

# BESSIE SMITH

There were a few young divers with a friend who wanted to dive on a shipwreck called *Bessie Smith* in Iron Ore Bay on the south end of Beaver Island. The wreck has two sections that lay in about 12 feet of water. We gave him our usual SCUBA textbook class which was simply "hold your breath while ascending and you'll die." Then he was prepared for the adventure of his lifetime.

There was enough spare gear that we could scrounge between us to fit this chap for a dive in the chilly water of the bay. I of course had some ripped wet suits, extra tanks, out of date regulators and tank harnesses. One thing appeared to be missing. He needed a weigh belt to allow him to submerge, otherwise he could not overcome the flotation of the neoprene suit. I always had log chains with me, for multiple purposes. "Here we go! Instant weigh belt!" It worked just fine, he was able to submerge almost perfectly. He was just ahead of us getting into the water, and everything was going well. There was about a 2 foot swell that day which was par for diving. All of a sudden, we heard a frantic "HELP!". Then silence, then another "HELP!". He had gotten his chain weight belt snagged on the buoy rope that was tied firmly to the shipwreck. He could reach the surface just long enough to scream "HELP!" and then a wave would cover him. He repeated this again and again, louder each time. There was a scurry to come to the rescue of the poor guy, and we quickly had him freed. So much for his SCUBA training and introduction to such a fun sport! Every time I meet the divers that were there that day we talk about this foolishness and laugh a lot. I still have witnesses to that fiasco, two of whom we see every year, Beans and Duff Conner. We still say, "All of we FOOLS ain't dead yet!"

Some years later, a friend of mine came to Beaver Island to visit. Jim was a school teacher, and was not too athletic. He expressed that he too would like to experience diving on a shipwreck. We elected to make a shore

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dive to *Bessie Smith*. We parked our car near the beach, and suited up. Not wanting to swim the full quarter mile distance we waded with fins in hand on the shoal that extended into the lake and ended a few yards west of the hull of the wreck. We stopped where we could see the darkened water to the east, donned our fins and swam to the hull. We explored it for several minutes, then surfaced. I asked Jim if he wanted to see one of the side sections of the wreck, which was about fifty yards northeast of the hull. He nodded yes. So off we went.

I kept watching him, for I had never dove with him before. All of a sudden he stopped. I turned to face him, and I could see panic in his eyes. I said, "Are you OK?", to which he responded, "I can't breathe!" Knowing this was an anxiety attack, I told him calmly, "Don't try to swim, just relax and breath slowly, and we will drift back to the shoal." Then I slid under his upper torso and inflated my dry suit enough to lift his head and shoulders well out of the water. There was some wind and wave action that day, in a favorable direction for it was taking us right toward the shoal we had started from. CPR had entered my mind from minute one, and I was wondering if I would be capable of doing it in a lake situation. Luckily it didn't become necessary. We just drifted along like an inflatable boat. I was in a position to watch his reactions. He calmed quite soon, and laid there saying nothing as we drifted toward the shoal. After about ten minutes he looked at me and said, "I'm OK, we can swim to the shoal now." And we did.

*Bessie Smith* wrecked and then broke up in storm circa 1873 in Iron Ore Bay. Like many ships of her day, she was fitted with a centerboard which may be lowered and raised through the sailing vessel's keel to reduce sideways motion as needed.

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Jim Sawtelle had purchased a pontoon barge in Charlevoix and some years later brought the barge to Beaver Island to salvage material from the *Bessie Smith*. Jim had a crew that loaded the barge with salvaged goods. When it was loaded the barge was anchored off shore overnight, waiting to be towed the next day to Charlevoix by Bob Timms with his tug *Claude L*. The salvage crew were in the Shamrock Bar that night celebrating their achievements when a storm came in and washed the loaded barge aground, breaking it up and spilling the booty in the bay. The barge wreckage laid on the beach for years. Then one day Bob Timms came and salvaged the tanks, and towed them to Charlevoix. The barge's winch and its frame are semi-buried on the beach to this day.

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Later I went back and found *Bessie Smith's* capstan, which was later taken to the Marine Museum in town. It is displayed there still these many years later, outside the museum.

I also found the centerboard and towed it close to shore with the help of snatch block & tackle. I brought the centerboard onto the beach so I could load it onto my trailer on a subsequent trip. I had cut out a "lifting eye" section to help me maneuver it, and I planned to make a bar top later. When I returned, I used my truck to pull a snatch block hooked to what was then a cable crossing sign, sliding the centerboard up a plank and onto my trailer.

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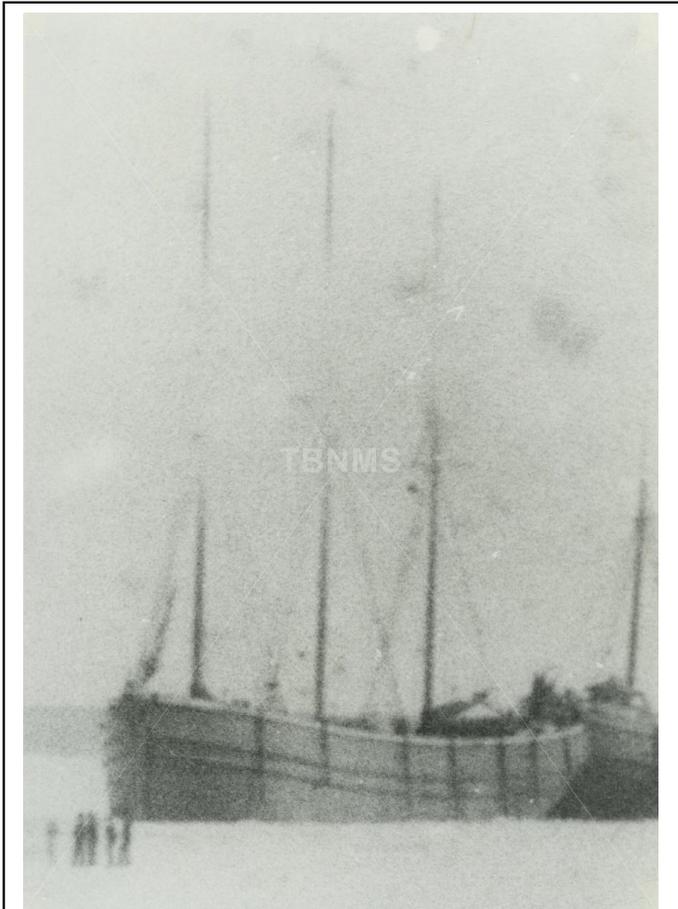
Centerboard in its box, before salvage. Photo by Dick Burris

Recently there had been some mention about the legality of shipwreck salvage. However, since I had gone this far I proceeded with my salvage. I was just finishing the loading, when I blocked off the only vehicle going through on the road that morning. Of all people, it happened to be a high-up official from the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR). I told him I was taking the centerboard off the beach, and explained what it was. He told me that at the present time there were no restrictions on items taken from the beach, but he emphasized that I should NOT take things from the shipwrecks.

Soon after, the DNR and the state included in restrictions in the law on taking artifacts from the beach. This put an end to my salvage collections. A lot of the white oak boards I had already salvaged ended up as mantel pieces in fireplaces that I built on the island. Also some of the stone fireplaces had a piece of iron ore installed in them, ore that came from around the hull of *Bessie Smith*.

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*Photo courtesy of Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary.*

This is a poor picture of *Bessie Smith* when she was still in service. Maybe the only one, because the ship was destroyed the year it was built.

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I still have two cabled deadeyes, one from the *Bessie Smith* and the other from *Sunnyside*, off North Fox Island.



The larger deadeye on the left is from *Bessie Smith*, while the one on the right is from *Sunnyside*. Dick Burris conserved them for lamp fixtures. *Photo by Dick Burris*

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<b>Built:</b>	1873 in Toledo, Ohio by Bailey Brothers for Shepard, Henry and Company of Erie Pennsylvania
<b>Dimensions:</b>	200' x 35' x 15'
<b>Construction:</b>	Three-masted wooden schooner barge
<b>Propulsion:</b>	Sail
<b>Cargo:</b>	1500 tons of iron ore
<b>Date Lost:</b>	1873
<b>Cause of Sinking:</b>	Ran ashore on Iron Ore Bay, Beaver Island, in a storm. Soon after leaving Escanaba, her usual tow steamer <i>J. Kelley</i> became disabled, so <i>Bessie Smith</i> raised her sails and towed her consort back to port. She then struck off on her own, and was overtaken by a storm. She was picked up by the steamer <i>Annie Young</i> , but soon broke loose and was driven ashore at Beaver Island. Wreckers put the largest available pumps aboard to try to float her again, to no avail. As of the end of the season she was still on the beach. Within five months, she was reported broken and scattered.
<b>Maximum Depth:</b>	12'

Sources Zoom Dune, November 7, 2014, and UM Library Digital Collections, Great Lakes Maritime Data Base