

On Saturday afternoon, August 4, twenty intrepid Aqua Masters met in Barcelona, NY, to do some wreck diving in the eastern basin of Lake Erie. We met at Osprey Dive Charters, run by Captain Jim Herbert with the big, beautiful boat "Southwind." The weather was perfect - the sun was shining, the sky was blue, the water was flat and calm, and the air temperature was a comfortable 75 deg F.

After a short run from the harbor, we arrived at the first dive site, the "Betty Hedger," a relatively newly discovered wreck. Up until recently it was called the "Sulfur Barge," but in the past few weeks it had finally been identified by tonnage marks found near the forward cargo hatch. It is a wooden barge that sank in 115' of water in approximately 1938 while carrying a cargo of sulfur. The barge lies east-west, and the mooring line is attached to the bottom at the western end, which is the bow. Upon descending, the barge was found to be upright but with its sides collapsed. However, the hatch framing and parts of the decking are still standing about 10' off the bottom precariously supported by a series of columns down the center of the ship. Beneath this overhead framing lies a large pile of sulfur, which has pushed the barge's sides outwards and caused them to collapse. The north (starboard) side has collapsed outwards, but the south (port) side has collapsed inwards. A small deck is still intact at the bow and has several square wooden tow bits, a small winch, and a capstan. A small anchor can be seen nestled into the winch if it is examined closely. A triangular bulkhead at this end marks the area where the hatches start. There are seven cargo hatches overall, and they are marked by a series of large rectangular openings surrounded on both sides by a continuous low wall with a thin strip of decking beyond the wall and running the length of the barge. Large cleats can be seen at regular intervals on this strip of decking. Some snagged netting was evident amidships on the port side. At the eastern end of the barge is the remains of a cabin. The roof, back, and front portions are gone, but the sides remain with two portholes on each side. They still have their glass in them, and remarkably all but the front port one have mesh insect screening on their outsides. A collapsed aft deck is tilted downwards behind the cabin with a single capstan still attached. Some excavation and scouring of the sediment on the bottom is also evident in this area.

Some treasure was inadvertently added to the wreck's debris field when a weight belt was lost, but everything else went relatively smoothly beyond a broken fin strap and a balky air-integrated computer. Strangely, the same person was involved, starting speculation about a possible voodoo curse. Visibility was good with an estimated 80' of viz, which is average for the eastern basin. Lighting conditions were also good, making for a good dive and a wonderful introduction to eastern basin diving. The thermocline was located at 70'-75' with a bottom temperature of 42 deg F (brrrrrr) below it. This is another joy of eastern basin diving. The surface temperature was a balmy 76 deg F.

The next wreck was the "Passaic," an arched steamer that sank in 80' of water off Dunkirk. Unfortunately, it was dynamited by a treasure hunter in the 1970's who mistakenly believed it was the fabled "Dean Richmond," which supposedly held treasure. The result was lots of scarps of wood and a fully exposed triple-expansion steam engine and its boiler. The mooring line is tied to the top of the engine, which is a pyramidal frame of iron resembling the Eiffel Tower and filled with the mechanisms of the engine. It rises about 15'-20' off the bottom, and at its base are the remains of the ship. It is mostly a jumbled collection of wooden timbers and occasional piping. Near the engine is the large boiler, including its firebox, which can be entered and then swam up through to exit at the top where the smokestack would be.

Unfortunately, visibility was extremely poor on this wreck at only 5'-8' at the bottom and improving slightly to 10'-13' near the top of the engine. This is definitely the result of the thermocline being present at the depth of the wreck. However, it is very reminiscent of the viz in the central basin, so it was like a dive in Cleveland. One positive result was the water temperature was much warmer and more tolerable at 55 deg F with a mild thermocline layer at 55'. Several burbot, also known as lawyer fish or ling cods, were seen on both wrecks, and some large 4" gobies were seen on the "Passaic." The zebra mussels, which in recent years have been invading the eastern basin, were moderate on the "Betty Hedger" but heavy on the "Passaic." Overall, a great time was had by all, and hopefully there will be more visits to the eastern basin again soon!