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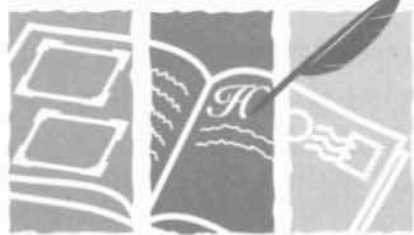
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# The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 13 Number 2

Summer 2003

## *A Glimpse into the Past: The Discovery of the H. C. Akeley*

by Valerie Olson van Heest

It was a cloudy and calm January 21, 1895, when the 219-foot steam-powered *Chicora* left Milwaukee for Benton Harbor, with a late season load of flour. Just as Captain Stines pulled away from the dock, a messenger boy ran down the dock to hail the captain with an impending storm warning, but he was too late. The captain, his crew of twenty-one men and one passenger, were never seen again. It is believed that Lake Michigan just swallowed the ship, leaving an appetite on shore, an appetite for answers that lingers over a century later.

That appetite drove divers and maritime historians, Valerie Olson van Heest, Jack van Heest and Craig Rich, then officers of the committee to establish Michigan's tenth underwater preserve in Southwest Michigan, and now Directors of Michigan Shipwreck

Research Associates (MSRA), to set out on a quest to find Michigan's most enigmatic and sought after shipwreck. History hunters, not treasure hunters, these Holland, Michigan, residents used historic newspaper accounts of eyewitnesses to the storm to narrow down their search to the waters between South Haven and Saugatuck. Despite the expert side scan services of David Trotter from Canton, Michigan, the most prolific wreck hunter/discoverer in the Great Lakes, three seasons of searching the depths covering over seventy-five square miles of lake bottom only turned up an unusual clay formation off Pier Cove near Saugatuck. That site has now been dedicated the *John Butler Johnson Claybanks* within the Southwest Michigan Underwater Preserve. In

preparation for their fourth search season in 2001, a new member, Jan Miller, also from Holland, suggested employing a more scientific approach using search and rescue techniques and drift theory.

After some ferreting around, Miller connected with Arthur Allen, at the U.S. Coast Guard Research and Development Center in Groton, Connecticut. Allen, a scientist, works out

problems in drift theory to aid the Coast Guard in its search and rescue operations. Using computer simulation technology, Allen is able to make predictions as to where objects drift in the water given certain wind and current conditions. Applying this technology to the missing *Chicora* was an intriguing idea. However, to do this, he needed to have a

meteorological profile of the lake at that time, including wind, currents and waves.

Allen directed Miller to David Schwab at the Great Lakes Environmental lab in Ann Arbor, a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA). Schwab saw only one problem: to simulate the winds and currents depends on knowing what the meteorological conditions were in 1895. Recent weather records are easy to obtain because the National Climatic Data Center (NCDC), a division of NOAA originally formed in 1870 by a joint congressional resolution as the National Weather Service, keeps

*(Continued on page 2)*



*The H. C. Akeley*

Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, Bowling Green State University

## From the Director

I cannot remember a more pleasant summer in Holland, Michigan. The heat and humidity have been almost non-existent, researchers continue to contact us with questions, and great collections are being donated weekly.

We are grateful to Valerie van Heest, an architectural design and marketing professional in Holland, for sharing her article on the *H. C. Akeley*. Her story details the work the Michigan Research Associates have been doing on the search for the nineteenth-century shipwreck *Chicora* and the discovery of the *Akeley*. What a find for maritime historians! I encourage you to consider purchasing their video (see page 5) as it really shows the hard work this team has completed.

The Joint Archives of Holland has been blessed with many new archival collections that are guaranteed to please our researchers: the important papers of well-known economist Henri Theil, local cemetery indexes from the Holland Genealogical Society, records of the famous 1st Air Commando Group (WWII), slide copies of Jack Eshenaur's Great Lakes vessels collection, and Lois Jesiek Kayes' local postcards. Thank you, donors, for your consideration of the Joint Archives of Holland as the place you most want your collections to be safely placed and used carefully by researchers.

Geoffrey Reynolds

### Oral History for Michigianians

Sponsored by the  
Michigan Oral History Association

Saturday, October 25, 2003  
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.  
Michigan Historical Center  
702 West Kalamazoo St., Lansing

The focus of the event is recording oral history as a resource for family history. This event is part of the department's recognition of Family History Month and MOHA's annual conference. For more information, contact: MOHA, 5580 West State Rd., Lansing, MI 48906-9325; telephone 517-321-1746; e-mail gwiskemann@arq.net.

### *A Glimpse into the Past (continued from page 1)*

computerized logs of all weather conditions around the county. However, century old records are harder to come by. After significant efforts, original hand-recorded weather reports were found for the ports of Chicago, Milwaukee and Sault Ste. Marie, which gave very good coverage for the entire month of January 1895.

Working in their spare time during 2000 and the early months of 2002, Schwab, Allen and Miller determined an area of scientific probability in which to search for the *Chicora*, this time in significantly deeper water than had previously been covered. The search team believed their commitment and diligence paid off when on May 25, 2001, four years after their search began, they discovered a wooden hull steamer, 230-feet long, resting quietly on the bottom of Lake Michigan in 275 feet of water off Saugatuck. But how could they be sure it was the *Chicora*?

At 275 feet, this wreck ranks among the ten deepest wrecks discovered to date in the Great Lakes. Several of these wrecks, including the most famous and deepest wreck at 575 feet, the Edmund Fitzgerald, were the subjects of major professional remote survey operations. As volunteers with minimal budgets, the process of identification of this deep wreck was going to be difficult for this discovery team. While the size and shape recorded on the side scan image matched the dimensions and shape of the *Chicora*, it also matched four other vessels presumed lost off West Michigan: the *Michigan*, a passenger steamer; the *Hennepin*, a cargo steamer; the *Andaste*, a whaleback freighter; and the *H. C. Akeley*, a cargo steamer. They had to "see" the vessel firsthand to make any further assessment. The significant depth was beyond a safe diving range for the team members to risk even though they are all skilled divers. While other highly trained technical divers could reach the site, dangerous conditions and limited bottom time are not conducive to a time-effective, analytical survey and video documentation.

The state of Michigan's Bureau of History and Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have responsibility for the ownership and management of the state's shipwrecks, so the team turned to State Archaeologist John Halsey, with whom they had been consulting during the search. Unfortunately, Halsey's office has no personnel or budget allocated for shipwreck documentation. Familiar with the level of professionalism exhibited by the team members over the years on other shipwreck projects, Halsey encouraged them to pursue documentation and identification of the wreck themselves. He strongly supported the use of remote cameras as a matter of safety and to reduce or eliminate diver impact on the site.

After the team exhausted options for participation by commercial operators, equipment manufacturers, and local experts utilizing remote operated vehicles (ROVs), the team turned again to the agencies that assisted with the search. With David Schwab's assistance, they made contact with Sergeant Bill Estlack from the Michigan State Police and Professor Guy Meadows, who operates the University of Michigan's underwater remote operated vehicle (M-ROVER). Estlack and Meadows were clearly interested in assisting with a survey of the site, but time constraints and commitments would not allow it until late in October 2001.



Photo by Lou Spencer

*MSRA search team members (from L to R) David Trotter, Craig Rich, Valerie Olson van Heest and Jan Miller, look over the side scan image of the newly discovered wreck on the evening of the discovery May 25, 2001.*

With summer ahead and the desire to identify the ship, the team acquired their own equipment for the survey: an inexpensive drop camera. Since a drop camera has no propulsion, they developed large weights with anchors to secure it at four points far off the wreck. Using lines secured to each weighted anchor, they could pull the survey boat to specific locations over the wreck. The first video glimpse of the ship indicated a wooden hull vessel with a side cargo opening, and a feature they thought might be a wooden fender. While still hopeful that they had found the *Chicora*, these first few minutes of video ruled out two other ships, the *Andaste* and the *Michigan*, which were clad in steel. Additional drop camera work during the waning summer months of 2001 captured video of hatches, engine mounts, a boiler, a capstan and something presumed to be a toppled-over smokestack. These bits of video evidence were all consistent with the construction of the *Chicora*, but not inconsistent with the *Hennepin* or the *Akeley*, the two remaining possibilities. The *Hennepin*, however, was reported to have sunk twenty-two miles to the south, off South Haven, and the *Akeley*, ten miles north, off Holland.

In reading accounts by the survivors of these two ship disasters, it seemed unlikely that seasoned sailors could be so wrong about their position.

Bad weather hit early in October 2001 and with it came the postponement of the M-ROVER operation. The date was rescheduled for June 2002. Facing a winter season with no possibility of site work, the team, now established as the non-profit Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates (MSRA), continued research and made presentations across the Midwest about the discovery of this shipwreck. The public generally agreed with MSRA that the *Chicora* had finally been found. In the course of these presentations, MSRA applied for and received a grant from Great Lakes Shipwreck Research Foundation, based in Wisconsin, to further study, document and preserve this wreck.

In spring 2002, the M-ROVER operation was once again postponed, this time due to a conflicting University of Michigan project in the Pacific. With a pressing desire to positively identify the wreck, MSRA turned to local technical divers, Charles Larsen and Doug Welsch. On June 1, 2002, they began the first of a series of dives on this vessel.

Initial dives focused on site orientation and safety, but later dives turned up some telling images. Larsen descended on the drop line just behind the forecabin, and as he traveled towards the stern, he encountered a series of deck hatches. During a later dive at the stern, he filmed the boilers. Comparing his video evidence with the deck plans of the *Chicora* dashed all hope that the long sought after ship had been found. The *Chicora* had only four small hatches on the deck, and its boiler was located significantly lower in the hull than the one Larsen had filmed. Coincident to this discovery, new MSRA member, Ross Richardson, turned up a newspaper article from a 1927 *Commercial Observer* indicating that the *Hennepin* had been stripped of her engine and boiler and had been used as a tow barge when she sank in 1927. Both the drop camera and diver video had captured images of a boiler, so the wreck could not possibly be the *Hennepin*.

So had MSRA found the *H. C. Akeley*? The only picture MSRA had seen of the *Akeley* was a rendered image depicted of her in the storm. Unlike the *Chicora*, no blueprints have been found of the *Akeley*. Stepped-up research efforts turned up the only known photo of the *Akeley* in the collection of the Tri-Cities Historical Museum in Grand Haven. That photo, taken in 1881 during her construction in Grand Haven, clearly shows a series of hatches and side openings identical to what had been captured by underwater video.





Photos courtesy of Tri-Cities Historical Museum

Above, the *H. C. Akeley* during construction in 1881 at Mechanics Dry Dock in Grand Haven; Healey Cady Akeley, left.

The *H. C. Akeley* was built at Mechanics Dry Dock by Thomas W. Kirby and Healy C. Akeley in the once-busy commercial port of Grand Haven, Michigan. The 230-foot steamer cost over \$110,000 and was launched in the spring of 1881. She was put under the command of Captain Edward Stretch. The vessel was named for financier Akeley, who arrived at Grand Haven in 1858 and was instrumental in developing the lumber and shipping industries. A Civil War veteran, he returned to serve as one of the major stockholders of the Grand Haven Lumber Company, justice of the peace, Circuit Court commissioner, newspaperman, U.S. Customs collector, bank director, mayor of Grand Haven and owner of the world's largest shingle mill. Captain Thomas W. Kirby was a prominent citizen in his own right, responsible for the construction of more than a dozen important vessels plying the Great Lakes. Kirby's Mechanics Dry Dock & Shipyard was built in 1867 on the north bank of Harbor Island in the Grand River.

The *Akeley* proved itself a stout and seaworthy vessel and for three seasons turned a profit for her owners. In November 1883 the *Akeley* was in Chicago to take on a load of 54,000 bushels of corn destined for Buffalo, New York. She departed on Sunday, November 11, as the gales of November began to blow on the lake. Heading north, just abeam of Milwaukee, the *Akeley* came to the assistance of the tug *Protection*, which had become disabled while towing the schooner *Arab*. The *Arab* sank while under tow and the *Protection*'s machinery was damaged during the operation.

The *Akeley* took the *Protection* under tow and headed north into the gathering storm. Soon afterward, the strain on the *Akeley*'s rudder was too much and the wheelsman lost control

of the vessel. The *Protection* was immediately cut loose to fend for herself. The helpless *H. C. Akeley* was left to ride out the storm—but the storm got the better of her.

Subsequent dives throughout the summer of 2002 brought up additional images of a wreck that matched the description of the *Akeley*. Finally, on October 12, 2002, the wind, waves and schedule cooperated and teams from NOAA, DNR, the University of Michigan and MSRA, using the NOAA Research Vessel *Laurentian* based in Muskegon, traveled to the wreck site to acquire remote video documentation. The operation was a success, and more than two-and-a-half hours of video were taken. Months of careful study, both of M-ROVER and drop camera footage, enabled Valerie Olson van Heest to develop a site drawing detailing the structure and features on the deck, port side and stern of the vessel. The evidence uncovered at the shipwreck site helped MSRA write the final chapter of the *Akeley*'s tragedy.

At 10:30 p.m. on Sunday, November 11, 1883, the pony fed pipe from the port boiler was ripped off due to high seas, and steam began leaking out. To access the problem, Chief Engineer Connell climbed onto scalding hot pipes to reach the valve. He heard two sounds like rifle shots: the guy chains supporting the smokestack snapped off. The *Akeley*'s funnel toppled over the side at 11:30 p.m. Video evidence shows the remaining lower portion of the smokestack and the location of the break.

The *Akeley* continued to drift as the seas built and soon the waves plucked one of the two lifeboats from the vessel. Trying to ride out the storm, Captain Stretch ordered the anchor set. M-ROVER video images show the anchor chain deployed from the starboard hawse pipe. The crew battled the storm at anchor overnight. The next day, Monday, November 12, brought signs that the end was near. Another vessel, the *Driver*, bound from Chicago to Grand Haven, encountered the *Akeley* at anchor and taking on water. On board the *Akeley*, the crew saw the *Driver* as their salvation but disagreed on how to effect a rescue. Twelve men feared the *Akeley* was ready to plunge beneath the waves, so they launched the remaining lifeboat and attempted to row to the *Driver*. The captain and five more men thought their chances were better to wait on the *Akeley* until the *Driver* could approach to the lee side and safely take them off. As Captain Miller of the *Driver* was racing to the ship, a big wave hit the *Akeley*, the aft mast cracked off and the ship foundered. In video taken by M-ROVER, the broken mast is clearly visible, a testament to the final disastrous moments of this once proud ship.

Survivors reported that the *Akeley* plunged to the bottom stern-first. Within a few minutes, the six remaining men, and the ship were consumed by the lake. M-ROVER video

of the rear deck shows a buildup of a clay-like substance, possibly a mix of bottom sediment and corn, caused when the ship hit bottom.

Captain Miller of the *Driver* reached the *Akeley's* lifeboat and brought her cargo of twelve exhausted men safely aboard his ship. He did not risk approaching the wave-tossed eastern shore, but instead turned into the wind and headed back for Chicago with the twelve survivors. For his heroics, Captain Daniel S. Miller was awarded the highest honor given to merchant seamen: a solid gold Lifesaving Medal, which is now on display at the Tri-Cities Museum in Grand Haven.

While that was the end of the *H. C. Akeley's* career, the story of her life is still being unraveled. MSRA learned a little known fact about the real origins of the *Akeley* from Patrick Labadie, historian for the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in Alpena. Labadie had come across documentation that the engine and boilers on the *Akeley* were salvaged from a much-earlier ship – the USS *Trefoil*, a Navy transport vessel built in East Boston, Massachusetts, in 1862. After the Civil War, the *Trefoil* was transferred to the Great Lakes, converted to a tug, renamed the *General Paine* and used for passenger traffic between Muskegon and Chicago. In 1879 it wrecked at the piers of Grand Haven. Although the ship was a total loss, its machinery was taken off, rebuilt and used in the newly constructed *Akeley*. A diver's sighting of a waterlogged gauge reading "Johnston .... Ferrysburg, Michigan" now made sense. The Johnston Boiler Works in nearby Ferrysburg was the only local outfit capable of retrofitting the salvaged machinery. John Watt Johnston, a

descendant of steam engine pioneer James Watt, had strategically located his Scotch boiler factory at the mouth of the Grand River, where numerous lumber mills and ship builders required his products and services.

This new information prompted MSRA to dig deeper and explore the life of General Halbert Eleazer Paine, after whom



Photo courtesy of [www.picturehistory.com](http://www.picturehistory.com)

*General Halbert E. Paine*

the *Trefoil* was renamed. They happened across what could only be considered an interesting twist of fate. Paine, who was born in 1826, joined the Union Army in 1861 as a colonel in the Fourth Wisconsin Volunteers. He was promoted to the rank of brigadier general in March 1863 serving in the Civil War. He resigned in 1865 when he was elected as a

Republican to the U.S. Congress, where he represented Wisconsin from 1865 until 1871.

As a congressman, Paine is most noted for introducing, on February 2, 1870, a Joint Congressional Resolution to establish the National Weather Service. The resolution was passed by Congress and signed into law on February 9, 1870, by President Ulysses S. Grant. Coincidentally, without the services provided by the National Weather Service, (now the NCDIC), MSRA would not have been searching at the precise spot where they discovered the *H. C. Akeley*. The wreck was not the ship MSRA had wanted to find, but it was a ship with a very interesting life, a tragic demise and unique ties to Paine himself.

General Paine's accomplishments changed the lives of all people who benefit from weather information and put in place the tools to help researchers and agencies like NOAA, the U.S. Coast Guard and MSRA discover lost ships.

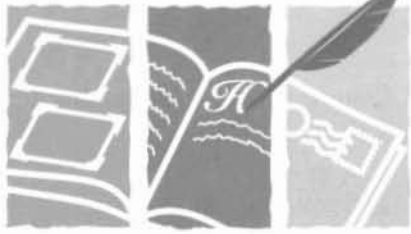
The method used to search for the *Chicora* is still valid – the *H. C. Akeley* simply came to rest within the high probability area for the *Chicora*. Perhaps in the near future, with the guiding spirit of the late General Paine, resting comfortably from his newly rediscovered place in history, the dedicated and persistent researchers of Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates will complete their original quest and find the long-lost *Chicora*.

### **A Glimpse Into the Past: The Discovery of the *H. C. Akeley***

Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates  
Copyright 2003, VHS 50 minutes  
\$20.00 + \$3.00 shipping and handling

Send check or money order to: MSRA  
1134 Goodwood Court Holland, MI 49424  
For further information  
see [www.michiganshipwrecks.org](http://www.michiganshipwrecks.org)

The history of the *Akeley's* construction, service record, and the significant individuals and companies that were involved in its life are explored in this documentary. Through new video images of this very deep shipwreck acquired by technical divers and the remote operated vehicle from University of Michigan, MSRA tells the tale of what happened to those eighteen crew members in the final, fateful moments aboard this doomed vessel.



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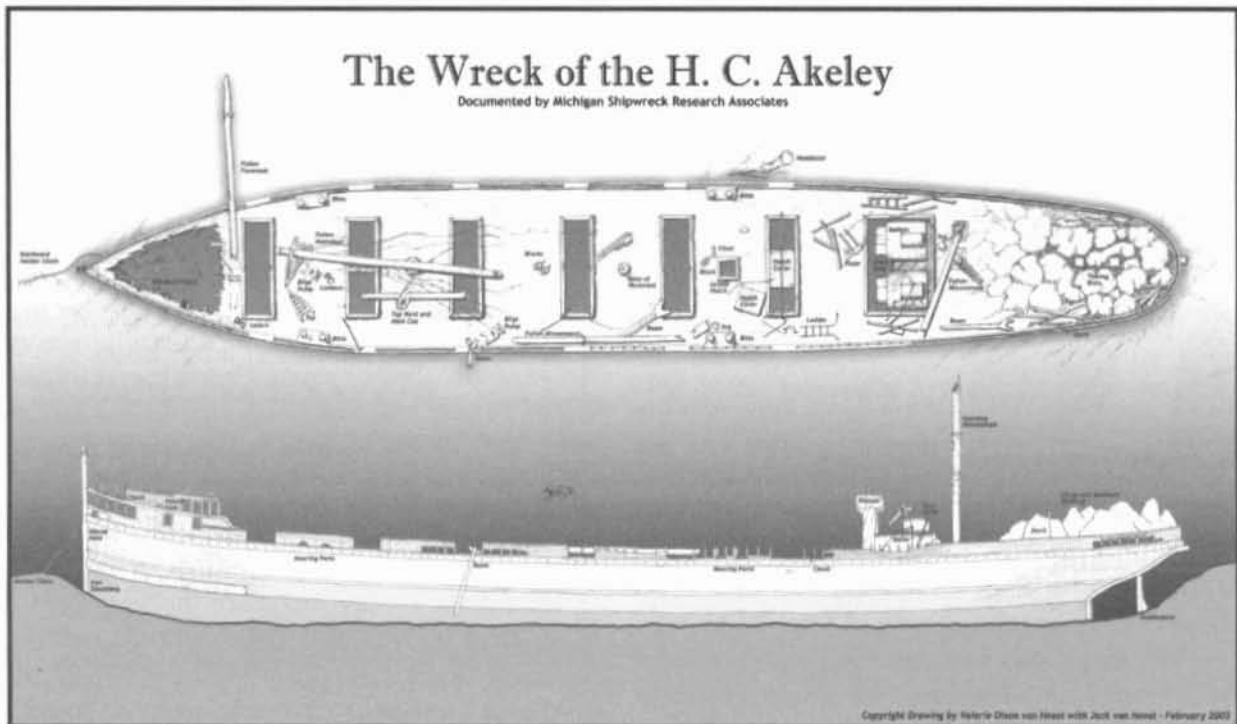
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*The deck plan and port side view of the wreck of the Akeley as it looked upon discovery in 2001*