
Divers discover 'Holy Grail' of Lake Erie shipwrecks

MOLLY KAVANAUGH
Plain Dealer Reporter

In the dark and drizzle of June 20, 1868, two ships off the shore of Lorain were on course to pass in the night.

The Cortland, carrying iron ore,

was sailing from the west for Cleveland. The passenger steamer Morning Star had left Cleveland bound for Detroit.

Around midnight, a crewman on the Cortland told the first mate to clean the dimming green oil lantern so the approaching steamer would

see them.

The mate took down the lantern, and the night grew darker.

Twenty minutes passed, and still the lantern was not returned. Suddenly, the crewman saw the Morning Star heading right for them and ran to the bell.

His warning came too late. The ships collided, sinking both and killing 38 people. Only the Morning Star was recovered.

Now, nearly 140 years later, a dive team believes it has discovered the Cortland, bell and all.

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SHIPWRECK

FROM A1

Divers find ore carrier that sank in 1868

"We are thrilled that they have found this wreck," said Georgann Wachter, a diver from Avon Lake. She and her husband, Michael, have written three books about Lake Erie shipwrecks.

The lake is full of sunken ships, between 1,500 and 3,000, Wachter said. Only about 400 have been found, and not all of those have been identified.

The Cortland is among the most coveted. The ship was only a year old when it sank, and the 173-foot, three-masted bark was one of the largest sailing vessels on the Great Lakes. The accident was Page One news across the Great Lakes as bodies washed ashore for weeks.

"It's probably the most historically significant wreck in the Cleveland area," said Kevin MaGee of Cleveland Underwater Explorers, an informal dive team that goes by the name CLUE. The other members are David VanZandt and Jim Paskert.

The Cortland had been on CLUE's wish list for three years. When the divers did find the ship this summer, they practically stumbled upon it.

Paskert, who no longer dives, passed along coordinates from his old records, not remembering why he had written them down. MaGee and VanZandt found a wreck in 60 feet of water using sidescan sonar imaging, but the water was too rough to dive that day to identify the ship.

The next day, July 31, VanZandt and another diver inspected the wreck. They suspected it might be the Cortland, and each dive reinforced their suspicion.

On the fifth dive, they found the bell. The fact the bell was still on the ship meant the vessel was more than likely an untouched wreck and that they were the first to see it in nearly 140 years.

Rigging, anchors and masts were salvaged from the Cortland within weeks of the collision, but the ship was never raised and details about its location were lost over time.

The CLUE divers say a number of facts have convinced them of their find. Along with the bell, the divers found a carved figure extending from the front of the ship. Figureheads were rare at the time, but the Cortland had one. The anchors are missing, and the chain appears to have been cut, which is consistent with a salvage operation.

One detail that is carefully guarded is the location of the wreck. Although federal and state laws prohibit the removal of artifacts without a permit, the men worry that the bell and other items could fall into the wrong hands.

Carrie Sowden, of the Peachman Lake Erie Shipwreck Research Center, is applying for a salvage permit. The plan is to remove the bell and figurehead in the spring, then conserve and display the items at the Great Lakes Historical Society in Vermilion, home to the shipwreck center.

The divers also want to com-

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plete a survey of the site, which means that an announcement of the Cortland's location likely is a couple of years off. Once the coordinates are released, divers will have another destination on Lake Erie.

And they will come, said Sowden, who dived on the wreck with VanZandt that first day.

"There are all sorts of Holy Grails," Sowden said. "This is definitely one of them for the state of Ohio."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
mkavanaugh@plaind.com,
440-934-0506