

# Fitzgerald sailors will be honored

The Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society is planning its annual memorial ceremony for the sailors who were lost in the wreck of the Great Lakes steamer the Edmund Fitzgerald.

The ceremony will be held at 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 10, in the Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point in the Upper Peninsula. The public is invited to attend.

The Fitzgerald was seeking the shelter of Whitefish Point on that Monday evening in 1975, just 22 years ago. Around 7:10 p.m. that day, all visual and electronic contact was suddenly lost with the 729-foot ore carrier. Still among the most puzzling of Great Lakes shipwrecks, the Fitzgerald's story has become a famous legend.

At the request of surviving family members, the Shipwreck Society raised the ship's bell on July 4, 1995, in a joint expedition with the National Geographic Society, Canadian Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, Sony Corp. and the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. The bell is now displayed in the Shipwreck Museum as a lasting memorial to the crew of the Edmund Fitzgerald.

Music and a poetic reflection will accompany the brief memorial ceremony on Monday. Refreshments will be provided. The Shipwreck Museum will be open free for those attending. For more information, call the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society at (800) 635-1742.

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# Edmund Fitzgerald life ring?

Family finds rescue ring that could be from famous shipwreck

BY JEFF KAROUB  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

DETROIT — An apple farmer and his family believe they've found a life ring from the Edmund Fitzgerald roughly 200 miles away from where the famed ship sank in Lake Superior 32 years ago.

No definitive tests had yet been conducted to prove it's a piece of the ore carrier that sunk in a vicious storm, killing 29 men off the northern shore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. But the director of a shipwreck museum says it matches in many ways another ring in its Fitzgerald collection.

"I saw it, photographed it and ... compared the two," said Tom Farnquist, executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, which owns the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, the nearest spot on land to the ship's gravesite 17 miles northwest. "It's identical in size and configuration. ... Is it possible? Certainly it is."

The orange preserver is worn by the elements and mice or other critters chewing on it. But it reads "Edmund Fitzgerald" in faded but mostly legible white letters.

Joe Rasch, a farmer from Conklin, about 15 miles northwest of Grand Rapids, said he was vacationing with his family last week in the Keweenaw Peninsula in Michigan's far north. Hunting for agates and other rocks along a remote beach, he saw an overturned tree where the beach meets the forest.

Hoping to find some stones underneath, he instead spotted the life ring nearby. He rolled it down to his daughters, who noticed the writing. Knowing well what it could mean, they took it to the museum.

Still, there are a few differences between the discovered ring and the one on display. The one Rasch found has no "S.S." before "Edmund Fitzgerald," as the museum's ring does. And the newly found ring reads "Duluth" on its back side. It's puzzling, Farnquist said, but not without a plausible explanation: The Milwaukee-based ship spent its winters in Duluth, Minn.

Of course, there are skeptics to such discoveries — especially when it's so far from the Fitzgerald's grave site and so many years later. It also adds to a story that is the stuff of Great Lakes legend — spawning a well-known song by Gordon Lightfoot, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," and decades of debate as to the cir-

cumstances of its sinking.

"I am smelling a rat," Frederick Stonehouse, maritime historian and author of a book on the wreck, told The Daily Mining Gazette of Houghton. "It's probably a hoax."

He said he finds it hard to believe that someone could find a life ring laying out in the open 30 years later. Anything is possible, but he would not accept it as legitimate until it's properly examined.

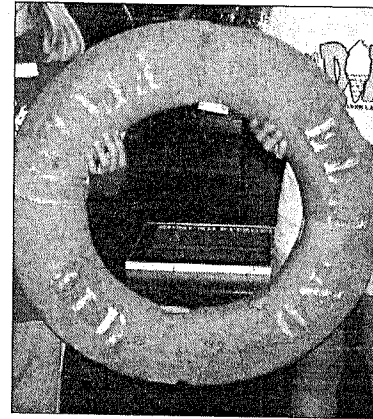
Rasch said Wednesday he doesn't believe it's a hoax, nor did he consider it "out in the open" — finding it as he did off an already off-the-beaten path.

Rasch said he offered to leave the ring at the museum, but Farnquist said he encouraged him to take it home and cherish it. They agreed Rasch will return it in time for the museum's annual memorial service marking the anniversary of the sinking in November.

"There's a million questions. ... The ring isn't talking, so we don't know," Rasch said.

"I have no reason to doubt. If anybody wanted to pull a hoax, they would have put it where somebody would find it."

Farnquist believes the time delay and distance from the wreck shouldn't dash hopes it's legitimate. Winds change often on the



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**In a photo provided by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, a life ring possibly from the Edmund Fitzgerald is shown in Whitefish Point Saturday.**

unpredictable lake, he said, and it's not uncommon to find debris a couple hundred miles from where ships sink.

On the emotional side, he knows it would be significant for people who lost loved ones in the wreck. He said he already has heard from two women who were "quite moved and excited about the possibility" that the ring is from the ship.

"Of the 6,000 ships ... lost on the Great Lakes, the Fitzgerald is the Holy Grail of all the shipwrecks," Farnquist said.

"It's an incredible story. Everyone hopes that it's the real thing. But only time will tell and the evidence will need to be acquired."

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# Celebration Sept. 18 at Whitefish Point site

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SAULT STE. MARIE — The Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, which owns and operates the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum and Whitefish Point Light Station, will hold a sesquicentennial celebration at 2 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 18., where officials from the Bureau of Land Management will formally transfer the U.S. Coast Guard station to the society.

Free food and beverages will be served beginning at noon and the lightkeepers quarters will be open for complimentary tours until 6 p.m. Great Lakes balladeer Lee Murdock will also entertain visitors throughout the day.

Ebenezer Warner built the first lighthouse at the point in 1848. He had split stone hauled in by schooner from Tahquamenon Island in Whitefish Bay. The tower was fitted with 13 Winslow Lewis lamps and put into operation in the spring of 1849 and was the first lighthouse on Lake Superior.

The first lanterns burned sperm whale oil that produced a lightsaving beam which could be seen a distance of 17 miles. This critical aid to navigation is still in operation today, though it is remotely maintained by the Coast Guard from Sault Ste. Marie.

"Whitefish Point marks a critical turning point in Lake Superior," society executive director Thomas Farnquist said. "Over the years the narrow passage posed almost as many problems for navigators as storms in the open water."

The light station and shipwreck museum will remain open to the public until Oct. 17. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Admission is \$7 for adults and \$4 for children. Groups of 20 or more qualify for a discount.