



Depth-defying fun

IN THE MID-1950S, THE EXOTIC SPORT OF SCUBA diving was gaining in popularity partly because of Jacques-Yves Cousteau, who had helped develop modern equipment. Scuba, which stands for self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, allowed divers to swim freely underwater, not tethered to the surface with air lines.

In March 1959 a group of 40 mid-Michigan residents came together to form the Saginaw Underwater Explorers.

"Divers banded together because of a common interest," said present club President Donald Cunningham of Saginaw Township. "Divers need compressed air to fill their tanks. The group bought a compressor for club members to use."

"Presently we have 23 members. I enjoy diving on the many shipwrecks in the Great Lakes. It brings out the explorer in me. You can physically touch the 100-year-old boiler that was functioning just minutes before the ship sank. The coal is still in place as are the tools."

In previous years, many club members concentrated on the shipwrecks.

"The focus has changed a bit," continued Cunningham. "Members enjoy the social aspect as well as helping fellow divers."

Michigan has designated almost 2,300 square miles of lake bottomlands in 11 underwater preserves. Divers are prohibited from removing artifacts so others may enjoy the many preserved ships. There are about 150 documented shipwrecks in all of the preserves.

On a recent weekend, Mike Fabish, 48, and his son, Justin Fabish, 24, of Thomas Township, along with Greg Prenzler, 41, of Saginaw Township ventured into Lake Huron to explore a couple of 17 known shipwrecks in the Sanilac Shores Underwater Preserve.

With a warm breeze under a blue sky and waves at just under a foot they set their sights on the wreck of the Mary Alice B, about six miles offshore or nine miles northeast of Lexington. It is a 65-foot tugboat that sank in 1975. A single white jug floating on the surface marks a mooring line. Navigation to the site by Global Positioning System is a must.

Boaters tie off to the mooring line to prevent damage to the wreck, which is in about 90 feet of water.

Fabish and his son decide to dive together while Prenzler and a Saginaw News photographer went together.

The divers wear a dry suit along with heavy underwear. The equipment protects them from the 45-degree water at the bottom while producing beads of sweat as they don the approximately 70 pounds of equipment on the 85-degree day.

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A quick equipment check follows and then they head down the mooring line.

About 50 feet down, the ship appears in the blue-green gloom. The divers can see and feel the thermocline, a transition area where water changes temperature. The cold starts to seep through the suit.

This tugboat looks like a member of a ghost fleet, sitting upright on the bottom. Divers can enter the wheelhouse and take a turn behind the ship's wheel, which still turns.

Zebra mussels cover much of the ship.

"I have always been fascinated with being underwater," said Fabish after the

dive. "The first time I put scuba gear on I was about 7. My favorite TV show was 'Sea Hunt.'"

"I enjoy looking at the fish or even some sort of rock formation. There are a number of bigger ships, and they are well preserved. You can still see the wood, the bolts and nuts, gauges and even anchors. It's very relaxing to me."

Because of the depth, divers are limited to about 25 minutes on the wreck.

During lunch the group motors to a buoy marking the wreck of the Sport, another tugboat. This 57-foot vessel sank three miles from shore in 1920.

In 1992, an underwater historical marker was placed next to the vessel — the first in the state. The marker now is missing.

This boat is about 50 feet down. The shallower wreck allows the divers more time to explore. A school of suckers inhabits the wreck and seem as curious of the divers as they are of the fish.

"It's amazing how well the ship is holding up, intact underneath the water," said Prenzler. The artifacts are pretty amazing...

"In the preserves the divers don't take anything. This makes sure the history is there for everyone to see in the future." ♦



Justin Fabish, 24, of Thomas Township surfaces after a dive to the Mary Alice B, a tugboat wreck in 90 feet of water in Lake Huron, about six miles off the shore between Lexington and Port Sanilac. Fabish is a member of a diving group called the Saginaw Underwater Explorers. Above, Greg Prenzler, 41, of Saginaw Township helps Mike Fabish, 48, of Thomas Township with his scuba diving equipment. Both are members of the Underwater Explorers.



Prenzler peers into a deck opening on the wreck of the Sport, a tugboat that sank in 1920. The craft is in the Sanilac Shores Underwater Preserve.

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Watch a video featuring the Saginaw Underwater Explorers, go to **The Saginaw News Extra** section on our Web site.