day, she maintains the tradition of bringing up to 1,500 Christmas trees to Chicago in memory of Captain Santa and all the brave merchant mariners who have plied the treacherous waters of the Great Lakes.

Chicago's Christmas Ship Committee works with the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Auxiliary, Navy Pier, private individuals, volunteer groups, and the generous boaters of the marine community to help make Christmas special for deserving Chicago families. The distribution of the trees throughout Chicago is organized by Ada S. McKinley Community Services. The spirit of Captain Schuenemann and his fellow captains is kept alive through this annual remembrance.

This year, the USCGS Mackinaw will arrive at Navy Pier on November 30, with ceremonies and tree off-loading commencing on Saturday, December 1, at 10 a.m.

main mast, thus giving his ship immediate identification entering port in Chicago. Whether the cargo was too much for the veteran ship or the storm hindered her passage was never known. At 2.50 p.m. on Saturday the 23rd, Life Saving Station logs at Kewaunee, Wisconsin, recorded that the station keeper, Captain Nelson Craite, was alerted that a schooner had been sighted heading south flying its flag at half-mast, a universal sign of distress. Through glasses, Captain Craite confirmed a distress signal "on a ship between 5 and 6 miles E.S.E. and blowing a gale from the N.W." But the Kewaunee gas tug boat had already left, and there was no other vessel to assist the stricken ship, which within minutes passed from sight of Kewaunee's life saving station.

At 3:10 p.m. Captain Craite telephoned Station Keeper Capt. George E. Sogge at Two Rivers, the next station further south and told him that a schooner was headed south, flying its flag at half-mast. Sogge immediately ordered the Two Rivers surfmen to launch the station's power boat, which shortly reached the approximate position of the schooner. By then it was dark, there was heavy snow and mist, and there was no trace of the ship. The schooner, not immediately identified as the *Rouse Simmons*, had vanished into the grey roiling waters of Lake Michigan.

## A MESSAGE FROM THE DEEP

Barbara Schuenemann and her daughters waited on the dock in Chicago, long past the expected arrival time of the Christmas tree ship. Ships did sometimes put into harbors when the storms were too severe to sail onward. Fears were realized when their husband and father together with his crew never arrived. But unlike many other lost schooners of the great sailing ship decades on the lakes, the *Rouse Simmons* would give up some of her secrets. Weeks and months after her disappearance, remnants of Christmas trees began washing up along Wisconsin's shoreline, a message from the deep.

## THE WOMEN CARRY ON THE LEGACY

Tempered by sorrow and used to hard work, Barbara and her daughters carried on Captain Santa's legacy of bringing Christmas cheer to the ever-growing Chicago metropolis. They hired schooners to bring the loads of trees across the lake to the dockside, where mother and daughters sold and distributed them in memory of their Captain Santa. Later, they brought the trees to Chicago by train, selling them from the deck of a docked schooner. After Barbara's death in 1933, her daughters sold trees from the family lot for a few years. The Schuenemanns and the *Rouse Simmons* were joined in the maritime history of the Great Lakes, and of a Chicago that celebrated the traditions of its multi-national settlers for time immemorial. U