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[Divers plumb depths of Otsego Lake history](#)

By Joe Mahoney Staff Writer [The Daily Star](#)

COOPERSTOWN — The computer monitor showed a video of the depths of Otsego Lake, and now Paul Lord pointed to the outline of an object with which he has become most familiar: the remnants of a gutted 24-foot runabout that had sunk to the bottom decades earlier.

The floor of Otsego Lake tells a story, and as a result of the same type of sonar technology used to discover the Titanic in the Atlantic Ocean, Lord and a team of volunteer divers are learning more day by day about the maritime history of the storied waterway.

Their biggest discovery so far is the forsaken carcass of the charred Leatherstocking, a wooden motorboat that belonged to W. T. Sampson Smith, who happened to be a U.S. House of Representatives candidate the summer of the calamity.

At a sailing event in 1940, after Smith's wife and other occupants of the boat detected the odor of gasoline, it was being towed to shore when it caught fire. All aboard escaped uninjured before the Leatherstocking went to the bottom.

"Right here, you can see the big hole in the stern," said Lord, pointing to the image on his screen. "It's one of the few shipwrecks in the lake with a tale to tell."

The Klein side-scan sonar survey of the lake was paid for by underwater archaeologist Joseph W. Zarzynski, who, like Lord, is a certified diver well-versed in finding ancient artifacts that are able to resist decay because of low water temperatures and minimal light.

Zarzynski, Lord and the team of volunteer divers working with them have detected numerous objects at the bottom of the lake, some of which have yet to be visited.

Zarzynski, a retired teacher from Saratoga County who is an expert on sunken military vessels from the French and Indian War, said he suspects Otsego Lake could be the grave of one or more bateau used by Gen. George Washington's troops before and after skirmishes with Native Americans loyal to the British crown. Used for troop and cargo transport, the bateau were built in Schenectady and Albany in the 18th century.

For now, however, the Leatherstocking is the most significant vessel that has been turned up in the survey of the lake.

Said Lord, a professor at the State University College of Oneonta who assists in projects at the Biological Field Station in Cooperstown: "There has never been an archaeological survey of Otsego Lake. The lake has a long history, going back to before the American Revolution, and we

have to make sure we do a good job of understanding what's here before somebody stumbles on these things and, through ignorance, destroys the evidence of the history.”

The fleet of volunteer divers has been a tremendous asset to the effort, he said. The precise location of any archaeological finds, such as the Leatherstocking, is being kept a closely guarded secret by those in the know because publicity could invite scavengers, even though the wreck is believed to have no significant monetary value.

“There's nothing down there that should be of interest to anyone except historians,” Zarzynski said.

Lord pointed out that any property left at the bottom of the lake for more than 50 years is legally protected because it becomes the property of the state.

Zarzynski said it's crucial to leave such wrecks undisturbed because future technology — such as developing holograms of the vessels — could be developed one day that would allow people to tour the inside of a virtually reconstructed vessel.