Skin Diving and Historical Research

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SINCE THE END of World War II, skin diving, a sport new to the Middle West, has developed substantial popularity. During the last three years, members of the Duluth Skin-Divers' Club have demonstrated that this form of aquatic recreation can be an important aid to the student of history. By means of skin-diving equipment, the aquatic-minded historian can recover artifacts of the past, which formerly could be retrieved only by professional divers using expensive marine diving equipment. The prerequisites of skin diving are few—a respectable agility at swimming, a watertight mask, fins, and aqualung, perhaps a rubber suit, and a body of clear, deep water of historical interest.

Lake Superior affords an excellent medium for enthusiastic marine investigation. Since 1953, the "Frigid Frogs," as members of the Duluth club are called, have examined a number of wrecked ships lost along the North Shore of the lake in the past sixty years. Successful dives have been made on these derelicts, and some interesting artifacts have been recovered that tell long-forgotten tales of earlier Minnesota conditions.¹

Members of the club have examined quite carefully two ships sunk in the great blizzard of November 28, 1905, named by sailors the "Mataafa blow" after the spectacular wreck of the steamer "Mataafa" at Duluth. One of these was the hulk of the "Lafayette," 1906, in Duluth harbor

²These efforts of the Duluth club have been the subject of comment in issues of the Duluth Herald and the Duluth News-Tribune for July and August, 1955. See especially the feature section of the latter for July 29, 1955. Fuller information on "Shipwrecks of the North Shore of Lake Superior," may be found in a mimeographed pamphlet by the author, a copy of which is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Pittsburgh Steamship Company’s barge “Madeira.” Towed by the “S. S. William Edenborn,” the “Madeira” was cut loose when it appeared that both vessels would be driven on the rocky North Shore of Lake Superior by the howling gale. After being tossed about for some three hours, the “Madeira” was hurled against Gold Rock, the first promontory northeast of Split Rock Lighthouse, where it broke in two. Seven of the eight-man crew were almost miraculously rescued by the superhuman rope work of a seaman named Fred Benson, who cast a line from the bobbing and sinking bow to the overhanging cliffs, pulling himself and six crewmen to safety.\(^a\)

Skin divers found the bow of the “Madeira” in thirty-five feet of water, with the midships nearly flattened by the blow against Gold Rock. Typical wreckage of a steel ship littered the lake bottom— chains, plates, beams, bolts, and pipe fittings. The deck boiler and towing engines had been salvaged shortly after the disaster, but the anchors were still securely cradled, and the name plate was clearly legible. The divers recovered letters from the name plate, miscellaneous brass fittings, and small pieces of wreckage. The “Edenborn” also had been wrecked several miles westward, but it had been salvaged in 1906, leaving little worth diving for.

A second victim of the “Mataafa” storm of 1905 often investigated by the Frigid Frogs is the “S. S. Lafayette,” another Pittsburgh Steamship Company boat, which went aground and broke into three sections on the north end of Encampment Island, at Lafayette Bluff some half-dozen miles northeast of Two Harbors. The stern, or engine section of the vessel, was salvaged the following year. The skin divers found that the bow portion had been reduced to little more than scrap metal, scattered over hundreds of square yards of lake bottom between the mainland and Encampment Island, but several attractive items were discovered. Among them was a forty-four caliber Winchester repeating rifle of a type patented in 1860, which may have belonged to the captain or the mate of the ill-fated ship. It was probably used to “persuade” the high-spirited sailors of the day to peaceable ways. The gun’s magazine was still loaded, and the action was still workable after immersion for more than fifty years. An ornamental brass standard, probably the stand of the ship’s binnacle, also was recovered along with a considerable amount of copper tubing, steel rivets, brass pulleys, chains, and other similar objects.\(^a\)

ANOTHER shipwreck which has engaged the attention of the Duluth skin divers is that of the “Belle P. Cross,” sunk in April, 1903, at the mouth of the Gooseberry River in what is now Gooseberry State Park. The “Cross,” a small coastal lumber steamer, was driven off course by an April blizzard and was smashed on the rocky shore. The crew was saved. Since the “Cross” was a wooden steamer, it had largely disintegrated, but the divers were able to recover portions of pipes and valves bearing manufacturers’ stamps of the 1880s. The flywheel and portions of the engines were located in some sixty feet of water, but these have not been recovered. One of the most interesting finds was apparently a part of the ship’s cargo—a mid-nineteenth century type horse-drawn plow, which is now in the possession of the St. Louis County Historical Society. The plow serves as a reminder that sixty years ago farming was seriously undertaken in
sections of Cook County now considered entirely unsuited for agriculture.  

In the summer of 1956, the Frigid Frogs dove on the wreck of the “S. S. America,” off Washington Harbor, Isle Royale. The “America,” a coastal passenger and freight vessel, had brushed a reef, ripping its hull badly, in June, 1928. No lives were lost, but the ship was hastily abandoned, and it sank at an angle in eighty-five feet of water. Although commercial divers had examined the craft, the Duluth club found the contents of the ship more or less intact, and the skin divers recovered dishes, clothing, furniture, and many mementos of sailing life in the 1920s. Of particular interest was a model T Ford truck in the ship’s hold, which was neatly loaded with plumbing equipment en route from Duluth to Port Arthur.  

A NUMBER OF other Lake Superior wrecks offer possibilities for investigation. Of perhaps greatest historical interest is the hulk of the “Onoko,” the first iron freight ship built on the Great Lakes. It was launched in 1882 and sank in September, 1915, off Knife Island along the North Shore of Lake Superior, after mysteriously springing a leak only an hour out of Duluth harbor. Good life boat discipline saved the entire crew, but the “Onoko” went to the bottom in a matter of minutes. Unfortunately, the approximate location of this wreck is in water charted as over two-hundred-and-fifty feet deep, making investigation a hazardous undertaking for skin divers.  

Somewhere between Knife River and Duluth lies the “Benjamin Noble,” a two-hundred-and-fifty-six-foot steamer laden with rails, which disappeared with all hands during a violent storm in April, 1914. Although the “Noble” never has been located, it apparently lies in water of reasonable depth for skin diving not too far out of Duluth, because wreckage from the ship has been cast up on Park Point a few miles east of the Duluth ship canal.  

Off Isle Royale are many wrecks, includ-

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1 For accounts of the sinking of the “Cross,” see News-Tribune, May 1, 2, 1903.
3 For information on the “Onoko,” see News-Tribune, September 15, 1915, and Bowen, Lore of the Lakes, 225 (Daytona Beach, 1940).
4 On the “Noble,” see News-Tribune, April 29, 30, May 1, 1914, and Bowen, Shipwrecks of the Lakes, 250-253 (Daytona Beach, 1952).
ing that of the Canadian Pacific steamer, "Algoma," sunk in 1885 with a loss of thirty-seven lives, apparently the largest loss of life in the history of Lake Superior navigation. The passenger steamer "George M. Cox" lies in deep water near Rock of Ages Light off the western end of Isle Royale, where it foundered after running aground in a fog in May, 1933. Of sinister attraction, too, is the wreck of the "Kamloops," owned by the Canada Steamship Lines, Limited, which sank with all hands aboard near the west shore of Isle Royale in December, 1927. Some day, with more effective equipment, skin divers will be able to investigate these and many other vessels.

SKIN DIVERS can also be used to recover artifacts of the past in other areas of Minnesota. It would seem probable, for example, that the lakes along the state's northern border hide unsuspected artifacts used in fur-trading days, for several ancient rifles have been recovered from Lake Saganaga. Grand Portage Bay, too, should prove fertile ground for seeking articles lost in the fur-trading heyday of the important post on its shores. Several years ago a sport fisherman at Mille Lacs Lake hooked up an eighteenth-century rifle, indicating research possibilities there, since several fur-trading posts were once located on the lake. Areas where log-driving operations were once carried on might furnish additional items connected with that aspect of Minnesota's past, and a complete history of the evolution and use of various types of fishing lures in Minnesota might be written from careful scrutiny of heavily fished inland lakes in the state. Thus, skin diving may produce some surprising and interesting historical discoveries in the next few years.

There are, however, some limitations to this form of research. Because a skin diver needs clear water and a solid bottom, many rivers and lakes in Minnesota are unsuitable for investigation because of siltation or vegetation. Moreover, to be recoverable with most current equipment, articles should lie in water less than a hundred feet deep. This factor precludes any great potential for skin-diving research in Lake Superior, where the water is, for the most part, much deeper. Further, skin divers should be carefully trained, disciplined, and supervised, since carelessness represents a substantial danger to life. Even with these limitations, however, skin diving has valuable potentialities for the student of history in Minnesota, and its possibilities as a research tool should not be overlooked.

THE "America" at Isle Royale in the 1920s

* For fuller discussions of the wrecks of these ships, see Williams, in Inland Seas, 12:253, 256; News-Tribune, December 8, 14, 15, 17, 24, 1927, May 28, 1928; Bowen, Lore of the Lakes, 176; and the same author's Shipwrecks of the Lakes, 122-133, 250-253, 308-312.

THE PHOTOGRAPH on page 278 is from the collection of the St. Louis County Historical Society at Duluth. That on page 280 was obtained by the author from the Duluth Herald-Tribune.