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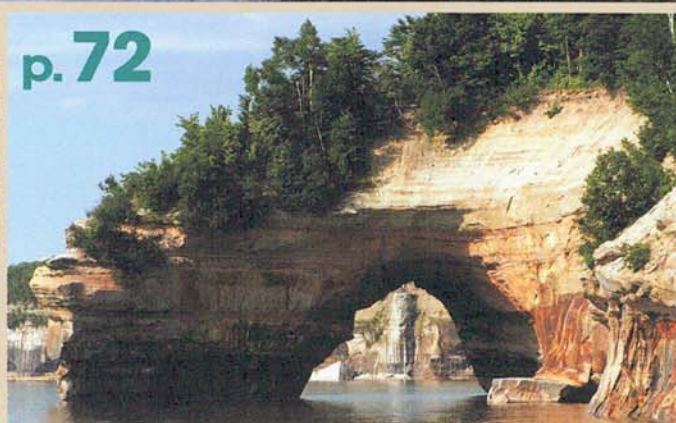
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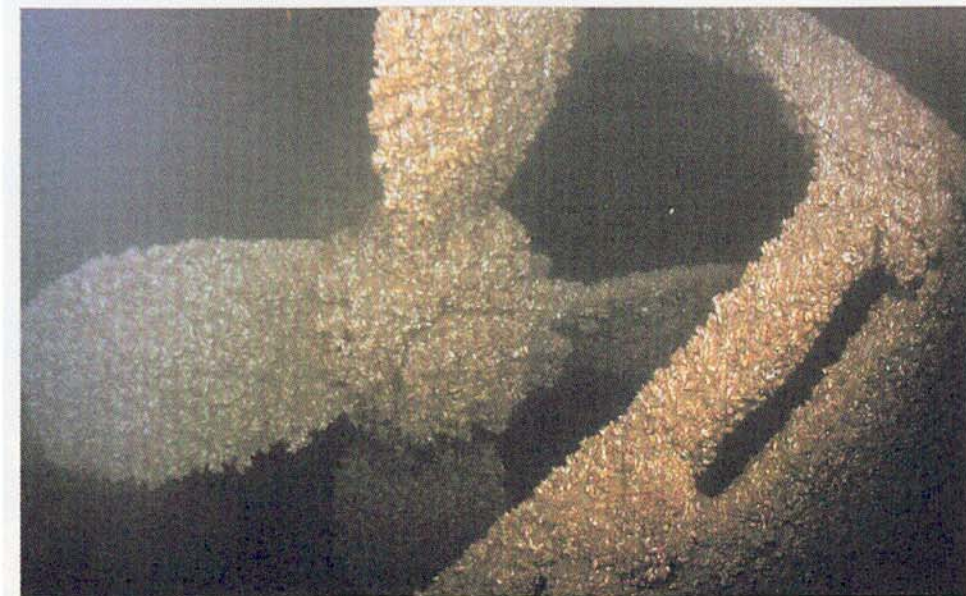


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An Unexpected Discovery

While trying to locate a missing plane, searchers come across a virgin Lake Erie wreck.



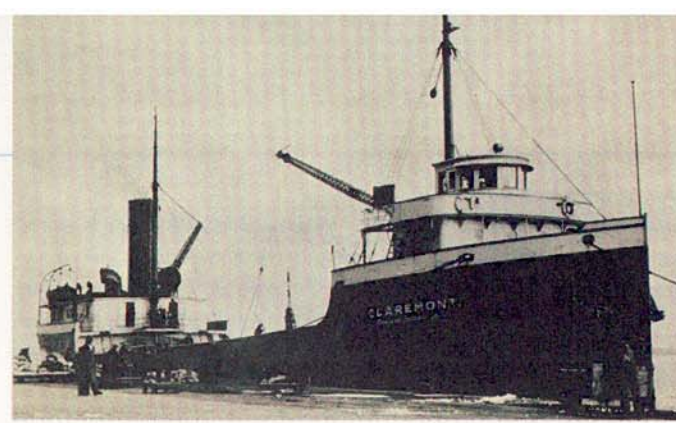
For 75 years, the steamboat *George J. Whelan* slept on her side at the bottom of Lake Erie. Eight miles offshore of Barcelona, New York and 145 feet down, the *Whelan* waited, undisturbed, to be discovered.

In October, the 220-foot-long, 40-foot-wide steamer was finally found.

Jim Herbert, captain of Osprey Charters, and Garry Kozak, an underwater search expert, discovered the wreckage while looking for a single-engine airplane that went down over Lake Erie in August. Using the latest sonar technology from Klein Associates, Kozak's employer and a leader in side-scan systems, the searchers were able to investigate more than 32 square miles.

"The holy grail for divers in the Great Lakes is a virgin wreck," historian Mike Walker told the *Buffalo News*. "That boat is literally sitting the

wreck: Jack Pappas • Whelan: Toronto Marine Historical Society



the French, who named her the *Port de Caen* and used her in World War I.

When the war ended, the steamer was returned to the United States, where she traveled the East Coast,

way it went down."

The divers noted that the steamer was impeccably preserved, thanks to Erie's cold, fresh water. Kerosene lanterns, fire extinguishers and porcelain light fixtures were visible, and all of the portholes were found open.

One boat, many names

The steel steamboat was built in Toledo, Ohio in 1910 to haul lumber. Owned by the Argo Steamship Corp., the vessel was first named the *Erwin L. Fisher*, after Argo's Cleveland manager.

Things didn't begin well for the future *Whelan*. In 1911, on her maiden voyage, the ship collided with the *S.L. Clement* and sank in the Detroit River.

After being retrieved and rebuilt, she was renamed the *Bayersher* in 1916 and was sold to

again as the *Bayersher*. She returned to the Great Lakes in 1923, was renamed the *Claremont* and became a coal carrier.

Kelleys Island Lime and Transport Co. in Sandusky, Ohio purchased the ship in 1929 and converted her to a sandsucker, specially equipped to mine sand from the lake bottom. The company gave the boat her final name, the *George J. Whelan*.

A stormy end

According to reports in the *Buffalo Evening News*, the *Whelan* began her final voyage from Sandusky to Tonawanda, New York on July 29, 1930, with a cargo of limestone and a crew of 21.

A violent squall developed at sunset with gusty winds, rolling thunder and large swells,

which caused the cargo in the hold to shift. It is believed that crewmembers were belowdeck attempting to redistribute the heavy limestone when the boat rolled to one side, trapping many of the crew below. Fifteen died.

Six survivors were able to stay afloat by clinging to the hull before she sank half an hour later. The crew of the *Amanda Stone*, which was traveling from Buffalo to Erie, Pennsylvania, heard cries for help and picked up the survivors.

Gearing up

Capt. Herbert believes the boat, located in shallow water and close to shore, is likely to become a destination for divers this summer. The law forbids touching anything on a Great Lakes wreck site.

According to Walker, there are at least 1,750 shipwrecks in Erie alone, only about 300 of which have been found so far.

"We're going to be the first human beings in 75 years to see this wreck," diver Michael Domitrek told the *Buffalo News*. "It's a snapshot of a piece of history, frozen in time." —K.S.

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