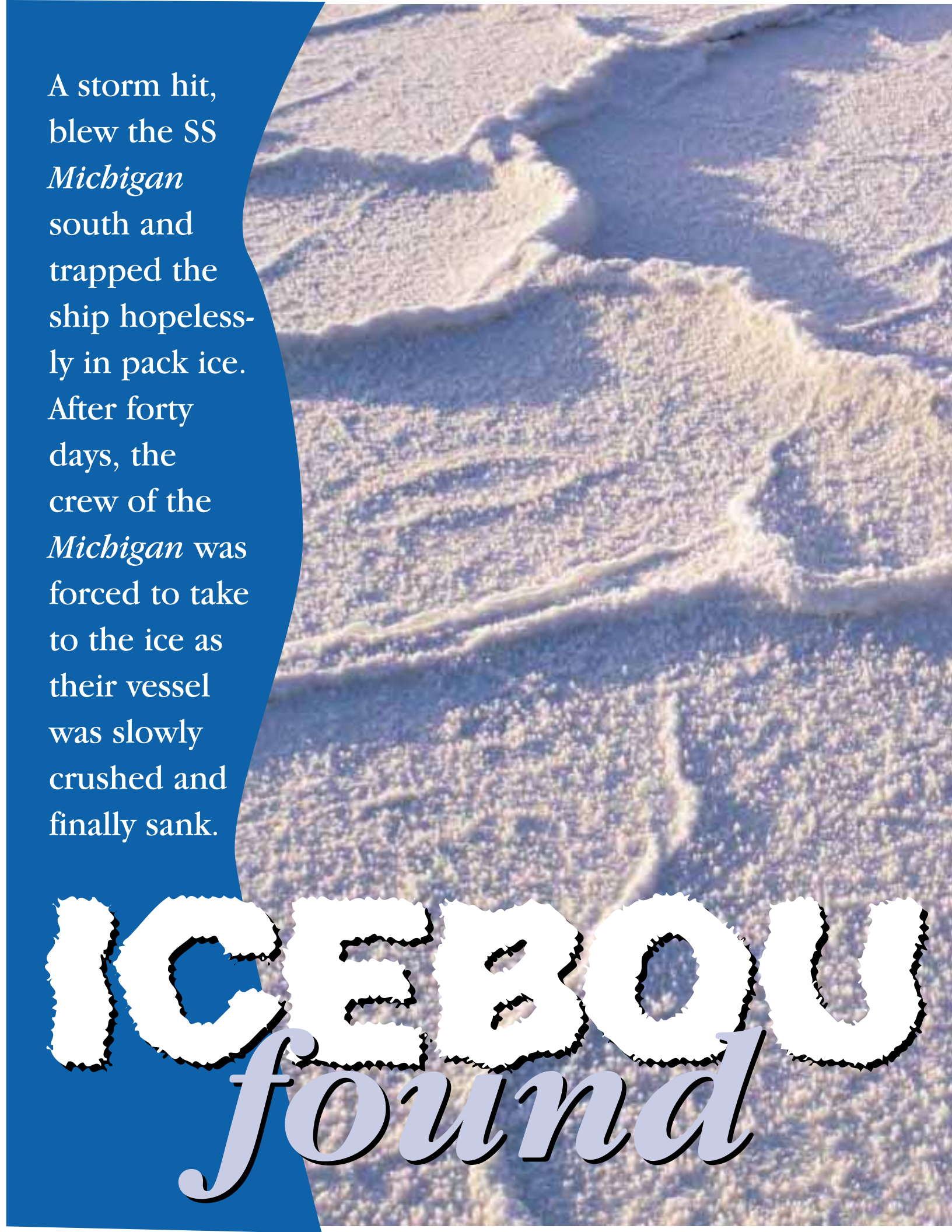
A storm hit, blew the SS *Michigan* south and trapped the ship hopelessly in pack ice. After forty days, the crew of the *Michigan* was forced to take to the ice as their vessel was slowly crushed and finally sank.



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by VALERIE OLSON VAN HEEST

Jeff Vos was among the first divers on the steamer Michigan, found by a team of shipwreck hunters 120 years after it sank in Lake Michigan.

Valerie Olson Van Heest

On a beautiful day in June 2005, technical diver Jeff Vos surfaced after ninety minutes under Lake Michigan. He was seventeen miles off Holland's harbor. I waited anxiously for him to make his way to the swim platform where he could tell me about his dive. He was burdened with the special equipment necessary for a technical dive: a dive computer, two lights, an oxygen tank, a nitrox tank, an argon bottle, and double tanks containing mixed gas (a special blend of air containing less nitrogen and oxygen to avoid the intoxicating and toxic effects of the gases under extreme pressure). Vos, a Holland business owner, had just made a twenty-minute dive to 275 feet. It took him seventy minutes to ascend, breathing the nitrox and oxygen—a process called decompressing—to rid his body of excess gases to avoid getting "the bends." Behind him were his dive buddies, Bob Underhill from Kalamazoo and Todd White from Saugatuck. As Vos reached the platform to steady himself, he removed his fins and handed them up to me. Anticipation was killing me. As a diver myself, I would have liked to make the dive, but I was not trained for mixed gas use.

os climbed the ladder and removed the regulator from his mouth. With a big smile he declared, "That's it. It's the *Michigan*!" I was thrilled! After hundreds of hours of research and three seasons of searching, covering over fifty square miles, Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates (MSRA), a non profit organization I co-founded with fellow divers Jack van Heest, Craig Rich, Ross Richardson, Geoffrey Reynolds and Jan Miller, had been successful in locating the remains of this once-proud steamer. While this was the fourth shipwreck our team had discovered, our previous discoveries—the *H. C. Akeley* (featured in July/August 2002 *Michigan History*), the *Ann Arbor No. 5*, and a scuttled commercial barge— had all been found in the course of looking for other vessels. This discovery was the first time we had found exactly what we were looking for.

Our interest in the *Michigan* originally developed as we realized the similarities with Ernest Shackleton's 1914 expedition to attempt to be the first humans to cross the South Polar continent. After eleven months, Shackleton and his crew of twenty-seven men became hopelessly trapped by the ice, abandoned the damaged *Endurance* and proceeded on foot. One month after they left their schooner, increased pressure from the ice splintered the hull and sent it to the bottom. Shackleton overcame insurmountable obstacles over the next six months to bring his entire crew safely home.

As familiar as we have become with this epic voyage, many of us did not realize that a similar epic played out thirty years earlier on Lake Michigan. In 1885, the 200-foot-steel-hulled SS *Michigan* headed north from Grand Haven to attempt to rescue the *Oneida*, which had become trapped in the ice during the most brutal winter then recorded. A storm hit, blew the *Michigan* south and trapped the ship hopelessly in pack ice. The rescuer became the victim. After forty days, the crew of the *Michigan* was forced to take to the ice as their vessel was slowly crushed and finally sank.

The Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates (MSRA) charted a search pattern based on newspaper reports from 1885, which gave brief information about the ship's sinking and the crew's activities.

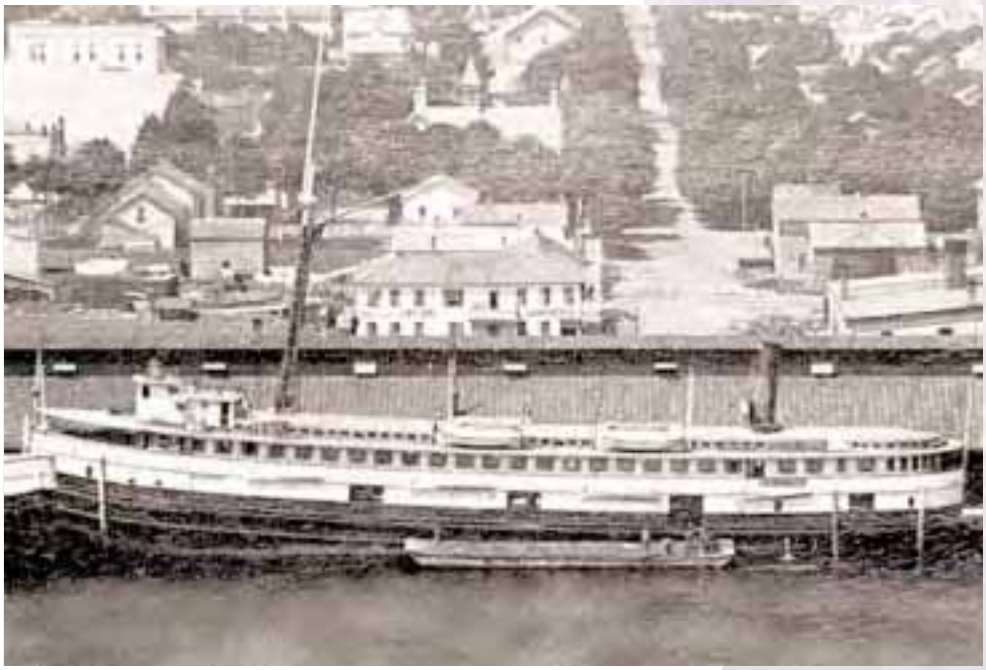
In 2003 MSRA began considering an expedition to locate the *Michigan*. There are several lost shipwrecks that we are intent upon locating, but because everyone on board the *Michigan* survived to record the details of the sinking, we initially thought the effort to find this wreck would not be too difficult.

Built as a sister ship to the SS *Wisconsin* by the Detroit Dry Dock Company for the Goodrich Transportation Company, the *Michigan* was a sturdy passenger steamer. Goodrich ordered three ships built in 1881-the two propellers and a side-wheeler named the SS *City of Milwaukee*. The *Michigan* was 204 feet long, and 35 feet wide with five watertight compartments and a double iron hull. She was launched August 20, 1881, in Wyandotte, Michigan. Her 123 spacious cabins were said to be the grandest on the lakes, decorated without regard to cost, with the finest velvet carpets, furniture and oil paintings. The *Wisconsin*, *Michigan* and *City of Milwaukee* operated successfully for the Goodrich Line for two years, but were sold in May 1883 to the Detroit, Grand Haven and Milwaukee Railroad Company.

Valerie Olson Van Heest

The early winter of 1885 had been especially harsh, but by February the weather had become rather mild. Taking advantage of the weather, the steam ship *Oneida*, also owned by the Detroit, Grand Haven and Milwaukee Railroad Company, was sent out across the lake for a regular cargo run. But the weekend of February 7-8 brought the worst storm in a decade. More than three feet of snow fell in two days. The storms left the *Oneida*, the *Wisconsin* and dozens of other ships trapped by the rapidly forming ice.

The railroad company owners assembled the captain and crew of the *Michigan* to send them to the aid of the *Oneida*, confident that her double iron hull could break the ice around the Oneida, setting her free. On February 9, 1885 the *Michigan* left its winter port in Grand Haven, with a twenty-nine-man crew. Fifty-eight-year old Redmond Prindeville, an Irish immigrant and father of thirteen children, served as captain. The first few miles were clear steaming as Prindeville headed a good distance out then turned north. About twenty miles out another fierce northeasterly gale hit, pushing the *Michigan* in the opposite direction-south into the ever-building pack ice.



Bowling Green State University

The SS *Michigan* was launched on August 20, 1881 and was said to be one of the grandest passenger steamers on the Great Lakes.

By February 11, Lake Michigan was completely frozen over. Overnight the crew on the *Michigan* fought the storm, but the nor'easter was too much for them. By morning, the *Michigan* was entrapped by ice and drifting south with the pack. Within a week, the crew was down to one meal per day and the ship was still locked solidly in the ice. With no relief in sight, the captain chose seventeen of the hardiest men to walk to shore. Among them was twenty-year-old George Sheldon, the ship's porter.

The temperature was 10 degrees below zero as the party, armed with axes, pikes, ropes and rations, began their trek at about 7:00 A.M. on February 17. With nothing but a compass to lead them in the direction of land, they trudged through deep snow and ridges of ice for the better part of the day.

Near day's end they reached shore in Allegan County's West Casco Township more than forty miles south of where they were when the storm struck. The half-frozen crew covered over twelve miles in ten hours. They faced one last remaining challenge before they could rest—to climb a steep bluff. They struggled up the rocky, ice-covered bluff. Once they reached the top, they saw a farmhouse. Owner Levi Thomas and other locals took the men in for the night. The following morning, they were taken by sleigh to the train station at Bravo for the trip north to Grand Haven.

Back on board the *Michigan*, Captain Prindeville and the twelve remaining crew members had little to do except pass the time. On Saturday, February 21, their patience was rewarded as they finally spotted George Sheldon approaching the ship with much-needed supplies to raise the crew's spirits. After a day's rest, young George again set out across the ice with a bag of letters from the crew to their families and a dispatch from the captain. On the twenty-fifth, aided by six local West Casco residents, Sheldon again made the twelve- to fifteen-mile hike out to the stranded vessel with more food and supplies. The West Casco men had planned to return the next day, but the weather suddenly took a turn for the worse and they became unwilling guests of the stranded crew.

David Trotter

Todd White

On June 11, 2005 a side scan sonar picked up an image (top) of the SS *Michigan*. Divers verified that the ship was the SS *Michigan* after clearing the silt and zebra mussels from the ship's capstan (bottom), which faintly revealed the word "Michigan."

In the distance, the ice was beginning to break and the captain hoped his ship would soon be freed. Unable to feed six more men, Prindeville ordered a lifeboat launched. In the morning, the West Casco men headed out on a perilous journey back home, towing the lifeboat as a precaution. The ice did not loosen its grip, though, and the weather worsened—this time with a strong wind out of the south. The *Michigan* began drifting northward in the ice. Newspapers speculated she would reach Grand Haven "after a while." The shifting ice was beginning to take its toll on the hull and the captain considered abandoning ship.

By Thursday, March 19, 1885 the pressure on the *Michigan* was incredible. The crew could hear the iron hull buckling throughout the night and all that day. Four miles distant they spotted a tugboat, the *Arctic* sent out to rescue the stranded steamer. But the ice had trapped it. As the *Michigan* succumbed to the ice, Captain Prindeville abandoned ship and sought the safety of the tug. The ice held as they set out for the *Arctic*, but when they were within a quarter-mile of the strained ship the ice finally stove-in the *Michigan*'s hull, filling the vessel with water and taking her to the lake bottom.

The *Michigan*'s crew spent the next few days with the crew of the *Arctic* waiting for the ice to relinquish its grip. The *Arctic*'s crew was running short of provisions. Early in the morning of Monday, March 23, the *Michigan*'s crew again took to the ice heading for the far-off shore, leaving the tug's crew to wait it out alone. Near Holland, the men reached solid land for the first time in forty days. Thanks to the skill of the crew, the heroism of George Sheldon and the decisive action of Captain Redmond Prindeville, all thirty men lived to tell their incredible story of patience, stamina and heroism. Within a few days the ice loosened its grip and the *Arctic*, the *Wisconsin* and the *Oneida* all made port safely.

With a good understanding of the sinking of the *Michigan* from newspaper accounts, we began to develop a probable search area. Captain Prindeville consistently reported that his ship had gone down between fifteen and twenty miles off Holland's harbor. This gave us a general idea of where to begin the search. However, other newspaper accounts complicated that simple assumption. One newspaper reported on Monday March 23, "Early this morning they left the *Arctic* firmly packed in the ice with no prospects of getting free and arrived at Holland this afternoon at 2:00 and here, via train, to Grand Haven, this evening." While MSRA could not be sure how far the *Arctic* was from shore, the train station was seven miles from Holland harbor. If the crew left the *Arctic* at daybreak—and reached the train station by 2:00 P.M.—their trek was accomplished in only seven and a half hours. Traveling at about two miles per hour would not have allowed them to reach the train station as soon as 2:00 P.M.. We considered the possibility that the *Michigan* was closer than the captain reported, possibly ten to fifteen miles off shore. That speculation caused us to increase the overall search area to over sixty square miles.

Since 1998, MSRA has been partnering with David Trotter of Canton, Michigan, to search for shipwrecks off west Michigan. Utilizing his Klein side scan sonar for ten days each spring, Trotter provides the technology and expertise to help solve local mysteries. The unit works by running a torpedo-like sonar, called a "fish," in the water behind the boat. The fish sends acoustical impulses through a cable attached to a printer on the boat, which translates the sound waves to a printed image.

Early on the morning of May 24, 2004, Trotter noted an unusual target 270 feet deep. In reviewing the printed image, Trotter estimated the target at about 200 feet long. The darker-than-usual plot suggested a ship made of metal. Could it be that with so little effort, the *Michigan* had revealed herself? When we returned to the target to plot more detailed images,

our hopes were dashed. The image did not match the shape of a steamer. Dives a few weeks later revealed a modern barge probably scuttled for the insurance money.

With over twenty miles now covered and a scuttled barge located in the middle of the *Michigan* search area, MSRA focused the 2005 search on finding the *Michigan*. Strategizing over the winter, we divided the remaining search area into quadrants of about six to eight square miles, which represented what Trotter felt could be covered in one long day. The initial focus would be quadrants closer to shore, based on the belief that the *Michigan*'s crew could not have reached the Holland train station by 2:00 P.M. if they were much farther out.

With good weather on our side, we made incredible headway in just four days, but found nothing. We turned back to the newspaper accounts to look for additional clues. Considering the reliability of a seasoned captain like Redmond Prindeville (who had the time to take sightings on his position while trapped), we concluded that he was probably not too far off in reporting his position fifteen to twenty miles off shore. But what of those newspapers that reported the crew reaching the train station, over twenty-five miles distant, in just over seven hours?

I reread all of the articles reporting the crew's final walk to shore and the wording was nearly identical. The *Saugatuck Gazette* reported, "After recuperating until Sunday morning, the Captain led the crew ashore reaching land seven miles from Holland. This morning [Monday] all walked to Holland, and arrived in Grand Haven on the 4:00 train." Could it be that the crew had actually taken two days to reach the train station from the *Arctic*? If they spent Sunday night somewhere along shore after hiking from the *Arctic*, they could have easily walked seven miles to the train station by 2:00 P.M. on Monday.

With those new insights, MSRA moved the search farther off shore. Selecting which quadrant to work each day was critical, considering that the weather could prematurely end the search. During the next few days, we covered three quadrants without finding the wreck. On our final search day, three quadrants still remained within the search area.

On June 11, we searched in the quadrant closest to our home. Reaching our stating point at 2:00 p.m., we began the first run of the day. Just near the end of the four-mile run, Dave Trotter, who was in the cabin watching the printer, called for us to come about and run the same line again. A small, odd image had captured Trotter's attention. It was directly below the boat and so was unclear. The next pass provided more detail. From his perch in the cabin, Trotter called out, "We have a target. I think we've got her!" Hopes were higher this time. This was surely not a barge.

Divers of the MSRA identified the SS *Michigan*'s anchors, bollards and capstan (top) and the ships double wheel (bottom).

Photos Todd White

The initial identifying dive made by Jeff Vos, Bob Underhill and Todd White was an amazing accomplishment considering the extreme depth of the dive. While an environmental nuisance, the zebra mussel infestation that began in the Great Lakes in the 1990s has had a mixed effect for divers. As filter feeders, the mussels have helped improve visibility, but they have begun to obscure the wrecks as they cluster on wood and metal surfaces. In the 1980s it would have been pitch black at only 100 feet deep. Today, the dive team could see the outline of this wreck from about 220 feet and still had ambient light at 275 feet. During their twenty minutes' bottom time the dive team was able to travel from stern to bow and back looking for features to help make a positive identification.

Vos made his way to the rail to look for the name board that the *Michigan*'s blueprints indicated would be there. Sure enough, at the right spot, there was the board, but silt action had "sandblasted" the paint, leaving the name illegible. White and Underhill headed to the stern, where the darkness revealed a tremendous double wheel. The wheel confused them, since accounts of the Michigan's construction did

Catherine Rich

The MSRA team includes (clockwise from top left) Craig Rich, Ross Richardson, Valerie Olson Van Heest, Jack Van Heest and Jan Miller.

not mention this unique wheel, which was designed to afford more leverage in high winds. Continuing forward they encountered the ship's capstan, used to help raise and lower the anchors. The divers knew that the round, domed capstan covers were always engraved with the ship's name. After clearing the silt and zebra mussels, they saw the letters MICHIGAN.

Before heading back, White and Underhill filmed the two sturdy wood stock anchors in place just as they would have been, considering the *Michigan* had no need for them. Heading aft along the starboard side toward the down line, the divers peered into the cargo openings. Some had hatches and doors in place, but others were open. The temptation to go inside was great, but their bottom time was almost up, and they faced over an hour of decompression before they could share their discoveries with us.

During subsequent dives on the *Michigan*, it became clear that this ship, which we had expected to be more intact due to the nonviolent way that it sank, was broken up. While the iron hull is mostly intact, the upper works have all collapsed onto the deck. The stern exhibits significant sand and clay buildup, which suggests that the ship hit stern first, churning up yards of bottom material. The upper works, smokestack and mast all lay fallen in the direction of the port side toward the stern, indicating that the initial impact caused a massive collapse. Had the joints waterlogged and decayed over time, the structures would have fallen more haphazardly.

Over the several dives, the divers became more familiar with the layout of the wreck and opted to venture inside through the open cargo hatches. Making his way toward the bow specifically to locate the galley, Vos was surprised to find white porcelain dishes still on the wall racks, possibly put away after the crew's last dinner onboard the boat. White swam down a stairwell near the bow to find himself in the forecastle where the windlass, around which the anchor chain wound, was in perfect condition. From there, a ladder led down to the chain locker. Before White exited this compartment, he videotaped the brass plaques on a forward stanchion that indicated the place of manufacture of the ship.

Meanwhile, Underhill made his way aft to the engine compartment, which was blocked by fallen structure. He knew from the blueprints that behind the engine were storage rooms. Arriving at the storage room door, he found it invitingly open, but had to twist sideways to make it in. He discovered several brass oil lanterns hanging from hooks and on shelves that would have lit the ship during the cold dark nights.

Respecting the ship and its artifacts as a time capsule that represents the ordeal that the *Michigan* and its crew endured, the divers left everything as they found it. mh

A 2006 inductee into the Women Divers Hall of Fame, **VALERIE OLSON VAN HEEST,** a Holland, based graphic designer and writer, has served eighteen years in leadership roles in the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago and the Southwest Michigan Underwater Preserve. She is presently a director of Michigan Shipwreck Research Associates. She wishes to thank Craig Rich and Ross Richardson, fellow MSRA Board Members, who assisted in preparing this article.

The story of the *H. C. Akeley* was featured in the July/August 2002 issue of *Michigan History*. Read about it at our website, **www.michiganhistorymagazine.com**.