

Divers appear dwarfed as they explore the wreck of the huge 270-foot steamer *Florida*, which sank in 1897 and lies just north of the Thunder Bay Underwater Preserve and Marine Sanctuary. Opposite, the *Eber Ward*, which sank in 1909, sits 140 feet below the surface of the waters of the Straits of Mackinac and is regularly visited by divers.

Whispers

by Valerie van Heest

When the last few piles of snow melt, exposing blades of brownish-green grass on our lawn, my husband, Jack, and I begin thinking about our annual summer vacation. As the planner in the family, I usually make a few suggestions: “How about we see *New Orleans* or *New York*, or maybe *Uganda* and *Minneapolis*.” Last year, Jack suggested *Florida* and the *Arctic*, then on the return trip we could go to *Bermuda*.

We can do all this without ever leaving Michigan, because those italicized words are shipwrecks on the bottom of the Great Lakes. As scuba divers, we choose our vacation destinations based upon the attractions found underwater. Each summer we hitch up our boat and head off to one of Michigan’s twelve Underwater Preserves. With many hundreds of submerged historic vessels to choose from in Lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior, it will take a lifetime to see them all.



Historical Collections of the Great Lakes,
Bowling Green State University

from the Past Michigan's Underwater Preserves



The intact cross-T on a standing mast of the *Cornelia B. Windiate*, is one of the most featureful wrecks in the Thunder Bay Underwater Preserve and Marine Sanctuary and showcases the ship's remarkable state of preservation.

Cris Kohl

There is nothing quite like descending through cold, clear water into another world where schooners and steamers still ply the inland seas. Only the rhythmic melody of breathing through the regulator interrupts the daydream. Bob Underhill of Kalamazoo recalls his first dive in the Straits of Mackinac on the wreck of the *Eber Ward*. "As I headed down the mooring line toward the wreck 140 feet below, the cold water reminded me that the *Ward* sank on a similar crisp spring day." In April 1909 the 213-foot steamer left Chicago loaded with corn on its first journey of the season. When it rounded the Straits, passing from Lake Michigan into Lake Huron, a large floating chunk of ice pierced the hull, sending the vessel to the bottom with five of its sixteen crewmen. "Just as the outline of the bow loomed into view," Underhill recalled, "I thought about the turmoil that must have taken place on deck when the ship started going down. Then, I saw two gaping wounds on either side of the hull." Evidence of the accident lay right be-

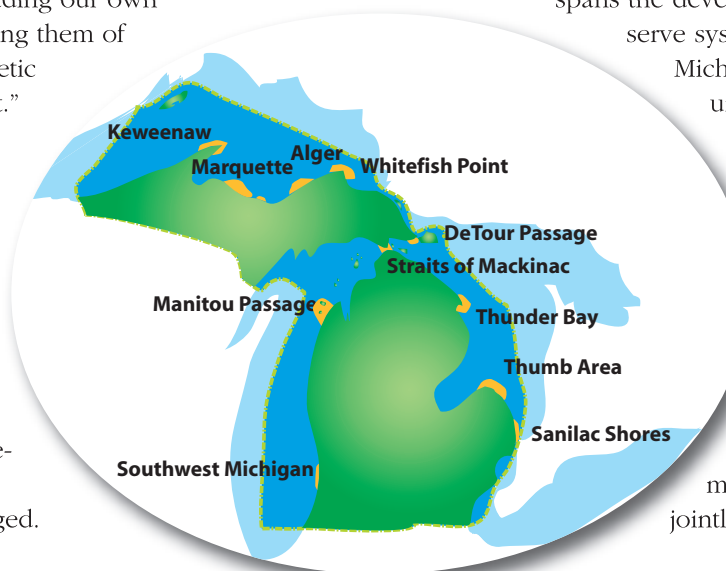
fore his eyes. "It's like being transported back in time," he reflected. As he made his way around the wreck, other sights called out to him: Wheelbarrows, still strapped below deck, and a bathtub lying among fallen timbers. "As I penetrated the darkness to the lowest deck, and saw a cup lying in a passageway, I realized this was where the five victims were trapped." Diving on shipwrecks allows us to experience history nearly firsthand.

This experience can only be had for two reasons: the fresh water of the Great Lakes and the respect afforded these wrecks by the Underwater Preserve designation. Unlike salt water with its wood-eating organisms that would reduce the timbers of a vessel such as the *Eber Ward* to a pile of iron fasteners, the fresh water of the Great Lakes preserves these historic vessels in a nearly timeless state. The schooner *Cornelia B. Windiate*, a victim of a storm in Thunder Bay, sits upright on the bottom 185 feet down. Not only are the three masts still standing, but one has a yardarm (cross-T) still in place, which is rare. A lone lifeboat, sitting just off the stern, reminds us the crew did not survive. Even ships that are damaged extensively during the sinking event and over time by the action of the currents can yield an array of artifacts like shoes, tools and foodstuffs that offer insights into shipboard life. The 1983 discovery of the scow schooner *Rockaway* in the Southwest Michigan Underwater Preserve, revealed a large number of personal artifacts that have been raised, conserved, studied and exhibited during a major archaeological project in the late 1980s by Kenneth Pott, now director of the The Heritage Museum and Cultural Center in St. Joseph.

This yawl boat is from the *Cornelia B. Windiate* lays in the sand just below the starboard bow in excellent condition and is part of the Thunder Bay preserve. It has always been a mystery why the crew, who all perished, did not use that vessel for escape.

While the fresh water preserves shipwrecks for centuries, the hand of man can destroy them in a moment. Thanks to the preserve system, however, these cultural and recreational resources have a measure of protection. When I began diving in the late 1970s my interest was in finding “treasure.” Although there were no gold or silver cargos in the Great Lakes, it was common practice to remove artifacts, such as utensils, a lantern or maybe even the ship’s wheel as a souvenir. More often than not, I came up with just rusted nails and slivers of wood. I took for granted that those who came before me got the coveted “booty” and that I would never see a “virgin” shipwreck.

Pete Lindquist from Munising, along with a group of other sport divers, was instrumental in altering the destiny of Michigan’s shipwrecks. “We finally saw the irony that we were actually degrading our own dive sites by stripping them of everything of aesthetic and historic interest.” Banding together, these citizens lobbied Michigan state government to designate certain areas with a high concentration of shipwrecks as underwater museums where the removal of artifacts would be discouraged.



Thunder Bay Underwater Preserve and Marine Sanctuary



Their wish was granted with the passage of Public Act 184 in 1980, authorizing the establishment of bottomland preserves.

In 1981, Thunder Bay in Lake Huron and Alger in Lake Superior were the first designated preserves. Successful experiences at these locations led divers to champion the establishment of nine more preserves over the next two decades. Today, the Michigan Underwater Preserve System encompasses 2,400 square miles of Michigan bottomlands. Later laws made it illegal to remove any artifacts from a shipwreck in or outside a preserve without a permit from Michigan’s Department of Environmental Quality.

State archaeologist John Halsey, whose career spans the development of the preserve system, notes that

Michigan’s preserves are unique within the Great Lakes. Unlike state and national parks, taxpayer dollars are not spent to manage these resources. While the Michigan Historical Center and Department of Environmental Quality are jointly responsible for the



Passengers on Pete Lindquist's glass bottom boat tours out of Munising get a rare opportunity to see an intact mid-nineteenth century canal schooner. The *Bermuda* sought the shelter of the bay, where her captain attempted to beach her in a fierce October 1870 Lake Superior storm. But the ship was too far gone and three of her crewmen trapped within the ship perished.

Tom Buchkoe

preserves as part of their other duties, businesses and individuals within the local communities promote these attractions without state funding.

The rugged beauty of the coastline, the picturesque islands and the open expanses of water that draw travelers to areas such as Munising, the Straits of Mackinac, Alpena and the Manitou Passage have also contributed to the tragic loss of so many vessels. Though the Great Lakes are today used primarily for recreation, they once served as a water-based highway system connecting the east coast with the Midwest. The notoriously treacherous waters and capricious weather have, however, created a vast underwater exhibit of maritime tragedies.

The preserve system focuses attention not only on the wrecks, but on the surrounding communities that play such a significant role in the state's maritime history. Halsey likens these shipwrecks to "jewels" that enhance areas already ripe with natural and cultural attractions. With 3,200 miles of shoreline, Michigan boasts more waterfront than any other state except Alaska, and owes much of its heritage to the water. Immigrants

came to this vast wilderness via water. They shipped its raw materials to regions far away via the water. The water defines Michigan and in its reflection we see our roots. The preserve system helps us understand our heritage.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore in the Upper Peninsula's Alger County has been drawing vacationers for years. But before the establishment of this underwater preserve, few people realized that the scenic sandstone cliffs along the southern shore of Lake Superior contributed to the large number of shipwrecks. Winds off the cliffs caused many ships to sink or run aground as they sought refuge in Munising's sheltered harbor tucked behind Grand Island. There are eight major wrecks there, making Munising a haven for divers and non-divers. Pete Lindquist operates a glass-bottomed boat tour. "The mystique of sunken ships and the stories of human agony draw people back again and again," he claims. Visitors can see three wrecks from the comfort of Lindquist's boat, including the *Bermuda*, a 150-foot wooden schooner that sits in only twelve feet of water after sinking in the spring of 1870.

Whitefish Point reaches into Lake Superior at the southeast end and provides a natural shelter for ships during November gales sweeping across the big lake. All traffic entering or leaving Lake Superior through the Soo Locks must pass through Whitefish Bay and around Whitefish Point. The last major shipwreck in the Great Lakes, *Edmund Fitzgerald* in 1975, was making for the shelter of Whitefish Bay when it foundered about seventeen miles out. High traffic, unpredictable fog and early spring and late fall storms have left the area with the highest

The wreck of the *Francisco Morazan* is one of the most frequented tourist attractions for divers, boaters and beachcombers. Forty-eight years ago the vessel sank on the south side of South Manitou Island. Although the former Liberian freighter continues to decay, it remains visible above the waters of Lake Michigan.

Aaron Peterson



concentration of shipwrecks in Lake Superior, most in deep water. Tom Farnquist, a local diver whose passion for the region's history led him to develop the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, shares the stories of these shipwrecks at the award-winning facility, and searches the waters off the Point for other lost vessels. In August 2007 his team discovered the 420-foot-long *Cyprus* in 460 feet of water. On only her second trip, she was downbound from Superior, Wisconsin, in 1907 with a cargo of iron ore for Buffalo, New York. It is believed that although she was just twenty-one days old, her hull plates leaked, sucking the ship into the frigid seas. Only one crewman survived. While deep-divers explore these wrecks, visitors to the museum can see scale models of the ships as well as the ship's bell recovered from the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

The Manitou Passage Underwater Preserve is ripe with maritime history. Museums, lighthouses and lifesaving stations dot the often treacherous shoreline and have been drawing vacationers for decades. Each year more shipwrecks are being uncovered. According to Jed Jaworski, who spearheaded the establishment of this preserve, "Mariners could save nearly sixty miles by threading their way through the narrow passage between Sleeping Bear Dunes and the Manitou Islands, but that savings often cost them their lives." With little over a mile of deep navigable water, numerous ships grounded in this area of shallow-water shoals. The most visible wreck, the Liberian freighter *Francisco Morazan*, grounded in a fog on November 27, 1960, after

leaving Chicago bound for the Netherlands with 940 tons of general cargo. Her remains are visible above water on the south side of South Manitou Island. On the north side of the island, the lumber hooker *Three Brothers* was revealed by shifting sands in 1996 after being buried for eighty-five years. Visible by satellite picture on Google Earth, the wreck is now visited each summer by snorkelers. Just last summer, kayakers discovered the timbers of a wooden steam ship, *General Taylor*, in shallow water off Sleeping Bear Dunes.

The collection of shipwrecks in each preserve is unique to its geographical area and is supported by shore-based facilities. In the Thumb area in lower Lake Huron, according to David Trotter, the shipwreck hunter who has located most of the wrecks in that region, "an incredible number of large freighters have gone down because of their exposure to the weather in this most dangerous and highly trafficked passage in the Great Lakes." The Point Aux Barques Lighthouse and Life Saving Station in Port Hope offers an overview of Lake Huron's wrecks. Passenger and cargo steamers lost in Lake Michigan off the coast of southwest Michigan harken back to the days of cross-lake traffic between Michigan's commercial ports and larger cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. The Heritage Museum and Cultural Center in St. Joseph is developing an exhibit, "Working Waterfronts" (opening spring 2008) to revisit those days. Marquette has been a major shipping port on Lake Superior since the discovery of iron ore in 1844. Heavy vessel traffic to and from the port, along with Lake Superior's gales and fogs, made shipwrecks here inevitable.



Bob Underhill

Diver and photographer Robert Underhill captures his buddy swimming over a hatch-loading roller that collapsed into the hold on this wreck of the *Eber Ward* in the Straits of Mackinac Underwater Preserve.

Visitors can learn about these wrecks at the Marquette Maritime Museum. The collection of shipwrecks within the preserve system offers a nearly complete picture of the evolution of transportation on the Great Lakes.

This summer, my husband and I have decided to visit the Straits of Mackinac Underwater Preserve where the narrow, fog-laden passage joining Lakes Michigan and Huron claimed so many vessels. We will dive on the *Uganda* and *Minneapolis* and the *Eber Ward*, where our friend Bob Underhill had such a memorable experience when he first dived on it. We know that because of the underwater preserve system and responsible divers

who “take only pictures and leave only bubbles,” the wreck will be much the same as when he visited it so many years ago.

A regular contributor to *Michigan History*, **Valerie van Heest** is an inductee into the Women Divers Hall of Fame and was a lead member of the committee that established the Southwest Michigan Underwater Preserve. Her newly released book, *Icebound: The Adventures of Young George Sheldon and the SS Michigan*, draws young readers into a story of heroism onboard a vessel trapped in lake ice in 1885. Learn more at www.valerievanheest.com. She lives in Holland.



State Archaeologist John R. Halsey’s long-awaited second edition of *Beneath the Inland Seas: Michigan’s Underwater Archaeological Heritage* will be released in early July. Watch for ordering information in the next issue of *Michigan History*.

Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary and Underwater Preserve

All ship traffic between the lower lakes and Lakes Michigan and Superior had to pass Thunder Bay, making this a busy stretch of water. With up-bound and downbound traffic separated by only a few miles, the numerous shoals and islands and the volatile weather conditions make navigation in this area of Lake Huron often hazardous. As a result, Thunder Bay contains one of the highest densities of shipwrecks per square mile of any point on the Great Lakes.

One of the first bottomland preserves in Michigan, Thunder Bay Underwater Preserve has been upgraded to a National Marine Sanctuary by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). One of only fourteen sanctuaries in the world and only the second created solely to protect submerged cultural resources (the first protects the famed Civil War ironclad *Monitor* off the shores of North Carolina), the 488-square-mile Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary is managed jointly by NOAA and the state of Michigan.

The NOAA designation led maritime historian Patrick Labadie out of retirement to serve as museum curator. "I could not pass up the opportunity to join the staff at the Sanctuary and to study the incredible shipwrecks that I had read about for years," he remembers. Labadie and sanctuary archaeologist Wayne Lusardi are directing the development of a major maritime exhibit that will open on June 14, 2008.

The first-floor exhibit hall will feature a unique reconstruction of a typical three-masted schooner, based upon the design of the *Cornelia B. Windiate*, showing its condition in the days it sailed as well as its condition after a century underwater. The second-floor gallery will explore the evolution of ships and settlement along Michigan's shoreline. Sanctuary staff also



reaches out to schools with classroom presentations, lessons and activities highlighting the maritime history and nautical archaeology.

The Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary and Underwater Preserve offer many shallow shipwrecks, perfect for those new to the Great

Lakes shipwrecks diving. The *Nordmeer* is one of the most recent wrecks and a popular dive site. This German steel steamer stranded on the rocks of Thunder Bay Shoal in November 1966 and is accessible in only forty feet of water. The city of Alpena has embraced the preserve and offers a host of diver support services including boat launch facilities, a dive shop and diving charters. Recent legislation has been introduced to expand the boundaries of this preserve to encompass 3,722 square miles in Lake Huron and include nearly 300 shipwrecks.

Perhaps no shipwreck more demonstrates the ferocity of Lake Huron than the 504-foot long steel hulled freighter *Isaac M. Scott*, one of eleven vessels lost during the great storm of 1913. The *Isaac M. Scott* left Cleveland on November 7, 1913, loaded with coal for Milwaukee, ran right into the path of a cyclonic storm with wind gusts up to seventy miles per hour. Waves reached a reported thirty-five feet in height, the likes of which lake mariners had never seen before. It is no mystery why the *Scott* went down with all twenty-eight crewmen.

Events like the storm of 1913, which destroyed nineteen ships and cost the lives of more than 250 mariners, led to increased efforts toward achieving better weather forecasting and construction of vessels with more strength and stability. Thankfully, these modern safety improvements have reduced the occurrence of shipwrecks.

For more information on the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, visit www.thunderbay.noaa.gov.

—Valerie van Heest



Alpena is home to the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary (left). This summer the museum will open a new exhibit that includes a replica of a typical 1870s Great Lakes schooner, loosely modeled after the *Cornelia B. Windiate* (above).