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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

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ICEBOUND!

The Ordeal of the *S. S. Michigan*

by Craig Rich and Valerie Olson van Heest

There are very few among us who are unfamiliar with Ernest Shackleton's famous Antarctic expedition onboard the schooner *Endurance*. In December of 1914, Ernest Shackleton and a crew of 27 set out on his 3-masted schooner in an attempt to become the first humans to cross the South Polar continent. After 11 months, they became hopelessly trapped by the pack ice, and abandoned their damaged ship to proceed on foot, pushing, pulling and dragging their lifeboats for security.

As familiar as we have become with this epic voyage through several books and a feature film, many of us did not realize that a similar epic played out 30 years earlier—right here off our shores in Lake Michigan.

The Ship

Built for the Goodrich Transportation Company as an identical twin sister to the *S. S. Wisconsin* by the Detroit Dry Dock Company at Wyandotte, Michigan, the *S. S. Michigan* was a sturdy steel-hulled passenger steamer.

Goodrich had ordered three ships built in 1881—the two propellers and a side-wheeler named the *S. S. City of Milwaukee*. The three vessels were designed by Frank E. Kirby—the same man who later designed the ill-fated *Chicora* a decade later.

She was 204 feet long, 35 feet wide and had a draft of 12 feet. The *Michigan* was rated at 1,183 gross tons. With five watertight compartments and a double steel hull with three feet of space between the two hulls, the *Michigan* was considered a very sturdy vessel.



The Michigan in port at Grand Haven

She was launched August 20, 1881, in Wyandotte, Michigan, and towed to Milwaukee for fitting-out. Her cabins were said to be the finest on the lakes and were decorated without regard to cost—with oil paintings and the finest velvet carpets and fine furniture. The cabins, accommodating 123

passengers, extended the length of the vessel and were more spacious than usual. They were heated by steam throughout.

The *Wisconsin*, *Michigan*, and *City of Milwaukee* were operated successfully by the Goodrich Line for two years, but were sold in May 1883, to the Detroit, Grand Haven and Milwaukee Railroad Company, and continued the next two years in their trade. Goodrich had recently lost his lucrative cross-lake shipping contracts with the railroads, which preferred to use their own vessels.

The Weather

The early winter of 1885 had been especially harsh, but by the first week of February, the weather had become rather

(Continued on page 2)

From the Director

In this issue's cover story, we are highlighting the true-life adventure of the crew of the *S. S. Michigan* and their struggle with the ice on Lake Michigan near Holland in February 1885. After reading Craig Rich and Valerie Olson Van Heest's story of freezing temperatures and disaster, you'll want to plan on attending the "Mysteries and Histories" shipwreck event at the Knickerbocker Theatre in downtown Holland on Friday, May 14 at 7:00 p.m. The Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates team, of which Craig and Valerie are members, will tell the tale through a multimedia presentation, including a dramatic re-enactment of the *Michigan* crew's ordeal. This event is co-sponsored by the Joint Archives of Holland to educate the public on the great underwater cultural resources located offshore of Holland. The proceeds of this event will be used for "Shipwreck Quest 2004"—the continuing search for shipwrecks in Lake Michigan. See the blue insert for more information.

Matthew Nickel, our former summer oral history student coordinator, has been notified that his article, "Extraordinary People: Polio Survivors," which appeared in the Fall 2003 *Quarterly*, will be featured this summer in *Michigan History* magazine. As you can imagine, we are very happy for Matthew as his article about those who experienced and worked with polio patients in Holland will be read by more than 30,000 readers nationwide.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

The award winning "Tulip Time in Holland" movie is selling briskly. Available in both VHS video or DVD, you'll want to send for your copy today!

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Icebound (continued from page 1)

mild in comparison. Folks in West Michigan thought the worst of winter was over. But old man winter had a surprise in store. Taking advantage of the weather, the steamship *Oneida*, also owned by the Detroit, Grand Haven and Milwaukee Railroad Company, had been sent out across the lake for a regular cargo run.

However, Monday, February 9 through Wednesday, the 11th, brought the worst storm in a decade. More than three feet of snow fell in two days. In the Midwest, temperatures were averaging 10 to 20 degrees below zero. The trains even stopped running. On Lake Michigan, dozens of ships were trapped by the rapidly forming ice, which was pushed up against the eastern shore of the big lake by a vicious west wind. The *Oneida* was one of those ships, and the owners of the Detroit, Grand Haven and Milwaukee Railroad Company called the *Michigan* back to duty to aid the *Oneida*. It was felt that her double steel hull could break the ice around the *Oneida*, setting her free to steam back to port.

The Ordeal

On Monday, February 9, 1885, the *S. S. Michigan* left its winter port of Grand Haven, Michigan, with Captain Redmond Prindeville and 29 men aboard. The captain, 58-year-old Redmond Prindeville, was an Irish immigrant, born at Castleisland on the west coast of Ireland in 1826. At the time of the *Michigan's* ordeal, Prindeville was the father of 13 children—aged 15 to 37.



Descendants of Redmond Prindeville

Captain Redmond Prindeville
later in life

The first leg of the journey was clear steaming as Captain Prindeville and his crew eased the steamer into Lake Michigan. The *Oneida* was last reported 10 miles off Point Sable, so the *Michigan* headed out a good distance, then turned to starboard and steamed north. It was a clear day with no indication of the storm to come. There was plenty of coal to handle the round-trip and any problems they might encounter while attempting to free the *Oneida*. The powerful engine was kept at peak performance and the *Michigan* was making good time.

It not known how long the *Michigan* steamed northward—cutting through the thin, patchy ice—but she must have been

about 20 miles out and heading north when the weather turned foul. She may even have reached Pentwater—possibly near enough to the trapped *Oneida* to begin breaking through the ice. But the historical accounts tell us that before the *Oneida* could be reached, a fierce winter storm moved in. Soon a Great Lakes Nor'easter hit, pushing the *Michigan* in the opposite direction—southward into the ever-building ice pack.

In just two days Lake Michigan had frozen completely over—something that had not happened since 1874. Overnight, the *Michigan* was covered with snow and hopelessly locked in solid ice. She began drifting southward with the ice pack as the pressure began building on her sturdy steel hull. Days later, she was more than 40 miles south of where she was when the storm first hit. While the engines were still running, the ship was at the mercy of the ice, current and wind.

It was clear to Captain Prindle that his ship would not be able to break free. But the crew kept a steady watch for a patch of open water even as the ice tightened its grip on the ill-fated vessel. It looked like they would not be returning home soon. Meals were all the crew had to look forward to. However, the ship was not provisioned for a long voyage and supplies would run out if the weather did not break soon. Within a few days, the crew was down to one meal per day.

After more than a week, the situation for the *Michigan* remained unchanged. She was still solidly locked in the ice. With no relief in sight, and with at least 13 men needed to operate the ship once she was free, Captain Prindle chose 17 of the hardest men to make the long walk to shore, since there was not enough food for all. Among these was the ship's young porter, George Sheldon, who promised Captain Prindle that if he survived he would return to the ship as soon as possible with news from shore, and much needed supplies.

The crewmembers left the *Michigan* on the 17th. The temperature was 10 degrees below zero as the party, armed with axes, pikes, ropes and rations began their trek at 7:00 AM. First mate Joseph Russell led the group, which was comprised of 16 other men including George Sheldon.

After ten long hours, exposed to the worst winter weather in a decade, they finally reached shore somewhere in West Casco Township of Allegan County. The half-frozen crew had covered over 12 miles in 10 hours on their hike from the *Michigan* to shore, only to face one last remaining obstacle before they could rest. The only possible way to reach a cottage or farm for food and shelter would be to climb the steep bluff.



Library of Congress

The long walk to shore

After their trek across the ice, this seemed an insurmountable task. They had all they could do to struggle up the rocky snow and ice covered hill. Once they reached the top, they knew they had reached safety. Nearby they could see a small farmhouse with smoke coming from the chimney. Someone was home! Imagine the surprise of Levi Thomas when these nearly frozen sailors showed up at his door. But he was quick to offer them shelter and food. The following morning, Wednesday the 18th, the men were taken by sleigh to the train station at Bravo, Michigan, for the trip north to Grand Haven where their journey had begun nine days earlier.

Meanwhile, back on board the *Michigan*, Captain Prindle and the twelve remaining crewmembers did not have much to do except pass the time. Food and fuel were becoming scarce, so they stayed together in one area of the ship to conserve heat. For three days they waited—not knowing if their fellow crewmen had even made it to shore or whether George Sheldon would return as he promised. A close watch was kept on the eastern horizon for any sign of movement. Finally, on Saturday, the 21st, their patience was rewarded as they spotted someone approaching the ship.

It was George Sheldon. He had returned! It was a joyous moment for a crew who, until now, were not sure anyone on shore even knew they were alive. After another daylong walk, the young porter had made it back with much needed supplies—sure to raise the crew's spirits. He brought news from home, letters from family members, books, tobacco and even a few bottles of whiskey! For a crew who had been trapped in the ice for two weeks, it was like Christmas!

Two days later, this hardy young man—with a bag packed with letters from the crew to family members back home, and a dispatch from the captain—again set out across the

ice for shore. Again, he promised he'd return. Having already made the walk twice, Sheldon had become familiar with his path, but the ever-changing ice made for some complications. Still, he was able to make the trip to shore in just five hours this time. Upon reaching West Casco, he again journeyed north to Grand Haven by train—delivering his letters and packages.

On Wednesday the 25th, aided by six of his newfound friends from Casco, Sheldon again made the 12 to 15 mile hike out to the stranded vessel—bringing even more food and supplies. The Casco men had planned to return the next day, but the weather suddenly took a turn for the worse and George and his Casco friends would not be able to leave the *Michigan*. The Casco men had unwillingly joined the stranded crew!

In the distance, the ice was beginning to run, and the Captain hoped his ship would soon be set free. The Casco men convinced the Captain to allow them to attempt to reach shore. To assist them, the Captain ordered a lifeboat launched. Although a heavy burden, the lifeboat was the insurance the men needed as they made their way home—across the solid ice pack, which was now moving freely toward the north.

The ice did not loosen its grip, however, and the weather worsened. The *Michigan* drifted northward with the pack ice for another week. The shifting of the ice and the wind were beginning to take their toll on the hull. The pressure was incredible! Thursday, March 19, was the final day that the *Michigan* would remain in the icy grip of the big lake. She was breaking up, and Captain Prindeville had to consider abandoning ship.

The ice had shifted again and the immense pressure on the *Michigan's* hull was beginning to take a toll. The crew could hear the steel hull buckling throughout the night and all that day. The 40-day battle was valiantly fought, but the ice was winning. It was only a matter of time.

At a distance of about 4 miles, they spotted a tugboat. It was the Goodrich tug, *Arctic*, sent out to find the stranded steamer. However, it too had become trapped by the ice.

As the hull buckled and the ship showed every sign of succumbing to the ice, Captain Prindeville made the decision to abandon ship and try to make for the safety of the tugboat. It was a difficult decision to abandon his ship after a 40-day battle with the ice. With the ice running, the men again employed a lifeboat on their journey to the *Arctic*. Before they were more than a quarter-mile away, the ice finally stove-in the *Michigan's* hull, filling the vessel with water and taking her to the bottom.



The Historical Collection of the Great Lakes at Bowling Green State

The Goodrich tug Arctic

The *Michigan's* crew reached the *Arctic* after a daylong battle with the ice and spent the next few days with the tug's 4-member crew, waiting for the ice to relinquish its grip. But, the *Arctic* crew had already been trapped in the ice for several days and was running desperately short of provisions. So, the *Michigan* crew again took to the ice and headed east toward the far-off shore early in the morning of Monday, March 23.

After 42 days of inactivity, little food and extreme cold, those last few miles were the toughest for the crew of the *Michigan*. Crewmember Charles Robinson gave up during the long walk and again, through the unusual stamina and strength of character of George Sheldon, was carried safely to shore. The crew touched solid land for the first time in 42 days, 7 miles north of Holland, after a 10 to 12 mile hike across the ice. Captain Prindeville and his remaining 12 crewmembers made it safely ashore just in time, as the spring thaw began breaking up the ice. That same day, the *Michigan's* sister ship *Wisconsin* was sighted 25 miles northwest of Muskegon ending fears that she too had been claimed by the ice. She eventually made port in Grand Haven on April 2.

The tug *Arctic* remained trapped for many more days. Captain Thomas Kirby—owner of the stout vessel—sent a relief party out to the tug with 150 pounds of flour, pork and other provisions. In command of this relief party was none other than George Sheldon the hero of the *S. S. Michigan*! The *Arctic* made it safely to port on April 3.

Unbelievably, the *Oneida* had actually worked herself out of the ice later on the very same day the *Michigan* had set out to rescue her. Therefore, the *Michigan* was the only ship claimed by the ice in the winter of 1885.

The brave and hardy George Sheldon lived only another 5 years, passing away in 1890 in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, where he had gone to partake in the mineral baths. Captain Prindeville sailed a few more years but later settled down to

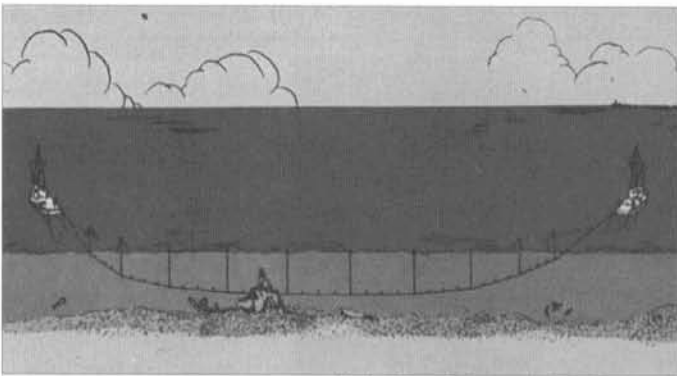
a more peaceful life as an insurance agent in Chicago—living to the age of 87. During this time, he also served as alderman on the Chicago City Council.

21 Years Later

The story of the *S. S. Michigan* did not end there. Several attempts were made to find the vessel as late as 21 years after the sinking.

On July 12, 1906, the Grand Haven Tribune reported that attempts would be made to locate and raise the ship from its watery grave somewhere between Grand Haven and Holland in between 120 and 175 feet of water. A week later, newspapers reported that the tug *Trio* of Muskegon left Grand Haven with buoys, cables and grappling hooks, prepared to search for the lost steamer. The *Trio* was assisted in the search by the steamer *Crouse* and the operations were carried on under the direction of the Crosby line.

Captain John Snay of the Crosby line was engaged in preparing the equipment and was chosen to do a great deal of the underwater work in the task of raising the *Michigan*. The location of the vessel was determined by a Holland fisherman, who fouled this nets on the bottom, and in grappling for them, supposedly brought up a piece of the *Michigan's* cabins or upper works.



National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration

Early recovery efforts utilized two tug boats and a drag line in an attempt to snag the shipwreck

The ambitious recovery plan required the ship to be located by dragging a two-mile long cable across the bottom between two ships. The hulk would then be dragged into shallow water where a diver would descend to make necessary repairs and pump the vessel dry. John Snay was given the task of going down in a diving bell and taking a look at her.

On July 21, 1906, the Grand Haven Tribune reported that the drag line running between the *Trio* and the *Crouse* snagged something so large that the line parted. A few days later, the search party again reported catching its cable on what might be the submerged wreck. When they found that the cable

had become fouled, they cut it and moored a buoy to mark the spot for the work, which was to have begun later in the week.

By the weekend, newspapers were reporting that the object found the previous week was not the *Michigan* and so had been abandoned. The searching and dragging would continue. A week later, the expedition was cancelled due to lack of success. The tug *Trio* was sent back to Muskegon. This ended talk of a possible salvage of the steamer *Michigan*.

Today

Since 1885 the *Michigan* lay abandoned and forgotten deep in Lake Michigan somewhere off the shores of Holland, Michigan. With the exception of the 1906 efforts, no one has seriously looked for the victim of the 1885 storm.

Holland-based Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates rediscovered the story of the *S. S. Michigan* in the last few years and have included her among the list of “ships gone missing” that they hope to locate in the coming years.

Those vessels include the *Chicora*, *Alpena*, *Andaste*, *Hennepin*, *Northwest Airlines Flight 2501*, and the *H.C. Akeley*, which was discovered in 2001 by those who are now members of Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates with the help of famed wreck hunter David Trotter of Canton, Michigan.

How long will be it before the remains of the *S. S. Michigan* are discovered? Time will tell. MSRA remains committed the discovery of these “ships gone missing” and to telling the tales of those ships and their brave crews. For more information about the *S. S. Michigan*, other Lake Michigan shipwrecks, and how you may get involved and become a member of the search team, visit the MSRA web site at www.michiganshipwrecks.org.



MSRA team



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May Day at Hope College, c. 1960s