

# Deep 'graveyard' mystery

EDMUND FITZGERALD

Greatest disaster in Great Lakes history unexplained 35 years later

*The legend lives on from the  
Chippewa on down  
of the big lake they called "Gitche  
Gumee."*

*The lake, it is said, never gives up  
her dead  
when the skies of November turn  
gloomy.*

— Gordon Lightfoot, "Wreck of  
the Edmund Fitzgerald"

BY KAREN ALLEN

Thirty-five years ago this month, the gales came early to the "Graveyard of Ships," a treacherous 80-mile stretch of Lake Superior that lies between Whitefish Bay, Mich., and Munising, Mich.

On Nov. 10, 1975, with its own guiding radar system and the Coast Guard radio beacon at Whitefish Point both knocked out by a raging storm, the mighty Edmund Fitzgerald — traveling from Superior, Wis. to a steel mill near Detroit — vanished into the snow and wind without warning or a distress call.

The 729-foot ship and its cargo of 26,116 tons of taconite pellets shot to the bottom of the lake, unseen and unheard, 17 miles northwest of Whitefish Point. All 29 crew members died, making the sinking the greatest disaster in the history of the Great Lakes.

Immortalized by folk singer Gordon Lightfoot's 1976 ballad, it is one of the most famous of the more than 6,000 shipwrecks in the region — and one of the most mysterious.

"It was certainly the most investigated wreck of its time, and still the mystery lingers today," said Tom Farnquist, executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, "especially as to what could have happened so suddenly that there was no cry for help."

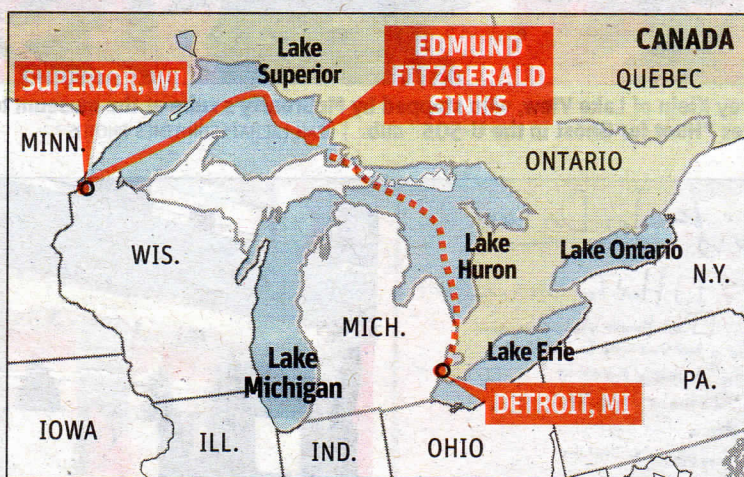
Three separate investigations — by the Coast Guard, the National Transportation Safety Board and the Lake Carriers' Association — failed to find a conclusive cause for the wreck. Farnquist, founding member of the museum and Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, participated in four manned dives to the wreck site that never found "smoking-gun evidence," either.

No one disputes that the ship sank quickly to the bottom. Wreckage was found later that month in 535 feet of water, and in May 1976, a sonar scan showed ship remains with the words "Edmund Fitzgerald" on the stern, upside down.

The Coast Guard's report, re-



A diver explores the pilothouse of the Edmund Fitzgerald in a July 1995 expedition spearheaded by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, National Geographic, the Canadian navy and the Sault tribe of Chippewa Indians. | PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GREAT LAKES SHIPWRECK HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The 729-foot lake freighter Edmund Fitzgerald is pictured in the St. Marys River in May 1975. | BOB CAMPBELL~GREAT LAKES SHIPWRECK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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leased in 1977, suggested that "ineffective hatch closures" allowed flooding of the cargo hold. The Lake Carriers' Association disagreed, preferring the theory that the ship was damaged when it passed over an area called the Six Fathom Shoal.

Earlier this year, father-and-son diving team Mike and Warren Fletcher from Port Dover, Ontario, using wave-generating technology to simulate the conditions faced by the Edmund Fitzgerald, argued that a gigantic, 50-foot rogue wave was responsible for sinking the ship.

Bernie Cooper, captain of the freighter Arthur M. Anderson, which was following 17 miles behind the Edmund Fitzgerald and had the last contact with it, later said he and his crew thought the Edmund Fitzgerald had passed far too close to the shoals.

*Scripps Howard News Service*

## MEMORIAL WEDNESDAY FOR 29 WHO DIED

A memorial service is planned for Wednesday to remember the 29 men who died when the SS Edmund Fitzgerald sank in Lake Superior on Nov. 10, 1975.

The ceremony, at Whitefish Point, Mich., about 17 miles from the wreck point, may be the last memorial attended by some of the relatives of the 29 men who died in the wreck. Ranging in age from 21 to 63, the sailors came from seven different states.

"It's been 35 years now, and the immediate family members are passing on," said Tom Farnquist, executive director of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point. "The last time I saw some of them, they mentioned that it might be their last trip north."

Farnquist said the families have always been grateful for Gordon Lightfoot's 1976 ballad.

"I had heard that he was hesitant for a while, that he'd heard a rumor that the families resented him profiting from their loss," Farnquist said. "But by and large they never felt that way."

"The families seemed to be honored that I wrote it," Lightfoot said.