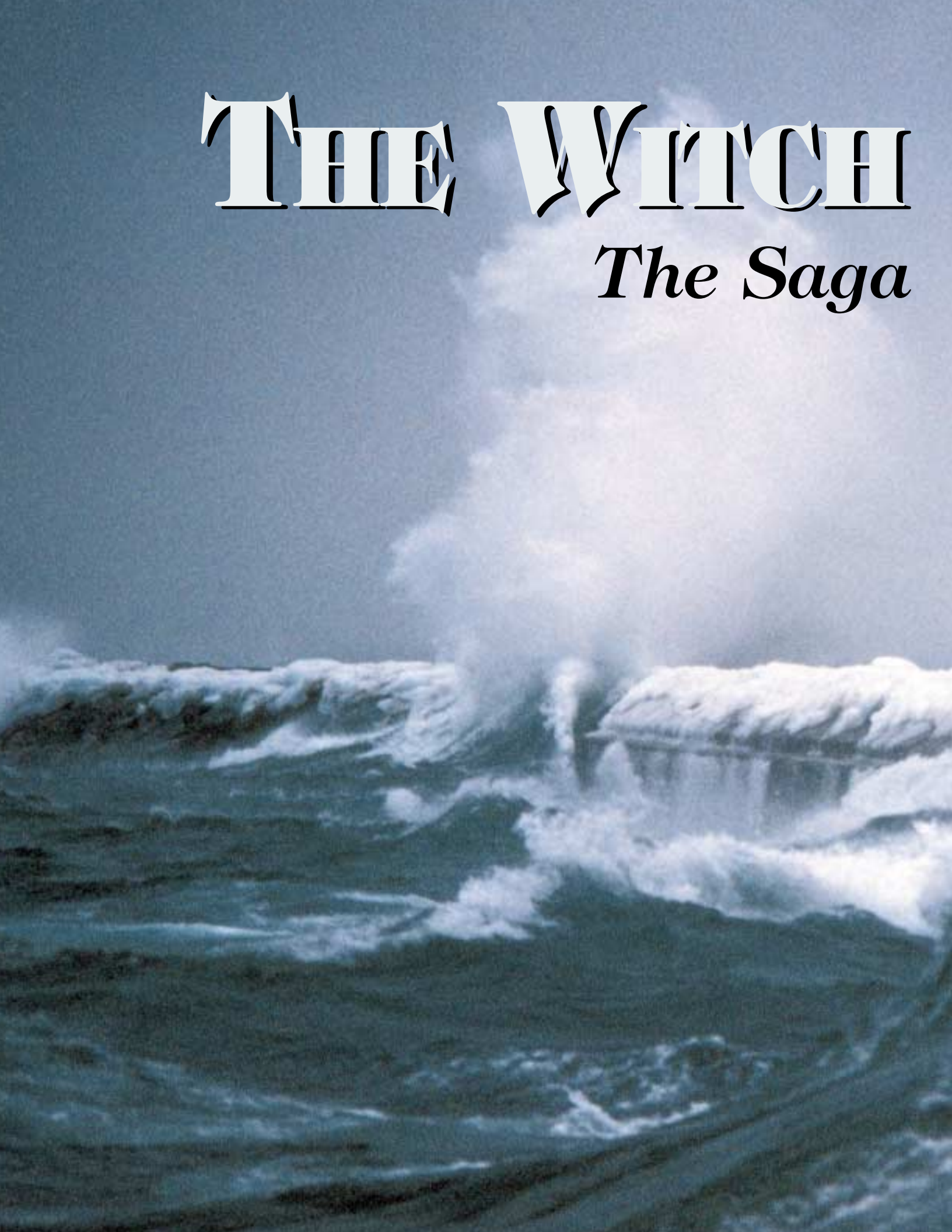


THE WITCH

The Saga



OF NOVEMBER

of the Edmund Fitzgerald

By Mary A. Dempsey

THE STORM RAGED AND THE SHIP LISTED, but the captain's voice over the radio sounded calm: "We're holding our own." Minutes later, what once was the biggest ship ever to ply the Great Lakes, disappeared forever.

Nearly a quarter century has passed since the *Edmund Fitzgerald* and its twenty-nine-member crew plunged to the bottom of Lake Superior. Yet, the public's fascination with the ship will not abate.

Some claim Canadian musician Gordon Lightfoot's ballad, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," keeps the tragic story alive. Others say the ship's size—it was the largest carrier ever lost on the Great Lakes—gives it a notoriety that endures. Still others are caught by the deadly series of unlikely coincidences that marked the tragedy: an unexpectedly savage storm, a flawed ship's map, a darkened lighthouse beacon and a delayed Coast Guard response.

"There are other reasons why the *Edmund Fitzgerald* has become the icon of the six thousand ships that have gone down in the Great Lakes," says Thomas Farnquist, executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point. "One has to do with the time in history when it occurred. With modern navigation techniques and technology, with our sophisticated weather predicting, there's a feeling that the wreck shouldn't have occurred."

But mostly, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* haunts us because no one really knows what happened that raging night in November. There were no distress signals, no witnesses, no survivors, no bodies recovered. It is a story without a final chapter.

The SS *Edmund Fitzgerald*, bearing hull No. 301, debuted at the Great Lakes Engineering Works shipyard in Ecorse in 1958 as the largest carrier on the Great Lakes. (It retained that title until 1971 when the 858-foot *Roger Blough* was launched.) The “Fitz” was a stunning engineering accomplishment designed to transport a load at sixteen miles an hour (thirteen knots), swift for a freighter. Named for a banker whose grandfather and brothers were Great Lakes captains, and coined “The Pride of the American Flag,” the 13,632-ton ship entered the history books again in 1964 when it became the first vessel to haul more than a million tons of ore through the Soo Locks. Five times the vessel broke its own records for tonnage in a single shipping season. It also bore the lake’s title for the most taconite pellets carried on a single voyage.

The flagship of Cleveland’s Ogleby Norton Company, the *Fitz* was on its fortieth voyage of the 1975 season on November 9. In Superior, Wisconsin, the freighter loaded up with more than twenty-six thousand tons of iron-ore pellets before heading to Detroit. As the vessel pulled out of the port in the afternoon, the sun was shining and the weather balmy. But bad weather was brewing. Captain Ernest McSorley calculated he would need five days to transport the taconite five hundred miles to Great Lakes Steel’s Zug Island complex.

About two hours after leaving port, the *Fitz* met up with the U.S. Steel ship, *Arthur M. Anderson*, commanded by Captain Jesse “Bernie” Cooper. The *Anderson* was headed toward the Soo Locks with its own iron ore cargo destined for Gary, Indiana. The two carriers agreed to sail together across Lake Superior to Sault Ste. Marie and, with the *Fitz* holding a fifteen-mile lead, they began their journey.

At 7:00 P.M., the National Weather Service issued a gale warning for Lake Superior, predicting winds up to forty-five miles an hour and dangerous waves. As the night passed, conditions worsened. By 1:00 A.M. on November 10, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was just more than twenty miles south of Isle Royale, fighting wind gusts up to sixty miles an hour and ten-foot waves that were like slamming walls of water. Within an hour, the National Weather Service upgraded the warning from gale to storm, predicting waves up to fifteen feet high. Torrential rains slashed visibility.

After discussing the furious weather, McSorley and Cooper decided to change course. Instead of following the shorter but more treacherous southern shore of Lake Superior, the skipper veered north toward the Canadian shoreline, sailing



On June 7, 1958, in front of a crowd of more than fifteen thousand at Detroit’s Rouge River shipyard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald (above) christens the ship named for her husband, Edmund, who stands to her right. From 1958 until 1971, the *Fitz*, at left passing through the Soo Locks, was the largest ore carrier on the Great Lakes.

Le Sault de Sainte Marie Historical Sites, Inc.

Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, Bowling Green State University

between the Keweenaw Peninsula and Isle Royale. The northern route promised to protect them from the monstrous waves until they could cut south toward the safety of Whitefish Bay.

Battling the Witch of November

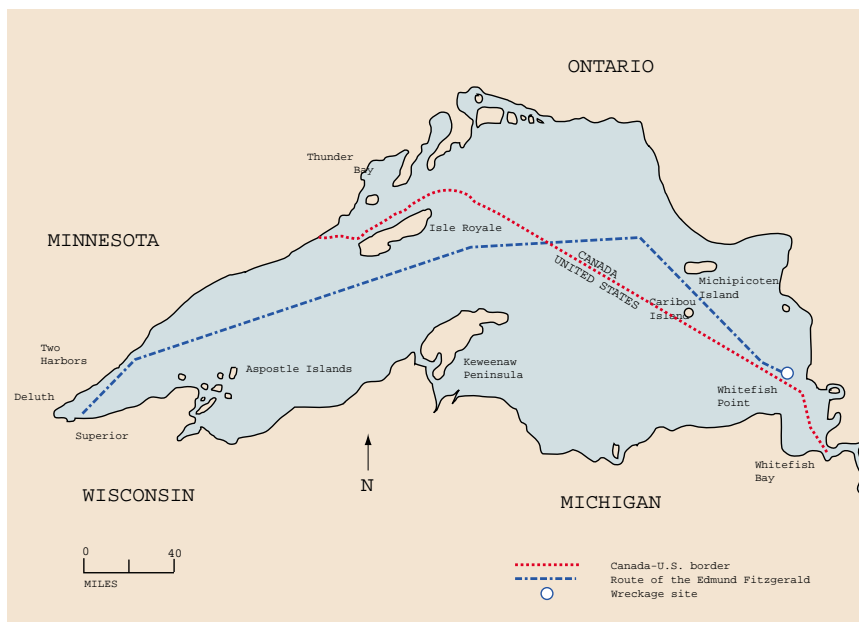
Through the predawn hours, the *Fitzgerald* and *Anderson* lumbered eastward, the *Fitz* still in the lead, battling fifty-mile-an-hour winds and ever-growing waves. About 7:00 A.M., the storm system passed over Marquette and hit Superior straight on. “You never can predict how nasty Mother Nature can become,” says Farnquist. “Certainly, many ships over the past centuries have been taken by surprise.” “On that day in 1975,” he continued, “they miscalculated the severity of the weather. They predicted gales, then a storm. But it ended up being a full-force hurricane.”

On land, schools were closed and emergency warnings were issued as lashing winds and rains ripped out power lines. On the water, towering waves smacked the vessels, rain cloaked the ships like blankets. At 7:20 A.M., the *Edmund Fitzgerald* contacted its home office to report the route change and announce it would likely arrive at the Soo Locks later than expected.

The *Fitz* would never reach the locks.

Mid-afternoon, north of Caribou Island, the *Fitzgerald* and *Anderson* had to navigate around the treacherous Six Fathom Shoal rocky bottom, covered by only thirty-six feet of water. The seas were pitching and thirty- to thirty-five foot waves slammed the *Fitz*. The *Arthur Anderson*, sixteen miles behind the *Fitz*, followed the progress of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* on radar and from the bridge. Although McSorley was a skilled captain with more than forty years’ experience on the lakes, Cooper testified later in Coast Guard hearings that it looked like the *Fitz* ventured too close to the shoals. That conclusion matched findings that the *Fitz*’s maps put the hull-tearing shoals about a mile east of their actual location. The *Fitzgerald* was not equipped with a depth gauge.

The crew of the *Arthur Anderson* spotted the *Fitz* moving past the shoals just before heavy snow, blown by fifty-mile-



an-hour winds, cloaked it from view. It was the last time anyone saw the vessel intact.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard had issued safety warnings, telling ships to seek safety and drop anchor. The Soo Locks, reporting furious wind gusts of nearly one hundred miles an hour, were closed. The Mackinac Bridge careened wildly in the wind. But there was no safe harbor near the two iron-ore freighters; it was impossible to land the crew in lifeboats at Caribou Island, now behind them. With the storm increasing in power, the big ships began their run for Whitefish Bay, where they hoped to wait out the storm.

At 3:10 P.M., McSorley radioed Cooper’s ship. “*Anderson*, this is the *Fitzgerald*. I have a fence rail down, two vents lost or damaged, and a list,” McSorley said, adding that he was going to slow his speed so the *Anderson* could catch up. “Will you stay by me ‘til I get to Whitefish?”

Pumps were working to remove water taken on by the ship. The next communication, just after 4:00 P.M., carried more chilling news—the *Fitzgerald*’s radar antenna had been snapped off by raging winds. With no visibility, no radar and darkness starting to fall, the vessel was sailing blind. McSorley asked Cooper for radio help to guide the crippled *Fitz* safely past approaching or passing vessels.

As the *Fitz* limped toward Whitefish Point, the already bad odds worsened. Winds were hitting at up to seventy miles an hour, thirty-foot waves slammed the damaged vessel and water poured in faster than it could be pumped out. “We are taking heavy seas over our decks. It’s the worst sea I’ve ever been in,” radioed McSorley, just before learning from the



Fifty-three-year-old Ransom E. Cundy (above) was one of the *Fitz's* most experienced crewmen. Cundy, who grew up in Houghton, had served on the *Fitz* since 1969 and planned to retire after the 1975 season. Ernest M. McSorley (right) was in his fourth season as captain of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. After forty-four years on the Great Lakes, he also planned to retire at the end of the season.



nearby Swedish freighter *Avafors* that the lighthouse and radio beacons at Whitefish Point were out because of storm-caused power failures.

Since 1849, when it joined the Copper Harbor Light as one of the first lighthouses on Lake Superior, the Whitefish Point Light had safeguarded the area called “the Graveyard of Ships.” The lighthouse sits at the end of the eighty-mile stretch appropriately nicknamed “Shipwreck Coast.”

McSorley had hoped the light would signal the *Fitz* to safety. The light came on later, but poor visibility made it useless to the big ship. The radio beacon remained inoperable.

“We’re Holding Our Own”

In the early evening on November 10, the *Arthur Anderson* radioed the *Fitz* to warn that radar had picked up what looked like another vessel ahead of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, but that the *Fitz* would pass safely if it maintained its course. While on the radio, the *Anderson's* first mate, Morgan Clark, asked McSorley about the condition of the damaged ship. “We’re holding our own,” McSorley replied. It was 7:10 P.M.

Minutes later, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* disappeared from the radar screen.

In those few minutes—somehow, for some reason—the ship with its load of iron ore and crew of twenty-nine slammed to the bottom of Lake Superior where it now rests, broken in two with bow upright and stern upside down. The crew never launched a lifeboat, never donned a life vest, never issued a mayday. And, experts say, even if the seamen had clambered into lifeboats, the towering waves, rain, snow and frigid waters would likely have claimed them, perhaps in a matter of minutes.

But the crew and captain of the *Arthur Anderson* did not know that. All they saw was a radar screen devoid of the

Fitz. For twenty minutes they attempted radio contact until the snow cleared and the men on the bridge could search—futilely, it turned out—for the lights or silhouette of the *Fitz*. Cooper radioed the Coast Guard’s emergency frequency, fearful that the *Fitzgerald* had gone down. Within half an hour, Cooper called the Coast Guard again, urging that a search be launched.

Cooper later recalled that his own ship lurched just before 7:00 P.M. A massive wave jammed the *Anderson's* bow into the water, and as the bow raised back up, it was slammed by another giant wave. “I watched those two waves head down the lake toward the *Fitzgerald*, and I think those were the two that sent her under,” Cooper said.

At 11:00 P.M. a Coast Guard search plane reached the last known position of the missing iron-ore carrier. Two hours later, two helicopters joined the search, using high-powered lights to scan the surface of the water for signs of the ship or its crew.

Nothing.

Blasting winds and high seas continued to slam Lake Superior, but the Coast Guard put out a plea for ships in Whitefish Bay to assist with the search. Cooper bravely took

THE CREW

OF THE EDMUND FITZGERALD

the *Anderson* from the safety of the bay back into the wild seas. Another freighter, the *William Clay Ford*, pulled up its anchor and joined the search. The Canadian ship *Hilda Marjanne* tried to help but murderous weather forced her back after only a half hour.

By the morning of November 11, a forty-foot Coast Guard patrol boat arrived to comb the area. But it was the crew of the *Arthur Anderson* that found part of an *Edmund Fitzgerald* life jacket, an oar, a life ring and a propane cylinder. The remains of one lifeboat were seen bobbing in the water nine miles east of the ship's last known location. At 8:00 A.M., part of a second lifeboat was found. Then one of the inflatable life rafts was recovered—equipped with emergency gear but no signs of life.

Over the next three days, more air and water search teams arrived. Life rings and pieces of oars were spotted, along with an oil slick and life vests. None of the crew or their personal possessions was discovered. Four days after the ship was lost, an airplane equipped with special sonar equipment detected what turned out to be the remains of the *Fitzgerald* on the bottom of Lake Superior.

In late May 1976, more than six months after the big ship disappeared, the Coast Guard used a new navy underwater system to confirm the *Fitz's* location. The Cable-controlled Underwater Recovery Vehicle, known as CURV III, plunged into Superior with still and video cameras. In Canadian waters seventeen miles northwest of Whitefish Bay, the mobile unit—operated from a control center aboard a ship—made twelve dives and spent fifty-six hours underwater filming the mangled, mud-covered wreck of the ship.

What Happened?

“Of all the wrecks on the Great Lakes, there hasn't been an investigation as thorough as that of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*,” says Farnquist, who has been involved in three dives to the wreck. “This ship disappeared without a single cry for help, no witnesses to tell why the ship went down, no survivors to tell why the ship went down. Then came the report—and it satisfied no one.”

For more than a year, the question of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was exhaustively researched. Past members of the crew were interrogated, hours of tape and reams of photos



Russell G. Haskell

- Ernest M. McSorley, 62, master, Toledo, Ohio**
- John H. McCarthy, 62, first mate, Bay Village, Ohio**
- James A. Pratt, 44, second mate, Lakewood, Ohio**
- Michael E. Armagost, 37, third mate, Iron River, Wisconsin**
- George J. Holl, 60, chief engineer, Cabot, Pennsylvania**
- Edward F. Bindon, 47, first assistant engineer, Fairport Harbor, Ohio**
- Thomas E. Edwards, 50, second assistant engineer, Oregon, Ohio**
- Russell G. Haskell, 40, second assistant engineer, Millbury, Ohio**
- Oliver J. Champeau, 41, third assistant engineer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin**
- Fred J. Beetcher, 56, porter, Superior, Wisconsin**
- Thomas D. Bentsen, 23, oiler, St. Joseph, Michigan**
- Thomas D. Borgeson, 41, able-bodied maintenance man, Duluth, Minnesota**
- Nolan S. Church, 55, porter, Silver Bay, Minnesota**
- Ransom E. Cundy, 53, watchman, Superior, Wisconsin**
- Bruce L. Hudson, 22, deckhand, North Olmsted, Ohio**
- Allen G. Kalmon, 43, second cook, Washburn, Wisconsin**
- Gorden F. MacLellan, 30, wiper, Clearwater, Florida**
- Joseph W. Mazes, 59, special maintenance man, Ashland, Wisconsin**
- Eugene W. O'Brien, 50, wheelsman, St. Paul, Minnesota**
- Karl A. Peckol, 55, watchman, Ashtabula, Ohio**
- John J. Poviach, 59, wheelsman, Bradenton, Florida**
- Robert Rafferty, 62, temporary steward (first cook), Toledo, Ohio**
- Paul Riipa, 22, deckhand, Ashtabula, Ohio**
- John D. Simmons, 60, wheelsman, Ashland, Wisconsin**
- William J. Spengler, 59, watchman, Toledo, Ohio**
- Mark A. Thomas, 21, deckhand, Richmond Heights, Ohio**
- Ralph G. Walton, 58, oiler, Fremont, Ohio**
- David Wiess, 22, cadet (deck), Agoure, California**
- Blaine H. Wilhelm, 52, oiler, Moquah, Wisconsin**



Allen G. Kalmon

Both photos: Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society

from the underwater survey were studied, Coast Guard officers and others who took part in the search were interviewed, debris recovered from the search was scrutinized. Then, a year after the Coast Guard Marine Board investigated the sinking, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) stepped in to conduct its own study.

“The most probable cause of the sinking of the S.S. *Edmund Fitzgerald* was the loss of buoyancy and stability

resulting from massive flooding of the cargo hold. The flooding of the cargo hold took place through ineffective hatch closures as boarding seas rolled along the spar deck,” said the Coast Guard report released on April 15, 1977. With the hatch covers no longer watertight and wild waves washing the deck, water began to fill the cargo area, pulling the vessel lower and lower, the report theorized. Finally, the “bow pitched down and dove into a wall of water and the vessel was unable to

WHEN THE GALES OF N

“Sailors.”

Etched in granite below a ship’s anchor, the single word marks a monument for five unidentified seamen whose bodies washed ashore near Goderich, Ontario, during the Great Lakes’ deadliest storm: four violent days that claimed more than 250 lives in 1913.

The Goderich grave stands as a reminder not only of the fury of the Great Lakes but also of the humans who risk their lives aboard the mammoth ships that navigate the world’s biggest freshwater system. It is estimated that more than thirty thousand mariners have been lost to the big lakes.

When the *Edmund Fitzgerald* slammed to the bottom of Lake Superior in 1975, it became the last and largest ship swallowed by the biggest and coldest of the lakes, joining the more than six thousand mangled and torn vessels that litter the floor of the Great Lakes. Despite its notoriety, the *Fitz* was far from the deadliest wreck. Just seventeen years earlier, thirty-three mariners died on Lake Michigan when the *Carl D. Bradley* went down. And in 1966, only one man from the twenty-nine-member crew survived when the *Daniel J. Morrell* disappeared into the depths of Lake Huron.

Much-traveled Lake Huron buries the largest number of shipwrecks, but Superior’s waters are the most intimidating. With a depth averaging 500 feet—and 1,333 feet at its deepest—Superior’s water is frigid year-round. Even more frightening are

the big lake’s legendary storms in which raging winds build waves as big as buildings, slamming relentlessly against the hulls and decks of vessels.

Like the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, many ships were snared by the lakes by the “Witch of November,” a vicious storm system that can turn the eleventh month of the year into the most perilous. Nearly five dozen sailors lost their lives in the Armistice Day storm, a November tempest that submerged three freighters in 1940. The deadly November 1913 storm, which brought some of the worst weather ever recorded on the lakes, left in its wake hundreds of bodies and scores of mangled ships.

Since 1678, when the French established a shipyard at what is now Buffalo, descriptions of shipwrecks have clogged Great Lakes archives. The first recorded loss of a cargo vessel was the sixty-foot *Griffon*, headed through Lake Erie, into Lake Huron and through the Straits of Mackinac in 1679. The ship navigated its way to Lake Michigan and the western shore of what is now Green Bay before it loaded up with beaver, mink and muskrat pelts. On its return journey, an unexpected squall on Lake Huron devoured the *Griffon*, its crew and its cargo.

Lake Superior’s first recorded wreck occurred in 1816 when the sixty-foot British schooner, the *Invincible*, went down in a gale. About 550 vessels now rest on Superior’s bottom, including those that sank during the Great Storm of 1913. For four days beginning November 11, pounding winds and waves slammed the lakes. Eight ships and all 178 sailors aboard were lost on Lake Huron alone. When the

recover. Within a matter of seconds, the cargo rushed forward, the bow plowed into the bottom of the lake, and the midship's structure disintegrated, allowing the submerged stern section, now emptied of cargo, to roll over and override the other structure, finally coming to rest upside-down atop the disintegrated middle portion of the ship."

Proponents of this theory say the sinking would have been too fast to allow a distress call. They also note that the hatches,

topside of the vessel, were cited in an inspection just a week and a half before the accident. On Halloween 1975, maritime inspectors in Toledo, Ohio, checked the ship's upper deck and noted cracks in four of the twenty-one hatches. But the inspectors deemed the damage so minor that repairs could wait until after the shipping season ended.

Like the Coast Guard, the NTSB report focused on the hatch openings. But rather than conclude they were

NOVEMBER CAME EARLY

"Big Blow" ended, twenty ships were gone, dozens more were badly damaged and more than 250 men and women had lost their lives to the lakes.

Those casualties included one of Lake Superior's most famous vessels, the *Henry B. Smith*. The ship was in port in Marquette when the captain inexplicably took it onto Lake Superior in the storm, just as other mariners were scrambling for safe harbors. The twenty-five seamen aboard the *Henry B. Smith* disappeared. The wreck was never found.

Other November shipping disasters include:

November 22, 1919: Only the captain survived when the steamer *Myron* sank on Lake Superior off Whitefish Point. Months later, the ice-covered bodies of eight crew members washed ashore.

November 11, 1940: A storm system carrying one-hundred-mile-an-hour winds and thirty-five foot waves hammered the Great Lakes, beaching big ships, leaving others with no steam power or instruments and smashing yet others into rocky shorelines. The level of Lake Michigan at Chicago dropped nearly five feet from the force of the wind pressing against the water and pushing waves out to sea. Even vessels that made it to dock were then thrown against wharf pilings. Before the storm ended, fifty-eight sailors died. And fifty duck hunters froze to death on shore or in small boats when the temperatures plunged.

November 18, 1958: The *Carl D. Bradley*, a 640-foot bulk freighter that became the Great Lakes' biggest vessel when it was unveiled in 1927, found itself caught in a deadly storm as it made its way home to Rogers City. It was the

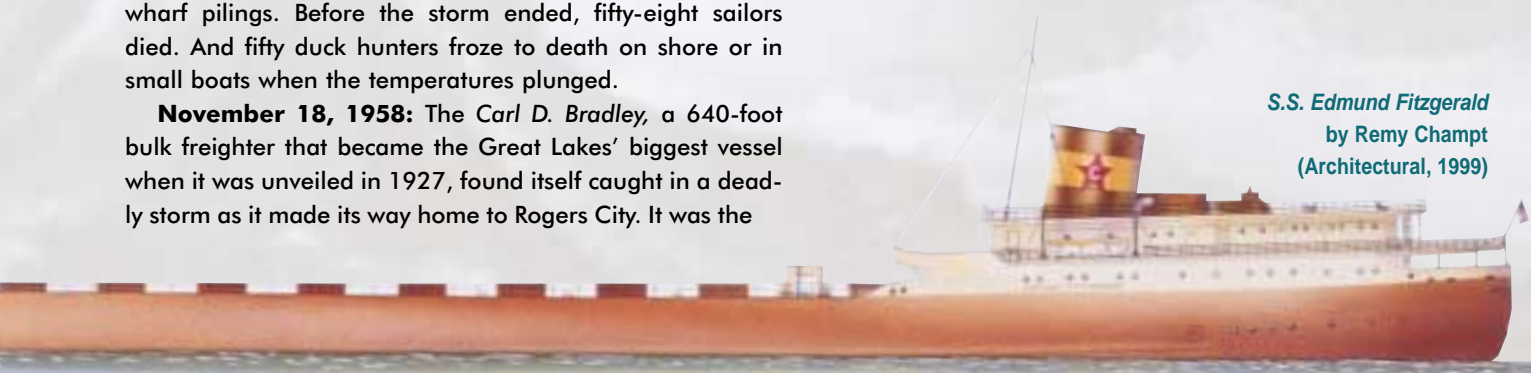
Bradley's last journey of the shipping season and, just twelve miles southwest of Gull Island in Lake Michigan, it broke apart. The weather was so furious that the 250-foot German freighter *Christian Sartori*, only four miles away, took two hours to reach the damaged vessel. Four of the ship's crew made it onto a life raft, but two died before rescue—as did another thirty-three aboard the ship, including the captain. Only eighteen bodies were ever recovered.

November 29, 1966: Its official shipping season had ended when the sixty-year-old *Daniel J. Morrell* took one last trip across Lake Erie and Lake Huron, straight into a murderous storm. The vessel was ripped in half and crew members were tossed into a watery grave. Four sailors scrambled into a lifeboat and floated for two days, but three of them died from the cold before the raft was spotted. The final toll was thirty-two; eight of those bodies were never found.

November 10, 1975: The *Edmund Fitzgerald* disappeared in Lake Superior, claiming the lives of its captain and twenty-eight crew members. It remains the biggest vessel ever lost to the lakes. It has never been conclusively determined why the ship went down.

—Mary A. Dempsey

S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald
by Remy Champt
(Architectural, 1999)



improperly closed, the fifty-one-page NTSB report speculated the hatch covers collapsed, perhaps under the weight of water crashing over the deck. The “probable cause of this accident was the sudden massive flooding of the cargo hold due to the collapse of one or more hatch covers,” the report said.

The Lake Carrier’s Association, other ship captains and engineers, as well as many of the victims’ families, vehemently dismissed those explanations, saying McSorley would never have overlooked such a detail. They believed it more likely the *Fitz* was slammed—perhaps by a quick succession of gargantuan waves—until the bow was pushed toward the lake bottom, the stern was left out of the water and the vessel snapped in half.

Captain Cooper told investigators he suspected the *Fitzgerald* punched a hole in its hull and started to take on water after it passed too close to Six Fathom Shoal. Confident the *Fitzgerald*’s crew had made sure the cargo was evenly loaded the day before, Cooper concluded the taconite could not have shifted to cause the list. He believed the ship began taking on water nearly four hours before it went down. An unexpectedly furious wave could have forced the ship’s bow toward the bottom, splitting the *Fitz*, he theorized.

Still other theories claimed that the seventy-five-foot-wide ship broke in two from a stress fracture and its engines drove the vessel to the lake bottom.

Diving at the Gravesite

The official investigations ended, but the curiosity did not. On September 24, 1980, Jacques Cousteau’s vessel *Calypso*, commanded by Cousteau’s son Jean-Michel, sent two divers in a submarine to examine the ship’s remains. For four days in August 1989 explorers and marine archaeologists used an underwater robot to explore the ship’s remains during an expedition sponsored, in part, by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, the National Geographic Society, WJRT-TV in Flint and the Michigan Sea Grant Program at Michigan State University. As evidence of the public’s continuing fascination with the shipwreck, more than four dozen television, newspaper and magazine reporters covered the robot’s dive.

In early July 1994, the three-person mini-submarine, *Clelia*, was used for a three-day expedition to film the wreck. Farnquist, who took part in the 1989 dive, and Canadian physician Joseph MacInnis, were part of the team. Later that same month, businessman Fred Shannon funded the two-person mini-sub *Delta*’s three-day expedition. Later Shannon went to court in an unsuccessful bid to block the *Fitz*’s bell from being removed for use in a memorial requested by the families.

In July 1995 Farnquist returned to the wreck to recover the bell. A diver wearing a NEWTSUIT, which offered protection from the frigid water, used a special underwater torch to cut the bell from the roof of the pilothouse. Assisted by two

Canadian Navy mini-submarines, the diver brought up the two-hundred-pound bronze bell. After the bell broke the water’s surface, *Fitz* family members, aboard a craft at the site, placed a wreath on the water. A replica of the bell, engraved with the names of the *Fitzgerald*’s crew, was placed in the pilothouse. On November 10, 1995, the twentieth anniversary of the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, the original bell



The morning after the sinking, the *Edmund Fitzgerald*’s battered and split number two lifeboat was recovered floating four miles south of the wreck site.

U.S. Coast Guard

Today, the bell of the *Fitzgerald* is on exhibit at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point. On July 4, 1995, divers returned to the wreck and removed the two-hundred-pound bell and replaced it with a replica bearing the names of the ship's crew.

was dedicated at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, where it remains on permanent exhibit. During the ceremony, family members tolled the bell twenty-nine times to mark the loss of their loved ones. Singer Gordon Lightfoot, whose ballad carried the story of the shipwreck around the globe, rang the bell a final time—for all the sailors who have given their lives to the seas.

The ongoing fascination with the *Edmund Fitzgerald* has made things difficult for the families left behind. “Up to a point, we’re glad that our family members are remembered, that they’ll go down in Great Lakes history and not be forgotten,” says Ruth Hudson, whose only son, Bruce, died on the *Fitzgerald*. “But now we want the site left undisturbed.”

Because of fears of undue media attention—Hudson notes that she gets calls from reporters every year near the *Fitz*’s anniversary—many of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* family members informally agreed to a pact of silence. For twenty years, they avoided interviews and grieved privately. But since 1995, the families have become upset by the many videos, television programs and other commercial enterprises spotlighting the *Fitz*. Much of their outrage stems from dives to the wreck to collect film footage.

“The first few dives, for the purposes of trying to find out why the ship went down, were okay,” Hudson says. “But then they started going down for other reasons. One individual went down, took pictures and came back and sold them. We don’t want that to happen again. That is a gravesite and we don’t want it desecrated.”

Although the Coast Guard still officially lists the crew of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* crew as “missing and presumed dead,” it is believed their bodies are trapped in the ship’s stern. Hudson said most families are not interested in retrieving the bodies for burial. “That is their grave,” she says. “We want it recognized as their grave and we want it left undisturbed.”

When the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum recovered the *Edmund Fitzgerald*’s bell, the families required Farnquist to



Tom Buchke

sign a contract guaranteeing the museum would serve as guardian of the bell, with the Mariner’s Church in downtown Detroit as a backup conservator. The contract also specified that nothing else would be taken from the vessel. For five years, Hudson has also led an effort to have the Canadian government declare the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* off-limits to divers. There is no precedent for such a move and, so far, her bid has been unsuccessful.

Hudson concedes that fascination about the ship and its fate will not soon dissipate. Others agree.

“I think the mystery will live on,” said Farnquist. “There may be dives in the future that come back with their own explanations, but I think those, too, will be disputed.” ■

Mary Dempsey, who lives in Detroit, is a regular contributor to [Michigan History Magazine](#). Opening photo Jerry Bielicki.
