

Shipwreck hunters discover 118-year-old sunken freighter in Lake Superior

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A freighter that sank 118 years ago off the coast of Michigan's northern tip was discovered by shipwreck hunters from Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The Hudson, a 288-foot-long steamship built in Wyandotte in 1888, sank off the coast of the Keweenaw Peninsula in September 1901 after getting caught in a storm, taking the lives of the 24 crew members aboard.

Kraig Smith of Rice Lake, Wisconsin, and Jerry Eliason of Cloquet, Minnesota, have known each other for 40 years. The two 66-year-old friends "share an appreciation and love for shipwreck hunting" and combining their efforts "to solve mysteries," Smith said.

Eliason, who Smith called "the brains of the operation," designed a sonar system with his son, which was used for finding the Hudson.

They knew the wreck was deep. Consequently, the sonar had to be produced properly to withstand pressure under tons of water in sealike Lake Superior and in order to get a clear photograph of the wreck.

"Building our own equipment is half the fun," Eliason said.

The shipwreck hunting duo narrowed their search down to 32 square miles, which Smith considered "rather small." He added that they knew they had "a good chance" of finding the sunken Hudson.

When they sailed over the wreck 4 miles off the coast of Eagle River in July, they had no idea what they'd found — until they reviewed the data shortly afterward.

"There's a certain level of excitement you get with each discovery," Smith said. "It's almost like deer hunting — you're out there for all this time and there are those few seconds of real excitement." There's a "small but enthusiastic subculture" of people who follow shipwrecks, and in many cases, Eliason said he finds a connection with someone involved with the ship's history, like a grandchild of a deceased crew member.

"That's a rewarding feeling," he said.

Eliason said he was pleased with how well the Hudson was preserved, citing its distance from shore being too far for divers to "mess with."

With every new shipwreck discovery, Eliason said he realizes that he and Smith are at the age where it could be their last.

"And then we plan the next one," he said.

It doesn't appear Eliason will run out of shipwrecks to chase. There are over 6,000 sunken boats in the Great Lakes, and there are eight sought-after, undiscovered shipwrecks, including the Griffon — often referred to as the Holy Grail — which disappeared in 1679.

Eliason will be giving a presentation on the discovery of the Hudson at Gales of November on Nov. 2 in Duluth, Minnesota.

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