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NEWS / HOME

Thursday, October 23, 2003 - Page updated at 12:00 A.M.

LOCAL

Politics

Eastside

Snohomish County

COLUMNISTS

Nicole Brodeur

Sherry Grindeland

Inside Politics

Inside The Times

Here and Now

The Rev. Dale Turner

BUSINESS/TECH

NATION/WORLD

EDUCATION

OBITUARIES

SPECIAL PROJECTS

OPINION

SPORTS

ENTERTAINMENT

HEALTH

TRAVEL

NORTHWEST LIFE

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MAGAZINE

COMICS / GAMES

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Testing the water: Dive team to scout out Lake Washington mystery

By [Natalie Singer](#)
Seattle Times Eastside bureau

A boatload of underwater investigators is heading out to the deepest part of Lake Washington today to try to uncover the mystery behind a sunken boat.

If the structure, lodged in the murky muck north of the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge, has any historic significance or any dangerous materials on board, state transportation planners are going to have a big problem.

The rotting, 160-foot-long vessel, along with two old barges buried nearby, might be in the way of anchor cables needed to build a new span.

The easiest thing to do would be to identify and destroy the three shadowy objects, part of the huge collection of decaying items, including planes, trains and automobiles submerged in the lake.

But what if the vessel, which could be anything from a passenger craft to a military boat, is holding valuable relics? What if, as state bridge planners wonder, it's loaded with oil tanks ready to burst?

Chances are the craft is just a burned-out skeleton not worth the cost of its destruction, more trash than sunken treasure, said Patrick Clarke, with the state Department of Transportation's (DOT) bridge and structures office.

Yesterday, a diver tethered to a research barge and loaded with recording equipment collected preliminary data on one of the sunken barges.

The pictures and observations indicate a worthless timber gravel-hauler that ended up on the bottom of the lake either by a twist of fate or perhaps on purpose. The only historic cultural remnants on board were some twist-top beer bottles.

The biggest surprise of yesterday's expedition was the discovery of a nameplate, with what looked like the words "Forest" and "Aberdeen" on it — unusual for a barge, said Dick Sylwester, a geophysicist with the Redmond office of Golder Associates, a consulting firm working on the project.



enlarge DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Traffic is seen on the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge in the background as a research barge collects data yesterday on wrecks on the floor of Lake Washington that might hinder future bridge construction.

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"It's not often that barges have nameplates on them. It's kind of like naming the trailer behind your truck," he said. He said the barge could have started its life as a boat and then been stripped down.

Neither barge appears to have any machinery or fuel that could pose a threat if disturbed.

Clarke, of the DOT, said he hopes today's finds from the sunken boat will turn out as benign as the barges seem to be. "We hope it's something we can break up and get out of the way so we don't have to design around it," he said.

Over the years, some strange and exciting discoveries have been made beneath the lake's surface. In 1986, a 100-pound World War II-vintage bomb was blown up on the lake's floor. A group of 18 wooden coal cars is buried south of the Evergreen Bridge. Numerous fighter planes have been found.

While working on the new bridge designs this summer, the state hired Golder to conduct sonar scans of the area. The three mystery figures showed up unexpectedly, and a remote-operated vehicle was later sent underwater to collect details.

This week is the first time the state has hired human explorers to examine the wrecks.

To collect descriptions and measurements of the sunken objects, divers from Advanced Commercial Divers in Bellevue descend nearly 200 feet wearing a suit that's continually pumped with hot water. The diver records data that are projected onto a television on the research barge, via a live feed. The divers must go into a decompression chamber as soon as they come up.

When research is complete this week, a report will be compiled and state planners will decide what to do with the objects.

Meanwhile, everyone seems to have an idea of what the objects might be.

Jeff Hummel, who produces high-tech training materials for marine-navigation software, thinks the barges are Navy barges and the boat is the Fresno, an old whaling vessel from the 1920s that caught fire and sank in Meydenbauer Bay.

Hummel, who has been diving and scanning Lake Washington as a hobby for more than 20 years, said the vessel was salvaged and then scuttled farther north near Kirkland, in a more out-of-the-way location.

According to Robin McClintock, an archaeologist with CH2M Hill engineering firm, one of the barges may be the Squak, a 60-foot-long, 20-foot-wide barge that hauled freight and passengers in the 1880s and sank off the shore of Kirkland during a violent Christmas Day storm.

But from the beginning, experts working on the \$1.5 billion to \$3.4 billion floating-bridge rebuild knew they probably wouldn't uncover any buried treasure. Although, said the DOT's Clarke, "maybe we could finance this project if we did."

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