



# KNOW YOUR ROOTS

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## MORE ON THE CHRISTMAS TREE SHIP

I think I first heard about the Christmas Tree Ship from my Uncle Henry Schueneman many, many years ago but it really didn't register. Then I sort of remember Uncle Henry's kids Ted and Pat talking about it. But it finally didn't sink in until I received two letters from a cousin, John Schueneman in Waukegan, in 1990. They had been written to him requesting information about whether he knew if Herman and August Schuenemann of the Christmas Tree Ship were related to our branch of the family.

These letters really piqued my interest with the result that I wrote a story about the Captains Herman and August, who every year brought Christmas trees to Chicago, in Volume IV Issue 4 Schueneman/Greitenevert (November 1999) KNOW YOUR ROOTS. It's a rather sad story because both of the Captains died in storms, but Herman especially became a cause célèbre at this time of year. He had come to be known as the Christmas Tree Santa because of the Lake Michigan trips he made every year to Chicago with a schooner laden with Christmas trees that he sold or gave away to needy children.

After that story appeared, the family began sending me information all about how Captain Herman, the Christmas Tree Santa, brought trees on his ship from Wisconsin to Chicago every year but was lost in Lake Michigan when his ship, the Rouse Simmons, sank laden with trees in 1912. I followed this up with a brief story in the Schueneman issue of 2001. The stories continued around this time of year.

However, because of the story, our family began asking questions. Were these Schuenemanns related? The answer is no. They do not appear anywhere in our history, but the name Schuenemann was a very popular name. (See the News page this month for more information.)

Nevertheless, the story about the Christmas Tree Santa has become quite famous. There is a children's book about The Christmas Tree Ship written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter. It's a romantic little story about how Captain Herman would bring the trees to Chicago, with the captain's wife Hannah and their three daughters there at the dock helping the Christmas Tree Santa with the trees, and they would also make wreathes and garlands.



In 1992 the Chicago History Magazine of Historical Chicago Society printed a long article by Frederick Neuschel titled "Bringing Christmas to the City." This article later blossomed into a hardcover book, "Lives and Legends of the Christmas Tree Ships," published in 2007, all from his letter of inquiry to John Schueneman in 1990.



From another member of the family I received a CD of the ballad with a chorus and four stanzas for "The Christmas Ship" written and sung by Lee Murdock, a Great Lakes songwriter.

*"Oh, Papa come look! Oh, Mama can you see?*

*I've been waiting for so long for this to come to be.*

*Oh, Papa come look! Oh, Mama can't you see?*

*Here comes the Christmas Ship with all the Christmas Trees."*

Probably the most attractive book is the original one of Rochelle M. Pennington's "The Christmas Tree Ship" featuring the art of Charles Vickery. The artwork is mystic and ethereal. This book printed in 2002 was the forerunner of Pennington's much larger work published in 2004, "The Historic Christmas Tree Ship, A True Story of Faith, Hope and Love."

Doubtless the saddest work I received was the video-cassette titled "The Finding of the Christmas Tree Ship." The Rouse Simmons sank off the coast of Wisconsin in a bad storm and the Christmas Tree Santa and all the crew perished. Its wreckage was finally uncovered after twenty years.

But this story is not about the Christmas Tree Santa Herman Schuenemann. After the Rouse Simmons was lost, so that the children in Chicago would not be without Christmas trees, Hannah, the captain's wife became Mrs. Christmas Tree Santa. This story is about how she continued with the legend for many years. First she went up north by boat, but later she brought the trees by train to Chicago and sold them from a docked schooner to emulate the original Christmas Tree Santa. Even her daughters continued being the elves, making wreathes and garlands just as they had when their father arrived with the trees before his ship was lost in a storm. Even after Mrs. Christmas Tree Santa died, the daughters continued selling the trees for a few more years. The legend is that when one visits Hannah's grave there is that wonderful pine fragrance of Christmas Trees in the air.

Today all is not forgotten, not Captain Christmas Tree Santa, nor Mrs. Christmas Tree Santa, nor their elves. The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Mackinaw makes the journey from northern Michigan to deliver a symbolic load of Christmas trees to Chicago's poor children in the spirit of the Christmas Tree Ship. Telling this heart-warming story at Christmas time perpetuates the beautiful legend. When Captain Herman said it warmed his heart when he saw the happiness his trees brought to children, think about the added joy he would feel knowing that he and his family live on forever in the future as the Christmas Tree Santas and their elves.



Note: Look on the News page for more on the Schueneman family name.

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