

The 4th of July weekend was a stormy one on Lake Erie, but on the last day, Sunday, July 5, 2009, the weather calmed, and it looked like a great day to attempt to go diving. Thus, Cindy LaRosa and Kevin Magee drove to Lorain, OH, and met Scott Harrison at his 26-foot Regal "Wreck-Reation" docked in the Black River. Ten miles to the west in Vermilion, OH, Greg Ondus, Gary Humel, and Linda Zander met at Greg's boat "Pirate" with the same intent. Upon entering the lake, it was discovered to be as flat as glass with a brilliant clear blue sunny sky and comfortable 75-80 deg F air temperatures. The decision was immediately made to run to a distant wreck on this flat day, so the "Marshall F. Butters" was chosen. The "Butters" was a 164' x 30' wood steamer carrying lumber that sank in 60' of water during the infamous October, 1916, storm called "Black Friday." Amazingly, all 15 crewmembers survived. Twelve took to the lifeboat, and three stayed with the ship to continue sounding the distress whistle in the huge seas as the ship foundered. One ship quickly picked up the three crewmembers from the "Butters," and the lifeboat passengers were rescued later by another passing ship. Other ships lost in the storm were not so lucky, including the "Merida" (all hands lost), "Colgate" (only the captain survived), and the "D.L. Filer" (only the captain survived).

The trip 20 miles out into the lake was a very pleasant one. The lake was absolutely flat, and a large number of fishermen were out, requiring frequent course changes. Greg was the first one to arrive at the wreck, and it was discovered the air was so clear the Avon power station was still visible on shore. The water's surface visibility was spectacular at 10'-15', and the whole lake looked like a swimming pool. The "Butters" sank very close to the US-Canadian border, and most believe it is just barely on the Canadian side. However, floating a couple hundred feet to the north was a Coast Guard buoy marking the border. It has a light and radar reflector on it and clearly shows the "Butters" is in US waters. Greg's GPS showed us on the US side, and Scott's GPS showed us on the Canadian side but with the wreck in US waters. Upon entering the water, a warm 70 deg F temperature was encountered down to 30', where the thermocline dropped the temperature to 55-57 deg F on the bottom. Visibility also dropped, but it was still a very respectable 8'-10' on the bottom. The "Butters" has notoriously low visibility, so these were unusually good conditions. The anchor was hooked near the bow, which points north. The wreck's decking is intact and slopes upwards towards the port side. Both sides are broken and fall away from the wreck, leaving gaps to peer under the decking. Both sides of the hull are separated from the standing stem at the bow with considerable separation and damage on the starboard side. There is a pile of chain running through a hawse pipe lying on the bottom behind the stem, and there is a large winch further back that probably acted as the windlass. No anchors were evident, although there may be one hidden somewhere among the extensive wreckage on the starboard side, where some loose chain is present.

It is a long swim back to the stern, and it is best made by following the sides since the middle of the wreck is flat and featureless. However, at least one mast hole was seen in the decking near the anchor line, and there may be other deck equipment and hatch openings as well. Upon arriving at the stern on the port side, the side splays away from the ship. The decking ends to reveal a very large boiler at the center of the ship that

stands at least 10' above the decking and rests on the bottom about 5' below the decking. The fireboxes are on the aft end, and immediately behind the boiler is a large compound engine that towers 20' above the wreck to a depth of 40'. On the port side is a large steam pipe that connects the top of the engine to the top of the boiler. It hangs in space over the wreck and is easy to miss unless looking up. On top of the engine's cylinders is a strange extra piece of machinery not normally seen on other ships, and it obstructs the view of the top of both cylinders. The decking continues down the starboard side of the wreck but leaves 5'-10' of room to avoid the engine and boiler. Scattered around the engine and boiler on the bottom are all sorts of machinery parts. Behind the engine the deck is intact across the width of the ship, and a vertical pipe with linkages sticks straight up out of the deck in the center. This was a pump. Behind this pump is a unique item: the ship's electrical generator, complete with grill and windings visible. The "Butters" was the first electrified ship on the Great Lakes, making this piece of equipment historic and definitely worth seeing. The deck ends about 10' past the generator with a standing rudderpost, which is turned slightly to port. Around the perimeter of the rudderpost is thin metal sheathing that would have served as a bearing surface where it passed through the hull. Wooden debris trails behind the ship on the bottom. At the edge of this debris field is a standing capstan still attached to a piece of decking underneath it.

After this great dive under excellent conditions, it was agreed to do another dive on the wreck since good visibility on it is so rare. There was a 1.5 hour surface interval while we ate lunch and relaxed in the pristine water around the boats. Upon entering for the second dive, conditions were about the same as before. However, within 10 minutes visibility suddenly started to drop until only about 2'-3' of visibility remained. Returning to the anchor line, this poor visibility was discovered to cover the whole wreck. Either Greg and Gary were rolling on the bottom, or a mass of low visibility water moved over the wreck and returned it to its normal conditions. In any case, the dive was ended prematurely, leaving most with extra air for another dive elsewhere. Since the lake was so flat and calm, it was decided to head to another wreck 4 miles to the northeast called the "Civil War Wreck." This is an unidentified early- to mid-1800's sailing vessel in 60' of water. Its history is unknown, but supposedly artifacts were found on it when it was first discovered that suggested it was from the Civil War period, thus the name.

Much to everyone's relief, conditions on the bottom were discovered to be much like the original dive on the "Butters" with a good 8'-10' of visibility. The anchor was again hooked near the bow, which points northeast. The port side of the hull is connected to the standing stem, but the starboard side is separated from the stem by quite a bit. Immediately obvious is a large pile of stone boulders that completely fill the interior of this wreck. This was its cargo, quite possibly from Kelley's Island to the west. The port side stands 3'-5' high and continues down the entire length of the ship. It is covered in old netting with a large netball floating off the side near the bow. The starboard side is only a couple of feet high, and a large piece of the side has fallen and lies away from the wreck running parallel to it. Propped up against the port side near the bow appears to be half of a small windlass' Carrick bitt with its lower end embedded in a slot in a

board lying on the bottom. However, no other signs of a windlass were seen. It is possible the windlass was torn away by fishing nets and carried away from the wreck.

Heading back towards the stern, a standing centerboard box is quickly encountered leaning to the port side. Very strangely, the centerboard itself is sticking out of the top of the box by 3' or so. The box and board are about 10' long. Kevin has never before seen a centerboard since they are always contained completely inside the box when a ship sinks. However, Kevin speculates it is not a centerboard but is instead a dagger board. This is an extremely rare feature on Great Lake vessels with only one other example known in Lake Ontario. It would also suggest the vessel might be older than originally suspected since this was a late 1700's/early 1800's innovation. While it is uncertain whether it is truly a dagger board, no other reason can be found for why it would stick out above the box along its entire length. More investigation is necessary, but it is exciting nevertheless.

Behind the box is a square bitt tilted to the port side. This may have been the bitt to hold the block and tackle for the boom. Further back is a small metal pipe sticking out of the pile of stones that is also tilted to port and may have been the ship's hand pump. Finally, near the stern the pile of stones ends, leaving a space where the cabin would have been located. A standing rudderpost is in the center, and the rudder appears to be turned almost 180 degrees. The post is strangely square and has a vertical slot cut in its top. The ship was very likely tiller steered with the tiller now missing. No other artifacts or items were found on the wreck. The vessel is small at only about 50'-75' in length and not more than 20' in beam. No chain plates or deadeyes hint at the number of masts, but it could have had only one mast (sloop or ketch) or two (schooner). It is a fascinating vessel with a potentially fascinating early history. Upon surfacing, the water was still glassy flat, but the day was growing late and all the scuba tanks were empty, so the boats parted ways and headed back to port. The trip was smooth and calm the whole way back, making for a spectacular end to a great day to be out on the lake with calm conditions, great visibility, and outstanding shipwrecks.