

Schreiber diver on cutting edge of movement

by Darren MacDonald
Staff

When talking about the Gunilda, Ryan Leblanc sits straight up and makes his views crystal clear.

"Gunilda's a time capsule," he says. "It represents an age that has gone by. It sunk in August 1911, and it shows the life of a very opulent millionaire. There just isn't anywhere else you can go today to see that."

Leblanc has been scuba diving since receiving his certification in 1973, and in 1975, he graduated from the Professional Association of Diving Instructors in Jacksonville, Florida.

Leblanc has seen the sport undergo a number of transitions since then.

"When scuba diving first started, it was very much geared towards spear fishing," he says.

"All the diving magazines was how to spear fish this, and where to spear fish that, and spear fishing competitions."

Eventually, Leblanc says divers began to realize that they were unwittingly decimating entire schools of fish.

"And once they realized it, they started turning to finding shipwrecks and taking the artifacts from them," he says.

Today, Leblanc says the sport is undergoing another transition, as a growing number of divers realize that they are destroying parts of history by raiding the underwater ships.

He is a board member of Save Ontario's Shipwrecks, a non-profit group dedicated to preserving the estimated 5,000 shipwrecks in the Great Lakes.

"We're not a policing organization," he says. "Instead, we feel that our objectives are best achieved through education. We're trying to let the diving public know that if every diver went down and just took one artifact from a shipwreck, eventually there's not going to be anything left."

Leblanc says that many divers believe that wrecks don't belong to anyone. In fact, under the provisions of the Ontario Heritage Act, the ships are the property of the province, and it's illegal to take anything from the ships.

"We've had a few cases locally where divers have been taking stuff from shipwrecks, and we've used the OHA to either prosecute them or ensure the artifacts are returned to the ship," he says.

In one case, a diver took a huge anchor from the Mary MacLachlan, a four-masted wooden schooner sunk near Gurney in 1921.

"He figured that it was like the old days where just because it's underwater he can come along and take it," says Leblanc. "But anything on the bottom belongs to the province unless you can prove ownership."

The MacLachlan was one of several wrecks that Leblanc and the North Shore Dive club located in the early to mid 1980s.

"In that era of 1980 to 1984, we were finding a new shipwreck every year," he says. "There was a real (local) fever for diving."

For one wreck Leblanc located, the Steamer Ontario, he and SOS built what is probably the world's first underwater interpretive trail.

"Divers can start at point A and follow along reading plastic plaques underwater which identify various components of the wreck," he says.

Another notable local wreck is Whaleback 15, a cigar boat that resembles a surfaced submarine. Only 44 of the ships were built, all on Lake Superior. The wreck was located in 1980, and is one of the few remaining in the world.

But the most famous local shipwreck is, of course, the Gunilda, which sunk near Rosspport.

World famous cinematographer Jacques Cousteau came here to photograph the ship in 1980, using his famous submarine.

Cousteau made use of the expertise of local divers, including Leblanc.

"Cousteau and his crew make you feel very welcome," he says. "They let you know that they appreciate that you're giving them your local expertise."

Unfortunately, bad weather on "Mother Superior" as Leblanc calls it, prevented them from diving, so Cousteau had to settle with the pictures he took from the safety of his submarine.

Underwater cinematography is another one of Leblanc's underwater activities. He's made a film for the CTV series Last Frontier; worked with many leading underwater cinematographers; and made his own film, entitled Square Tail, a film about Speckled Trout which won a film competition in Toronto.

"It was pretty well shot entirely in Walker's Lake," he says.

The Gunilda was in the



Scuba diver Ryan Leblanc

news again last year when a Thunder Bay man named Fred Broenle laid claim to the ship and began to talk about raising it.

"We don't believe there is a valid claim on Gunilda," he says. "The ship was granted to his company through a federal authority, and it's our contention that bottom land is a provincial jurisdiction."

Besides the fact that he's against raising ships in principle, Leblanc says he was alarmed because Broenle hadn't budgeted for conservation of the ship after raising it.

"Preserving it would be very costly and very time consuming if the Gunilda was raised," he says. "The ship would be in a state of constant decomposition, but they hadn't budgeted one red penny for conservation."

Broenle ran into stiff opposition when he came to Rosspport with his idea, and combined with support they have received from the province, Leblanc says plans to raise the Gunilda are in "limbo."

"The message is gradually getting across," he says. "We're trying to educate peo-

ple that there are laws to protect our marine heritage."

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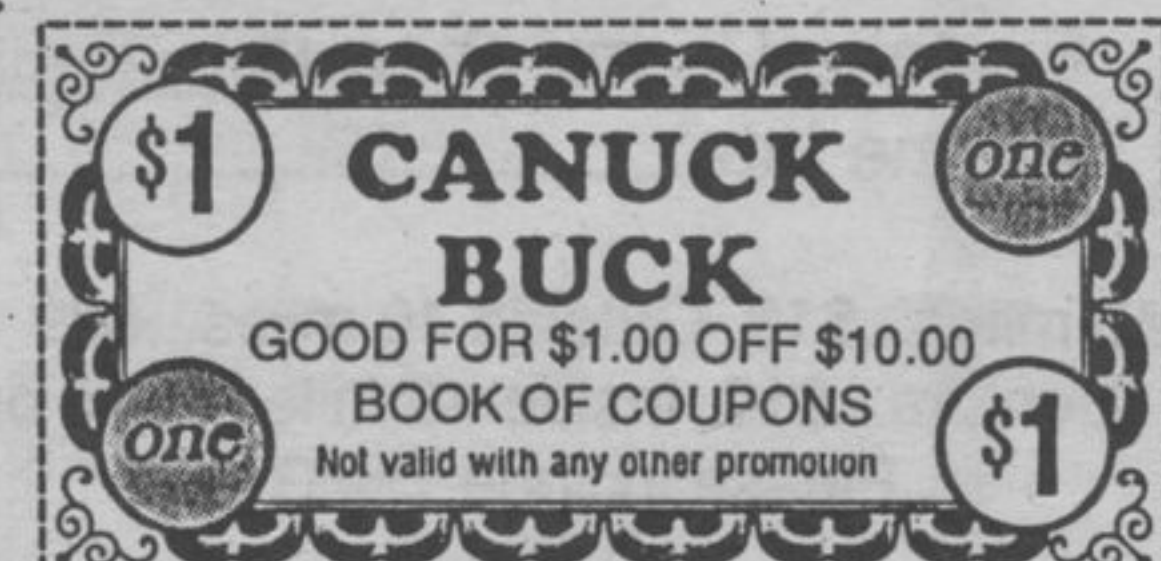
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