

https://madison.com/news/local/education/university/tamara-thomsen-wisconsin-sunken-boats-wisconsin/article_014d9430-78ca-11ee-90e4-af10dd1ca764.html

KNOW YOUR MADISONIAN | TAMARA THOMSEN

Tamara Thomsen has a knack for finding Wisconsin's sunken vessels

Ed Treleven | Wisconsin State Journal

Nov 20, 2023

From Wisconsin's Great Lakes shipwrecks to a pair of ancient Ho-Chunk dugout canoes found in Lake Mendota, Wisconsin Historical Society underwater archaeologist Tamara Thomsen has some great stories to tell.

Thomsen's **discovery of a 1,200-year-old dugout canoe**, found in June 2021 while diving with a student near Shorewood Hills' McKenna Park boathouse, caused a sensation. Then in **May 2022, she found another about 300 yards from the first one**, estimated to be 3,000 years old.



Luck strikes twice as another ancient canoe is pulled from Lake Mendota's depths

When her student couldn't stay at the site after Thomsen spotted the first canoe, Thomsen said she phoned Amy Rosebrough, now the state archaeologist, and asked her to come sit in the dive boat while Thomsen went back down to the canoe and took video.

Rosebrough, Thomsen recalled, hedged a bit — too busy — but relented after Thomsen told her, “I think this one might be important.”

As it turned out, it was.

Thomsen, 54, was born in Bethesda, Maryland, and raised in Indianapolis, but her roots are in Wisconsin. Her dad is originally from Madison, while her mother is from the La Crosse area. Thomsen first moved to Madison to attend UW-Madison and to look after her elderly grandparents. Her grandfather was a retired UW-Madison professor.

Her college education, she said, “is going to make no sense to you.” Her undergraduate degree is in horticulture and agronomy, and her master's degree is in genetics. In college, though, she also learned scuba diving and loved it so much that she became an instructor.



Tamara Thomsen has worked as an underwater archaeologist for the Wisconsin Historical Society since 2004, when she took what was to be a temporary job. Since then, she has regularly explored Great Lakes shipwrecks, and between 2021 and 2022 found two ancient Ho-Chunk canoes in Lake Mendota.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

After graduate school, Thomsen took a job in the lab of then-UW-Madison Professor Jillian Banfield, a MacArthur fellow who studied geomicrobiology and conducted experiments in abandoned lead and zinc mines in southwestern Wisconsin — at least until Banfield departed for the University of California, Berkeley. Thomsen soon realized she wanted to do more with her diving experience and in 2004 took what was supposed to be a temporary job at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

From then until about nine years ago, funding for her job existed purely from one grant to the next.

“We were one grant away from figuring out how much money we needed to pack this place up, you know, put it in mothballs,” she said. “We were always a little short. And then, the state decided to fund it.”

How did you get involved in diving?

I had begged all through high school to take scuba diving lessons. I just begged my dad and he would say next year, next year, next year. And then I finally went away to college and I found out that the University of Wisconsin at the time offered it as a PE class. It was really a popular class, I finally got in my junior year, and I loved it. And my dad was so jealous that he took scuba lessons in Indianapolis. Then we went on some really great adventures together, traveling to various places and diving underwater. And I loved it so much that I took more classes and met more people. I became an instructor, and then all through graduate school kind of made it a side gig. And then it got a little out of hand. I ended up opening a dive shop of my own, which is Diversions Scuba.



Thomsen, at the Wisconsin Historical Society's office and lab on Stoughton Road, discusses a pair of Native paddles donated to the society. They're likely hundreds of years old but their exact age will be determined by further analysis.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

What drew you to diving in the first place?

I don't know. My parents had a place in Marco Island, Florida. We would go down there for some holidays. I spent a lot of time on the beach, that type of thing. But I don't know, I didn't want to be a marine biologist or anything like that. There was never this draw to, you know, save dolphins or turtles or whatever. But I just knew, something weird happened to me. I think I really wanted to see what was under the water and be part of it.

How many different places have you been diving?

One of the weird things that this job affords me is that when we ran out of money, I would have these patches of time where I could choose my own fate and I would sell myself off as a scientific diver for various projects. For instance, one was with a professor named Tom Iliffe, out of Texas A&M University. He's had a few grants that I've traveled with him around the Caribbean basin. I'm a cave diver, I can go into caves and help him do biological sampling, collect animals for genetic study. And also, because I have the scientific background, I can also help him at night, do water processing and prep the animals and that type of thing. I went to work for **Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution**, just about the time they were coming up on the 100th anniversary of the sinking of Titanic. That was 2010. I worked with them processing all of the data and created the models that showed up in National Geographic, the mosaics of Titanic. I worked on those for eight months, on and off.

This porthole was salvaged illegally from a sunken luxury yacht in Lake Michigan off Racine in 1991. Thomsen said it's illegal under state and federal law to take items from shipwrecks.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL



What would you say is the thing that you found diving that was the biggest thrill of your life when you came across it?

The one thing that I collected from a shipwreck is a mast step coin. For good luck when they were building ships, the lore was that you would take a coin from the year that it was built and you would throw it in the step of the main mast. We had a project in Jacksonport up in Door County. We had an intern (Matt), one of the first sites he was working on. We learned we could scare him really easily. You know, when you throw a penny (in the water), it flips through the water and it shines. Matt just about jumped out of the water. So then everyone discovered that that was hilarious. They started bringing coins with them and would swim out to the site and they would drop these coins. At the end of the project, the last thing you do is you go out and you collect all your stuff, things that are dropped on the site. And in this case, I picked up a whole container of change. I couldn't see underwater (to) really make out what this coin was, but I collected it and I put it in the bag. I remember picking it up and it was back near the main mast. So, I thought it was a wheat penny, you know? (A volunteer) went through the bag and he got the thing out. He's like, I don't think this is a wheat penny. He gave it to me, and we started shining it up a little bit. And it was a seated liberty from 1841, a seated liberty dime. We didn't even know the name of the shipwreck. But because that coin was associated, we were able to put a name on that shipwreck.

What would you say is the most unusual or weirdest thing you've seen in your diving experience?

There's a couple ships that are out of place that we just don't know the name on. And one of them is called the Green Bay sloop. It's sitting in the middle of Green Bay. It's in over a hundred feet of water, 130 maybe, feet of water. And it is so old. The construction features on it are so weird. It's likely late 1700s, early 1800s, and was

probably a ship that was servicing the fort there. But we don't know much about it. That one is weird. We have nothing that's supposed to be lost in that area that we know of.

We pick up a lot of trash in the Madison lakes, and you see a lot of weird stuff there too. There's all these old boats and these excursion things that were abandoned. I've seen a kayak, too, that's standing upright on the bottom. I don't think anyone could have sunk it there because it's in 40 feet of water. You just dive down and it's like this spire that's like a canoe. That was weird.

By Ed Treleven | Wisconsin State Journal