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CLARK, ALVIN (1846)

The Mystery Ship



For 105 years the Mystery Ship rested at the bottom of Lake Michigan. With each passing day she became a more valuable historic treasure. She remained a virtual time capsule until the relentless efforts of a group of amateur divers brought her closely guarded secrets back to the surface in 1969.

Now anchored at the Mystery Ship Seaport in River Park, Menominee, Michigan, the old merchant ship releases more of her historic cargo to every visitor, adding to their knowledge of life aboard a sailing ship in the mid 1800's.

We hope you will enjoy your visit to the Mystery Ship and that this brief story about her recovery will make your stroll into yesteryear even more educational and rewarding.

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The Mystery Ship Story

On a bitter November day in 1967, Frank Hoffmann, SCUBA diver, was called to free the tangled nets of a commercial fishing trawler. Hoffmann found the nets fouled around the forward mast, bowsprit and catheads of a sunken 'mystery ship'.

Unable to free the nets, Hoffmann sought aid from a number of divers. Together, they wrestled with the nets at the icy bottom of Lake Michigan well into December.

The divers found the 'mystery ship' in a remarkable state of preservation and decided to raise the ship when work on nets was completed. If she could be raised intact it would be one of the greatest contributions ever to the annals of Great Lakes maritime history.

The ship rested 110 feet below the surface of Lake Michigan. The very idea of raising her seemed far-fetched to many. Advice flowed in from every direction when word of the discovery spread. Ideas ranged from practical to absolute suggestions that the entire crew was feeble minded! Professional engineers and salvage experts agreed that the accident factor was too great to warrant the risk. The pros wouldn't touch it!

So a vote was taken among the amateur divers and they decided the opportunity to raise the historic schooner was of greater importance than all the professional opinions and objections. They planned to begin raising the ship the following spring.

Work toward actual recovery began in 1968. The effort was monumental. Days turned to weeks. Divers worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week.

Over 60 tons of silt, black as a swamp bottom, had accumulated in the cabins and holds of the old ship. The divers began pumping it into a dive boat with a huge 'vacuum' cleaner. Screened at each end, the pump allowed divers to sort artifacts from the inky mud. Piece by piece the historic treasures were raised to daylight after more than 100 years on the bottom.

The pumping continued in complete darkness. Shifting silt kept bottom visibility at absolute zero.

Numbing cold hampered the divers. Water temperature remained at a constant 38-42 degrees and divers needed immediate stimulation to regain body warmth.

Nitrogen narcosis and the bends were a constant danger. Divers could work at 110 feet for a maximum of 20 minutes without undergoing decompression.

Divers pushed themselves to the limit and quit only when winter forced them from the lake.

As the divers toiled, discovery of an account of a maritime disaster in the "Green Bay Advocate" of June, 1864, suggested that the ship might be the Alvin Clark. The report said the Alvin Clark was sailing light for Oconto, Wisconsin, when she was struck by "a squall such as we seldom get in this quarter. Tearing up trees by the roots and down fences, picking up the water before it and carrying it for hundreds of feet ahead."

The schooner was caught in the unexpected storm and capsized under full sail. The Captain, first mate and a passenger working for passage were drown. Two remaining crewmen were rescued by a passing ship.

The ice left Green Bay in April, 1969. The diving crew was back on the water, prepared to do more preliminary work before the actual lift. Special equipment had been manufactured to jet holes under the wreck so she could be slung with steel cables. When the slings were in place and the remainder of the silt had been pumped from the holds, the vessel would be ready for raising.

The crew decided to fasten the cables to four specially crafted hand winches which would lift the wreck toward the 100 foot recovery barge, anchored directly overhead.

The crew feared that the old ship might change position during the lift and slip from her slings. They relied on precision hand power to do what machinery could not accomplish.

The four winches were operated by 12 men working in continuous rotation. 75 men spent 17 hours cranking the Mystery Wreck into position immediately below the barge. Every 100 turns of the winches brought the old schooner five inches closer to the surface.

Snugly in place under the barge, the schooner was moved 15 miles to the Marinette Marine Corporation shipyard in Marinette, Wisconsin. The actual surfacing of the historic treasure was to take place here.

On July 29, 1969, Marinette Marine Corporation opened its doors to the public. This was the day of the proposed surfacing and some 15,000 spectators watched as the Mystery ship was raised from her watery resting spot.

Two cranes on shore and two aboard the barge were positioned and connected to the cable slings still in place beneath the schooner. Slack was taken up by the cranes. They applied steady pressure and cheers filled the air as the Mystery Ship's deck came into view. Once again the Mystery Ship rode proudly above the waves.

Today the Mystery ship shares her secrets with the public from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.