



# NEWSLETTER

December 2020  
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## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- MEETING BITS AND BYTES
- WHAT'S ON THE DECEMBER SCHEDULE
- A QUOTE TO PONDER
- HISTORY LESSONS
- MEMBER SPOTLIGHT
- UPCOMING PROGRAMS
- ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

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DECEMBER 2020

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*WISHING ALL OUR MEMBERS PEACEFUL AND HAPPY  
HOLIDAYS AND A HEALTHY NEW YEAR!*

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*January 13, 2021  
7:00 PM – New Berlin Ale House  
16000 West Cleveland Avenue  
New Berlin, WI 52151*

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## MEETING BITS AND BYTES

Our 5<sup>th</sup> MPAFUG meeting since the pandemic lockdown was held on Veterans Day, November 11<sup>th</sup> at the New Berlin Ale House. There were 27½ members in attendance. Yes, you read that right. It seems there were different numbers on the headcount so we averaged. Humm, wonder who the ½ person is.... There were no new members or guests.

By the time you read this newsletter, you will all have had a chance to watch the meeting video if you weren't able to attend the November meeting. The presentations were fascinating so if you haven't watched the video, you are missing out on a great story as well as a lesson on DNA. Guest speaker Erika Zuehl could give CeCe Moore a run for her money in the genealogy detective arena. The whole John Doe story was almost unbelievable, but was also a valuable history lesson on the consequences of war. Who among us can even imagine traveling around the world, as a child no less?

Part of John Doe's story involved St. Joseph's Orphanage and during the presentation someone asked where it had been located. Following the meeting Bob Tatalovich did a little detective work himself and provided this website for those that are interested:

<https://uwm.edu/mkepolonia-st-joseph-orphanage/>.

## WHAT'S ON THE DECEMBER SCHEDULE

NO MEETING! It will definitely be a different holiday season to close out 2020 but we have to make the best of it and try to stay safe. Keep up your spirits, decorate as usual, keep some old traditions and perhaps make new traditions.



### A QUOTE TO PONDER:

“They call it a family tree because if you look hard enough, you’ll always find some sap in it.”  
(found in the American Legion magazine)

## HISTORY LESSONS

### *The Christmas Tree Ship*

Following are excerpts from an article in Prologue Magazine, a publication of the National Archives. It was written by Glenn V. Longacre, an archivist at NARA – Great Lakes Region, Chicago in 2006 under the title “The Christmas Tree Ship – Captain Herman E. Schuenemann and the Schooner Rouse Simmons.”

“On a drizzly, overcast day in late October 1971, Milwaukee scuba diver Gordon Kent Bellrichard was surveying with sonar the bottom of Lake Michigan's west coastal waters off of Two Rivers, Wisconsin. Bellrichard was searching for the *Vernon*, a 177-foot, 700-ton steamer that had sunk with only one survivor in a storm in October 1887.

Local fishermen described an area to Bellrichard where their nets had snagged on previous occasions as a potential site to search. His sonar made a promising contact, and he descended to what appeared to be a well-preserved shipwreck resting in an upright position on the lake bed in 172 feet of water.

Upon reaching the wreck, his jury-rigged dive light promptly malfunctioned, leaving him blanketed in murky darkness. Without light, he

surveyed the wreckage by feeling along its hull. Bellrichard quickly realized that he had not discovered the larger, propeller-drive *Vernon*, but the wreck of the elusive *Rouse Simmons*, a 205-ton, three-masted schooner that had disappeared beneath the waves in a winter gale in November 1912.

When Bellrichard surfaced, he lay in his boat and yelled for joy. His discovery ended a mystery that surrounded the fate of one of the most legendary ships, and its much-loved captain, to sail Lake Michigan's waters. For Bellrichard had discovered the grave of one of the most famous "Christmas tree ships" and its skipper, "Captain Santa."

The saga of Herman E. Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons* is a microcosm of Great Lakes maritime history preserved for researchers who visit the National Archives and Records Administration–Great Lakes Region in Chicago. The original and microfilmed records held in the Great Lakes Region not only document the birth, life, and death of the legendary schooner but also its enigmatic and kind-hearted captain.

The 1870 census reveals that Wisconsin native Schuenemann was born about 1865, into the middle of a growing family of six children in the predominantly German community of Ahnapee, now present-day Algoma, on the shores of Lake Michigan. His oldest brother, August, born in 1853, was the first of the children to make his living on the lake. Herman, however, soon followed in his brother's footsteps.

In 1868, three years after Schuenemann's birth, the age of sail on Lake Michigan reached its zenith when more than 1,800 sailing vessels populated the lake. After that year, the number of sailing ships began a decline that lasted until they disappeared almost completely by the late 1920s. The dominant sail-powered vessel on Lake Michigan was the sturdy schooner, built to haul heavy loads out of, and into, shallow harbors. The principal cargo for most schooners on Lake Michigan was lumber, which fed the high demand for building

materials in growing urban areas such as Chicago and Milwaukee.

The 1868 peak in sail-powered ships on Lake Michigan also marked the year the *Rouse Simmons* was launched from Milwaukee's shipyards. The ship was built by the firm of Allan, McClelland, and Company, one of Milwaukee's preeminent shipbuilding firms.

Sleek and sturdy, the 123-foot *Rouse Simmons* was licensed and enrolled on August 27, 1868, at the Port of Milwaukee. The vessel's managing owner was Royal B. Towslee of Kenosha, Wisconsin, and its first master was Alfred Ackerman. The *Rouse Simmons* was named after a well-known Kenosha merchant of the same name. A brother, Zalmon Simmons, soon gained fame for his family's burgeoning mattress company.”

\* \* \*

“By the early 1890s, Schuenemann lived in Chicago, and his career as a local merchant and lake captain was well established. On April 9, 1891, he married German-born Barbara Schindel. The 1900 federal census indicates that Barbara and Herman Schuenemann had three daughters during the 1890s: Elsie, born in January 1892, and in October 1898, twins Hazel and Pearl. Barbara learned that being the wife of a lake captain took special qualities. She also realized, as did most wives whose husbands made their living on the Great Lakes, that it was not a matter of if catastrophe would strike, but when.”

\* \* \*

“By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the popular German tradition of decorating an evergreen tree in the home was widely practiced, and demand for Christmas trees was great. It was not uncommon for a handful of lake schooners to make late-season runs from northern Michigan and Wisconsin—before the worst storms and ice made lake travel too hazardous—loaded with thousands of Christmas trees for busy Chicago waterfront markets. Estimates of the number of Christmas schooners vary, but perhaps up to two dozen

vessels in any season delivered evergreens to markets in Great Lakes states.

In Chicago, most vessels, including the *Rouse Simmons*, sold the trees directly from their berths along the Chicago River's Clark Street docks. Electric lights were strung from the schooner's bow to stern, and customers were invited to board the ship to choose their trees. In addition to selling Christmas trees, many boat operators, including Schuenemann, made and sold wreaths, garlands, and other holiday decorations. Barbara Schuenemann and her three daughters helped make and sell these items as part of the family's holiday trade.

At some stage of Herman Schuenemann's long career as a late-season tree captain, he was given the title of Captain Santa. The affectionate nickname was bestowed by Chicago's local newspapers and by the city's grateful residents. Schuenemann's profits from selling Christmas trees had never made the family wealthy, but his reputation for generosity was well established, and he delighted in presenting trees to many of the city's needy residents. Schuenemann enjoyed the sobriquet and proudly kept newspaper clippings about his role as Captain Santa in his oilskin wallet.”

\* \* \*

“On November 9–10, 1898, tragedy marred the Schuenemann's holiday season when, just one month after the birth of twins Hazel and Pearl, Herman's older brother August Schuenemann died while sailing a load of Christmas trees to Chicago aboard the schooner *S. Thal*. The 52-ton, two-masted schooner, built in Milwaukee in 1867, broke up after it was caught in a storm near Glencoe, Illinois. There were no survivors. The Schuenemann family was devastated, but Herman continued the family tradition of making late-season Christmas tree runs.”

\* \* \*

“By 1912, Schuenemann was a veteran schooner master who had hauled Christmas trees to Chicago for almost three decades. While Schuenemann was in his prime as a lake captain, the same could not be said for the *Rouse Simmons*. The once-sleek sailing

vessel was now 44 years old and long past its peak sailing days. Time, the elements, and hundreds of heavy loads of lumber had taken their toll on the vessel's physical condition.

On Friday, November 22, 1912, the *Rouse Simmons*, heavily laden with 3,000–5,000 Christmas trees filling its cargo hold and covering its deck, left the dock at Thompson, Michigan. Some eyewitnesses to the *Rouse Simmons*'s departure claimed the ship looked like a floating forest. Schuenemann's departure, however, coincided with the beginnings of a tremendous winter storm on the lake that sent several other ships to the bottom, including the *South Shore*, *Three Sisters*, and *Two Brothers*.

What happened after the *Rouse Simmons* departed the tiny harbor at Thompson with its heavy load of trees is unknown, but Life Saving Station logs testify that at 2:50 p.m. on Saturday, November 23, 1912, a surfman at the station in Kewaunee, Wisconsin, alerted the station keeper, Capt. Nelson Craite, that a schooner (the *Rouse Simmons*'s identity was unknown) was sighted headed south flying its flag at half-mast, a universal sign of distress. In his remarks on the incident, Craite wrote, "I immediately took the Glasses, and made out that there was a distress signal. The schooner was between 5 and 6 miles E.S.E. and blowing a Gale from the N.W." Craite attempted to locate a gas tugboat to assist the schooner, but the vessel had left earlier in the day. After a few minutes, the life-saving crew at Kewaunee lost sight of the ship.

At 3:10 p.m., Craite telephoned Station Keeper Capt. George E. Sogge at Two Rivers, the next station further south. Craite informed Sogge that a schooner was headed south, flying its flag at half-mast. Sogge immediately ordered the Two Rivers surfmen to launch the station's powerboat. The boat reached the schooner's approximate position shortly thereafter, but darkness, heavy snow, and mist obscured any trace of the *Rouse Simmons* and its crew. The schooner had vanished.

Barbara Schuenemann and her daughters were concerned when the *Rouse Simmons* failed to arrive in Chicago Harbor on schedule. However, it was not uncommon for a schooner to pull into a safe harbor to ride out a storm and then arrive days later at its destination. The family's worst fears were realized days later, when still no word of the vessel had been received. Over the next weeks and months, remnants of Christmas trees washed ashore along Wisconsin's coastline. Astonishingly, the lake continued to give up clues long after the vessel's loss. In 1924 some fishermen in Wisconsin hauled in their nets and discovered a wallet wrapped in waterproof oilskin. Inside were the pristine contents that identified its owner as Herman Schuenemann, the captain of the *Rouse Simmons*. The wallet was returned to the family.

What caused the disaster that befell the *Rouse Simmons*? There are several theories, but most likely a combination of circumstances or events drove the ship under in the heavy seas. Among the factors are the possibility that the vessel lost its ship's wheel in the storm, its poor physical condition, heavy icing and snow on the vessel's exterior and load, plus the load of 3,000–5,000 evergreen trees itself.

A recent underwater archaeological survey, conducted in July and August 2006 by the Wisconsin Historical Society, discovered that the *Rouse Simmons*'s anchor chain, masts, and spar were all lying forward beyond the bow of the wreck. The location of these items suggest that the schooner's weight was in the bow, causing it to nose-dive into the heavy seas and founder. Another explanation may be that the masts, rigging, and chains were all shoved forward when the vessel dove into the lake bed during its descent to the bottom.

After the schooner's loss, the vessel's sailing condition came under scrutiny. One of the legends associated with the disaster was that prior to its departure from Thompson, rats living aboard the now-dilapidated ship were seen making their way to dry land, as if they had a premonition of its doom.

Moreover, some of the crew was rumored to have deserted the ship prior to its departure. There is some disagreement over the exact number and the identities of the crew members aboard the *Rouse Simmons*, but newspaper accounts following the tragedy provide evidence that those aboard the vessel included Captain Schuenemann; Capt. Charles Nelson, who was part owner of the schooner; and approximately 9 or 10 other sailors. Some estimates place the number of men aboard the ship as high as 23, when it was said that a party of lumberjacks had secured their passage back to Chicago.

Following the tragedy, Barbara and her daughters continued the family's Christmas tree business. Newspaper accounts suggest that they used schooners for several more years to bring trees to Chicago. Later, the women brought the evergreen trees to Chicago by train and then sold them from the deck of a docked schooner. After Barbara's death in 1933, the daughters sold trees from the family's lot for a few years.

The loss of the *Rouse Simmons*, however, signaled the beginning of the end for schooners hauling loads of evergreens to Chicago. By 1920, the practice of bringing trees to Chicago via schooner had ceased. Just a few years later, the majority of the once-proud schooners lay leaking and decaying, moored in their berths around the lake.

Over the years, the schooner's disappearance spawned legends and tales that grew ever larger with the passage of time. Some Lake Michigan mariners claimed to have spotted the *Rouse Simmons* appearing out of nowhere. Visitors to the gravesite of Barbara Schuenemann in Chicago's Acacia Park Cemetery claim there is the scent of evergreens present in the air.

Today the legend of Captain Schuenemann and the Christmas Tree Ship appeals to a large and varied audience, but children seem most attracted to the story. Perhaps the allure of a heart-warming story mixed with shipwrecks, Christmas, ghosts, and Lake Michigan's many mysteries proves irresistible to children of all

ages. At least four histories, two documentaries, and several plays, musicals, and folk songs have been written or produced about the legendary ship and its captain and crew.

Each year in early December, the final voyage of Captain Schuenemann and the *Rouse Simmons* is commemorated by the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw*, which makes the journey from northern Michigan to deliver a symbolic load of Christmas trees to Chicago's disadvantaged. Captain Schuenemann and the crew of the *Rouse Simmons* would be proud.”



Christmas Tree Schooner by Charles Vickery.  
Image from the NARA article above.

**FYI:** There are 2 historical markers in Wisconsin regarding The Christmas Tree ship. One is in Two Rivers and the other is in Algoma. Might be a point of interest stop if you are passing through either town (when it's safe to travel again of course!)

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

The Member Spotlight column will return in January.

If you would like to submit your story, please email Louise Stack at: [kilostack@att.net](mailto:kilostack@att.net) for the member spotlight questions.

There are 12 basic questions to answer about your genealogy story, but beyond that you are free to tell your story any way you wish. All the stories are unique and interesting, but also give other members research hints and hope that they too will find their ancestors.

## UPCOMING PROGRAMS

### January 13, 2021

What's New in Security (Bill Heck)  
Password Security: Multi-factor  
Authentication (Sam Colon)

### February 10, 2021

How to Convert Slides, Film and Video to  
Digital Images (Sam Colon)  
Using Photomyne to Colorize & Digitize  
Photos and Albums (Bob Heck)

### March 10, 2021

Primary & Secondary Documentation and  
How to Source Them (Jane Orne)  
MyHeritage (Bruce Butterfield)

### April 14, 2021

Why Join DAR, Mayflower Society or SAR  
(Randy Ray)  
Researching Your Revolutionary War  
Ancestor (guest speaker Brian Barrett)

### May 12, 2021

Reading Worn Headstones (Randy Ray)  
Follow-up for presentations on Cemeteries,  
Find-a-Grave and Family Tree Maker  
(Randy Ray)

### June 9, 2021

Working on it

### July 14, 2021

Catholic Cemeteries, Milwaukee  
Archdiocese, and Billion Graves  
(Sam Colon)  
Divorce and Marriage (Randy Ray)

### August 11, 2021

From Start to Finish (Cathy Dailey)  
Understanding Street View in Google  
(Randy Ray)

If you would like to make a presentation or have a suggestion for a meeting topic, please contact Bob Heck at: [bobheckmpafug@gmail.com](mailto:bobheckmpafug@gmail.com).

## About This Newsletter

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NO COPYRIGHTED ARTICLES may be submitted without express permission of the author and publisher. Articles should be submitted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday to be considered for inclusion in that same month. Credit will be given for your article.

## MPAFUG KEY INFORMATION

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Steering committee meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month except in December. The meetings have historically been held at the Family History Center located at 9600 W. Grange Ave, Hales Corners, WI; however, due to the Covid 19 pandemic the meetings are currently being held via Zoom. The Steering Committee is an informal group of members who get together to plan the general agendas for future meetings. All MPAFUG members are welcome to attend.

## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Membership in MPAFUG is open to anyone interested in learning more about computer genealogy. Membership is \$12 per calendar year for an individual or family. Dues are \$6 for the balance of a year if you join after June 30<sup>th</sup>. Send a check made payable to MPAFUG to:

Lynn Thrasher – MPAFUG Treasurer  
PO Box 14222  
West Allis, WI 53214-0222

### OUR WEB PAGE: <http://mpafug.org>

We invite you to visit our web page and even print a copy of this and the previous month's newsletter. We also have a surname section where you can see who else is working on your family line. Members of MPAFUG have access to a members-only web page which contains past newsletters and handouts from our meetings.