The cold waters of Lake Michigan help preserve for the ages a wealth of underwater resources.

Underwater Museums

(Photo by Jim Jarecki.)

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The waters off Chicago's Magnificent Mile are known for incredible fishing opportunities. Anglers anxiously await the annual runs of Coho and chinook salmon, yellow perch, smallmouth bass and rainbow, lake and brown trout.

Sportsmen of a different sort spend hours beneath those waters, watching fish found congregating in and around another fascinating resource—Lake Michigan's shipwrecks.

Illinois is a water-rich state, bordered by 880 miles of rivers and an additional 87,100 miles of rivers and streams within its borders. But it is the approximately 1 million acres of Lake Michigan that Illinois owns that make this a maritime state.

This network of waterways is what made Illinois a hub for distribution of goods and services throughout the frontier. With hundreds of ships plying the waters daily, casualties occurred. Some due to nature (shallow water, dangerous current, sandbars, a lack of natural harbors, ice, unexpected storms), others to mechanical or human error. Within the Great Lakes lie an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 shipwrecks, with several hundred within Illinois' portion of Lake Michigan. An estimated 195 steamships lie wrecked on the beds of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers.

"There are a number of popular shallow and rewarding Lake Michigan

Just off the Chicago beach front, divers can explore the Straits of Mackinac (above), scuttled in 2003, and the Wells Burt, a three-masted schooner that sank in 1883.

(Photo by Chet Childs.)

Photographed as it was purposely sank in 2000, structures on the Holly Barge now support a diversity of plant, invertebrate and fish life.

shipwreck dive sites a short boat ride from the Chicago shoreline," said Cris Kohl, a former high school English and history teacher who wrote his first book on the Great Lakes maritime history in 1985, spurring a career change to the publication world.

The cold, fresh water of Lake Michigan has helped preserve wooden structures on the Wells Burt for 123 years.

With more than 2,000 dives under his belt, Kohl is intimately familiar with Great Lakes wrecks.

"Some of the best shipwrecks in the world are the cold-water museums lying within the waters of the Great Lakes," Kohl explained. "Within a few decades of going down, marine worms penetrate and obliterate wooden ships submerged in saltwater environments. The combination of cold, fresh water and absence of those organisms creates an environment suitable for the long-term preservation of shipwrecks."

Before you dig out your dive gear or sign up for a class, a word of caution is in order. Lake Michigan diving conditions are different from the clear, warm waters many certified divers are accustomed to, and many have not attained the level of expertise required for shipwrecks (wreck diver certification is required for penetration dives). Contact a local dive establishment for informa-

(Photos by Tony Kiefer.)

A dive on the tug Tacoma offers everything from scores of gobies peeking from holes within the zebra mussel-encrusted boiler to panoramic views of the double expansion steam engine beneath the shadow of the dive boat.

Modern-day pirates and claim-jumpers beware

Shipwrecks—the physical structure and artifacts in and around it—are protected by federal and state laws, and wrecks in Illinois waters more than 50 years old belong to the state. While diving is permitted on such shipwrecks, removing, disturbing or damaging any part of the shipwreck or the associated artifacts is prohibited by state and federal laws and subject to various criminal and civil penalties.

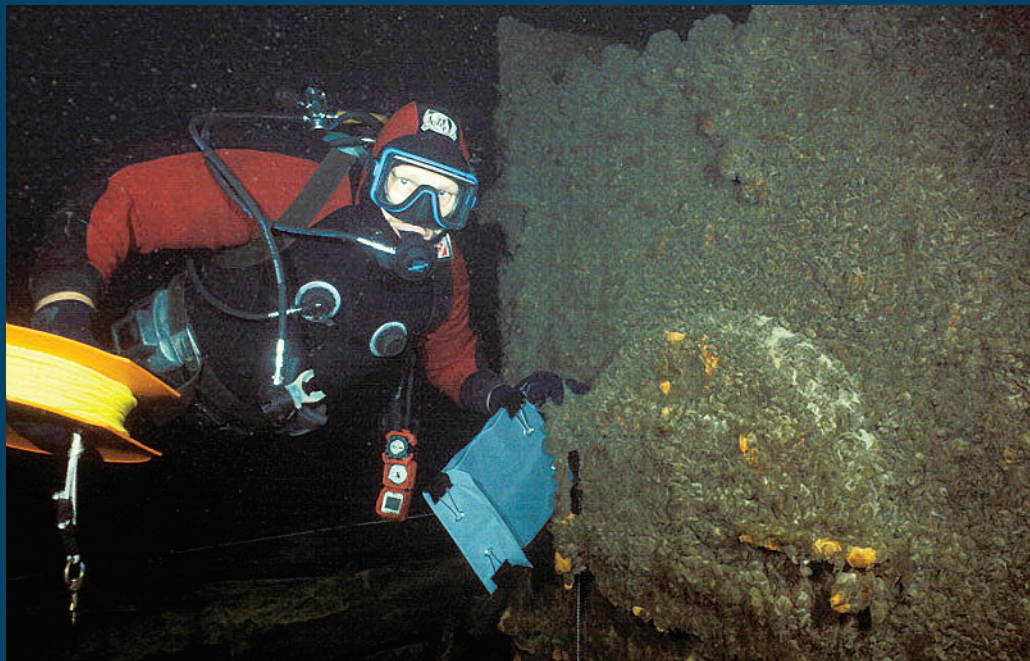
Covered under the federal Abandoned Shipwreck Act of 1987 are the wrecks and artifacts on the bottom of the 1 million acres of Lake Michigan Illinois owns. In 1990 as the Chief Archaeologist with the Illinois Historic Preservation, Tom Emenson authored the state Archaeological and Paleontological Act. Now an Adjunct Professor in anthropology with the University of Illinois and director of the Illinois Transportation Archaeology Research Program, Emenson explained that in Illinois, shipwrecks are considered archaeological resources and receive protections similar to historic and prehistoric human skeletal remains, mounds, earthworks, forts and village sites.

tion on classes and accessing wrecks.

The latest Lake Michigan wreck, the steel ferry The Straits of Mackinac, was intentionally sunk in April 2003 and is providing scientists and recreational divers an opportunity to observe how aquatic creatures colonize a new habitat.

"Within weeks of sinking, divers were observing fish in and around the ship," said Patrick Hammer, owner of Scuba Emporium and one of the forces behind the project to receive state and federal clearance to scuttle The Straits of Mackinac as a dive site. "The food chain started developing almost immediately, with small perch, bass and crayfish quickly finding protective cover inside the wreck. It also didn't take long for zebra mussels to start attaching to the ship and divers are keeping a vigilant eye on the boat's hull and recording the rate of infestation."

"While there is no active search taking place, we know a number of unexplored



After years of service as a sailing vessel, the 1889 Rotarian was docked and used as dance hall and restaurant. Bottles remain in the boat 75 years after it was scuttled.

(Photos by Tony Kiefer.)

Whether floating above shipwrecks or penetrating the hull after earning advanced certifications, divers absorb a historical perspective of Illinois.

wrecks exist—some we know the location of, others we have vague history on," Kohl explained. "We've yet to find the location of many of the old ships filled with garbage in the 1920s and 1930s and scuttled 8 to 12 miles off shore."

And the dive sites are not restricted to ships in Lake Michigan.

Kohl elaborated: "At several locations in the Great Lakes, including a site off Chicago's shoreline, petrified tree stumps stand—remnants of forests present more than 7,500 years ago, sometime after glaciers sculpted the land now known as Illinois. Scattered throughout the lake are at least 150 World War II planes, put there by pilots unsuccessful in their aircraft landing training. And 21 miles off shore, in 251 feet of water, sits a World War I UC-97 German submarine, a ship used to raise War Bonds but destroyed as a stipulation of the Treaty of Versailles."

"Diving on shipwrecks isn't for the faint-hearted as you usually are moving around in a cold, dark environment," Kohl concluded. "But I always emerge with a smile on my face and a great sense of accomplishment. No matter where in the world I go diving, life can't get much better than when I come up from a dive and look back at the sun setting behind the gorgeous Chicago lakefront skyline."

Popular Wrecks

Built in 1873, the 201-foot, three-masted schooner the Wells Burt sank during a storm in May 1883. The 11 crew and a load of coal were lost. The boat sits in 38 to 45 feet of water approximately 3 miles east of Evanston.

On July 29, 1936 after foundering with a load of sand and gravel, 15 of the 22 crew on board lost their lives when the 239-foot Material Services barge sank 7 years after it was launched. Today, the nearly intact barge lies in 22 to 38 feet of water about 2,000 feet northeast of the Calumet Harbor Light.

Near Chicago's Clark Point Shoal and Rainbow Park, 2.5 miles north- northwest of the Calumet Harbor Light, is the Tacoma. The 73-foot-long wooden steam-powered tug sank in 1929 and lies 27 to 35 feet beneath the surface.

Resting on the lake bed, at a depth of nearly 85 feet, is the 1889 wooden steamer the Rotarian. After being abandoned as a sailing vessel, the Rotarian was docked and used as a Chicago dance hall and restaurant. It was scuttled in 1931 8.2 miles east-northeast of the Chicago harbor entrance to Lake Michigan.

The most recent Chicago-area shipwreck, the 196-foot-long steel car and passenger ferry The Straits of Mackinac, was scuttled in 78 feet of water at 4:10 p.m. on April 10, 2003. The ship is located approximately 10 miles north of Navy Pier.

Holly Barge is 120 feet long, 27 feet wide and 12 feet high and sits upright on the bottom in about 33 feet of water. Approximately 2 miles from Chicago, it was purposely sank in May 2000 approximately 150 feet from another wreck, the 1906 Illinois. A hydraulic sand dredge, the Illinois sank by the early 1930s and has failed the test of time and wave action, being strewn across the lake floor.

Want to learn more?

The Underwater Archaeological Society (UASC) of Chicago holds monthly meetings at the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. Members and invited presenters share their expertise on Lake Michigan shipwrecks and history, and provide updates on survey and research projects. For information, visit www.chicagosite.org/uasc.htm or write the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago, P.O. Box 11752, Chicago, IL 60611.

Check with your local dive shop for more information on Lake Michigan shipwrecks and training to make your dive a safe and enjoyable experience. In planning a trip, ask for maps of the wrecks prepared by UASC.

After a day under water, divers can pause to admire a spectacular Chicago skyline sunset.

(Photo by Dan Kashberger.)