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The saga of the Christmas Tree Ship comes to life at Memories Ballroom.

To some people, the holidays aren't complete without seeing "The Christmas Carol" or "The Nutcracker" ballet.

For Roland Roebuck and Lynn Klemm, owners of Memories Ballroom in the Town of Port Washington, it's the tradition of staging "The Christmas Schooner" that is dear to their hearts.

The musical is a fictional account of the Rouse Simmons, known as the Christmas Tree Ship, and Capt. Herman Schuenemann's mission to bring Christmas trees from Michigan to Chicago.

The ship docked each year around Thanksgiving at the Clark Street bridge festooned with lights and a Christmas tree lashed to its main mast. Schuenemann charged 50 cents to $1 for the pine trees.

The Christmas cargo run was always Schuenemann's last voyage of the season, braving high winds and harsh conditions for the one-week journey to Michigan to load the trees and bring them to Chicago to brighten the holidays for his fellow Chicagoans.

A generous man who would often donate trees to needy families, Schuenemann was known in Chicago as "Captain Santa."

During a Nov. 23, 1912, storm, the three-masted schooner sunk off Two Rivers. Christmas trees washed ashore, but the ship's location was unknown until a diver discovered it 59 years ago. The ship, with trees still in its cargo hold, is now a Wisconsin Historical Society diving site.

Some say too many trees, 5,500, were packed on the ship and became heavier when they were soaked with water and ice. Some crew members reportedly refused to sail on the last voyage.

This is the 100th anniversary of the sinking, so this performance of "The Christmas Schooner," the fifth run at Memories, is a special one, Roebuck said.

"We've done it so many times because we felt it has such a wonderful story and it's something we can relate to," he said.

“In the show, they say they’re going past Port Washington and heading for Racine. I don’t know if it has as much meaning elsewhere as it does here. It’s like Port Washington’s Christmas classic.

“It holds the record for the highest attendance (at Memories).”

Klemm, who portrays cousin Martha from Chicago, said the musical kicks off the holiday season for her.

“It’s absolutely one of my favorites,” she said. “It’s so heart-warming, and it’s a great Christmas story. The music is so beautifully written.

“It’s so heaped with family traditions, which has always been near and dear for me. We’ve touched a lot of people over the years with this show.”

Tara Williams, Memories marketing director, said when Lake Michigan is rough, she can envision the Rouse Simmons — or in the case of the show the Molly Doone — foundering and being battered by the wind and waves.

David Bourgeois, an elementary music teacher in Manitowoc, has portrayed Capt. Peter Stossel for every Memories’ production of “The Christmas Schooner,” and Joe Fuestel has directed it.

Bourgeois grows a beard for his role.

This year, the cast also put on the musical Nov. 23 at the Rogers Street Fishing Village Museum in Two Rivers to mark the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Rouse Simmons.

“We had the captain’s grandson and great-granddaughters and relatives of people who tried to rescue them,” Bourgeois said. “They planted a tree in honor of Capt. Schuenemann.”

In the musical, Peter, his wife Alma and son Karl live with his father Gustav in Manistique, Mich., their home base for shipping timber and other cargo on the Great Lakes.

A letter Peter receives from Martha lamenting not having a Christmas tree like the ones she remembers in Germany prompts him to cut trees from his land to sell them in Chicago.

Thus the tradition begins until one fateful voyage when the ship sinks in a gale.

Karl, the lone survivor played by Nic Bohn, a senior at Ozaukee High School, vows to continue the tradition.

The musical is funny, educational and poignant.

In reality, all hands on board the Rouse Simmons were lost. As the ship was sinking, Schuenemann put a note in a bottle and corked it with a piece of pine tree.

“Friday. Everybody goodbye. I guess we are all through. During the night, the small boat washed overboard. Leading bad. Invald and Steve lost too. God help us,” he wrote.

The bottle washed ashore in Sheboygan.

Schuenemann’s wife Barbara and two daughters, who made wreaths and sold them along with the trees, continued the Christmas Tree Ship tradition, but in later years they transported the trees by rail and sold them from a boat.

By 1920, the tradition of shipping trees by schooner had disappeared as railroads, highways and tree farms made it easier to acquire Christmas trees.

Today, the tradition continues in Chicago when the Coast Guard cutter Mackinaw arrives at Navy Pier with Christmas trees that are given to needy families.

“The Christmas Schooner” will be performed at 7:45 p.m. Friday and Saturday with a buffet dinner at 6 p.m. and 1:45 p.m. Saturday and Sunday with a buffet at 12:30 p.m.

Tickets, which are $32 with the meal or $25 without, are available online at www.memoriesballroom.com or by calling 285-6850.