



DEALING WITH GRIEF

Local author pens book after her losses

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OFF AND RUNNING

Little South Shore has big track goals

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THE LEGEND LIVES ON

World-class model of Edmund Fitzgerald drops anchor in Ashland

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Paul Wickman heard plenty about the Edmund Fitzgerald as he was growing up in Ashland. His godmother was Mary Louko, the daughter of John Simmons, one of the famous ship's wheelsman — the guys who steer Great Lakes ore haulers. Louko's mother's walls were covered with photos of life on the water; her coffee table laden with books memorializing one of the world's most famous shipwrecks and her husband, one of five Bay-Area men who died aboard her.

"I'd hear (family members) talk about it when I was young because it had only sunk a few years before then," Wickman, 48, said. "I was aware of the family connection. But I had nothing to do with shipping. The closest I ever got was when my dad and I were fishing on the bay and we'd go alongside

one of the ore boats. I was always afraid one would tip over on us, they were so big."

Fast forward 30-some years as Wickman, now living near Madison, was scrolling through social media classified ads when he stumbled upon something truly remarkable — an 8-foot-long, meticulously detailed scale model of the Fitzgerald being offered for sale by a craftsman in Ohio. He immediately was struck by its intricacy — and an idea: Could the model be used as memorial to the local people who died and help the entire city of Ashland in the process?

That was the beginning of an eight-year journey for Wickman, during which he learned even more about the ship, got to know the family that created the model and dedicated himself to bringing it to Ashland as both a local historical artifact and a tourist attraction.

More **FITZGERALD** | **A18**



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ED MONROE



Paul Wickman, second from right, hands over the model to museum representatives at a local restaurant.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

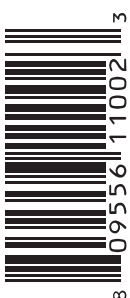
IF YOU GO

Local artists Harvey Hadland and Sam Armstrong have crafted ore boat models that can be seen along with the Edmund Fitzgerald at the Ashland Historical Society Museum. The museum also is seeking donations to help build a display case for the Fitzgerald model. Donate or learn more at ashlandwishhistory.com.

A photo of the fully loaded Edmund Fitzgerald as she plied the waters of the Great Lakes in the early 1970s. Contributed photo by Greenmars via Creative Commons.



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Fitzgerald/from A1

One part of the journey ended Saturday when the model weighed anchor in the Ashland Historical Society Museum. But its arrival also opened another chapter in the story.

ABOUT THE FITZ

The 730-foot Fitzgerald sank Nov. 10, 1975 with all hands — 28 crew and Capt. Ernest McSorley. When launched in 1958, she was the largest ship plying the waters of the Great Lakes, and she remains the largest to have sunk. Her wreckage was located on the bottom in 530 feet of water shortly after she sank.

She was named after the chairman of a Milwaukee insurance company that invested in her construction and was somewhat ironically called “the Titanic of the Great Lakes, among other nicknames.

Her main job was shuttling taconite, or iron ore, from Duluth and Superior to steel mills in Detroit and Toledo, Ohio. She set several annual records for hauling the most ore during her 17 years in service.

That service came to an end when she set sail from Superior on Nov. 9, 1975 with a full load of taconite, headed for Detroit. The crew ran into hurricane-force winds and 35-foot waves on Lake Superior, and reported via radio that they had lost their radar and the ship was listing badly. But they never sent a mayday message, never reported they were sinking.

McSorley’s last radio message, sent at 7:10 p.m. to fellow oreship the Arthur M. Anderson, said, “We are holding our own.”

No crewmember bodies ever were recovered and the precise cause of her demise remains uncertain. She may have suffered damage to giant hatch covers on the deck, allowing water to enter her cargo holds. She could have run aground on a shoal, been broken apart by giant, rogue waves or lost engine power and been swamped. Submersible surveys of her wreckage over the years have offered some evidence supporting every theory.

Whatever the cause, when she went under, she was off Whitefish Point and just 17 miles, or an hour or two of sailing, away from the Soo Locks and safety.

The Edmund Fitzgerald immediately became part of the lore surrounding the roughly 6,000 vessels Lake Superior has claimed — and was memorialized in the Gordon Lightfoot song the next year.

Her bell, recovered during one survey of the wreckage, is on permanent display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in Whitefish Point, Mich. — which would play a role in the model’s arrival in Ashland.

ASHLAND CONNECTIONS

Most people know of the ship only via the lengthy Lightfoot tune — which got a few facts wrong but also hit No. 2 on the U.S. charts in 1976 — that has been sung and resung in bars on Lake Superior’s shores for the past 40-plus years.

But to Ashland residents like Robert Klamerus, the ship was much more than that.

His dad William died aboard the Fitzgerald — though not on the night of the wreck.

“He was a fireman, shoveling coal into the boilers on the ore ships, and then they went to oil which made it easier,” Klamerus said. “He had a heart attack

in 1968 in the fire room of the Fitz and dropped dead at his station.”

William Klamerus sailed on several vessels before being assigned to the Fitzgerald, which was to be his last assignment. At 62, he was preparing to retire after a life spent sailing with the four other Bay-Area residents who died when the ship went down.

“He knew all those guys — he was good friends with Johnny Simmons,” Klamerus said. “The one and only time I was on board the Fitz was after he passed. I had to go down in the boiler room and clean out his locker when he passed away.”

Klamerus himself got his seaman’s card and spent a year after high school sailing the Great Lakes. The money was wonderful, he said. But the job wasn’t, so he went ashore permanently after that one year.

“The life was miserable,” he said. “It’s like you’re in jail out there. It was a tough life — no family life at all. I grew up without my dad around and I wasn’t going to do that.”

He went to work instead for the Ashland water department. And when he retired, he began volunteering for the Ashland Historical Society and joined its board — which turned out to be fortuitous indeed for the model’s arrival in Ashland.

THE MODEL

Russ Clemmer was working as a craftsman in 1973 for the Sperry Rand corporation in Cleveland when the Fitzgerald sailed into the city’s shipyard to have her radar and other navigation equipment replaced and updated.

“Basically the old parts were going to be thrown away,” said Clemmer’s brother, Michael, in a phone interview from his home near Milwaukee. “So Russ said, ‘Do you mind if I take it home?’ They said sure, and about a year later the ship sank. So the radar mast with the Fitzgerald’s name on it sat in his bedroom until Sperry asked if he still had the stuff, and they asked for it back. But that got him reading about the Edmund Fitzgerald and the crew members, and he developed a passion for the crew. So he decided to build one, his own Edmund Fitzgerald.”

The idea wasn’t outrageous. Russ Clemmer had been building models since he was a kid. Like most kids, he started out with the plastic kits sold at Kmart or the local hobby store.

Unlike other kids, though, Russ Clemmer was frustrated by the lack of precision in those scale models — parts that didn’t fit together seamlessly or that didn’t replicate the real thing accurately.

“They just weren’t up to his standards, so he started building his own to make them look better,” Michael Clemmer said. “He would build stuff on the inside of a plane engine, the turbines and stuff, out of brass. And I said, ‘Why are you doing that? No one will ever see it in there.’ And he said, ‘Yeah but I’ll know it’s in there and it’s right.’”

As he aged, Russ Clemmer’s skills improved — and his collection of models grew to consume entire rooms of his Cleveland home. Models of airplanes he had seen growing up on military bases — their dad was a career Marine. Models of aircraft carriers and submarines. Models of just about anything you can drive, fly or sail.

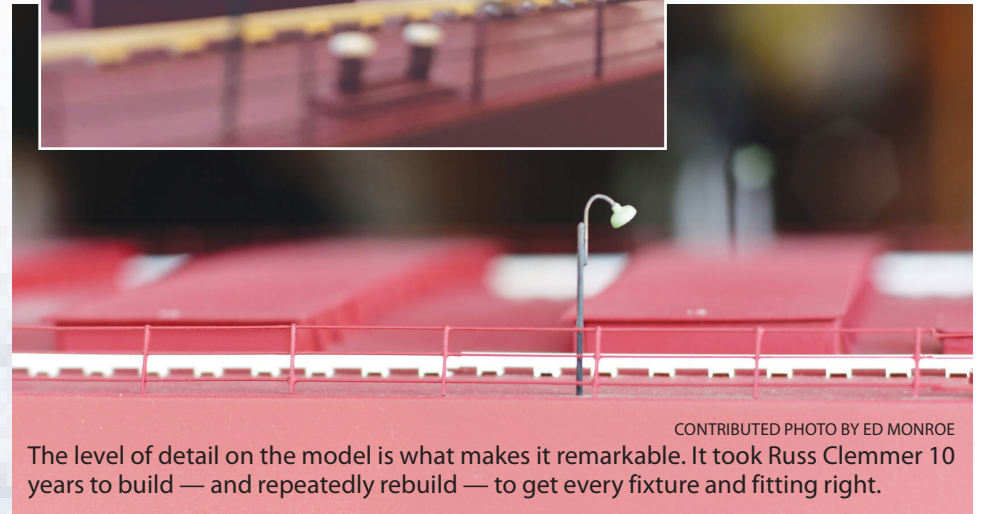


CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS BY ED MONROE

Every fixture and fitting on the ship was hand-crafted.

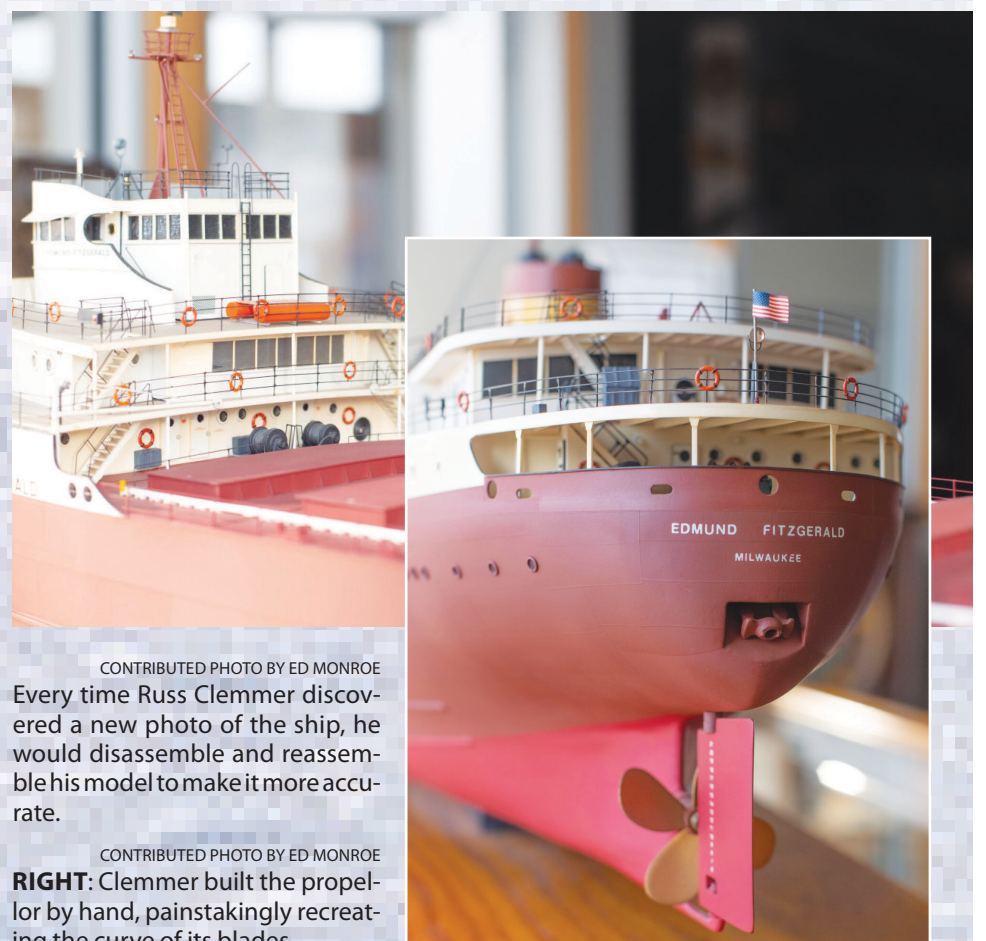


PETER J. WASSON/STAFF PHOTO
The trolley that removed hatch covers and traversed the ship’s deck on rails is perfectly recreated, down to the shafts that drove its wheels.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ED MONROE

The level of detail on the model is what makes it remarkable. It took Russ Clemmer 10 years to build — and repeatedly rebuild — to get every fixture and fitting right.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ED MONROE

Every time Russ Clemmer discovered a new photo of the ship, he would disassemble and reassemble his model to make it more accurate.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ED MONROE

RIGHT: Clemmer built the propeller by hand, painstakingly recreating the curve of its blades.

Fitzgerald/ from A18

In 1995, Russ Clemmer began work on what would become a 10-year project replicating the Edmund Fitzgerald in exacting detail. He wrote to the company that built the ship and got blueprints of her design and had them scaled down. He pored over every photo and book he could find about the ship, absorbing every detail.

“My brother literally built every single part of it by hand,” Michael Clemmer said. “There’s not one bought part on that boat. If you look at the railing, that’s 18 feet of brass wire and he hand-soldered every single joint in it. The prop alone — he made that by hand 25 years ago. It took him hours and it is perfect. You can’t just go buy a (propellor) for the Edmund Fitzgerald. The whole thing took him about 10 years because every time he found a new photo or something, he would go back and redo it to make it more accurate.”

Russ Clemmer finished the model in about 2005, and it joined the fleet already berthed in his basement. But it was giant — eight feet long — and it took up a lot of room.

So the Clemmers approached the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum — which already had a model of the Fitzgerald on display, but one that wasn’t nearly so accurate. The museum sent a representative to Cleveland to look at the Clemmer model — and he wanted it.

“But they wanted us to pay to ship it and we couldn’t afford that,” Michael Clemmer said. “So we said screw them, and we put it up for sale probably seven or eight years ago. Well, I got a couple thousand messages within minutes. So I marked it as sold because I just couldn’t deal with it and I forgot about the whole thing for five or six years. Then someone found the ad in the annals of Facebook, and it got bounced back to the top of the queue, and even though it was marked sold, I got thousands and thousands of messages again.”

That was early 2021, and somewhere in all those thousands of messages was a note from Wickman. But the Clemmers never saw it.

THE CONNECTION

A few months later, Russ Clemmer became critically ill with cancer. He and Michael began discussing what to do with the models — and specifically, the Fitzgerald.

They considered the Whitefish Point museum again, or a museum in Toledo or Duluth, or even the headquarters of the Milwaukee insurance company that originally owned the Fitzgerald.

“Then one day, I went through all these messages we got on Facebook, and we had people offering us up to eight grand for the model,” Michael Clemmer said. “We said, ‘It’s not about the money, it’s about getting it to the right place.’ Then I got to Paul’s message, which said, ‘Hey, I don’t know what the situation is and I know I can’t afford it,’ but he told us the story of his connection to the Fitzgerald and what he wanted to do with it. I called my brother and said, ‘It’s gotta go to this guy because he cares about it and its history.’”

Russ Clemmer died early this year, leaving his brother and Wickman to complete the deal. Wickman paid \$500 for the model — a fraction of what he believes it to be worth — and immediately began seeking a place to put it on display so everyone can appreciate its craftsmanship and history.

That’s when, Wickman believes, providence stepped in.

Klamerus, the Historical Museum board

LOCAL CREWMEMBERS LOST ON THE FITZGERALD

Michael Armagost of Iron River

John Simmons, senior wheelman, of Ashland. The trip on which she sank was to be his last before he retired.

Blaine Wilhelm, an oilman, lived in Moquah and went aboard the Fitzgerald after serving in the navy during World War II and Korea. He left behind a wife, seven kids and a grandchild who was born four days after the ship went down.

Allen Kalmon of Washburn

Joseph Mazes, a maintenance man from Ashland, who also planned to retire at the end of the 1975 season after sailing the Great Lakes for 30 years.

- Source: Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum

member whose dad died in the Fitzgerald engine room, was talking one day with his neighbor — who turned out to be Wickman’s uncle.

“He was telling me about the Fitzgerald and his nephew buying the model,” Klamerus said. “He said, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to have that on display here?’ and I said, ‘It sure would.’”

That was the key connection that, on Saturday, April 1, brought Wickman to Ashland with the model. It now is temporarily housed in the front window of the Historical Society Museum on Main Street. From there, visitors can look across the street and see the mural that celebrates Ashland’s shipping history and connection to the Edmund Fitzgerald — including portraits of William Klamerus and John Simmons.

They also can marvel at the detail involved — the tiny deck lights, with even tinier bulbs in their shades; the gilded bell and portholes on the wheelhouse; the life preservers and winches and that brass propellor that Russ Clemmer labored over.

The museum has begun work on how to protect the model — it will need a case of some sort to ensure delicate parts aren’t damaged — and promote it as part of its shipping collection.

Meanwhile, everyone involved with the model hopes it can educate and fascinate visitors while on indefinite loan to the museum.

“I think it’s a great display for Ashland,” Klamerus said. “It fits with Johnny Simmons and Joe Mazes, who was with my dad in the boiler room, all from Ashland. And the history of the Great Lakes, the history of the ore trade on the lakes. The younger generation has no idea of what the shipping past is all about.”

Michael Clemmer said he is convinced that it all came together as it did for a reason, and that his brother would be happy knowing the model has a home.

“I hope that people who know about the Fitz and the story, the surviving family members up there, get to see it and know that people out here had a passion and love for that boat,” he said. “People still care. They’ll never be forgotten.”

And Wickman? When asked about his efforts in the affair, he paused to reflect for a moment before answering.

“I feel that it’s in good hands and that I’ve fulfilled by obligation to Russ and his brother. I’m only a steward of this — like the guy in ‘Field of Dreams,’ — just a part of a bigger story,” he said. “If you believe in divine intervention, and I’m not sure I do, but this has given me pause, the way it all worked out. It’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

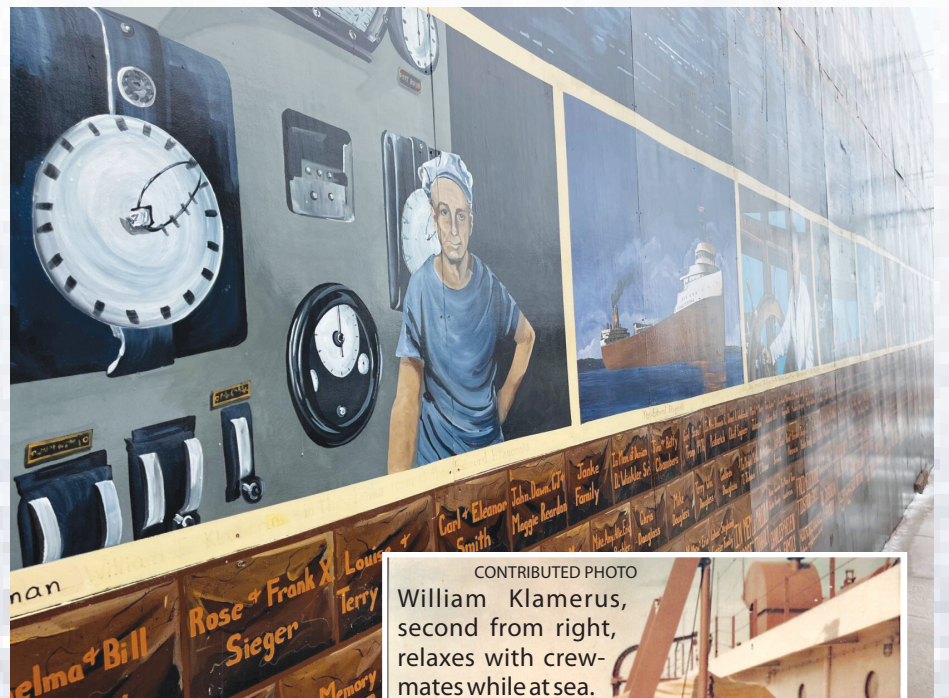


AP PHOTO

When launched in 1958, the Fitzgerald was the largest boat on the Great Lakes, and she remains the largest ever to sink on the lakes.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

RIGHT: Ashland’s William Klamerus, an oilman, in the engine room of the Edmund Fitzgerald. He died at his station of a heart attack, and his son was a key connection on bringing the model to Ashland.

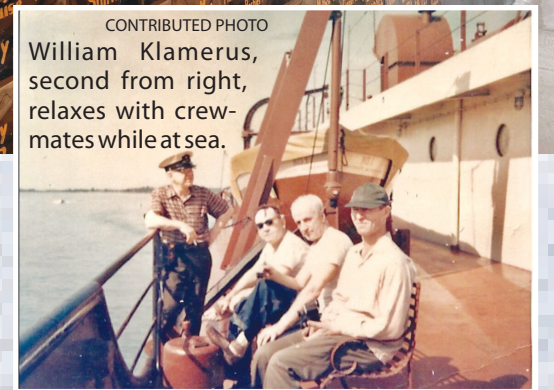


PETER J. WASSON/STAFF PHOTO

A mural in downtown Ashland celebrates the city’s shipping history, and includes paintings of William Klamerus, the Edmund Fitzgerald and John Simmons, who went down with the ship.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

William Klamerus, second from right, relaxes with crewmates while at sea.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

LEFT: Paul Wickman dropping off the model at the Historical Society Museum and signing papers cementing the loan as Bob Klamerus looks on.

