

The Christmas Tree Ships of Lake Michigan

Legend has it that if rats abandon a ship, so should you. When rumor spread that rats were leaving *Rouse Simmons*, perhaps the crew should have followed that advice.

The 125-foot schooner left Chicago one autumn day in 1912, headed for the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The plan was to load a cargo of Christmas trees and carry them across Lake Michigan. The ship never reached its destination.

Captain Herman Schuenemann and his brother August were among several captains who used aging wooden schooners like *Rouse Simmons* for this purpose. Instead of selling his trees to stores that resold them to the public, Herman sold directly to customers on the dock. His ship sat dockside, draped in electric lights. It bore a banner that read "The Christmas Tree Schooner. My Prices are the Lowest." Schuenemann gave many of his trees to needy families.

August died in 1893 when his ship *S. Thal* sank. The entire crew was lost. Losing his brother didn't stop Herman from continuing the tradition of the Christmas tree ships, however.

In 1910, Herman leased the old schooner *Rouse Simmons*. When Schuenemann took command of *Rouse Simmons*, it was no longer in good repair. The schooner, built in 1868, was originally designed to carry lumber. It was one of many schooners used for this purpose along the heavily wooded Great Lakes.

The weather began to turn as the ship loaded Christmas trees for the 1912 season. Fearing that bad weather would prevent another trip, the captain decided to take on extra trees. Christmas trees



The Arrival by Charles Vickery

Courtesy of The Clipper Ship Gallery

were piled 15 feet high on deck and filled the hold below. It may have held 5,000 trees.

As the ship headed for Chicago, it ran into a snowy gale. The ship was last seen on 23 November 1912. Sailors have reported seeing the ghost of a ship, with tattered sails and icy decks, flying a distress pennant.

In 1971, a scuba diver named Keith Bellrichard was using sonar to search for another wreck in the area. Instead, he found the remains of *Rouse Simmons*. The ship lies 180 feet below the icy Great Lakes waters. The cold has helped to preserve the ship and its cargo. Skeletons of Christmas trees still filled the hull. Other items that have been found include a message in a bottle and Captain Schuenemann's wallet.

Web Link

To learn more about the Christmas tree ships, visit <http://christmastreeships.homestead.com>
To see more seascapes and ship paintings by Charles Vickery, go to www.charlesvickery.com