

Ruins of 1930 shipwreck found in lake

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BARCELONA, N.Y. — The divers could see lanterns and light fixtures scattered about the ship, which was on its side on the dark bottom of Lake Erie. There was no doubt about

what the divers had found. Their lights told them the same thing the highly beefed-up sonar had told them moments before: The wreck was the steamboat George J. Whelan, which sank off New York state's Barcelona Harbor in July 1930. Until that day in late October,

no one had seen the steamship for 75 years. "It was a real find," said Jim Herbert, captain of Barcelona Harbor-based Osprey Charters. "Very seldom do we find anything as pristine as that." ▶ Please see **LAKE, 4A**

Did you know? Some sources pin the number of shipwrecks in Lake Erie at as many as 3,000. Underwater search expert Garry Kozak estimates the number as 1,000. **More on the Whelan wreck, 4A**

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Historical Collections of the Great Lakes Bowling Green State University

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

This historic photograph shows the steamboat George J. Whelan before it sunk off the New York state coast of Lake Erie in July 1930.

Lake: Old shipwreck found

Continued from 1A

The law forbids touching anything on a Great Lakes shipwreck. But wrecks do tend to get picked over once independent divers find them.

Herbert knew this wreck was untouched because so many artifacts remained where they had fallen 75 years ago in a wreck that claimed the lives of 15 of the vessel's 21 crew members.

The "virgin" wreck is about 35 miles northeast of Erie and nine miles north of Barcelona in about 145 feet of water.

Because of its condition, Herbert said, he suspects divers will find it popular to dive at the site in 2006.

"That'll be a featured destination, for sure," he said.

The wreck was discovered by Herbert and underwater search expert Garry Kozak of Salem, N.H.

The friends had been working together to find and salvage a single-engine airplane that went down in the lake in August. When that search was over, Kozak had an extra day to look around.

The two had searched for the Whelan off and on for years, so they thought they'd try to look once more.

This time, luck smiled on them.

They chose the right area to search. Plus, they had use of the latest sonar from Klein Associates, a New Hampshire-based sonar manufacturer that is a leader in side-scan sonar systems. Kozak consults and trains for the company.

Sonar technology has been used for about 40 years. New technical advancements in digital imaging, powerful computer software and a Global Positioning System allowed them to search more than 32 square miles. "That's unheard of previously to cover that amount of area in one day," Kozak said.

At 220 feet long and 40 feet wide, the Whelan's large size and resting place in relatively shallow water — plus the loss of life — make it a desirable destination for divers, Herbert said. No remains have been found on the ship. In 95 percent of wrecks, remains aren't found, Kozak said.

Only nine divers have seen the wreck so far, and only for a short time.

Usually within six months of a wreck discovery, "everyone knows where it is," Kozak said.

Kozak's dream growing up in



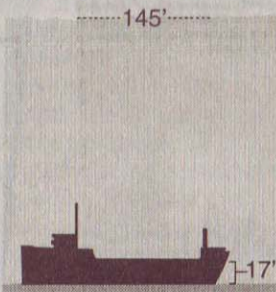
HARRY SCULL JR./Buffalo News

A group of underwater divers prepares to examine the sunken steamboat George J. Whelan on Oct. 27. The shipwreck, lost since July 1930, was found in Lake Erie about nine miles from Barcelona, N.Y. — about 35 miles northwest of Erie.

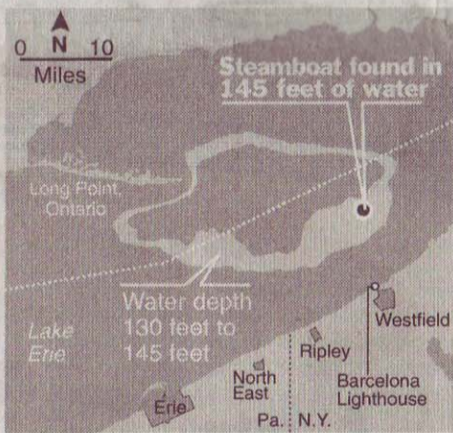
Where it was found

The steamboat George J. Whelan was found nine miles off Barcelona, N.Y. It sank more than 75 years ago, on July 29, 1930. Only six of 21 crew members survived.

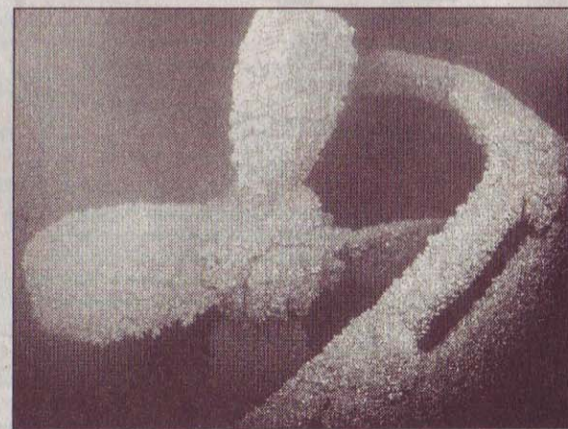
HEIGHT COMPARISON
A comparison of the water depth where the ship was found to the height of the ship before it sunk.



SOURCE: The Great Lakes Shipwreck File



CHRIS SIGMUND/Erie Times-News



JACK PAPES/Contributed photo

Divers were greeted by images such as this one, of the George J. Whelan's propeller, when they discovered the wrecked steamboat in the waters of Lake Erie in late October.

Windsor, Ontario, was to find a wreck in the Great Lakes, he said. His dream came true time and again with at least 40 wreck discoveries in Lake Erie and countless more around the world. As a Klein employee, he's worked with such underwater luminaries as Bob Ballard, who found the RMS Titanic, and novelist Clive Cussler.

"I've had my fair share of adventures," Kozak said. "But Lake Erie is one of my (favorite) places." He estimates the number of shipwrecks in Lake Erie as "maybe up to 1,000," while other sources pin the number at as many as 3,000. Whatever the number, Kozak said, "There are still more ship-

THE SHIP'S HISTORY

The storied history of the George J. Whelan steamship:

- **1910:** Built by the Craig Shipbuilding Co. of Toledo, Ohio. It is one of the steel lake boats designed for the lumber trade. Its original name is the Erwin L. Fisher, for the Cleveland manager of its owner, the Argo Steamship Corp.
- **1911:** Ship collides on its maiden voyage with the S.L. Clement, and sinks in the Detroit River.
- **1916:** After being raised and rebuilt, it is renamed the Bayersher and sold to France to fight in Europe during World War I as the Port De Caen.
- **1923:** Once again the Bayersher, it returns to the Great Lakes and is refitted as a coal carrier and renamed the Claremont.
- **1929:** The ship is purchased at the end of the shipping season by Kelley Island Lime and Transport Co., Sandusky, Ohio. It is renamed the George J. Whelan and made into a sandsucker to mine sand from the lake bottom.
- **1930:** The ship sinks with a cargo of limestone aboard while sailing from Sandusky, Ohio, to Tonawanda, N.Y.

Sources: <http://boatnerd.com>; Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University, <http://alcheminc.com/east.html>.

wrecks to be found and mysteries to be solved. They're all important."

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