



CAMILLA CHIC

In Life & Arts: The Duchess of Cornwall has remade herself into stylish royalty. Page C1



IN THE SPOTLIGHT
In Sports: Big-name coaches highlight NBA Preview. Page B1

THE BUFFALO NEWS

METRO EDITION

Copyright, 2005

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2005

Serving Western New York since 1880

90 PAGES • 50 CENTS



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News
Chris Duncanson from Modern Electric changes a light at a car dealer's in Lockport Thursday.

Index

- Business Today . D7
- City & Region . D1
- Classified . B8
- Comics . C8
- Crossword . B20, C9
- Entertainment . C4
- Jingo . D2
- Life & Arts . C1
- Lotteries . D2
- Obituaries . D4
- Opinion . A6
- Picture Page . C10
- Sports . B1
- Television . C6

The News online: buffalo.com



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News
A diver enters Lake Erie off Barcelona Harbor, 145 feet above the George J. Whelan, which sank in 1930. Sonar equipment located it this month. Related photos on the Picture Page, C10.

FOCUS: ADVENTURE

Shipwreck brought to light

Nine divers emerge thrilled by the condition of a steamboat that sank in 145 feet in a 1930 Lake Erie squall eight miles off Barcelona

By JOHN F. BONFATTI
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

BARCELONA — It sank during a summer storm in Lake Erie off this Chautauqua County harbor on July 29, 1930, with 21 aboard. The boat took 15 lives with it; just six survived. It was front page news.

After resting undisturbed on the lake bottom for 75 years, the steamboat George J. Whelan

came to life Thursday for nine divers, who were clearly excited about their opportunity.

"You can dive a whole lifetime and never be the first one on [a wreck]," said Wayne Rush, who drove two hours from Port Allegany, Pa., for the dive.

Rush was the first of the divers to reach the Whelan in 145 feet of water eight miles from shore.

Rush and the others said the

boat was in impeccable condition, with all of its portholes open. During their brief examination, they said they saw kerosene lanterns, fire extinguishers and porcelain light fixtures, more than enough to pique their interest.

"Next summer, I'll be out here every chance I get," said diver Dan Kuzdale of Dunkirk.

See **Wreck** on Page A2

Only 300 of Lake Erie's many wrecks have been located

WRECK • from A1

Lake Erie has at least 1,750 shipwrecks, according to Great Lakes shipwreck historian Mike Walker. He said other estimates put the total at closer to 3,000.

Only about 300 have been located, he said, and serious divers in the area are likely to have made multiple trips to most of them.

"The Holy Grail for divers in the Great Lakes is a virgin wreck," he said, noting that the cold, fresh water helps preserve wrecks for hundreds of years. "That boat is literally sitting the way it went down."

A parade of names

The George J. Whelan went down, on its side, sometime around midnight on a warm summer night in 1930, ending its brief but colorful history.

Built by the Craig Shipbuilding Co. in Toledo, Ohio in 1910 as one of the few steel lake boats de-

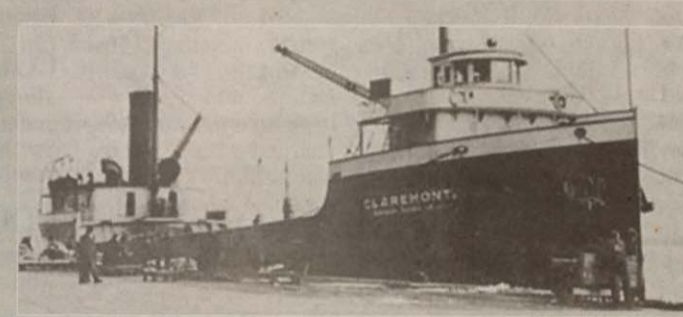
signed for the lumber trade, it was 220 foot long and 40 feet wide. It originally was named for Erwin L. Fisher, the Cleveland manager of its owner, the Argo Steamship Corp.

It got off to an inauspicious start when, on its maiden voyage in 1911, the boat collided with the S.L. Clement and sank in the Detroit River.

Raised and rebuilt, it was renamed the Bayersher in 1916. During World War I, it was sold to the French government, renamed the Port De Caen, and sent to the fight in Europe.

After the war, it was returned to the United States, where it operated along the East Coast again as the Bayersher. In 1923, it returned to the lakes, where it was refitted as a coal carrier and renamed the Claremont.

At the close of the 1929 shipping season, Kelley Island Lime and Transport Co. in Sandusky, Ohio, purchased the vessel. It was renamed the George J. Whelan, and converted to a sandsucker, a specially equipped boat that mined sand from the lake bottom.



The George J. Whelan

A brief history of the 220-foot-long, 40-foot-wide steamboat:

- 1910:** Built in Toledo to carry lumber and named the Erwin L. Fisher.
- 1911:** Collides with the S.L. Clement and sinks in the Detroit River.
- 1916:** Rebuilt and named the Bayersher.
- World War I:** Sold to France.
- Early 1920s:** Returns to the United States and operates along the East Coast.
- 1923:** Boat returns to the Great Lakes as a coal carrier and is renamed the Claremont.
- 1929:** Renamed the George J. Whelan and equipped to mine sand from the lake bottom.
- July 29, 1930:** Sinks off Barcelona harbor during a storm in Lake Erie.

lakes, you don't know what it means to locate six men swimming around in the nighttime," Capt. Walter H. McNeill said. "The ship's searchlight and the voices of the men were all that the crew . . . had to go by to find those fellows."

Ohlemacher agreed. "It was only fate that we should have been seen in that pitch darkness that surrounded us," he said. "The chances are we would have perished if we had to stay in the lake many more hours."

Seven sites proposed

The wreck was discovered by undersea search expert Garry Kozak and Captain Jim Herbert, who operates a diving company, Osprey Charters, out of Barcelona Harbor.

Kozak works for Klein Associates, training the navies of a number of countries and other parties that buy Klein's sophisticated side sonar scanning equipment.

Kozak came to Western New York to help search for a plane that went down in the lake in August and contacted his friend Herbert about taking another look for the Whelan.

"We had the advantage of using the latest technology, which allowed us to search an incredible area in one day," Kozak said in a phone interview from Europe. "We did over 32 square miles that day, which is unheard of."

Conflicting reports about where the Whelan went down led Herbert and others to search the wrong areas. "There were seven different versions of where it was," Herbert said. "One said six

miles off Dunkirk. That isn't near the shipping lane."

Herbert did more research and picked a target area. "We had an element of luck in that it truly showed up right where we selected," Kozak said.

Finding the Whelan was a priority because it meets several criteria that make it desirable for divers, Herbert said.

"It's a big ship, with a loss of life," he said. "It's in relatively shallow water, and not too far from the shore."

Chance to be first

For veteran divers like Rush, Michael Domitrek and Jack Papes, the chance to be the first to see the Whelan was worth using whatever excuse they could to take the day off from their real jobs.

"We're going to be the first human beings in 75 years to see this wreck," said Domitrek, from Welland. "It's a snapshot of a piece of history, frozen in time."

Papes, who drove from Akron, Ohio with his equipment and underwater camera, said he, like many divers, is curious about the stories behind the wrecks.

At 145 feet, the water "is dark and it's cold," Papes said. "You have to have an interest in the history to enjoy it."

Judging by the smiles as the divers returned from their trip to the lake bottom, the Whelan will occupy their time underwater for quite some time.

"We'll be diving the hell out of this next season," Papes said.

e-mail: jbonfatti@buffnews.com

How to reach us

On the Web: www.buffalo.com

- Main office: 849-3434
- Circulation: 842-1111
- Newsroom: 849-4444
- Editorials: 849-4444
- Features: 849-4470
- Sports: 849-4461
- Library: 849-4401
- Photo: 849-4428
- Advertising: 849-3411
- Classified: 856-5555
- On the Web: 849-5406

Caught in squall

Limestone, not sand, was the cargo that night as it set sail from Sandusky for Tonawanda, according to accounts in The Buffalo Evening News.

Mariners on the lake at the time reported that a violent squall developed at sunset. While no rain was reported, winds gusted, thunder rumbled and lake waves swelled.

Survivors told investigators that the limestone in the hold

shifted as the boat listed under the strain of the winds and waves.

Reportedly, crew members were working below the decks to redistribute the load when a sudden gust rolled the ship onto its side. It is believed most of the 15 dead were trapped below.

All six survivors were pitched into the water, where they clung to the hull for 30 minutes before it sank. They began swimming for shore. First mate Irving Ohlemacher, who had no flotation de-

vice, stayed afloat by grabbing two other survivors who did have devices.

The survivors' faint, anguished cries for help were heard by crew members on the Amanda Stone, a coal-hauler headed to Erie from Buffalo. The ship lowered its rescue boats and picked up the crew members.

The words of the Amanda Stone's captain indicated just how lucky he considered them.

"Unless you have sailed on the

C10

THE BUFFALO NEWS / SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2005

THE PICTURE PAGE

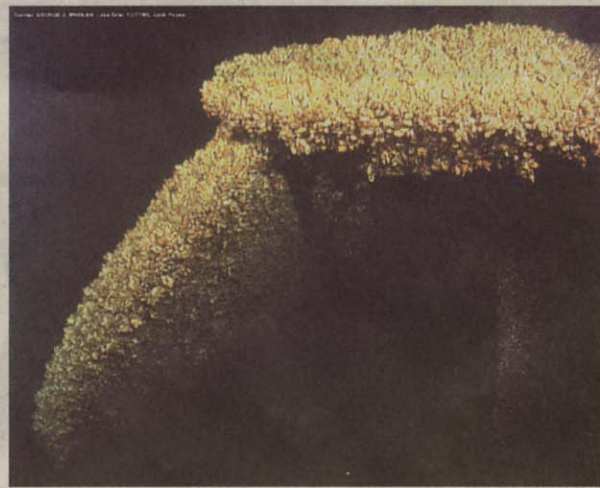
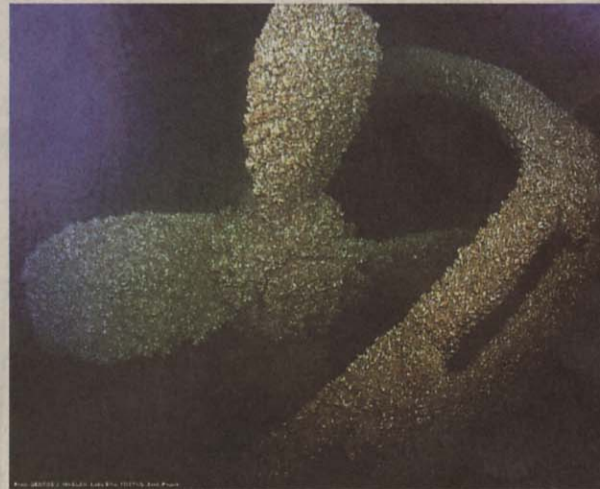
Finding the secrets below the surface



Photos by Harry Scull/Buffalo News
Equipped to explore: Divers prepare Thursday to leave the Southwind, a charter boat owned by Capt. Jim Herbert, to examine the newly found wreckage of the George J. Whelan, a steamboat that sank in Lake Erie off Barcelona Harbor in 1930. Story on Page One.



On the money: Jim Herbert pilots the Southwind to Thursday's dive site, above. At right, diver Wayne Rush, holding the motorized scuba scooter that will speed him to the wreck, prepares to enter the water.



Jack Papes
Their first look: Diver/photographer Jack Papes took these pictures of the wreckage, coated with zebra mussels, at the bottom of Lake Erie. At the top is the George Whelan's propeller; in the middle, its rudder; and at the bottom, a winch.