

Ghosts, Ghouls, and Crimes of the Lakes

Lisa Beutler



A campfire along the shore of Lake Superior, said to be one of the 14 most haunted water bodies in the world. Source: Wirepec, Adobe Stock.

MANY A LAKE IS SAID TO BE HAUNTED, FREQUENTED BY ghouls, the scene of a crime, or some combination of the three. Scary lake stories, often grounded in slivers of truth, offer important lessons. They warn of danger, urge us to stay close to our communities, and allow us to confront, even for a moment, our greatest fears.

[Two in five Americans](#) say they believe ghosts, and one in five says they've seen one. We love to be scared. As proof, [Wisconsin-based artist and professor](#) Geo Rutherford (@geodesaurus) boasts well over a million followers for her ["Spooky Lakes" Tik Tok series](#). She's featured more than 60 lakes and their odd, disgusting, mysterious, frightening, and deadly attributes. Among her stories is one about the Great Lakes Graveyard, also known as Lake Superior, named by *Reader's Digest* as one

of the [14 most haunted water bodies in the world](#).

As Gordon Lightfoot penned, "The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead," and the song verse is literal. The frigid water of Lake Superior is too cold for the bacteria that make a body's internal organs bloat during decomposition. The bloating is what causes bodies to float to the surface. In deep, cold lakes, sunken bodies remain sunk.

Lightfoot's eerie lyric captures the story of 29 men that perished on the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* on November 10, 1975. The ship, originally commissioned by a life insurance company as a business venture, was named for the company's president. When her keel was laid on August 7, 1957, she became the biggest vessel on the lake, a title she held until 1971. [The Great Lakes](#)

The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald Controversy

The *SS Edmund Fitzgerald's* final voyage was chronicled by another ship, the *Arthur M. Anderson*, which traveled 10–15 miles behind and maintained radio contact. Conditions were bad—winds gusted to 50 knots and seas were 12–16 feet—but both captains had often piloted their vessels in similar conditions. At 1530 hours on November 10, Captain Cooper from the *Anderson* received a radio call that the *Fitzgerald* had been damaged. Captain McSorley of the *Fitzgerald* was asking the *Anderson*, “Will you stay by me till I get to Whitefish?” Captain Cooper replied yes and asked if they had the pumps going. “Yes, both of them,” replied McSorley.

Then conditions got worse, with wind steady at 58 knots, gusts to 70 knots, and seas of 18–25 feet.

At around 1855 hours, Cooper and the men in the *Anderson's* pilothouse felt a “bump.” The ship lurched as a monstrous wave engulfed the vessel, driving the bow of the *Anderson* down into the lake.

“Then the *Anderson* just raised up and shook herself off of all that water—barrooff—just like a big dog. Another wave just like the first one or bigger hit us again. I watched those two waves head down the lake towards the *Fitzgerald*,” said Captain Cooper.

At around 1915 hours the *Anderson* could no longer locate the *Fitzgerald* by radar or reach it by radio. The *Anderson* called the Coast Guard to report that the *Fitzgerald* was in trouble and request help, but it was the *Anderson* that was first on the scene. In the rough

seas the crew retrieved two *Fitzgerald* lifeboats and saw debris, but no men.

To this day, the cause of the sinking remains in dispute. The Coast Guard found the cause of the sinking could not be conclusively determined. It maintained, however, that “the most probable cause of the sinking of the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* from massive flooding of the cargo hold through ineffective hatch closures as boarding seas rolled along the spar deck.” The Coast Guard finding essentially placed the blame for the disaster on the *Fitzgerald's* crew by suggesting they had failed to properly close the hatch covers.

The finding enraged the Lake Carrier's Association, which vigorously disputed the claim. They believed instead that the *Fitzgerald* had likely picked up hull damage in choppy water when it passed over the Six Fathom Shoal Area—as observed during Captain Cooper's monitoring of the ship's route and validated by the known damage to the ship before it was consumed by the overtopping waves. Some believe McSorley knew the ship was going down and had hoped the *Anderson* would arrive in time for a rescue.

An examination of the upside-down *Fitzgerald* at 535 feet below the surface of the lake shows damage to the bow consistent with the building waves that submerged but did not sink the *Anderson*. The true cause, or causes, of the wreck may never be known.

[Shipwreck Historical Society](#) claims the story of her wreck is surpassed in books, film, and media only by that of the Titanic.

In 1985, a decade after the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* sank, the alarmed crew of a commercial vessel spotted it sailing on the lake's surface. At the time, reasonable explanations involving mist and a lighthouse were offered, but local lore holds that the *Edmund Fitzgerald* will sail on as a ghost ship until its controversies are resolved (see sidebar).

Bodies of the Kamloops Shipwreck

Rutherford's series featured a different ship, the *Kamloops*, a steel freight

ship, that set sail on Lake Superior with a load of farm equipment bound for Canada in early December 1927. It was lost in a furious blizzard. After a weeklong search for the missing vessel, the ship's 22 crew members were presumed dead. Six months later a local fisherman happened upon nine bodies attired in life vests stenciled with “KAMLOOPS.” Many think the crew likely froze trying to swim from the point of the wreck, or died later,

succumbing to the harsh conditions after having made it to shore on Isle Royale.

Along the same lines, another legend claims one of the *Kamloops* stewardesses, Alice

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Bettridge, made it in her lifeboat to Isle Royale. Facing dire conditions, she's said to have written a message, placed it in a bottle, and launched it into the water, hoping that someone on the Canadian shore might find it and come to the rescue. As the story goes, a year later, far too late to help, the bottle was found by a trapper along the Agawa River. But Alice had already foreseen her future. The note read, "I am the last one left alive, freezing and starving to death on Isle Royale. I just want mom and dad to know my fate."

Tellers of the *Kamloops* story say the captain stayed at the helm and went down with his ship. In fact, thanks to the cold water, the ship's cargo is said to be in excellent condition, and multiple credible reports claim a crew member is floating in the wreck's engine room. Called "Old Whitey" for its white waxy appearance, the corpse is described in a way that adds to the story's validity. Submerged bodies acquire this appearance from adipocere, a wax-like organic substance also known as corpse or grave wax. Formed by the breakdown of fat in tissue, such as body fat in corpses, it replaces normal putrefaction with a permanent firm cast of the substance. The formation begins within a month of death and, in the absence of air, can persist for centuries.

Old Whitey is said to have given more than one diver a fright, but official records do not acknowledge a body. Still, Old Whitey fans claim it can be seen at the two-minute mark of diving footage posted on YouTube in 2014. The ship sits below 280 feet of water, not far from the Isle Royale shore, and is accessible to only the most experienced divers—those who don't mind a dangerous, dark dive in frigid water. At least one diver has perished in an attempt to visit the watery grave.

The Impatient Colonel of Lake Loughareema

On a late September day in 1898, storms had filled Ireland's Lake Loughareema to the brim. Because the lake comes and goes on an unknown schedule, a road runs right through the middle of it. That fateful day, one Colonel John Magee McNeille was determined to catch the 3 p.m. train from the town. Although there were other less watery routes, the fastest, he believed, was through the lake, and he persuaded his coachman to drive a covered carriage, drawn by two horses, into the basin. Loughareema, even when full, is shallow, but midway into the crossing, water began to lap at the horses' bellies, and one became skittish, refusing to go further. The coachman cracked a whip. The horse reared up, turned, capsized the coach, and drowned them all in the frigid water.

To this day it's said that in the right conditions a phantom carriage can be seen crossing the lake. Others have seen a military man traversing on horseback. Lake visitors, even those unfamiliar with the story, have also reported hearing a strange clip-clop sound, like the sound

The Value of Haunted Hydrology

Every good camper knows that telling ghost stories at a lake is as important as building the campfire and making the s'mores. And many a lake is blessed with the legend of wayward teenagers meeting an untimely end during an unsanctioned visit to a remote shoreline.

But is there a point to haunted hydrology beyond instilling fear? University of Southern California anthropology professor Tok Thompson says there is. Thompson teaches a class on ghost stories and believes that "if there wasn't value in them, people wouldn't keep telling them."

[In an interview on National Public Radio](#), Thompson explains that ghost stories deal with a lot of issues—"not just whether or not one believes in ghosts, but also questions of the past that haunt us, perhaps past injustices that haven't been taken care of." He illustrates the point with examples of ghost stories related to slavery and indigenous people.

Paul Patterson, a Saint Joseph's University associate professor of English, agrees and notes that scary stories have been told across cultures for millennia. [He writes](#), "We see a lot of these stories start to emerge in ancient Roman writings. In the first century, they wrote letters recounting ghost stories they claimed to have witnessed—chains rattling, haunted house type stories." He explains, "The ghosts are never really harming anyone, but they're always showing up. A lot of the time, the hauntings are because the person was never properly buried. It's tied to respecting the dead."

For Adam Booth, a professional storyteller and expert in Appalachian folklore and legends, the tales serve a loftier purpose. In a 2021 [Sierra Club interview](#), he says, "Ghost stories give us a sense of survival, an understanding about how we might survive in situations that are uncertain." They can even, he says, help us prepare psychologically for bumps along the road of our own life journeys.

of horses' hooves pulling a wagon.

Over the years, the town raised the road and constructed a stone wall on each side to prevent another such tragedy, but to this day the sightings and sounds continue.

It's Probably Haunted

The residents of New Hampshire's Frankestown call it like they see it. Two miles east of town sits Haunted Lake. Some say its name recalls a catastrophic fire that charred everything in its path, leaving a strange and disturbing landscape that spooked the Native People and later the European surveyors who encountered it. A more contemporary theory attributes the lake's name to a story from a 1753 [surveyor's diary](#). Penned by the Honorable Matthew Patten, the diary describes nighttime "groanings and shrieks as of a human being in distress" that continued "most plaintive and affecting, till nearly morning."

Nearly 30 years later, despite the ghost stories, construction of a sawmill and gristmill commenced at the lake outlet, and a body was unearthed nearly immediately. Most speculated that it probably belonged to a young hunter from an adjacent state who had been killed by a cougar. The hunter's partner, unable to transport the body home, buried it at the spot.

The series of local tragedies continued for the next 80 years. One boy was drowned with lilies clasped in his hand. A similarly fated Ichabod Gray, age 55, was noted in the death notice as "deranged."

In 1860 the sawmill was abandoned, and by 1912 the neighborhood was becoming gentrified. The new crown jewel of the area was Shattuck's Grove, advertised as a remarkable resort of "fishing, scenery, delightful shade, pure air, and pleasure parties."

Today, townspeople note the spirits are quieter, and those seeking to capitalize on the value of lakefront property refer to it as Scoby Pond, after the sawmill owner. But the historic name persists, even if locals suggest that visitors seeking a fright might instead appreciate the lake for its scenery.

The Crimes of Lake Jackson

One sunny day in early June 2021, Lake Jackson, a 4,000-acre aquatic preserve along U.S. Highway 27 north of Tallahassee, Florida, was experiencing one of its disappearing acts. Lake water here is known to suddenly drop as water rapidly drains into its famous sinkholes.

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It seemed like a perfect day for a spin in a four-wheeler over a newly dried portion of the lake. Then, about 2 p.m., things got very exciting. The rider encountered human remains in the muck.

Sheriff's reports describe the remains as lying about 80 yards from a boat ramp, in what normally would

have been six feet of water. No one knew how many victims were involved or if foul play was a factor. Law enforcement took no chances, making the lakebed become a crime scene and drawing the attention of lake visitors and the media. Also unknown was whether the highly deteriorated remains had been there for a decade or, as Shade McMillian, Leon County Sheriff's Office spokesman described it, was "something from way back in the day," adding that those answers would require forensic analysis.

There are plenty of lake crimes, but this may be the only crime of its type. The two full skulls delivered to the lab for forensic examination were found to be more than a century old. DNA analysis identified the remains as Native American, but not a lineage of local tribal people—they belonged instead to a Midwestern tribe. The skulls had not been in the water for decades but stored elsewhere.

It is illegal to dig up, buy, or sell human artifacts from Native America or federal land, and in Florida, it is illegal to own human skeletons outside of an educational or research setting. One theory says that the holder of the remains didn't care to explain where they came from and decided to dispose of them clandestinely. But for all anyone knows, an unwitting recipient of the skulls may have superstitiously delivered to them to the water to avoid an unknown curse.

Tell Your Story

You may have a lake tale of your own, but if not, there are many reasons to learn more about haunted hydrology. In addition to adding a little spice to your conversations, the stories grow our understanding of lakes as places and the ways human interact with them. ■

Lisa Beutler (lisa.beutler@stantec.com), an AWRA past president, is an executive facilitator at Stantec, working on an extensive water management portfolio.