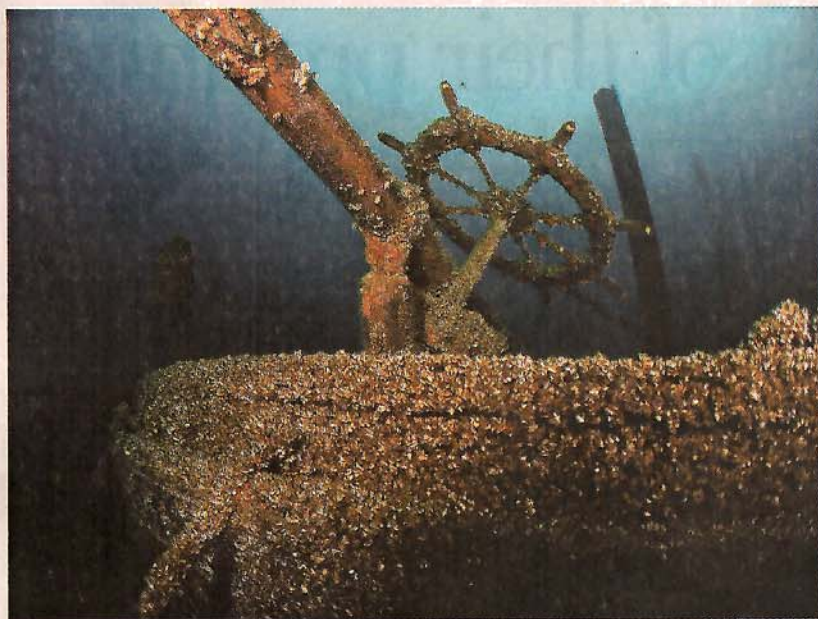


## THE REGION



Jack Papes photo

Dislodged wheel on the stern of the Schooner C.B. Windiate, which sank in November 1875 in northwestern Lake Huron after leaving Milwaukee for Buffalo. Of an estimated 8,000 shipwrecks in the Great Lakes, about 2,000 are at the bottom of Lake Erie. Most have never been explored.

## Mysteries of the Deep

Lake Erie shipwrecks, preserved by fresh water, are diver favorites

By Shannon M. Nass

The marine forecast is perfect. Winds are southwest at 5 knots and waves are 1 foot or less. The surface of Lake Erie is almost placid, beckoning a local diver to don his gear and dive 200 feet to the lake floor below.

He begins his descent through tepid water, but as he passes through the thermocline the water temperature drops 30 degrees, cold water envelops his body and visibility is limited. Suddenly, out of the darkness the mast of a ship comes into view, beckoning from its watery grave. The diver's doubt is replaced by exhilaration as the wreckage of a ship from the 1800s is unveiled, perfectly preserved in all her glory.

For centuries, Lake Erie has been a bustling thoroughfare. But weather-related sinkings, collisions and other calamities claimed many vessels, leaving the lake floor littered with their remains. It is estimated that the Great Lakes are home to 8,000 shipwrecks, with approximately 2,000 located in Lake Erie. Most of the wrecks have yet to be discovered, drawing divers from all over the world in hopes of being the first to uncover a lost piece of history.

"I can imagine standing at the pier on Lake Erie over 150 years ago. It must have been just a massive traffic jam of ships on the horizon," said Jack Papes, a diver from Akron, Ohio.

Mr. Papes has been documenting and photographing the wrecks of the Great Lakes for the past 10 years and has visited nearly 120 of them. He's traveled all over the world to dive to shipwrecks, but he prefers the ones close to home.

"People have asked me, if you could have an all-expense paid trip to anywhere on the planet, where would you go?" Mr. Papes said. "I tell them, well, I'd be up on the west coast of Lake Huron diving. I think that's some of the best shipwreck diving there is."

Many of the shipwrecks located along the East Coast have eroded from years in salt water. But the cold, fresh water of the Great Lakes preserves these lost pieces of history. Among the diving community, they're considered world class, offering opportunities to visit an underwater museum that most people will never see.

"I love the shipwrecks on the Great Lakes. They're very diverse and very well preserved," said Mr. Papes. "A lot of the artifacts are there, which isn't the case in many places. They are very intact time capsules down there."

Diver Dave Schoebe of Washington, Pa., is drawn north to Erie by the relics.

"You'll have glass intact on windows, tools on the deck, lifeboats still in place, and stoves on the wreck," he said.

Mr. Schoebe, who has been diving for 25 years, said he has witnessed the disintegration of the saltwater vessels and the preservation of the freshwater wrecks. Because saltwater wrecks are subject to decay, divers frequently take artifacts with them, he said, to keep them from being lost forever. In freshwater, the condition of the wrecks depends upon the divers who visit them.

Many freshwater divers, he said, are "preservationists." The few instances when artifacts were taken were met with outrage in the diving community.

"People are pretty much playing by the same rules. They'll keep their hands off the wreck and keep it as they found it," Mr. Schoebe said. "That's a big

draw, because if you take stuff off, the next person won't be able to see it."

Shipwreck divers are considered highly skilled, able to navigate shipwrecks, use specialized equipment and endure the harsh water conditions of the Great Lakes. For 20 years, Capt. Jim Herbert of Osprey Charters in Westfield, N.Y., has shuttled divers out to the wrecks of Lake Erie. In a typical season, which runs from April to October, he and his son Jim Herbert Jr. and Capt. Mike Cochrane charter approximately 1,500 divers.

"This is different diving than you would do in the Caribbean or Florida," the captain said.

"Our diving is more strenuous and it's cold water, so you have to be a dedicated diver and have some experience.

"I always say if you can dive the Great Lakes, if you can dive Lake Erie, if you can dive these shipwrecks, then you can dive anywhere in the world."

To view more of Mr. Papes' photos of Great Lakes shipwrecks, visit [www.n2junkie.com](http://www.n2junkie.com). For more information on Osprey Charters, visit [www.osprey-dive.com](http://www.osprey-dive.com) or call 716-753-6565.

Shannon M. Nass is a freelance writer.

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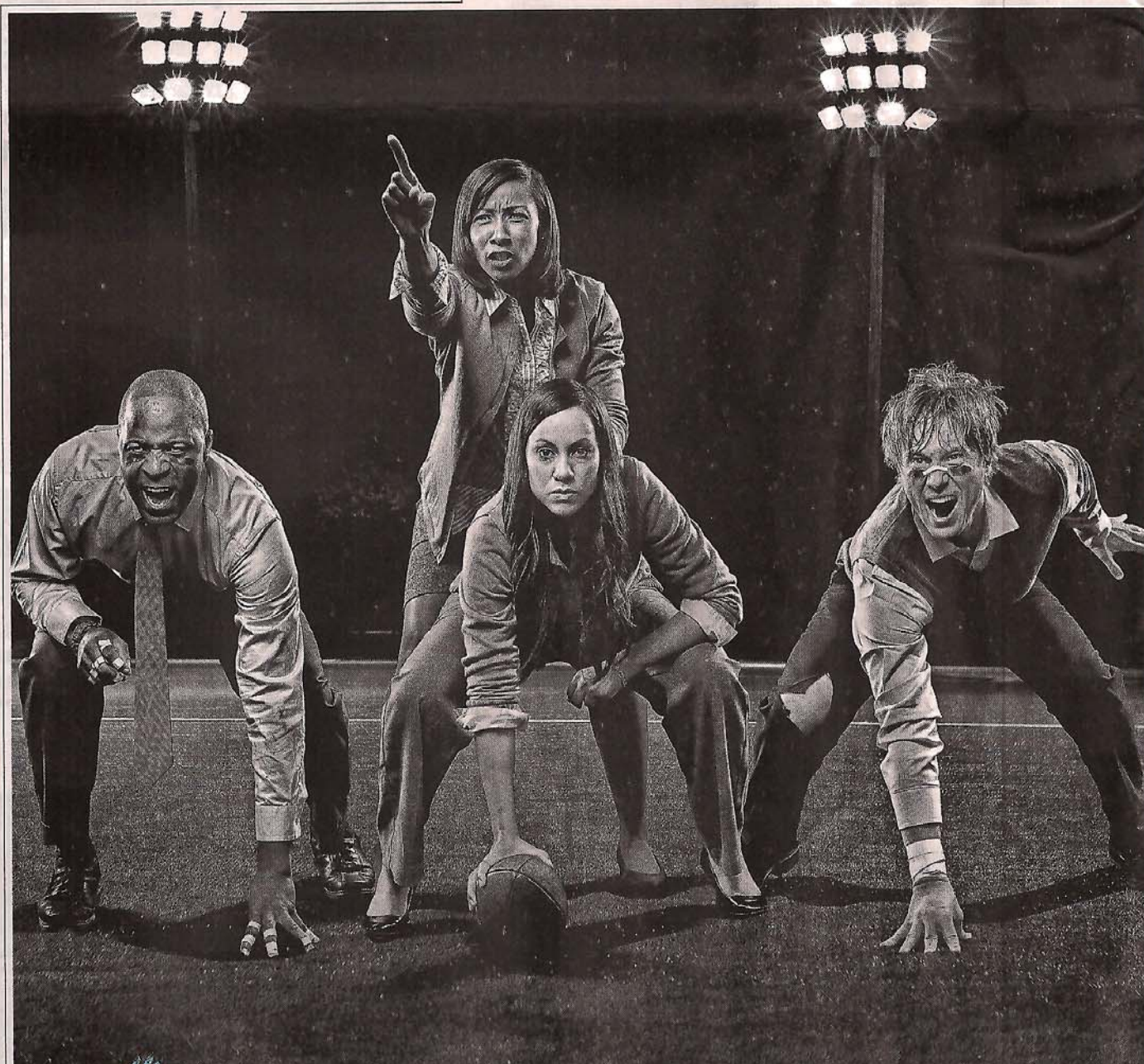
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