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Winter 2006

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 15.04: Winter 2006

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: van Heest, Valerie Olson and Reynolds, Geoffrey D., "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 15.04: Winter 2006" (2006). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 49.

<https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/49>

Published in: *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 15, Issue 4, Winter January 1, 2006. Copyright © 2006 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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Half a Ship – Twice the Mystery: The *Ann Arbor No. 5*

by Valerie Olson van Heest

There is something dramatic about a ship sinking—stormy seas, foggy nights, collisions, and groundings accompanied by stories of heroic rescues of the fortunate survivors, and tragic losses of those who perished in these disasters. But, for every ship that met its demise beneath the inland seas, there are a dozen others whose careers ended in much less dramatic ways. Such was the case, according to the historic records, of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*. The *Ann Arbor No. 5* was built in 1910 as a car ferry for the Ann Arbor Railway line. She served 57 years in her career until she finally outlived her usefulness. According to *Ahoy & Farewell* (revised edition 2001, Detroit Marine Historical Society) this once proud vessel was sold to a marine salvage company, cut down to a barge, and used in the construction of a shoreline facility. In 1970, it was scrapped. So that was that—the ship was decommissioned and taken off the register in 1970.

If that is true – how did a large portion of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* end up on the bottom of Lake Michigan off South Haven in 155 feet of water?

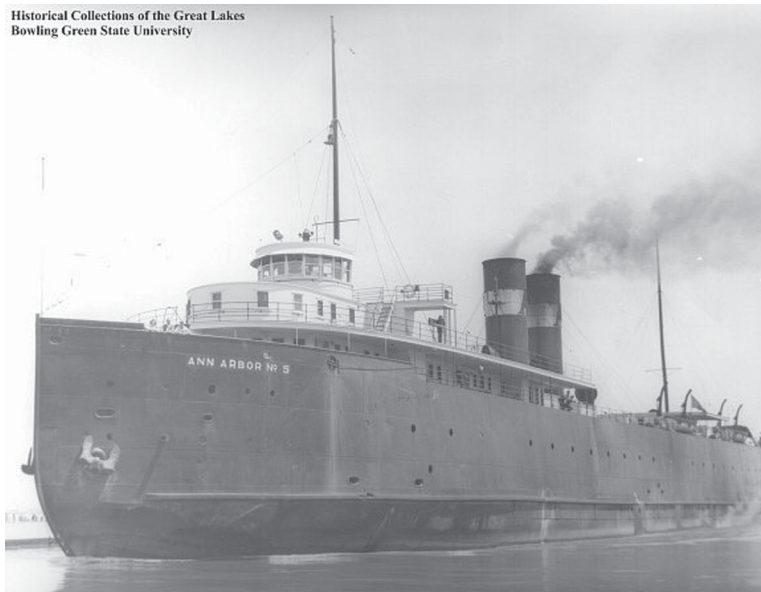
For anyone involved in the search for lost objects—whether shipwrecks, airplanes, famous paintings or a host of other sought-after items—you have to be prepared to find the

unexpected. Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates (MSRA), dedicated to the research, exploration, discovery and documentation of West Michigan's maritime history, found two shipwrecks unexpectedly. In 2001, while searching for the wreck of the long lost *Chicora*, which disappeared in 1895, we instead discovered the *H.C. Akeley*, a ship of similar size, construction and vintage. And while searching for the 200-foot long steel hulled *S.S. Michigan* in 2004; we turned up a 200-foot steel barge, which had apparently been scuttled right where we expected to find the *Michigan*.

Of course, there are the stories of ships found nowhere near their presumed location of loss.

The schooner *Windiate* was accidentally found by Paul Ehorn and John Steel in Lake Huron, when it was presumed to have gone down in Lake Michigan. The WWII German submarine *U-869*, made famous in the engrossing book "Shadow Divers," by Robert Kurson, was found off the coast of New Jersey, when war records indicate its loss off Africa.

But what happens when you find something that was thought to no longer exist?



From the Director



I recently read the article “Archivist Extraordinaire,” which includes the obituary of Harry Gotlieb (*The Economist*, 12/10/2006) and thought it really illustrated what an archivist and an archives, like the Joint Archives of Holland, strives to do every day: “He had no immediate family. Indeed, he didn’t need one. He was already the custodian of substantial parts of more than 2,000 lives, including their dreams of immortality.”

Every day we help someone who has “hit the wall” with their research topic or is just beginning a new adventure into the world of historical research and writing. I like knowing that we will always be here and our staff will be willing to help researchers find that missing nugget of information that they really need. We also strive to collect material that you may no longer have use for, but which may be valuable to a researcher. Always feel free to contact us if there are archival materials you are willing to donate.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Half a Ship - Twice the Mystery (continued from page 1)

Scattered throughout history are the incredible stories of valuable objects thought destroyed by fire, war, or decay, but which then miraculously turn up—sometimes centuries later. There are several accounts of famous paintings lost, which later resurfaced. One example is the painting “Toilet of Bathsheba” by Italian artist Giorgio Vasari, thought to have been lost in the bombardment of Berlin, but found in 1965 in private ownership. Ford Motor Company’s 20 millionth vehicle, a 1931 Model A Ford Town Sedan, was thought to have been destroyed in a museum warehouse fire in the late 1930s, but was found more than 40 years later stored in a garage in northern Michigan. Music lovers will appreciate that in 2004, technicians at Sweden’s public television station unearthed a complete original recording of a 1969 Jimi Hendrix concert long thought to have been destroyed due to storage limitations.

However, until now, those kinds of unanticipated discoveries have not touched upon the shipwrecks of the Great Lakes. There are numerous databases of “ships gone missing” available in books, on line, and in museum and library archives. Much is known about the building of these ships—

their careers, their losses, and in most instances, the general location and circumstances of the loss. If a search team studies the data, expends the effort on the search, and has a bit of luck, they can usually find the shipwreck, as has been evidenced by thousands of discoveries in waters around the world.

How surprising, however, to discover the wreck of a ship long believed to have been destroyed—a ship that, according to historical records, no longer exists. That is the case of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*.

Historic Accounts

On November 24, 1892, a unique looking ship with rather high sides departed Frankfort, Michigan, to begin a crossing to Keweenaw, Wisconsin, carrying four railroad cars filled with coal across a wide body of water. This ship, the *Ann Arbor No. 1*, became the first car ferry service across Lake Michigan.

MSRA member, Holland city councilman and railroad historian, Bob Vande Vusse, shared some of his vast knowledge about the car ferry industry with us. One of the things about Michigan’s geography, that makes it such a wonderful place to live, made it difficult for railroad transportation. Being surrounded by four of the five Great Lakes caused an excess amount of labor when shipping cargo from one midwestern state through Michigan to another. Originally called break-bulk shipping, boxcars were unloaded upon their arrival at Windsor, Ontario, and their goods transferred to a boat to cross the Detroit River. The freight was re-loaded into railcars to cross the state, and then transferred onto boats to cross Lake Michigan. Upon reaching Wisconsin, those goods were again re-loaded from boat to boxcar. At first, this inefficiency was overlooked because of the great benefits brought by railroad transportation. However, it soon became obvious that this service was too labor intensive.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the railroad industry saw a new technology taking root in Scotland in Firth of Forth, as the railroads there developed the first railcar ferries to cross the River Forth that spills out into the North Sea. First tested in the midwest in crossing the Detroit and St. Clair rivers, the technology quickly caught on. Larger boats were soon designed, and crossing the six miles at the Straits of Mackinac became possible.

In 1892, attorney James M. Ashley, governor of Montana and president of the Toledo, Ann Arbor & North Michigan Railway, began desperately searching for customers for his rail business. He engaged the noted naval architect Frank



www.boblosteamers.com

Frank E. Kirby

E. Kirby to design a ship capable of carrying loaded railcars across the open waters of Lake Michigan between Frankfort, Michigan, and Kewaunee, Wisconsin.

Although Kirby's *Ann Arbor No. 1* had a wooden hull, it incorporated most of the features that eventually characterized all Lake Michigan car ferries. A key feature was a broad, flat car deck with four sets of track. Another feature was an open stern for loading cars. It was soon realized

that this open stern posed a hazard since waves could crash over the car deck, allowing water to pour into the engine room. Two ships were lost due to this faulty design. In 1909, the *Marquette and Bessimer No. 2* sank in Lake Erie, and a year later the *Pere Marquette 18*, caught in a storm, sank off Wisconsin in deep water. These two events were a wake-up call for railroad lines that saw a need for stern protection from the often-wild inland seas. The design of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* would change that.

Built in 1910 at Toledo Shipbuilding Co. in Toledo, Ohio, the *Ann Arbor No. 5* was the largest ferry on the lakes. At 360 feet long, 56' 3" wide, with two triple expansion engines, four Scotch boilers and individually controlled twin propellers, she could carry 30 railroad cars. She was the first ship to be equipped with a sea gate to close the open stern and this feature was soon added to the Lake Michigan fleet.

By 1910, the success of the car ferry service had been established, and several other railroad companies began operating car ferries. Only the Pere Marquette Line would overshadow Ann Arbor's service, but the *Ann Arbor No. 5* was considered the best of the fleet for winter boat handling, due to her solid construction and maneuverability.

The actual operation of the car ferry involved backing the ship into her slip using the twin props to maneuver into position, carefully aligning the rails on the ship's car deck with the rails on the dock apron. Once in position, the apron was lowered, the ferry locked in place and the cars unloaded. The only tricky aspect to this involved keeping the train cars evenly distributed. During loading, cars were pushed onto the car deck using empty flat cars, called idlers, so the heavy engines could stay off the apron. Half of one center track was loaded, and then the other center track was loaded before the remainder of the first center track was filled. This process continued on the two outside tracks. The deck crew then jacked up the corners of each car to take the weight off the springs and trucks and chained them to the rail, so they could

not rock independent of the ship. Blocks or clamps were employed to keep the cars from moving forward or back.

On one occasion, this loading operation resulted in disaster. In May 1909, the crew loading the *Ann Arbor No. 4* in Manistique failed to exercise due caution while loading cars of iron ore, and the ship slowly turned toward its port side and capsized.

In addition to freight cars, the car ferries carried passengers and were built with staterooms, dining quarters and public spaces. When the Great Depression brought an end to most of the package freighters, the Ann Arbor and Pere Marquette lines actively promoted the passenger business and planked over their car deck to carry automobiles. Passengers and automobiles became a major source of revenue for the Pere Marquette and Ann Arbor lines.

The *Ann Arbor No. 5*'s career was rather uneventful, and after more than fifty years of service, the ship was retired in the mid 1960s. But the ship likely had a brush with fame. In the book, "The Legend of the Christmas Ship" by Carl Behrend, the author suggests that the crew of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* may well have been the last people to see the schooner *Rouse Simmons* afloat before she disappeared in a winter storm in 1912 with a cargo of Christmas trees. For those who attended MSRA and the Joint Archives film festival, "Mysteries and Histories," at the Knickerbocker Theatre last May, you will remember the *Rouse Simmons* as the famous schooner that delivered evergreens from the Upper Peninsula to Chicago each year to be sold at the Clark Street Bridge.

The heyday of car ferry service would continue beyond the usefulness of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*. Ann Arbor's busiest year for passenger service was 1971, boasting nearly 30,000 passengers and 11,000 automobiles. But the early 1970s also marked the beginning of the end for the car ferries. By then, all the railroad companies were convinced that car ferry service was no longer practical or profitable. Improvements to the Chicago railway system reduced transit time. The evolution of diesel power led to trains of up to one hundred cars—more than could be handled by the 25-30 car capacity ferries. Crew and fuel costs also became prohibitive and after 50 or more years in service, the ships themselves were outdated.

In 1966, the Ann Arbor Transportation Company sold the *Ann Arbor No. 5* to the Bulk Food Carriers of San Francisco. It was swapped back and forth for a number of years in government's ship exchange program. It was sold by the Maritime Commission to Bultema Dock & Dredge Co. in 1967 for \$27,775 and towed from Frankfort, Michigan, to Manistique by the tug *Muskegon* on December 1 of that year.

Historical records, as gathered by Vande Vusse, indicate that Bultema Dock and Dredge cut the ship down to a barge by removing its smoke stacks, engine and upper works. With a contract to work on the offshore construction of the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant south of South Haven in 1969, Bultema utilized their “new” barge, in what was a common practice, by sinking it along the shoreline to be used as a temporary breakwater during shoreline construction activities. By then it was an old hull and its structural integrity was likely compromised during this use that harsh winter. Written records simply indicate that it broke up during winter storms of 1969-1970, and the hull was clam-shelled out, scrapped, and removed from the registry that next summer.

Spring 2005

In May 2005, MSRA had the honor and privilege to begin working with Clive Cussler and his organization NUMA (National Underwater Marine Agency) in a joint venture to search for the remains of Northwest Airlines Flight 2501, lost off South Haven in 1950 with all 58 persons on board. The Northwest disaster represented the worst loss of life at that time, and its discovery would garner national interest and offer closure to family members still troubled by an accident that was never explained.

Clive Cussler sent his side scan sonar expert Ralph Wilbanks, with boat pilot Steve Howard, to West Michigan in September 2004 and May 2005 to work with MSRA on the search. Wilbanks has been working with Cussler for over a decade on several high profile searches, and was responsible for locating the *Horace L. Hunley*, the first submarine to sink an enemy warship during the Civil War.

MSRA and Wilbanks established an initial search grid off South Haven that encompassed approximately 20 square miles of high probability area presumed to contain the airplane’s remains.

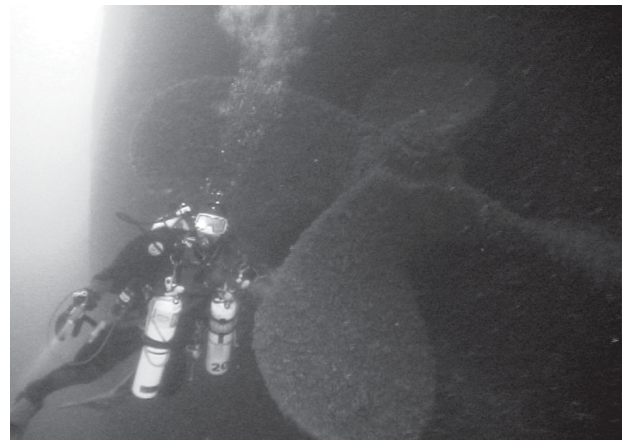
Wilbanks’ side scan sonar was set at a resolution to locate small pieces of aluminum, which was all we believed would remain of the wreck. When shipwreck hunting, we have to be prepared for surprises and realize that it is rare to make a quick discovery. During the first week of May, the sonar plotted several disturbed areas that we thought might indicate airplane remains, but subsequent dives revealed nothing but rocky bottomlands and an uprooted tree. A discovery on May 6th of a 30-foot pleasure boat revealed, upon inspection by our divers, an intentionally scuttled Chris-Craft.

And then, the next day, with the sonar tuned up to “see” what we had hoped to be small pieces of a broken airplane, it surprisingly generated a huge image that filled the screen.

MSRA Board Members Jan Miller and Craig Rich, on board that day, could not believe what they were seeing. The object was at least 100 feet long and more than 50 feet wide. They were certain it was no airplane, but what was it?

Several passes over the anomaly revealed what could only be a shipwreck. Over the next few days and into the summer, MSRA affiliated divers, Jeff Vos and Bob Underhill joined the MSRA dive team (me, my husband Jack van Heest, Craig Rich and Ross Richardson) to make dives on the wreck for the purposes of identification.

As soon as I saw the first video footage that Bob Underhill shot, I noticed rails running front to back along the deck. These rails immediately reminded me of the *City of Milwaukee*, a car ferry now serving as a museum ship in Manistee, Michigan, that I had visited a few months earlier. I knew I was looking at the deck of a car ferry, but could not understand why there was no structure above the deck, as there most certainly would be on that kind of a vessel.



MSRA

Diver and one of two large propellers on the Ann Arbor No. 5

The wreck was really amazing. The ship sits in 155 feet of water at about a 30-degree angle to the bottom of the lake, with the stern upended and the highest point at 120-foot deep. The two twelve-and-a-half-foot diameter propellers sit perched so high that we could actually swim all around them and under the rudder. Swimming from the stern along the deck brought us to the sand where the ship appears broken. At 150 feet deep, we could penetrate the broken end and swim into what would have been the “flicker,” the crew’s area aft of the engine room, aptly named because in rough seas, the electric light bulbs flickered. What has held the wreck at this precarious angle for so many years is not yet clear to us.

While Ross Richardson had heard rumors that an old rail car ferry, perched on a severe angle, had been found by noted

marine contractor Captain Dick Race years ago, no name had been associated with that wreck. After diving the wreck, we again contacted Bob Vande Vusse, who could not recall any car ferries lost off South Haven, but steered us to consider the *Ann Arbor No. 5*, due to its close proximity in the building of the power plant near South Haven. While all his archival collections indicated the *Ann Arbor No. 5* had been scrapped, he was willing to consider that the records may not be fully correct.

After looking into the final dispositions of the various car ferries that worked Lake Michigan and making several dives on the wreck to record detailed measurements and shoot video, we could only conclude that we had found the stern portion of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*. However, if it was supposed to have been scrapped, how did a piece of it come to rest eight miles southwest of South Haven?

MSRA's press conference in June 2005, announcing the discovery of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* as well as the *S.S. Michigan* off Holland, generated a number of newspaper articles and television news reports. A contact from a reader, Holland resident Robert Love, would shed light on the true fate of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*.

Robert Love's grandfather, Carl Johnson, was helmsman and watchman on the *Ann Arbor No. 5* from age 14 to age 56, along with his four brothers Richard, Johnny, Raymond, and Harry Johnson, and so he had a particular connection to the ship. Mr. Love had some specific knowledge of what became of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*. A good friend, local marine contractor Kenny Cartier, now deceased, knew of Love's family ties to the *Ann Arbor No. 5*. In the 80s, Cartier shared some home movie footage in which he thought Love would be interested. Apparently, Cartier served on board the vessel used to salvage the sunken *Ann Arbor No. 5* barge from its position near shore at the site of the Palisades Power plant. After much effort, they drained the vessel, righted it, and took it under tow with the intent to cross the lake and scrap it in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. A few miles offshore, Cartier heard a load crack and turned his movie camera towards the vessel under tow. There was



Carl Johnson

chaos on board the salvage vessel as the crew realized the *Ann Arbor No. 5* was breaking apart. Love reported seeing the five minutes of film that Cartier recorded in which the rear section of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* broke off and sank quickly to the bottom. He recalls Cartier mentioning that the forward half of the vessel surprisingly continued to float, and was towed to Manitowoc for scrapping as originally intended.

Those five minutes of film seen 20 years earlier by a man who shared this fact with the discovery team, has altered the historical records. These facts have also altered what we know of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, or "NOAA" lake chart for the southern portion of Lake Michigan.

MSRA has always been curious what shipwreck the "Wreck PA" marker charted a few miles west of the Palisades Power Plant in 140 feet of water was supposed to be. During the summer of 2005, searching with Clive Cussler's team, we covered the entire area surrounding the wreck marker and found nothing. We discovered the wreck of the *Ann Arbor No. 5* several miles northwest of that marker. Its discovery prompted us to contact NOAA to see how that marker came to be added to their charts. Apparently, a report called "A Local Notice to Mariners" was issued in the mid 1970s indicating an unknown wreck at that location. The timeframe suggests that perhaps the salvage company reported the loss of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*, but they obviously did not have accurate coordinates. While it is unlikely that NOAA will correct and reissue their chart based upon MSRA's discovery, boaters and divers will now know the correct position of the *Ann Arbor No. 5*, which rests at N 42° 22.760' by W 086° 27.427'.

The scuba diving community has an exciting new dive site, historic records have been rewritten, and our local navigation charts can be revised, and all because of an interest in a lost airliner. MSRA would like to express our gratitude to Clive Cussler, nationally acclaimed author of the Dirk Pitt/Kurt Austin adventure series and his associates from NUMA, Ralph Wilbanks and Steve Howard, who funded and conducted the search for Northwest Airlines Flight 2501. It's funny how things turn out, isn't it?

Please join the Joint Archives of Holland and MSRA on May 6, 2006, at the Knickerbocker Theatre as we present the story of the continued search for Northwest Airlines Flight 2501. We will also chronicle the discoveries that occurred during that search, last June's discovery of the *S.S. Michigan*, and the Cussler search for John Paul Jones' ship, *Bonne Homme Richard*, that will be presented by keynote speaker Ralph Wilbanks. It will be an evening you will long remember.



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John F. Zalsman, a resident of Holland, invented and patented what he thought was a more practical cycle for use in Holland's climate: the ice velocipede. Zalsman's invention consisted of two sleds, one in front and one in the rear, and a large wheel with spurs to help propel it through the snow. It was boasted that the contrivance could go faster on ice than skates. (*The Michigan Cyclist*, Vol. III, No. 1, July 1894)