

On Memorial Day, Monday, May 28, 2012, Scott Harrison, Cindy LaRosa, and Kevin Magee went out into Lake Erie for their first dives of the season. They had attempted to go out on Sunday the previous day, but the lake was too rough with a strong wind blowing from the east and 3'-4' seas, so they were forced to turn around shortly after leaving the harbor. Thankfully, Monday was much calmer with nearly flat seas, so they headed north out of Lorain, OH, on Scott's boat "Wreck-Reation" to the first wreck, the wooden side paddlewheel steamer "Morning Star." This ship sank on June 20, 1868, in a nighttime collision with the barkentine "Cortland" while running on its regular route between Cleveland, OH, and Detroit, MI. The ship sank 15 minutes after the collision, which resulted in the loss of approximately 30 lives from the steamer's passengers and crew. The ship was salvaged by divers and raised soon afterwards, but it sank again several times while being towed to port. The final time it sank was in about 60' of water 8 miles north of the Black River.

Joining "Wreck-Reation" was the boat "Nobody" with Gary Humel, Greg Ondus, Martie Truby, and Ann Stevenson on board. Gary's boat was already hooked into the wreck, and Greg Ondus was in the process of installing the MAST (Maritime Archaeological Survey Team) mooring on it for the season. After gearing up in the hot 75-80 deg F heat with a bright blue sky and sun beating overhead, the 65 deg F surface water felt good. The surface visibility was also very good at 10'-15', leading to great hopes for a good dive. However, after descending down the anchor line, visibility decreased to a disappointing 3'-5' with dark conditions below 45'. The bottom temperature was 53-54 deg F, and a mild thermocline was noticed at a 25' depth. The anchor was hooked on the wooden hull adjacent to the two side-by-side boilers. The bottom visibility was not good enough to see the boilers or fireboxes well, but once on top of them, the visibility improved enough to see the two large flues leading up from the fireboxes. One has fallen at a diagonal angle and leans up against the other's vertical flue. The vertical one goes all the way up to a 35' depth and has a large opening on top where the smokestack would have been attached. After exploring the boilers and flues, the divers returned to the anchor line and decided to run a reel to find the large walking beam engine. The ship lies north-south with the bow pointing north, and the boilers are forward of the engine, so a reel line was run to the south. Unfortunately, the bad visibility made navigation difficult. Ultimately, the broken hull around the engine was found, but there was little bottom time left, so the engine, broken paddlewheels, and their connecting shaft were never seen.

After surfacing, the biting black flies were present en masse, forcing most divers to keep on the lower portions of their wetsuits to protect their legs and ankles, a favorite target of these much hated insects. After a conversation on the radio with the boat "Figment," all three boats decided to meet on the "Marshall F. Butters." This wooden steamer sank in 60' of water during the infamous October, 1916, storm called "Black Friday," but all 15 crew survived the sinking and were rescued. After running 12 miles to the north, "Figment" was found to already be hooked into the wreck, which lies 20 miles out in Lake Erie and is very near the

American-Canadian border. As usual, some boats' GPS units indicated we were in U.S. waters while other boats' GPS units indicated they were in Canadian waters. Even the U.S. Border Patrol can't decide. In previous years a buoy marking the border was seen several hundred feet to the north despite the fact the wreck is in Canadian waters according to traditional wisdom. In any case, the remaining two boats rafted off the back of "Figment." Aboard were Mike and Georgann Wachter, Bob Vincent, and Jim Wilson. After suiting up and descending to the bottom, much better 5'-10' visibility and bright ambient lighting was discovered on this wreck with no real need for a light.

The anchor was resting on top of the compound engine with the all-chain anchor line from the Wachter's boat descending to lie on the deck off to the side of the engine. The seas above were flat, and the anchor chain went straight down to the wreck instead of at an angle. The engine stands 15' high off the deck, which is itself at least 5' off the bottom. The ship's deckhouses blew off during the sinking, leaving only the bare decks and collapsing hull sides of the wreck. Aft of the engine is the ship's electric generator mounted to the deck on the centerline. Visible is the generator's electrical windings and grillwork. The deck ends at the broken-down rounded fantail some distance past the generator with a standing rudderpost, which is sheathed in a thin lead or tin metal strip at its midsection to serve as a bearing surface when passing through the hull. The wreck lies north-south with the bow north, and just north of the engine is a large single boiler embedded halfway in the deck with a large clear space around it.

Forward of the boiler the decking continues for a short way before encountering the cargo deck well. This ship was a lumber hooker in design with raised deckhouses forward and aft and a sunken cargo deck in the middle. The cargo deck is therefore at a lower level than the main deck, and it also lies at a 30-degree angle to starboard since the hull has pulled away on this side, causing the cargo deck to collapse in this direction. Following the cargo deck to starboard, it eventually disappears into the mud bottom about 10' short of the standing starboard side. On the port side the deck is attached to the standing hull. Traveling along the cargo deck, three large cargo hatches are encountered, and then a large winch is found on the centerline. Afterwards, there is a large opening where the deckhouse would have been located but is now missing. At the extreme bow the starboard side is pulled very far away from the standing stem, leaving a 15' gap. There is a much smaller 5' gap between the port side and stem. On the port side is a pile of anchor chain running through a hawse pipe on the bottom, and the chain leads aft to the winch and forward to underneath the tilted port hull. Overall, this wreck offers a lot to explore and see with debris everywhere.

After surfacing, a Sheriff's boat from Homeland Security was seen approaching from the west. Gary decided to make a run for it to the south towards Lorain, but he didn't get far. The 3 x 300 hp outboard engines on the back of the Sheriff's boat easily outmatched him, and with lights flashing he was pulled over. The rest

of the boats hung around while he and his passengers were questioned, and then everyone took turns talking to the Sheriff's boat before being released back into American waters. "Nobody" headed home back to Lorain while "Wreck-Reation" and "Figment" headed to Vermilion for dinner at Quaker Steak and Lube. It was an exciting opening to the dive season!