

Remote US village abuzz over shipwreck search

June 17 2013, by John Flesher

French and U.S. experts are continuing their search for the 17th-century ship Griffin, which they believe sank in northern Lake Michigan in 1679.

Three French underwater archaeologists were planning to dive Monday afternoon at a site near Poverty Island, where expedition leader Steve Libert believes the vessel sank. He discovered a wooden beam jutting from the lake bottom in 2001.

Crews are digging a pit at the base of the beam to see if it's attached to a buried ship. Leaders say they hope to have an answer soon.

The search is stirring excitement in the Upper Peninsula community of Fairport, where about 40 experts and support crew members are encamped by the lake.

Commercial fisherman Larry Barbeau's 46-foot (14-meter) boat is the offshore nerve center for an expedition seeking the underwater grave of the Griffin, the first ship of European design to traverse the upper Great Lakes. Built on orders of legendary French explorer Rene Robert Cavelier de la Salle, it ventured from Niagara Falls to Lake Michigan's Green Bay but disappeared during its return in 1679.

Divers this weekend opened a pit at the base of a wooden beam that juts nearly 11 feet (3.35 meters) from the [lake bottom](#), believing it could be a section of the vessel, the rest presumably entombed in mud. They picked

up the pace Monday with more powerful equipment after a weekend of probing showed that whatever is buried is deeper than sonar readings indicated.

U.S. and French experts insist it's too early to say whether there's a shipwreck—let alone the Griffin. But anticipation is building at the prospect of solving a maritime puzzle that's more than three centuries old.

"After we get done for the day, everybody calls or comes to the house and they're like, 'What did you find? What did you see? Can you tell me anything?' " Barbeau said in a Sunday interview aboard his ship, the Viking, which holds crucial expedition equipment, including "umbilical" cables that supply oxygen to divers. "People are really interested and they're excited to see what it is."

His neighbors aren't the only curious ones. The roughly 40-member expedition team consists of archaeologists, historians, boat pilots, divers, an underwater salvage crew and assorted helpers. When not on the water, they stay in cottages and tents by the lake in the unincorporated village of Fairport, in one of the most remote corners of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The hands-on excavation work is being handled by a three-man crew from Great Lakes Diving and Salvage, a Michigan company that ordinarily deals with mundane tasks: repairing pumps or scraping zebra mussels off intake pipes.

"We're basically underwater janitors," said Tom Gouin, vice president of operations. The Griffin, he said, is "like a play job for us. We're loving it."

Archaeologists Rob Reedy of Morehead City, North Carolina, and Misty

Jackson of Leslie, Michigan, sit on the Viking and sift through material that was found in the sediment, watching for artifacts, from bronze cannons to axes or knives—"anything man-made" that would help identify a ship, Reedy said. Thus far, the only candidate has been a slab of blackened wood about 15 inches (38 centimeters) long with characteristics suggesting it might have been fashioned by human hands. Its origin remains unknown.

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