

110-year-old Great Lakes Shipwreck Mystery Solved

Oct. 12, 2019

SAULT STE. MARIE — Before the winds began to rile a peaceful Lake Huron on April 29, 1909 there was much for the men aboard the *Russia* to talk about as the 231-foot passenger freight vessel made her way from Port Huron to Alpena, Michigan.

Fresh off his inauguration a month earlier, America's largest president, William Howard Taft — at 340 pounds by historical estimates — was occupying the White House, while his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt was preparing to embark on an African safari. In early April, famed explorer Robert Peary became the first man to reach the North Pole. New \$20 coins were now in circulation as the Liberty Head Double Eagle, first struck in 1850 had been replaced in 1907 by the Saint-Gaudens version, with Miss Liberty now walking across a rocky outcropping of solid gold.

But there was no time for idle chatter once the *Russia* docked in Alpena. It was time to take on the final load, a shipment of cement and as described in a 1957 *Inland Seas* account reprinted from *The Sault Evening News*, a steady breeze was beginning to build.

Powered by twin steeple compound steam engines, the *Russia* was “heavy-laden” carrying enough cargo “to warm any owners heart,” when Captain John McLean left Alpena on the evening of April 29 for Duluth, Minnesota at the western end of Lake Superior. Captain McLean reported that “we cleared Thunder Bay, rounded Thunder Bay Island, and nosed Northwest across Lake Huron toward Point Detour, a straight distance of 73-miles.”

As *The Evening News* reported, weather conditions rapidly intensified. “Once out in the open lake, Captain McLean found the breeze strengthening by the minute. By the time the *Russia* came abeam of Middle Island the ‘breeze’ had attained gale proportions

and the creaking old vessel, influenced by her heavy deck load was rolling quite severely.”

A lull in the storm evidently convinced Captain McLean to continue instead of turning back, that is until the cargo began to shift causing a list to port. With a call of “all hands on deck”, the crew began moving the 64 pound bags of cement by hand, in an effort to counteract the list and after two hours of what Captain McLean reported as “back-breaking labor” it appeared as though the Russia was returned to an even keel.

“Then the real blow fell,” read the old account. “Without warning of any kind, the vessel’s smokestack scribed a long arc in the sky as she rolled severely to port, caught herself just in time then rolled speedily to starboard.”

Despite a laborious effort to once again correct the list, the crew seemingly making no headway, was ordered by the captain to begin throwing the cement bags into Lake Huron in a failed bid to lighten the load and save the Russia.

“This is it fellows,” Captain McLean reportedly said directing the 22 crewmen and one unidentified passenger to head for the lifeboats. “We’re leaving her here and now.” And, so they did in the early morning hours of April 30, 1909 under tremendous stress and extremely difficult conditions the specially trained lifeboat crew successfully launched three of the four boats into the raging sea. The men manning the oars began the excruciating pull toward the Detour Lighthouse, a distance of approximately 12 miles. Amazingly all survived the ordeal, cold, wet and exhausted safely reaching shore a little before dawn much to the surprise of local residents.

“Hearing about the Russia since my teenage years, I told my wife Chris, ‘If I don’t accomplish anything else this summer, I am going to find the Russia,’” explained Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society founder and Director Emeritus Tom Farnquist.

Last winter Farnquist contacted and convinced shipwreck enthusiasts from Minnesota, Ken Merryman and Jerry Eliason to assist in a search for the elusive Russia. Both Ken and Jerry have successfully located dozens of previously undiscovered Great Lakes shipwrecks. Captain Ken Merryman is founder of the Wisconsin based Great Lakes Shipwreck Preservation Society and owner of the Research Vessel Heyboy. The Heyboy was used to conduct digital sonar surveys to search for the Russia. Jerry Eliason is recognized as a shipwreck researcher, diver and designing a drop camera system that records high definition video he uses to create incredible 3D mosaics like the one used in this article.

The Russia's final resting place remained a mystery for 110 years in spite of numerous attempts to locate same by serious shipwreck enthusiasts from around the Great Lakes for at least six decades.

Farnquist decided to try one more time, working with his own research data collected from various sources including reported areas where others have searched, he marked out a few high probability locations on a chart in the vicinity of where the Russia disappeared 110 years ago.

"I eliminated a lot of bottom land previously searched by others before gridding off areas of high probability and prior to launching the sonar towfish," he explained.

This latest venture took the R. V. Heyboy and search crew to an area of Lake Huron located just outside the 1,440 square mile Thunder Bay NOAA Marine Sanctuary, in the northwest corner of the Lake, to a predetermined gridded search area where the Garmin sonar revealed a target of interest, that seemingly answered the question of where the Russia was hiding.

Confirmation that this was indeed the Russia came through the live video feed lens of Jerry Eliason's drop camera and lighting system lowered to a depth of 220 feet. In July, out of the darkness came the outline of a shape all too familiar to wreck divers. Jerry's live video broadcast revealed a remarkably well-preserved intact shipwreck,

evidenced by wood-stock anchors on the starboard bow, open hatch openings and intact after cabins seen on the first fly by.

“Needless to say there was great jubilation following our confirmed discovery of the Russia,” Farnquist said.

The Russia was discovered July 23, just 1,200 feet from a previously discovered three masted schooner wreck called the Celtic, lost with the entire crew of eight to a storm November 29, 1902. The GPS numbers for the Celtic were shared with Farnquist by Paul Ehorn from Waukegan, Illinois prior to beginning their search for the Russia. It was during Paul’s years of searching for the Russia that he located the Celtic resting at a depth of 220 feet.

While no stranger to deep diving, Farnquist solicited technical diving assistance crediting videographers John Janzen of Madison, Wisconsin, John Scoles of Minneapolis, Minnesota and Ken Merryman with son Andrew equipped with rebreathers charged with special gas mixtures blended for 230-foot depths.

“We have only conducted three dives on the Russia to date,” Farnquist said. “These tantalizing dives pose many questions about this intriguing wreck and what may be contained in the hundreds of crates preserved and contained in the cargo holds.”

Archaeologists Phil Hartmeyer, Stephanie Gandulla with the Thunder Bay NOAA Marine Sanctuary and Michigan DNR Archaeologist Wayne Lusardi aboard the R.V. Storm conducted additional sonar imaging of the site. The Michigan State Police Dive Team headed by Randy Parrols were invited to conduct Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) UP-RIGHT video survey work as a way of collecting preliminary inventory data for future underwater cultural resource management.

“This is going to be a very popular dive site for advanced technical divers once the location is released to the public” Farnquist predicted. “The Russia sits on an even keel at a depth of 220 feet with intact metal after cabins, boiler house, and galley area. The

mizzen mast stands serenely above the deck. Like most shipwrecks, the Russia's wooden passenger cabins designed to accommodate up to fifty passengers, hatch covers, and pilothouse floated off when the she dove to the bottom."

Plans to return to the Russia next summer are being discussed to acquire additional information about the cargo and the many artifacts littered throughout the vast debris field surrounding the Russia. Of special interest are the 1872 compound steeple engines still solidly held in place deep within the cluttered engine room area.