

# Ship wreck Disasters on the St. Clair River

The mystery and lore of the Edmund Fitzgerald has become part of our culture. The glory and tragedy of the one-time queen of the lakes only highlights the danger and sadness that is part of our shipping heritage.

The exact number of shipwrecks on the lakes is unknown. The Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum approximates 6000 ships and 30000 lives lost during the history of Great Lakes shipping, while historian and mariner Mark Thompson estimated that the total number of wrecks is likely more than 25000.

The St Clair River is one of the busiest waterways in the world. It is also a focal point of tourism and recreation from its start at Lake Huron to the wonders of its delta at the St. Clair Flats. It is hard to imagine that the St Clair River has been part of this shipwreck history. However, since LaSalle first traversed her length in 1679 there have been hundreds of shipwrecks and disasters along the beautiful blue water of our greatest resource.

One of the well-known is the Monarch, a 63 foot steam powered tug which lies in about 55 feet of water about 200 feet just south of the Bluewater Bridge. Its life came to an end July 6, 1934 when while towing the freighter C.F. Bielman towards Lake Huron, the Bielman swung out of control flipping the Monarch onto her starboard side then dragging the stern down to the river bottom. Today she is a popular scuba diving destination.

On May 31, 1906 the steamer Erin was up bound in the fog on the St. Clair towing the schooner Danforth. About a mile below Courtright she was run into by the steamer John B. Cowle. Cut in two, she sunk immediately with the loss of five of her crew members. Rescue efforts were provided by local fishermen as the damaged Cowle, unaware of the severity of the accident, had to contend with her own damage. The last deceased crew member was found floating in the river near Sombra almost two weeks later. Mrs Herbert from Cleveland, was one of the Erin's cooks, who was sleeping at the time of the crash and never had a chance to save herself. Half of the wreck lies in American waters and the other half in Canadian.

August 6, 1887 at the Wolf and Davidson shipyard in Milwaukee Wisconsin, over 3000 people turned out to experience the launching of the new 285 foot wood steamer, William H Wolf, named for the owner of the company. She had a beam of 41 feet and depth of 24 feet. The side launch of the vessel created a tremendous wave which resulted in the death of two men who had come to witness the launch of what was then the largest vessel ever built on the Great Lakes. The tragedy at the birth of the vessel's Great Lakes career was to eerily mirror her death some 34 years later.

The Wolf performed yeoman but ordinary service during her career. It was not until October 21, 1921 that she again found tragic notoriety.

The Wolf left Port Huron early morning down bound, empty for Detroit. While underway, fire was discovered in the forward hold and gained fast and furious headway because of the wind and forward motion of the ship. The alarm was sounded and the ship was steered for the beach on the Canadian side running aground at Fawn Island. With the fire burning out of control, the members of the 22 man crew were ordered to abandon ship by Captain Thomas Hanson. Unfortunately, two crewmen, Wheelman Tony Smith and First Mate Edward Henry, who had been directing the abandon ship manoeuvre, perished in the fire. Meanwhile the ship burned to the water line. Survivors were taken to the Colonial Hotel in Marine City and cared for there.

The carcass of the Wolf lay beached for four years until in 1925 she was floated off her death bed and towed to a spot south of Fawn Island near present day Riverview School where she was dynamited and settled to her final resting spot on the bottom of the St. Clair.

Today the broken bow is located in shallow water, while the stern is at the bottom of the drop-off in approximately 60' of water. You can still find the engine, boiler, and four-bladed propeller at the site. She is a popular scuba diving and fishing spot and is easily visible from a pleasure boat.

The Sombra Museum is preparing a Ship Wrecks on the St. Clair program for the 2016 season.