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U.S. Coast Guard History Program

The “Christmas Ship Mackinaw” Sails Into Chicago

by Debbie Allyn Jett
With Special Thanks to Frederick Stonehouse

*“As we slowly glide into this port, the frost hangs in the air.
The bustle of the city streets in the distance you can hear.
The pier sparkles festive on this cold December day,
When Big Mack comes to this harbor to give Christmas trees away.”*



The new U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw*, docked at Chicago's Navy Pier, December 5, 2009. 1542 Christmas trees were aboard, to be donated to needy families.

Lee Murdock's sweet voice rang clearly in the icy air as he entertained the crowd gathered at Chicago's Navy Pier on a brisk sunny Saturday, the 5th day of December, 2009. Anchored at the pier, just a short distance from the stage, sat the United States

Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw*. A large banner on the side of the vessel declared the *Mack* to be “Chicago’s Christmas Ship.” Following the tradition of the Christmas tree ships of the early 1900’s, the *Mack* was on a mission: to bring Christmas trees to the people of Chicago, specifically to those families who could not afford to buy one .



The ceremony, hosted by Rich Renik, a familiar voice to listeners of Chicago radio

for 41 years, began with music by the Taft High School Girls Chorale. The colors were presented by the Sea Cadet Color Guard & North Suburban Young Marines, followed by the National Anthem and the blessing and dedication of a wreath, which was then placed at the foot of the “Captain of the Helm” statue, which honors those who have served on the Great Lakes.

Lee Murdock, a well-known composer and interpreter of Great Lakes maritime ballads (**right**), then regaled us with two of his most well-known Christmas tunes, “The Christmas Ship” and “When Big Mack Comes To This Harbor.” “The Christmas Ship” tells the tale of the *Rouse Simmons*, the original Christmas tree ship, from the point of view of a young child, looking forward to the annual trip to the foot of the Clark St. bridge to purchase the family holiday tree. Capt. Herman Schuenemann sold the trees directly to the public from the deck of the *Simmons*, much to the delight of the children who got the chance to go aboard a real three-masted lake schooner! The aroma from the evergreens filled the air as the adults haggled over the price and the children played amid the fragrant balsams and firs, brought all the way down the lake from Northern Michigan. The Captain, it was said, was also known to give away trees to the needy.



The Christmas tree business was a risky one for those bringing the trees to Chicago on the lake in late November. The profit margin was very low, meaning that the boats, mostly old, worn-out schooners, were routinely overloaded with trees, making them top-heavy and subject to heavy icing. At a time of the year when most vessels were laying up for the winter, the Christmas tree schooners were heading out into the storm-tossed lake, overloaded and undermanned, hoping to make a slim profit before winter.

Like many others in 1912, the Schuememanns found themselves with debts to pay, and no money to pay them with, so another trip north for the trees was planned. Capt. Herman’s brother, August, had been lost on a previous Christmas tree trip, when the Schooner *S. Thal* went down in 1898. The loss of that “Christmas Tree Ship” was played up in the newspapers and magazines of the day, garnering much sympathy from

the public, when in actuality, the actions of the captain, taking an un-seaworthy vessel out onto the lake so late in the year, putting his crew and himself in mortal peril, may have been to blame.

In 1910, Capt. Herman purchased a 1/8 interest in the "*Rouse Simmons*." By 1912, the *Simmons* was 44 years old and in bad shape. He added a temporary second deck on top of the main deck in order to be able to carry more cargo, which made the vessel unbalanced and more dangerous in high winds. On Friday, November 22 of 1912, with stormy weather brewing, he and a crew numbering between 10 and 17 set out from Thompson, Michigan, north of Green Bay near Manistique, bound for Chicago with a tremendous load of Christmas trees. Riding so low that her bobstays were under water, she made slow progress. She was only halfway to Chicago on the 28th, when a full-blown gale roared across the lake, sending snow and scud flying through the air. A schooner, most likely the *Simmons*, displaying a distress signal, her flag at half-mast, was spotted by the lookout at the Kewaunee Life-Saving Station at 2:50pm. The Keeper, Captain Nelson Craile, knew that they could not make it out to the vessel in the storm in their pulling surfboat, so he went out to locate a tug to tow the surfboat out to the vessel, but the only tug capable of doing so was out on another call. Craile then placed a telephone call to the Life-Saving Station at Two Rivers. Two Rivers had a motorized lifeboat, which would give them a huge advantage in the rough waters. Keeper George Sogge and his crew launched the lifeboat at 3:20pm and headed out. It wasn't long before the boat and the men were covered with ice. They searched for hours, but saw no sign of the schooner. Finally forced to give up due to the cold and darkness, they returned to the station at 8:00pm.

Hopes began to fade in Chicago as the days passed and the *Simmons* did not arrive. However, wreckage and thousands of trees began washing up on the beaches on the Wisconsin shore, as well as the Michigan side of the lake. There was little doubt that she had gone down, taking her crew with her. Most likely she had been unable to steer a course in the high winds of the gale, and the huge cargo of trees had become coated with frozen spray, weighing the vessel down more and more as the storm progressed, making it impossible to keep her gunwales above water.

The Schuenemann family continued in the Christmas tree business, with Herman's wife, Barbara, taking over the business. Bringing some of the salvaged trees down aboard another schooner, and receiving trees delivered by rail, the family sold Christmas trees from their same location on the river aboard "The Christmas Ship."

Thousands of families in Chicago were touched by the loss of Capt. Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons*, as it had become a part of their family tradition to purchase their trees from the schooner. As the decades went by, the legend of the Christmas Tree Ship continued to grow in the hearts and minds of the good people of Chicago. The story was told and retold, songs were written about it, and a musical stage play is presented every year.

In the spirit of the tradition, in December of 2000, the Coast Guard Cutter WAGB 83,

the *Mackinaw*, arrived in Chicago, carrying a load of Christmas trees to be distributed to disadvantaged families. The old *Mackinaw* was replaced by the new *Mackinaw*, WLBB 30, in 2006, and took over the duties of icebreaking and buoy tending, and also carried on the tradition of the Chicago Christmas Ship. Loaded with 1542 trees, the *Mack* sailed into Chicago's Navy Pier for the 10th year, on December 4th, 2009. The trees were purchased by the Chicago Christmas Ship Committee, which is comprised of the International Shipmasters' Association, Chicago Marine Heritage Society, US Navy League, Chicago Yacht Clubs, Friends of the Marine Community, Coast Guard



Auxiliary, and the Chicago Yachting Association. The trees were loaded into trucks by local youth volunteers, the Sea Cadets, Venture Crews, Sea Explorer Scouts, the Young Marines, and volunteers from the Coast Guard Auxiliary. They will be distributed to 1500 families in Chicago by the Ada S. McKinley Community Services organization.

After the laying of the wreath, Capt. Luann Barndt, Commander of Coast Guard Sector Lake Michigan and Captain of the Port, spoke about the

tradition of the Christmas ship and the loss of the *Rouse Simmons*. The Coast Guard had, in recent years, retraced the search pattern launched by the life-savers from the Two Rivers Station, and had discovered that they had completely encircled the area where the *Simmons* went down, but had not seen her. Perhaps by then, she had already sunk, or the snow was too thick and the visibility too poor. The wreck had been found in 1971, sitting upright on the bottom roughly nine miles off Two Rivers.

Commander Scott Smith, Commanding Officer of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw* also spoke about celebrating the 10th anniversary of the *Mack* as Chicago's Christmas Tree Ship.

Next to speak was Capt. George Lisner, member of the Christmas Ship Executive Committee. He told us that on the trip down from their home port of Cheboygan, Michigan, the crew of the *Mack* had laid a memorial wreath over the site of the *Simmons* to honor those who went down with her. He also told the crowd that in the 10 years since the *Mack* became the Christmas Tree Ship, over 12,000 trees had



been brought to Chicago, creating “family traditions that can last a lifetime.” No Coast Guard funds were spent. All the expenses were covered by donations. He stated that the reason the tradition was started with the *Mack* was that “We just wanted to do something nice for somebody else.” You can’t argue with that!

The ceremony concluded with the firing of a cannon and several long blasts from the *Mack’s* whistle. The unloading of the trees continued (**right**), and then at 1:30, the vessel was opened to the public for free tours.

What a magnificent vessel this *Mack* is! According to the Mighty Mac website, the *Mack* is the largest U.S. Coast Guard Cutter on the Great Lakes.

Commissioned on June 6, 2006, WLBB 30 assumed the *Mackinaw*

name and duties. Besides ice-breaking, the *Mack* is configured to handle a variety of roles, including buoy maintenance and handling of environmental spills. The *Mackinaw* is powered by 3 Caterpillar 3612 Turbocharged V-12 engines and propelled by 2 ABB azimuthing electric propulsion drives, where the propulsion motor is installed inside a submerged azimuthing 360 degree pod. Length is 240 feet, Beam 58 feet, Draft 16 feet, Displacement 3350 tons, Range at 12 knots 4000 nautical miles, Officers 9 and Crew 47. There is no rudder, as the rotating pods turn the vessel. There is also no wheel on the bridge. Steering is done by joystick (**below**).



This baby can parallel park itself, as the propulsion system can propel the vessel sideways, which is the way she entered the narrow waterway alongside Navy Pier. The public was given tours by the Coast Guard Auxiliary and some of the crew of the ship. Among the places we were allowed to go were the fantail, the bridge and the control center. All the equipment is state-of-the-art and the crew takes great pride in her. I really enjoyed my tour, and had just toured the old *Mack*, which is now a museum in Mackinaw City, a few months ago, so it was quite an experience seeing the differences between the two.

The vessel had been polished spotlessly clean and her red and white paint gleamed brightly in the sun. A number of bell buoys lay on the deck, having been picked up for winter storage and maintenance. They will be placed back on their locations in the spring. One of the Christmas trees had also been hung up in the cables above the bridge, reminding everyone that on this trip, she was more than just the *Mack*; she was *Chicago's Christmas Ship*.





