

Previous to 1979

Diving on Great Lakes shipwrecks since 1964 I observed a gradual increase in the public interest over the years. For years the main interest of shipwreck divers has been the salvage of souvenirs. Non-diving interest was in seeing what was brought up.

In 1966 I met John Steele, John lived in Waukegan, Illinois and traveled all over the Great Lakes finding shipwrecks and collecting souvenirs. We became good friends and traveled together for many years.

John was different from most souvenir collectors however, in that he donated most everything brought up to museums.

About 1970 John took an interest in making films and in my opinion that changed the course of Great Lakes shipwreck history! (see Telescope article). Because John was so well known in shipwreck circles, news traveled fast about his films and it wasn't long before he had his whole crew involved in showing his films for interested groups of divers.

In 1974 John had a request to do a program in Detroit for the American Skin Divers Association. He told them to contact me and then mailed one of his films over. That was the first program I had been involved in and John had twisted my arm into getting involved.

The state of Michigan had been trying to stop souvenir salvage since about 1969, but public opinion was generally against them. Open hearings often turned into violent shouting matches by concerned divers and the DNR. The non-diving public liked to see what was brought up so sided with the divers.

John's solution of bringing items up and placing them in museums seemed to work out the best and probably will continue to be the most viable because there has developed in this country a market for artifacts; so some individuals are engaging in souvenir salvage for economic gain. Probably the most workable solution is to bring up the small, easily portable items to be placed in museums and depend on the public awareness to keep an eye out for any large salvage operations.

In any case as John's films continued to be shown around the Lakes I noticed that more and more divers were becoming interested in photography. Diving clubs and other groups were starting to have film festivals. Much of the materials shown at these festivals were coming from the oceans because the problems with Great Lakes photographic work were so much more difficult, but the interest in shipwrecks, especially Great Lakes shipwrecks, was growing. Many of these programs now attract five hundred to five thousand people.

The main reason that most divers liked to see John's films however, was because he was usually the first one to find the wrecks and they liked to see all the souvenirs that were usually gone from the wrecks that they were able to dive on. Their attitude was generally that there "should be a law" to protect the wrecks. Unfortunately, the underlying reason for this was to save the souvenirs until they could get their hands on them. That mentality generally exists today and the attitude that prevails when one finds a wreck is that if I don't take it, some one else will.

The non-diving public seemed to become less supportive of the souvenir collecting as they were able to see through films more of the wrecks and what they looked like laying on the lake bottoms.

Both the diving and non-diving public however, were becoming more sophisticated in their viewing requirements. Jacques Cousteau, Stan Waterman, Jack McKinney and others were putting out films taken in the clear ocean waters and subconsciously the Great Lakes viewers were comparing other materials with these that they saw on television.

In 1974 at a working diver symposium in Columbus, Ohio I met Mike Kohut from Birmingham. Mike was a diving instructor part time and soon went into the diving retail business full time, Recreational Diving Systems. We became good friends and Mike began diving with us in about 1976. After two years Mike's business had grown to the point that he couldn't get away on weekends, but we remained good friends, and he was a big supporter of the films.

Mike has now built one of the largest diving retail stores in the country as well as becoming the publisher of the largest diving related newspaper in the country (the Diving Times).

1974 was also the year that I met Bob McGreevy - You already know about him.

In 1977 I met David Trotter from Canton, Michigan. Dave had been diving for quite a few years and was obsessed with diving. He spent part of his time diving in Florida and part in the straights of Mackinaw. He had gone through a photographic phase (35mm, slides) but was into spearfishing and diving instruction. He was also an officer in the Ford Seahorses Skin Diving Club.

Dave came along with me a few times in 1977 and became re-enthused in photography. He was so intense that he served to re-motivate me and I decided to buy a new boat that winter. (My boats name is the SHARK).

Some of Daves friends were planning a trip to Isle Royal in 1978 with him and his boat. They invited me to go along with my boat.

John and I were interested in filming the Kamloops, a new wreck that had just been found at Isle Royal, so we decided to go. I wanted to try out my new boat and we recruited a friend of John's (Bill Cohrs) to round out our crew. We went in July of 1978 for a week. John gave me an old underwater camera of his to use so that we could get the job done in one week.

I had already been filming above water for a couple of years and had been editing on Johns films since he started me in 1974. As I said before, I perceived a desire from our viewers for more than just a divers view of what a wreck looks like underwater. Non-divers were lost all the time because the water is so dirty that they could only see a few feet of wreck at one time, so they quickly got bored. I was trying to inject more personal interest by having Bob McGreevy do a drawing so that we could show what the entire wreck looked like before, during and after the sinking and by shooting more film of John getting his equipment

on and getting his camera equipment into the water. People were also interested in seeing our boats and electronic equipment.

Isle Royal turned out to be a fascinating trip, but not the place to start learning underwater photography. I immediately developed camera problems and none of my film turned out, so John had to go back later in the year to get the additional footage he needed to finish his film.

When he sent a copy to me I was very impressed with the water clarity and the subject matter, but as usual my ideas on the editing varied from Johns. By this time however John and I were getting much closer together in our ideas and I didn't want to cut up the film without getting some advice.

Mike Kohut is an excellent photographer (35mm) as well as being involved with all types of audio-visual materials in his business, so I went to him for guidance.

Mike agreed that the footage was good, but needed some work to be up to the growing sophistication of the viewers. One of his customers was a professional film editor, so he arranged a meeting.

Winter, 1978

Grace Garland turned out to be the turning point for me. Grace is an extremely gracious lady with a delightful personality. She agreed to have a look at the film and promptly informed me that it would never meet professional standards. Being a very demanding professional, she had a difficult time tolerating me the first few times we talked. She would show me all the things that were wrong with our film and I would tell her all the reasons why we couldn't do things the way she suggested. But I kept coming back and she kept taking time out of her busy schedule. (Grace works about 16 hours a day). Slowly we broke down the communications barrier which exists between a novice and a professional and she began to teach me how to handle a camera so that an editor will be able to live with the film.

One of the biggest things that Grace taught me was that film making is extremely expensive. On a commercial scale, underwater films would cost at least one thousand dollars per minute of finished film. That price would increase with the complexity of the operation.

S.H.I.P.S. Begins

About March, 1979 I decided to form a non-profit organization to raise funds to try and produce films that would be of the quality that the public would soon be demanding. I talked with a close personal friend who was an attorney about it.

Bob Crites and I had been friends for several years. He wasn't a diver, but being a good friend he volunteered to handle the legal aspects of getting S.H.I.P.S. organized for me. (Bob observed that a friend is someone who knows your faults but likes you anyway - he considers my obsession with film making as one of my faults).

I enlisted Bob McGreevy, John Steele, Mike Kohut and Dave Trotter to be the original Board of Directors and Bob started the paper work necessary to get us approved as a non-profit corporation. It was five months later when we were finally approved.

During this time, (May, 1979), Dave Trotter and I had located the Morrell and decided to make her the subject of S.H.I.P.S. first film. John Steele loaned me his extra camera again and we started in. John was soon called away on another project however, while we had been diving in Lake Superior in 1972 John had located the Indiana, a ship that had sunk in 1858 and possessed an engine that historians had no records on. According to calculations the boat was too big to be propelled by this engine. John had taken films of the wreck which had found their way to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. They had decided to raise the engine for research and display, so John was needed to work with them. That turned out to be a two year project for John and eventually lead to his recently being named to a three year term as a research associate for the Smithsonian.

All during the summer of 1978 I was driving down to Royal Oak to see Grace every time I had enough film for her to look at. She would come up with new ideas on how to shoot scenes as well as telling me what I had done wrong. It was a type of on the job training. Grace sorted out the useable film and helped me develop a shooting script as we went along. By October the weather had chased us off the Lake. John and I had shot 6,000 feet of film, but Grace informed me that we didn't have enough scenes with divers. We would have to go back in 1980 to get more.

During that winter we did programs for groups all over Michigan using John's films and slides that Dave Trotter had taken on the Kamloops and the Morrell.

Bob McGreevy produced some limited edition artwork for use in our fund raising efforts. We solicited memberships and also received contributions from many clubs, historical society's, etc.

During that winter John purchased a new camera with electric drive and a new, extremely wide angle lens so that we could get more perspective on the wreck and see more of the divers needed.

Mike Kohut designed a lighting system and his Recreational Diving Systems secured a manufacturer of the lights. Some experts said it was not possible to fill the entire field of view with such a wide angle lens and using battery powered lights, but it worked out very well.

By enlisting a variety of volunteers to handle all aspects of promoting the organization and assembling the programs we were able to keep going. We each paid our own expenses and also donated heavily to the organization in order to meet expenses.

I enlisted the aid of another friend that winter - my accountant - Carol Baker, worked for months to get S.H.I.P.S. approved by the IRS as a tax exempt organization. We were finally approved in June of 1980.

During the summer of 1980 I shot another 1,000 feet of film showing divers - to fill in the holes from the previous year.

During 1980 I met Phil Kwiatkowski. Phil was a diver and also Director of the Sloan Museum in Flint. Phil is an expert in the operations of non-profit organizations and eventually became more and more involved with the day to day operations of S.H.I.P.S. Today Phil is a Director as well as being Treasurer and Corresponding Secretary. Without Phil, S.H.I.P.S. would not be able to progress through the maze of paper work involved. Phil makes it all seem so easy.

Mike Kohut was a continual supporter of the project. He was constantly supplying me with some new type of equipment or camera information which would be useful. He also provided the maintenance expertise to keep the camera and diving equipment performing week after week. He was also on the lookout for volunteers.

One of the people Mike introduced me to was Jerry Feldstein, a M.D. with vast experience in diving medicine. Jerry checked my physical condition and obtained specialized information for the type of extreme diving exposures that we were encountering on the Morrell.

Another volunteer Mike introduced me to was Juergen Forester. He was an excellent diver and a master engineer. He became a regular member of my crew and handled maintenance of the boat as well as designing all kinds of boat and equipment modifications. Juergen took the film we made of the Kamloops to Germany for a program, so we made him S.H.I.P.S. "International Activities Chairman". Unfortunately, he was offered the position of Plant Manager for his companies South Carolina Plant and had to move, but he still is an active supporter of S.H.I.P.S. and continues to design modifications for my boat and camera equipment. Juergen is also making arrangements to do programs in Germany with the Morrell film. He is of German nationality and came to the U.S. just shortly before we met, so he can interpret. We also expect to do some programs in South Carolina soon.

Juergen was also the diver I used during 1980 as an actor to fill in the scenes we had not completed the previous year. Our friendship was spontaneous and we still call each other regularly when we are having a particularly hectic day and need to break the routine of making a living and coping with the problems of daily business life.



Another, newer supporter of S.H.I.P.S. is also an engineer - an old friend from the Flint area, Jim Peterson who works for GM has volunteered and is now a Director and also S.H.I.P.S. Corporate Secretary. Jim was not involved in the Morrell project but he is now organizing a mailing list and is working with Mike Kohut to put it on a computer so that we can publicize S.H.I.P.S. and the availability of professional quality programs. Jim will also be an excellent speaker at programs.

During 1980 I met a diver from Detroit who was also Production Manager for National Television News (NTN). Dave Kelley was a professional film maker who handles all aspects of the projects from start to finish. He also teaches classes on film making at a local college. He volunteered to help out if I ever need guidance.

That winter Grace put in countless hours trying to make my film work. She had accepted a project in New York making a film for television and would be gone for several months so deadline for my film was December. Eventually we just ran out of time.

I contacted Dave Kelley and he agreed to take a look at the project. While looking at what we had done so far, Dave asked if a friend (of both Dave and Grace) could join us. His friend turned out to be a playwright who was also in the film production industry.

Bob Jackson has a background in theatre (Ph.D.) and is working as a Production Supervisor for Sandy Corporation, a large producer of educational films. Bob, Dave and I looked over the Morrell film together. Dave had seen a unique quality in the film that Bob also picked up right away. They asked what my goals were for the film and I told them to make an interesting film for the general public, divers and non-divers alike. They then asked how long I wanted it to be, to which I answered that it should be only as long as we could keep it interesting and of high quality. The last question was how soon it had to be finished. This was about December of 1980 and I already had a year and a half of my life invested in this project so my immediate answer was "as long as it takes to make it good".

With those parameters Dave and Bob agreed to volunteer for the task of completing my film. Bob went about creating a script based on what he saw in the film and all of the other information that I could furnish him about the Morrell and our efforts to document her. Dave and I went about making some changes in the editing.

When Bob came back a couple of months later with his script I was amazed! He had captured the entire atmosphere surrounding the project in a way we had never dreamed of. Instead of the normal travelogue type of shipwreck film he had incorporated the wrecks story into a first person tale told by the wreck herself! I was elated!

Bob has written two other scripts for films recently and has just returned from a trip to California where he tried to interest the film studios.

Grace is back in New York now for her third film since we started the Morrell project together.

At this point Dave set about completely cutting a part all of the work done already to start editing all over again to make the film conform to Bob's script.

Both Dave and Bob began searching for actors with the ability to handle the voices in the script and who would be willing to volunteer for the project, (information on the actors is in the S.H.I.P.S. newsletter).

We have now completed the rough work print of the film and the narration for the sound track (the actors had to be taped first so that Dave could edit the film to conform with the voices).

Dave enlisted Rick Slotnick, a musician/composer who works for Filmhaus Music in Troy. Rick works with music for films, so was familiar with the other major ingredient we needed to complete the film - a musical score.

We are now waiting for Rick to finish our soundtrack and we will go into the final stages of finishing the continuing saga of the Daniel J. Morrell.

One thing we need to convey is the reason for the film is that S.H.I.P.S. preserves shipwreck history by supplying speakers and audio-visual materials for interested groups.

Another item is how readers would get in touch with us. I'm sure we would have to be careful not to turn the article into an advertisement but if we get the idea across of why we are making the film - interested readers could write to the magazine asking how to get in touch with us.