

On Saturday, October 6, 2007, ten Lake Erie Wreck Divers (LEWD) gathered in Brockville, Ontario, to dive the shipwrecks of the St. Lawrence River. On the trip were Georgann and Mike Wachter, Ted Green, Rita Montorsi-Green, Jacques Girouard, Marty Leonard, Jim Gilbert, Jim Wilson, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee. The eight- to nine-hour drive to Brockville was done the previous day, and everyone gathered at the waterfront for dinner that evening after arriving in Brockville. Also along on the trip was Linda Wilson, who came aboard the boat the first day and toured ashore the second day.

The first day's trip was aboard the "Emily C," a converted houseboat with Captain Paul and dive master Danny. The boat was out of Rockport, Ontario, about 20 miles upstream from Brockville closer to Lake Ontario and the particular wrecks we wished to dive that day. There were also two non-LEWD divers aboard. Since the first wreck was on the American side of the river, after leaving the Canadian dock it was necessary to go about 5 miles upstream to check in with American customs. It was also necessary to have a complete list of divers aboard, identification documentation, and their passport information a week beforehand. The customs office is located on Heart Island, which contains beautiful Boldt Castle, an enormous 120-room Rhineland-style castle. It was built by an American millionaire at the turn of the century but never completed or occupied due to the premature death of his new bride, for whom the castle was intended. After lining up on the dock and being thoroughly inspected by customs personnel dressed in black body armor with lots of weapons, we headed off to the first wreck.

The trip to the customs office was fortuitous, however, because we got to see the castle (and gift shop) up close and because it extended our trip through the river in what is called the Thousand Islands area. The entire area is extremely picturesque with hundreds of islands of every size dotting the river. Almost every island, no matter how small, seemed to have a summer cottage or two on it, and the entire area is heavily forested with clear water, allowing the rocks, weeds, and fish to be seen on the bottom of the river as the boat lazily made its way along the shallows between the islands.

Once leaving Boldt Castle, we entered the main channel of the river and headed to the first wreck, the "Keystorm." This steel freighter got lost and hit a shoal outside the shipping channel in October, 1912. The ship stayed afloat for several hours, allowing the crew to escape, but it eventually sank and slid down the shoal's slope. A salvage attempt was made to raise the ship, but it failed, and the vessel was abandoned in place after its coal cargo was salvaged. The bow rests in about 30' of water pointing north towards the Canadian shore, and the stern lies in 105' of water. We tied off to the amidships mooring, and as everyone geared up to enter the water, a loud, sharp gunshot was heard next to the boat. At first it wasn't clear what had happened, but then it became obvious a bolt of lightning had just struck within tens of feet of the boat. The day had been overcast and warm at 70 deg F, and the sky to the west had darkened as we

prepared to dive the wreck. Everyone was called back into the boat as a sudden hard rain started. The Wachters had just descended, however, and missed all the excitement. After about 10-15 minutes the rain stopped and no further lightning or thunder was observed, so the divers entered the water and descended to find only a mild current, 30' of visibility, and a warm 65-68 deg F water temperature from top to bottom with no thermocline. The ship lies on its starboard side with its deck sheltered from the river current. There are two large masts attached to the deck, and they stick out horizontally downstream about 20'-40' above the bottom. Each mast has an attached boom that drops down into the bottom. A winch is mounted to the deck next to the aft mast, and a cavernous cargo hold extends between the two masts.

Moving towards the stern, there are two more cargo openings that are connected to each other inside, and then the stern deckhouse is encountered. The large smokestack on the roof of the deckhouse has fallen diagonally into the bottom, and a ventilator (air scoop) lies on the bottom underneath it. Aft of the fallen stack on the roof are the skylights to the engine room. They provide easy viewing and access to the triple-expansion engine along with the floor grates, piping, and other machinery occupying the engine room. A lot of time could be spent inside this area exploring if penetration of the wreck is desired. Moving further aft, there is a large square opening to the interior of the ship in the crew's mess area. Finally, the rounded stern is encountered, and peeking around it into the river's current, two blades from the propeller can be seen sticking out of the mud on the bottom, but the rudder is completely buried. There is a sheltered breezeway along the side of the ship that progresses upwards. Swimming sheltered against the current inside this breezeway, the rooms along this side of the deckhouse can be seen. Most are filled with silt or open to a collapsed maze of wood paneling, but various items can be distinguished such as a partially buried stove in the galley. Another ventilator can also be seen mounted to the roof near the forward end of the deckhouse.

Along the length of the ship towards the bow, bundles of steel cables can be seen wrapped around the girth of the ship at regular intervals. These are the remains of the failed attempt to raise the ship. On the bottom can be seen sinks, tubs, dishes, and pots left for divers to view. Forward of the first mast is another cargo hold and then the impressive front deckhouse. It is three levels high with the first two levels enclosed and the top bridge level a skeleton framework with lots of windows and openings. The interiors of the two top levels are penetrable but barren of items, and the bottom level is a maze of broken wooden paneling with lots of silt. Because of the sideways orientation of the wreck, it was also extremely disorienting to swim around and look into the interior spaces of the deckhouse. Hanging motionless inside the interior spaces were dozens of perch. In fact, the entire ship is covered with fish. Huge schools of bass were seen hang around on top of the wreck waiting for food to drift into them from upstream, many perch were seen in the interior, and an enormous sheepshead (freshwater drum) was seen at the stern. This wreck, like all the wrecks in this area, is also

covered with lots of freshwater sponges. This amount of life is unexpected for someone used to diving Great Lakes shipwrecks.

On the bow's deck forward of the deckhouse is a large windlass with anchor chains running across the deck and down hawse pipes to the cavities on the sides of the ship where the anchors were mounted. The anchors were salvaged, however, and an anchor chain with a cut link can be seen hanging off the bow. The rocky slope of the shoal that the ship hit rises up ahead of the bow, and on the current side of the ship, an enormous dent and gash can be seen on the port side that extends for 30'-40'. It is interesting how the metal appears twisted and torn as if it was tissue paper. The ship obviously hit at high speed, extending the damage for a considerable distance along its length.

After the dive, burgers and hotdogs were grilled for lunch on the top deck of the houseboat. There were also cookies, drinks, and chips. We were fascinated to discover ketchup-flavored potato chips that are popular in Canada but not available in the United States. Dive master Dan also entertained us by talking to Rita about an interesting prosthetic device he has. After lunch we motored back to our original Canadian dock to briefly check in with their customs (no inspections, passports, body armor, or weapons required), and then we headed out only a few hundred feet to dive the next wreck, the "Kinghorn." This wreck was discovered by accident relatively recently in 1995 in a busy boat channel only a few hundred feet from the popular Rockport dock used by dive boats. It was discovered while looking for a sunken cabin cruiser that supposedly exists not far downstream. It was one of seven wheat-laden schooner-barges being towed downstream by a tug in April, 1897, when a sudden storm sank three of the barges, and the leaking "Kinghorn" sank in 85' of water just before making it to the Rockport dock.

The current was noticeably stronger on this dive, requiring holding onto the mooring until reaching the bottom where the current was weak enough to swim against with some effort. The ship lies with its bow pointing west into the current, and the mooring block is about 30' off the starboard side of the bow. Visibility was noticeably better at 30'-40' at this site. The bowsprit is missing from the wreck, but there is a small piece left on the deck behind the stem, and a small statue holding a lantern – obviously a modern piece placed there by divers - rests on top of it. Cindy also located an interesting sponge in this area with tentacles that made it appear as if it were an anemone. A samson post is near the stem, followed by a pawl bitt, and then a metal windlass with prominent gears for the purchase rims. These are connected by rods to a rocking arm lever mounted on the front of the pawl bitt. This method of ratcheting the windlass to raise the anchors is easily observed and a well laid out example. A large pile of anchor chain rests on the deck behind the windlass, and some of it dangles down a hatch opening into the chain locker, which is divided by a partition from the main hold.

It was easy to drift down the length of the deck while observing it. The deck is mostly intact with three or four hatch openings and a cylindrical-headed capstan mounted amidships. A total of four wooden bitts are mounted near the gunwales forward and aft on each corner of the ship. No railing is present around the ship, and just a plain low gunwale marks the perimeter. A rectangular hatch opening at the stern possibly marks where a small cabin may have existed since the area below deck in this area is divided by a wooden partition from the hold. The stern of the vessel contains the ship's wheel lying flush on the deck with its attached steering gear hanging vertically down through a hole in the deck. Curiously, the stern is very pointed and could easily be mistaken for the bow if were not for the presence of the wheel. On the bottom behind the stern is a large pile of wood that formed the transom, and the rudder can be seen lying flat on the bottom next to this wreckage. There is also an informational plaque and a new stone marker for a diver that died on this wreck this past winter.

Due to the current, it was easier to swim back along the length of the wreck by swimming inside it. There is a hatch opening forward of the partitioned cabin area that makes this possible, and the deck in this area is also somewhat torn up. This damage reveals the deck beams are in fact made of metal, not wood. Interestingly, this vessel is an unusual composite sailing vessel with metal used for the frames and many structural members, but it is planked in wood. This transitional style of construction was short-lived and more common in steamers. It is unusual to find in schooners, making this wreck a rare example. Due to the river current, the interior of the wreck is also almost completely free of silt, revealing the ceiling (bottom) planking, which is usually hidden by silt in most wrecks. Wherever planks are missing, the metal keel and frames are revealed for examination. There is no centerboard, and small deck stanchions inside are made of metal. A modern bicycle can be found in the hold – another diver-added item – and towards the bow is the stove sitting inside the hold. It is piled high with pots, pans, bottles, dishes, and other glassware – some old and some modern. Many divers spend a lot of time here examining the various items. Just forward of the stove on the starboard side is a double-barreled hand pump lying flat on the floor. A large square wooden post is at the extreme forward end of the hold and mirrors an identical one at the stern near the cabin's divider. Both posts end just above the deck and may be the remains of the ship's rudimentary masts.

After the dive it was an extremely short trip back to the dock, where gear was unloaded and tanks were taken to the dive shop, Abucs Scuba, in Brockville for filling for the next day. After dropping the tanks off, everyone cleaned up at the hotel, and then a restaurant search commenced. Since it was Canadian Thanksgiving weekend, it turned out most places were closed or reserved for special holiday dinners. However, a place was eventually found that was empty and looking for customers. We obliged and had the whole place to ourselves throughout the evening.

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On Sunday, October 7, 2007, LEWD boarded the small pontoon boat "Helen C" with Captain Carlie in charge. The dock was located just a few minutes upstream in a Brockville park, but one member of the group heard "15 miles" and proceeded to get drive far, far away and get lost. After eventually finding their way back into town and loading their gear, we headed out 45 minutes late to the wreck of the "Robert Gaskin" downstream and immediately offshore of the scuba shop in downtown Brockville. The "Gaskin" was a barkentine that had been stripped to a work barge and was being used to raise a sunken train ferry in September, 1889, when a salvage pontoon on the submerged ship broke loose and punched a hole in the bow of the "Gaskin," sinking it next to the ferry. The first attempt to raise the stricken "Gaskin" failed, and it sank again. The third attempt saw it towed a short distance towards Brockville only to have another runaway pontoon put a hole in the stern, this time sinking it for good.

We connected to the bow mooring and descended to find 30'-40' of visibility and a strong current that required pulling oneself hand-over-hand along the chain on the bottom to reach the mooring block, which lies downriver of the bow on the starboard side. The bow points north towards the shore/Brockville, and the ship rests upright on the bottom perpendicular to the current with the starboard side sheltered. There is an informational plaque near the mooring block, and a large anchor missing its wood stock lies on the bottom near the ship. This was supposedly a stolen anchor from another location that was placed on this wreck for divers to see. An enormous round hole exists on the starboard side of the bow, and it is easily entered to get inside the ship and away from the current. This hole was most likely created by the first pontoon to sink the ship. Inside the bow are several 55-gallon metal drums, and the top staves of a buried wood barrel can be seen just barely sticking out of the silt. Swimming inside, wooden center posts are found but no centerboard. Large metal turnbuckles with attached chain were seen in several locations, and a large pot was seen amidships. The decking above is mostly missing except around the hatch coamings, making this barely a penetration dive. There is a wooden centerline partition dividing the ship into two halves at the stern, and there is another large circular hole, probably made by the second pontoon, on the starboard side.

The very tip of the stern comes to a sharp point like the "Kinghorn," and two rectangular openings allow swimming out the tip of the stern. The rudder lies flat on the bottom, and a pile of debris that was the transom is on the bottom upstream. Chain and a metal block hang off the stern on the starboard side. Swimming back along either the deck or starboard side, two large wooden beams are seen mounted to the deck with built-in pulleys at their tips and overhanging the starboard side by 10'-20'. These were probably used in the salvage effort to raise the car ferry. Two sets of chainplates were seen, and a single deadeye is at the bow. On the bow's deck is an enormous samson post

along with the port carrick bitt for a missing windlass. A rocking lever exists on the forward part of the samson post that would have been used to ratchet the windlass when raising the anchors. More wooden debris exists off the port side of the bow on the bottom.

Topside during the surface interval, the day was bright and sunny but much colder than the previous day with a 53-deg F air temperature and a strong, biting northeast wind blowing up the river, creating whitecaps and 1' waves. Those in wetsuits were pretty cold, especially in the exposed pontoon boat, and it was joked everyone should get back in the 65-deg F water to warm up. The boat motored with some difficulty in the waves upstream to the Brockville Narrows. This is where the shipping channel and most of the river's flow is funneled between the Canadian shore and Sparrow Island in the middle of the river. The result is a fast 2-3 knot current with shipping traffic running both ways in the narrow passage. The dive was to the "Lillie Parsons," a two-masted schooner that had its cargo of coal shift in a squall, resulting in the crew abandoning the ship, the ship striking the island, and the ship sinking in the shallows. It then flipped upside down into deeper water and lies on a narrow ledge against the island at about a 30' depth at the stern and a 40' depth at the bow. The dive is started by being dropped upstream and drifting on the surface until an anchor without a wood stock is seen on Sparrow Island with its chain leading down into the water. Due to the fast current, a quick decent must be made in time to catch the chain. It then leads down a rocky cliff in the strong current to the bow of the wreck, which points downstream. There is an informational plaque at the base of the chain, and then another chain eye-bolted to the bottom runs the length of the wreck on the port/island side. To navigate the wreck, one pulls oneself hand-over-hand up the chain to the stern, releases the chain, and drifts downstream to catch the length of chain at the bow to work one's way upstream again.

There is coal scattered everywhere from the cargo, and one can peer under the gunwales to see various fish, including catfish, inside the wreck. At the upstream/stern area, the transom can be examined along with the rudder, which is turned 90-degrees to port. The tip of the mainmast's boom sticks out from underneath the transom with a two-sheave block hanging from its tip. The ship's stove is underneath the transom, and a display tray filled with plates and glassware is mounted to the side of the ship near the chain for divers to view. Drifting down the starboard/channel side of the ship, it appears as if it were a wooden wall covered with colorful sponges, just like a drift dive in the Caribbean. The centerboard slot can be seen on the keel of the ship, and the top of the centerboard itself can be seen inside. The mainmast sticks out from underneath the ship and runs down the rocky slope to a depth of about 100'. Near the bow the foremast does the same. At the bow one must be quick to catch the chain again. A bobstay chain runs from the stem to the broken off bowsprit and jib boom. A cutwater is broken away from the stem, and a pile of anchor chain lies on the bottom.

To end the dive, instead of catching the chain at the bow, one continues drifting downstream at a depth of 30' for four minutes until a rope is seen eye-bolted to the bottom and running up a rock cliff. One does a safety stop holding onto the rope in the current, then works up it to enter a shallow, sheltered bay on Sparrow Island with the dive boat waiting at a mooring. The dive was an absolute blast, not so much from the wreck but from the pure fun of the current and drifting along. Afterwards, lunch was cooked in the warm sheltered bay with more grilled hamburgers and hot dogs, and we watched a laker go by that would have really added to the fun and noise of the dive had we been in the water at the time. We then headed back to the dock, unloaded our gear, and headed home.

Many thanks go to Georgann for organizing the trip and arranging for the hotel, dive shop, and boats. We all had a wonderful time. The area is amazingly picturesque, relaxing, and a lot of fun to dive. We can't wait to go back and see more of the area and its wrecks!