

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

November 10, 1975
Edmund Fitzgerald sinks in Lake Superior

The Great Lakes have claimed so many ships and so many lives. The best known are the 29 men who went down aboard the 587-foot *Edmund Fitzgerald*, which sank during a pounding storm on November 10, 1975.

Its celebrity is due in part to the song by Canadian folk singer Gordon Lightfoot, "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*," which he wrote after reading of the 29 tolls of the bell rung at Mariners' Church of Detroit soon after the tragedy. The wreck remained fascinating for another reason – no one knows with certainty why the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank.

An early theory, put forth by the U.S. Coast Guard, proposed that the *Fitzgerald* sank after it broke in two when thrust out of the water by two large waves simultaneously. That theory was debunked in the early 1990s when a film crew reached the wreckage and found evidence that the ship was intact when it sank and broke into three pieces when it reached the lake bottom, 535 feet below the surface. Another theory claimed the ship sank after she filled with water that poured in through improperly secured hatch covers. Yet another proposition maintained that the hatches were secured but structural failure claimed the ship. Despite efforts by loved ones of the lost crew to have the shipwreck designated a burial site to keep away diver, the wreck has been visited numerous times by submarines. The ship's bell was salvaged and put on display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point.