

I was sitting in my den this morning with coffee in hand thinking about the call I received yesterday from my good friend Art Cohn who is the Executive Director of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum at Basin Harbor Vermont. He wanted to know if I would be interested in participating with him in writing a chapter in a book being written by Kevin Crisman. The bulk of the book would pertain to the War of 1812. The chapter we would write would be about Lake Champlain with emphasis on the Battle of Plattsburgh, September 11, 1814. My contribution would be to recall things about the lake during my fifty plus years of scuba diving. I told him that I would love to help.

I grew up in Champlain NY on the shore of the great Chazy River during the 1940's and '50's. From the age of ten I had a boat and motor and spent a great amount of my youth exploring the river and eventually the lake. I would spend countless hours on the shore looking for Indian artifacts. During the mid'50's commercial traffic on the lake had been reduced to oil barges and the steamer Ticonderoga. Sailboats were almost nonexistent which often gave the impression that you had the entire lake to yourself. When I saw the Ticonderoga headed down the lake to Rouses Point I would motor out and get in her huge wake and pretend I was a P.T. Boat after a battle ship.

My interest in the history of the lake was encouraged by several mentors, Hugh and Mel^Acolm McLellan. They would let me sit on the floor of their walk in vault and spend hours reading old letters and documents of the early years of our country. Most of their collection now resides in the Special Collections section at S.U.N.Y. Plattsburgh. They gave me books about the lake's history by such authors as Palmer, Crockett, and Lamb. These historical accounts fired my imagination of battles and sunken ships. I knew I needed to begin my own explorations of Lake Champlain as soon as possible.

In 1957 I bought my first self contained underwater breathing apparatus (scuba). I began my first lake adventures in the Rouses Point N. Y. area. On one of my initial dives I discovered a steam driven boat who's sides had collapsed outward. The steam engine was standing tall in the center with brass fittings hanging on the piping like ornaments on a Christmas tree and when touched, fell

off. In the front was a large mushroom anchor and on the back, half buried in the sand, a huge brass propeller that weighed 385 pounds once I got it up. To retrieve the prop I had to cut through a three inch drive shaft with a hack saw. When completed I had used a dozen blades and had made about five trips to Larkin's Drug Store in Plattsburgh to fill my air tank. This experience was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with scuba diving and Lake Champlain. A short time later I bought my own air compressor and started selling air and diving equipment. At about the same time, I got my brother-in-law, Robert Leahy, interested in diving. We had an opportunity to do several diving jobs in the area including repairs to the center pier on the railroad bridge in Rouses Point and the outflow line for the Rouses Point sewage treatment plant.

Bob and I continued to dive in the northern end of Lake Champlain. We were doing a search on a dive off Point Au Fer in front of the historic "White House" (known today as Scales's Point) when I found an eight inch mortar bomb. After retrieval, we put to shore for lunch. The bomb was sitting in the sun next to us and started to bubble around the plug. To say the least it startled the crap out of my brother-in-law. I removed the plug and dumped the black powder and water. By the time we had finished lunch the powder had dried thoroughly. We lit the powder and it burned with a big puff and a cloud of white smoke.

Remembering my first trip to Valcour to look on site for artifacts from the Battle of Valcour, which occurred October 11, 1776, I pulled my boat up to secure it when I looked down in the water, and there, lying in less than a foot of water, was a cannon ball. The strange thing about diving at Valcour at that time was that the lake had a liquefied bottom. So much so that you could swim into it, which was a scary thought. One time I took a six foot boat hook, put it down into the slurry up to my armpit and found no solid bottom. Artifacts would lay on top of this with little means of support. The lake bottom has solidified significantly since then, but that puzzles me to this day. If you tell people about it they look at you as if you are crazy.

The Battle of Plattsburgh took place on Lake Champlain on September 11, 1814. This engagement varied substantially from most naval battles. It was

fiercely fought at anchor at very close range in the shallow waters of Cumberland Bay. Though no vessels were sunk, there was a rich debris field that was lying in between twenty five and thirty feet of water on a hard sand bottom. On most days the visibility runs between fifteen and twenty feet with very light current making for ideal diving conditions. In 1959 while looking for the Battle site I found a snatch block which appeared to be from the correct era. I was excited to think that it might be my first physical evidence of the battle site. I made a trip to Essex N.Y. to confirm my belief with an authority on the subject, Colonel Lorenzo Hagglund. He was the "hard hat" diver that, in 1935, raised the gunboat Philadelphia from the waters off Valcour Island which had been sunk during the naval engagement of 1776. He confirmed my suspicions and said that the snatch block was likely shot from the rigging of one of the ships in the battle. At this time the only diver I knew of that was working the area and finding artifacts was Derek Grout from Quebec Canada. I later saw his collection in an exhibit at the McCord Museum in Montreal. I also learned that other Canadians with good collections of artifacts from Lake Champlain were John Forget, Sean Gilmore, and Richard Weiss.

Still hungry for more information my wife Beverly and I went to Washington D.C. on vacation. While there we spent a good deal of time in the Manuscript Department of the Library Of Congress searching through everything we could find on the lake battles. Bev typed all of the pertinent information. Returning home with new information Bob and I planned a diving trip to Arnold's Bay, Vt. to look for remains of the American fleet from the Battle of Valcour Island in 1776. Our main objective was locating Benedict Arnold's flagship, the Congress. I discussed our project with a good friend, Oscar Brendenberg. Oscar was a local historian and published author. He was intrigued by the idea and said he would like to go along as deck crew. He said his good friend, Richard Crook, lived in that area and might provide lodging. We welcomed him aboard.

Richard Crook lived on Buttonmould Bay, only two miles from Arnold's Bay. Mr. Crook was contacted and agreed to help in any way he could. The team choose August 23, 1960 as the time to begin the search for the Congress. Bob Leahy and I arrived at Block House Point where Mr. Brendenberg lived. He had

assembled some needed equipment including a boat and trailer. We proceeded to Dick Crook's home at Buttonmould Bay. This location would be our base of operations. We drove to Arnold's Bay on the 24th to begin preparations for the search. As we began to plan our strategy Crook suggested that we talk to Ira Brydia who lived in Panton, Vt. Mr. Brydia told us that as a youngster he had seen the ribs of what he thought were some of Arnold's vessels sticking out of the mud in the Bay. Another clue to help us find the Congress.

August 25th proved to be a successful day for our team. After loading technical equipment and a 5hp Johnson motor onto the scow Bob and I proceeded to Arnold's Bay and commenced our dive. After four hours of exploring and using an underwater glider we had nothing to show for our efforts. In an attempt to secure more information Mr. Crook introduced us to Paul Bilhuber at the Basin Harbor Club. Bilhuber had found numerous artifacts and, at that time, had found the only cannon. (Currently on display at The Basin Harbor Maritime Museum.) He had many artifacts but the one that was most memorable was sitting on his mantel. It was a cluster of grape shot with a large gold coin half exposed in the rusted clump.

On Thursday August 26th we made our first find. I searched the entrance to the Bay and discovered three pieces of wood connected to a bolt containing two eyebolts similar to those used on gun carriages during the Revolution. We went ashore to exchange air tanks. While there we met a man named Captain Sinon. This 80+ year old former ferry boat captain said he saw the ribs of what he thought was the Congress in the northern half of the Bay. Col. Hagglund had pulled out one of Arnold's gondolas in that area. We proceeded to the area where Sinon suggested and, while using a metal detector, I found a 4 inch cannon ball. Shortly after that discovery Bob found a boat rib sticking out of the mud. These finds were about 65 yards from the north shore and about 35 feet from a shale reef. The ribs were covered with silt and stones that had been used as ballast for the boat. After being in the water for many hours we decided to end the dive, excited in the belief that we had found the Congress.

numerous items in the mud. We found several 8 inch spikes, a number of hand wrought nails, grape shot, and a hollow rectangular collar made of steel. As we continued to search the ribs I touched the side planking nailed to the ribs as I dug a full arms length into the silt. Bob and I wanted to continue our work but having been in the water for 6 hours we decided to end the day's work.

The 1960 search ended on Friday the 28th. Our team packed the gear and thanked the Crooks for helping with the project. We realized that the mud and stones would have to be removed before the full extent of the Congress site could be searched. Next year we would resume our quest to further explore the site.

August 3, 1961 marked phase II of the Congress Project. We decided to rent a mud sucker to hasten our search. Our team again consisted of myself, Bob Leahy, and Oscar Brendenberg. We loaded the rented machine as well as our other equipment onto the floor of the skiff and proceeded to the site of the Congress. In the process of relocating the ribs I found a six pound cannon ball. Bob and I made a special strainer and after a few modifications began to successfully remove debris from the Congress using the mud sucker. We worked many hours that day with great excitement and anticipation.

When pumping began on August 4th results were apparent immediately. Some of the items discovered included a shipbuilders adze, shot, and nails. The most exciting find was a coin that I found that turned out to be a 1767 silver piece of eight. By the end of the day we were exhausted. We needed to fill our tanks and the nearest place to do so was in Burlington at Victory Auto Sales. We filled the tanks in preparation for the next dive.

The dive on Saturday the 5th was very successful. The mud sucker continued to reveal more artifacts. We cleared approximately half of the Congress. More artifacts including grapeshot, buttons, cuff links, a silver shoe buckle, and human bones were discovered. Most of the buttons were plain. One button had a number 49 superimposed on it. Two others had fancy designs. The cuff links had a simple design etched on one side. The final tally of the 2 year Congress project resulted in over 700 items discovered.

During the fall of 1961 I was called back to the army for a year during the Berlin Crisis and was stationed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. I spent my time in ordinance and as a leader of an aggressor squad which included scuba diving.

When I returned home I took a hiatus from diving to raise a family and built a home on Rand Hill in the Town of Beekmantown. At that time I sold my compressor to Frank Pabst who was starting a dive shop on the Lake Shore Road south of Plattsburgh. In my absence some exciting finds were made. In 1967 two Vermont divers, Bruce Montgomery and Bob Schumacher, were diving in Cumberland Bay and found the lower part of the sheet anchor from the British flag ship *Confiance* that was shot away at the beginning of the Battle of Plattsburgh. It is now displayed in front of the Lake Champlain Yacht Club at Shelburne Point, Vermont.

In 1968 two boys, Peter Vernon and Michael Davidson, were swimming near Cliff Haven, just south of Plattsburgh, when they accidentally found artifacts that had been thrown overboard by the crew of the French sloop *Muskellunge* before they scuttled her so she would not fall into the hands of the British. That was in 1759 during The French and Indian War. Included in this material were two twelve pounder bronze cannons, a swivel gun, five anchors and a number of small arms. After years of squabbling over ownership the decision was made to display one of the bronze cannons at the Clinton County Community College and the other at the Crown Point Museum. The swivel gun is on display at the Clinton County Historical Association Museum. All on loan from the State of New York. Also in my absence several diving clubs had formed in the Plattsburgh area. One was called the Wreck Raiders and the other the Scuba Explorers.

In 1977 after more than a dozen years of limited diving I got back to what I loved most, working the battle sites. I made sixty dives that year, and the excitement and anticipation of finding a long lost artifact at the next kick of a fin was still there. One of the things that surprised me was how big a sport diving had become and how many local followers there were. But after an active diving season at the Plattsburgh Battle site I found little had changed and very few artifacts had been found in my absence. Considering the size of the site it would

indicate that the divers of the day did not do their homework, had bad information, or did not know what to look for once they were there. That season I found 95 artifacts from the Bay site. The most interesting item was an anchor that was seven foot two inches long with a wooden stock seven foot four inches long and a ring with a circumference of three feet and a half inches. Realizing I would need help getting this out I decided it was time to get new equipment.

Knowing the battle sites were still rich with treasure, in 1978 I went to Maine and bought a new lobster boat. I rigged it for diving with mast, boom, electric winch, planning reels, and boarding ladder. During the winter my daughter Stacey got her certification in scuba diving from both the Y.M.C.A. and P.A.I.D. and soon became my favorite diving partner. During the summer of 1978 my son William obtained his diving certification through P.A.D.I. and in doing so I picked up another diving partner. The biggest find I made that year was the top two feet and ring of Confiance's sheet anchor that was shot away during the Battle. It mates perfectly with the lower portion that Montgomery and Schumacher found in 1967. When found, the ring was wrapped with hemp rope that disintegrated when I raised it. Under the rope was a wrapping of canvas that was still soft and pliable.

At this time I began to patronize the Sub Aqua Pro Dive Shop run by Gary Allen and in short order we became good friends. Through Gary I met two other local divers, Matthew Booth and Dennis Lewis who also became friends. We shared many diving adventures together. With Stacey as my diving partner we started to collect many artifacts from the Bay site. My new boat started to draw some attention from local divers and soon had them following me to the dive site.

In short order the secret was out on the true location and divers started to retrieve relics from the Battle site. It was at this time I started to meet many of the local divers and was made an honorary member of a local dive club. With so much material coming up, and not having a way of keeping track of it, it became a concern to some of us who were truly interested in preserving the historical artifacts. The Dive Shop became a meeting place where like minded divers met to discuss possible ways to achieve this goal. We decided to call our group The Lake

artifacts. The Dive Shop became a meeting place where like minded divers met to discuss possible ways to achieve this goal. We decided to call our group The Lake Champlain Archeological Association. We started to have regular meetings at my home. Some of the divers from other clubs had concerns that we were a competing club. We were unable to convince them that we were all in this together. We had a good group and started working towards our goals. All material brought up on dives would be cataloged and stored together. We arranged exhibits in the community starting with the Dive Shop, then the Plattsburgh Air Force Base Museum, Feinberg Library at S.U.N.Y. Plattsburgh, and the Clinton County Historical Museum. A constitution and by-laws were written and in March 1982 we became a non-profit corporation. The names of the first Directors were William Legee, Gary Allen, Dennis Lewis, Matthew Booth, Thomas Brunet, Bruce Pelkowski, Ronald Allen, Craig Allen, and Robert Simonsen.

On one of our early group check out dives we all met back on the boat except for Gary Allen. The rest of us only had found a few old bottles but Gary came up and as he was heading to the boat someone asked how he had done. "An old jug" was his reply. He was about ready to hand it up when I happened to look over the side and started to shout, "don't take it out of the water". He was holding the most beautiful late Woodland Indian pot I had ever seen. I took a pail and lined it with a towel, then put it in the water and Gary carefully put the pot in the pail. It was full of mud and sand so we carefully removed the contents looking for something of interest. The clay was very soft and would have disintegrated had it been taken out of the water without the care we gave it. After careful conservation by our group it was loaned to the Clinton County Historical Museum where it can be viewed today. This is a case where my interest in Indian artifacts paid off because no one else on the boat that day knew what a treasure Gary held in his hands.

The accounts written about the Battle of Plattsburgh describe how the Confiance's sheet anchor steering and compass were blown away early in the fight. Then while diving I found a piece of the anchor, the compass rose, shards of glass and brass from the binnacle. Knowing that you are the first person to see and touch these artifacts since that epic battle was an awe inspiring feeling.

While continuing to work the Bay site I eventually found three sites that had a lot of debris other than shot. For example, I found a number of wooden buckets, their sides fallen out, but a lot of artifacts still inside. Also found were a large quantity of what I call rum bottles. By plotting this on a map, stretching a line between them, we have a line that runs from the Battle site south to within two hundred feet of shore on the west side of Crab Island. It is reasonable to assume that after the fight the badly damaged ships were pulled into shallow water. The crews were probably ordered to clean the decks and throw damaged goods over board. As for the rum bottles, I think they got thirsty.

As I continued to work the battle site I found a large quantity of projectiles. A great many of them, such as grapeshot, were wrapped or covered in a burlap or canvas material, and after being fired during the battle some of that material remains to this day. It caused me to come to the conclusion about the hot shot controversy. I have watched muzzle loading rifles fire and observed that down range you will see a smoldering piece of cloth. This is the cloth patch that holds the projectile in the barrel before firing. The cannon when ignited fires the shot, but in so doing catches the covering on fire. Both sides say they did not have hot shot furnaces yet two fires were reported aboard the American brig Saratoga and one aboard the British cutter Chub. All of the fires were in the rigging or sails. I believe that the closeness of the ships, some as close as one hundred yards apart, allowed the projectiles carrying this smoldering material to pass through the sails and rigging leaving the fabric behind. There was a light breeze blowing that day allowing the smoldering fabric to set the sails on fire.

I had many surprises working the Battle site. One of the biggest was the different types of eating utensils found. I had in my mind that war ships at that time would be using simple eating utensils such as tin cups and pewter plates. I was wrong. We found hundreds of pieces of ceramics and glassware. There were glass tumblers, stemmed wine glasses, china with oriental designs, cream ware with both blue and green trim, pearl ware, and white glazed ceramics. We found a tea pot, butter dish, salt dish, pepper shaker, and a serving ladle, some broken and some whole, but all were ceramic. The difference between officers and common seamen dinner ware was quite apparent in that there was more white glazed ceramics. Early in our diving Matthew Booth found

a large stack of the white glazed ceramic plates. While studying them we found that all had the same design scratched into the back. As time passed our collection grew. We found seven different scratch mark designs in the white glazed ceramics. Doing some research Dennis Lewis said that most likely they were messing marks. These marks would have been a method of identifying one's dinner ware. A ship as large as the *Confiance* would have to feed the crew in shifts. Each shift would be responsible for the washing and care of their own dinner ware.

By the 1990's our beautiful lake was being invaded by the zebra mussel and now any hard surface under the water, be it man made or natural, was covered with these little organisms. The growing boat traffic, especially sail boats, had increased the danger of diving to a point where your boat crew was constantly looking for boats approaching to close to the dive site. Also, our Lake Champlain Archeological Association was on the decline due to the loss of members. Some moved away, got married, lost interest, or died. We did not actively seek new members and did not project ourselves into the community enough. We continued to have meetings but some were without a quorum. We knew we had to do something. By this time the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum was well established. Art Cohn, the Museum Director, had become a good friend. I knew that with the professional staff and the conservation lab the Museum was the best place for our collection. There was some disagreement among the remaining members of our Association. Some thought that the collection should remain on the New York side of the lake. Eventually an agreement was reached to send our artifacts to Vermont. In September of 1992 we turned over our assets and the collection of artifacts as a permanent loan to the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum.

In 1996 there was a significant find in Cumberland Bay. Another large anchor believed to be from the *Confiance* was found by Ken and Bill VanStockum. It was raised with the help of Frank Pabst. It was transported to the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum's Conservation Lab. After two years of extensive preservation it was returned to Plattsburgh and is now on display at Plattsburgh City Hall.

In recent years the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum has been spending a week or two every summer working on the "Valcour Bay Research Project," with approval from the United States Navy and New York State. This project is a first of its kind. They are

surveying and documenting a debris field under the site of The Battle of Valclour. I am working with the Museum crew and other divers in the community to eventually help them achieve their goal.

I cannot write about the Lake without mention of "Champy" the Lake Champlain Monster. He was first sighted in 1609 when Samuel D. Champlain entered into the Lake, and from that time on there have been many reported sightings up and down the Lake. Of all the time that I have spent on and under the Lake I have not had the pleasure of his appearance. Even though I never saw him, in the early fifty's two of my uncles, both teetotalers, were fishing in King's Bay and swear they saw him and gave me a vivid description.