

# Fishermen find big one that didn't get away: a steamship resting miles off Naples

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Diver Joe Citelli maneuvers near the City of Everett at its resting place 400 feet under the Gulf of Mexico about 150 miles due west of Naples. The Everett, the first American steamship to circumnavigate the globe, sank in a storm in October 1923 en route from Santiago, Cuba, to New Orleans.



[MIKE BARNETTE | Special to the Times]

In its nearly 30 years at sea, the steamship *City of Everett* survived fires and collisions. The first American steamship to circle the globe, it carried food to a famine-stricken India. • Then came the storm in the Gulf of Mexico. • "Am lowering boats," the radio operator announced late on Oct. 11, 1923. "Will sink soon." • Twenty-five minutes later came another message: "Going down stern first." • The 346-foot freighter issued one more S.O.S. before the radio fell silent. • "That was the last anybody heard of the ship or her crew," said underwater explorer Michael C. Barnette. "For nearly 90 years, nobody knew what happened to those 26 men."

A chance encounter

Jay Travis and Brian Beukema live to fish.

"We think nothing of running 250 miles offshore," said Travis, who lives in Bradenton. "We fish all the local tournaments. We love the deep water."

A few years ago, the pair and some friends found themselves about 150 miles due west of Naples. Like any serious anglers, they know that the farther out you go, the larger the fish.

"We catch big amberjack, grouper, you name it," said Travis.

In one area thought to be the site of several shipwrecks, their electronic depth finder registered a large object on the ocean floor.

"It was too big to be a school of bait," Travis said. "We knew it had to be something man-made."

Travis marked the location and returned several times. Eventually, his curiosity overwhelmed his reluctance to reveal a favorite fishing spot.



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Citelli uses a safety line from the divers' surface vessel to make his way to the City of Everett. The divers got to the wreck's location with Travis and his crew aboard a 29-foot boat after a 12-hour trip from Bradenton.

"I heard about (Barnette) and his shipwreck work," Travis recalled. "So I figured I would give him a try."

After a few e-mails and phone calls, Travis and Barnette agreed to meet, though the angler wasn't exactly forthcoming at first.

"It was the classic 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours,?' " Barnette recalled. "But after a couple of beers, we decided to go check it out."

### Going deep

Barnette, a St. Petersburg marine biologist, and his diving partner, Joe Citelli, an auto supply store owner from Fort Lauderdale, are not professional scuba divers, but they venture far beyond the realm of most recreational divers. They use high-tech equipment — custom-made "rebreathers" that circulate and "scrub" the gas mixture they breathe — instead of the multiple tanks of compressed gas favored by most divers.

The men dive to depths of 400 feet or more, where the air we breathe every day, a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen, is deadly. The pressure at the depth, more than 10 times than on the surface, makes the nitrogen narcotic and the oxygen toxic. So technical divers like Barnette and Citelli mix in helium to dilute the negative effects of too much nitrogen and oxygen.

"It is not a casual sport," said Barnette, who has explored such famous shipwrecks as the Civil War ironclad *Monitor*, the Italian passenger liner *Andrea Doria*, the battleship USS Virginia and the *Britannic*, the sister ship of the *Titanic*. "It takes a lot of time and preparation. Needless to say, it is not for everybody."

When you're 150 miles from land, there is no easy solution if something goes wrong. So Barnette and Citelli always travel with extra dive equipment, plus safety gear recommended for any offshore expedition, including a life raft and an emergency position indicating radio beacon.

"You have to have everything in order because at the depths we dive there is no room for error," Citelli said.

"But there is no reason to be anxious as long as you have done your homework. After a while, you also develop that little voice that tells you when something isn't right. When you hear it, you don't dive."

### A radical design

As the nation recovered from the Civil War, demand was high for faster, better ways to move people and goods.

Alexander McDougall, a captain on the Great Lakes, dreamed of a commercial vessel that could carry a heavy load and cut through the water with minimum resistance. In 1872, he designed an oceangoing ship that looked a little like a fine cigar.

Some thought the fully laden hull resembled the body of a whale, which is why the ship was called a "whaleback." The shipping industry never embraced the radical design, so McDougall formed his own company and built 24 barges and 16 steamers, all whalebacks.

The *City of Everett*, launched in the fall of 1894, measured 346 feet long and 42 feet wide. The ship, named for the then newly incorporated Washington port city, worked the Pacific Northwest for a few years, hauling freight such as coal. Then in 1897, laden with a hold full of corn, it steamed off to India, which was suffering through a major famine.

Load deposited, the ship headed to Spain with a cargo of jute via the Suez Canal, and then back to the United States, becoming the first American steamship to circle the globe.

In the years that followed, the *City of Everett* suffered its share of misfortune, including collisions at sea and a fire in port. The ship was repaired, refurbished and put back into action hauling molasses from Santiago, Cuba, to New Orleans.

On the morning of Oct. 11, 1923, the whaleback steamer foundered in a storm. It signaled its position, "latitude 24:30 north, longitude 86 west," and then disappeared without a trace.

Nearly 87 years later, on Sept. 10, Barnette and Citelli joined Travis and his crew aboard a 29-foot boat and left Bradenton for a 12-hour ride to find what would turn out to be the final resting place of *City of Everett*.

Mystery solved

The sea was flat and the sky was clear as Barnette and Citelli prepared to dive to the location Travis and Beukema had found, due west of Naples.

The men were about 20 miles from the final position that the *City of Everett* had signaled. Barnette already suspected what they would come upon.

"It's not unusual to give the wrong location in the middle of a storm," he said of the ship's desperate last transmission. "The only thing we could do was go take a look."

The divers had to go down 400 feet. To allow time for decompression, they would have only 20 minutes to travel to the wreck and gather as much information as possible.

With visibility of 100 feet, the men could quickly assess the situation.

"The ship was virtually intact and it looked like it went down stern first," Barnette said. "And it was obvious that it was a whaleback steamer."

Back on the surface, they talked about their dive and the unusual hull they saw in the darkness below.

"There is no doubt in my mind that we found the *City of Everett*," Barnette said. "It was quite a remarkable find."

Citelli, a veteran of dozens of wrecks, found this experience particularly moving.

"There are people alive who could have had a grandfather on that ship," he said. "For years, people have wondered what happened to those men. Now, for 26 families, the mystery is solved."

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**Chronicles of a wreck hunter**

Underwater explorer Michael C. Barnette is the author of *Shipwrecks of the Sunshine State: Florida's Submerged History* and the newly released *Encyclopedia of Florida Shipwrecks, Volume I: Atlantic Coast*, available at most local Barnes & Noble bookstores and Aquatic Obsessions Scuba Shop in St. Petersburg. In 2009, he was elected as a fellow to the Explorers Club.

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