


# Exploring the Hidden Okoboji



STORY AND PHOTOS BY LLOYD B. CUNNINGHAM



00	Dive No:	166	Dive Site:	Lincoln Park
	Date:	9/24		Beach dock
				Fresh-Salt
	Weight:	23 lbs.	AIR level:	200 psi
				Day-Nite
Activity:	Exploring NW p. areas			
Comments:	Left on 200' full of cold air, felt about 50° then swam north along life line. Found 50' hole. 50' deep. 50' deep punching foot surface and to the canyon. Reached 150' to 100' near bottom. Side Park. 70' from 100' off surface. The cut. Show 100'. Brought back 4 bottles			
Temperature:	Bottom time		Total bottom time	
32 Air	45		1:13:57	
63 Bottom				

An aerial photograph of a wide, sandy beach. A long, dark shadow is cast across the sand from the upper right towards the lower left, suggesting a low sun position. The sand is a mix of light and dark tones, with some darker patches and textures visible. The background shows a calm body of water meeting the shore.

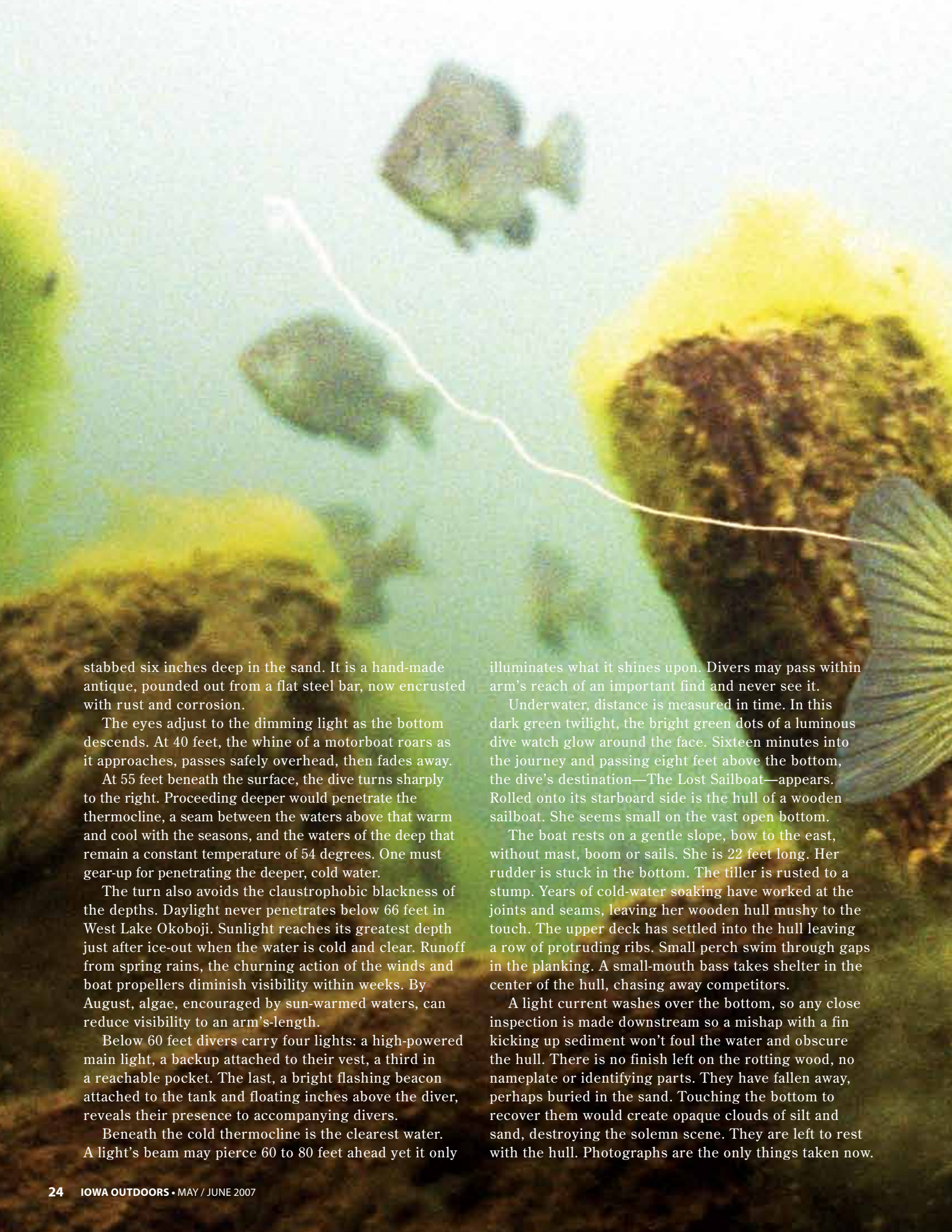
**E**ight feet beneath the surface and passing weightlessly above the fine sand, the bottom of West Lake Okoboji looks like a vast sunken beach. Its open flat sands stretch out in every direction, broken only by an occasional stone or a bottle slipped from the hands of a clumsy or careless boater.

The sun shimmers on the rolling surface above—its golden disk squeezed and stretched by the water as it illuminates the bottom in bright yellow-green. Two smallmouth bass hang in the water above and left, just out of reach. The curious fish gather around visitors.

To the east, tumbled stones line the lake bottom 30 yards out and lap onto the shore of Sunset Beach. Ahead, sand slopes gently into deeper, darker water.

A receding curtain limits visibility to about 30 feet. Swimming along, objects first appear as dark smudges in this otherwise seamless fog. Approached, they begin to take shape. Slowly they become distinct outlines and finally clearly visible in the darkening waters. Passed, they recede in the fog behind.

At 20 feet deep, a single rock appears, an old tire passes. Nesting smallmouth bass appear around a large boulder on the right. Ahead an ice spud lost from the hands of a harvester chopping blocks apart, stands upright,



stabbed six inches deep in the sand. It is a hand-made antique, pounded out from a flat steel bar, now encrusted with rust and corrosion.

The eyes adjust to the dimming light as the bottom descends. At 40 feet, the whine of a motorboat roars as it approaches, passes safely overhead, then fades away.

At 55 feet beneath the surface, the dive turns sharply to the right. Proceeding deeper would penetrate the thermocline, a seam between the waters above that warm and cool with the seasons, and the waters of the deep that remain a constant temperature of 54 degrees. One must gear-up for penetrating the deeper, cold water.

The turn also avoids the claustrophobic blackness of the depths. Daylight never penetrates below 66 feet in West Lake Okoboji. Sunlight reaches its greatest depth just after ice-out when the water is cold and clear. Runoff from spring rains, the churning action of the winds and boat propellers diminish visibility within weeks. By August, algae, encouraged by sun-warmed waters, can reduce visibility to an arm's-length.

Below 60 feet divers carry four lights: a high-powered main light, a backup attached to their vest, a third in a reachable pocket. The last, a bright flashing beacon attached to the tank and floating inches above the diver, reveals their presence to accompanying divers.

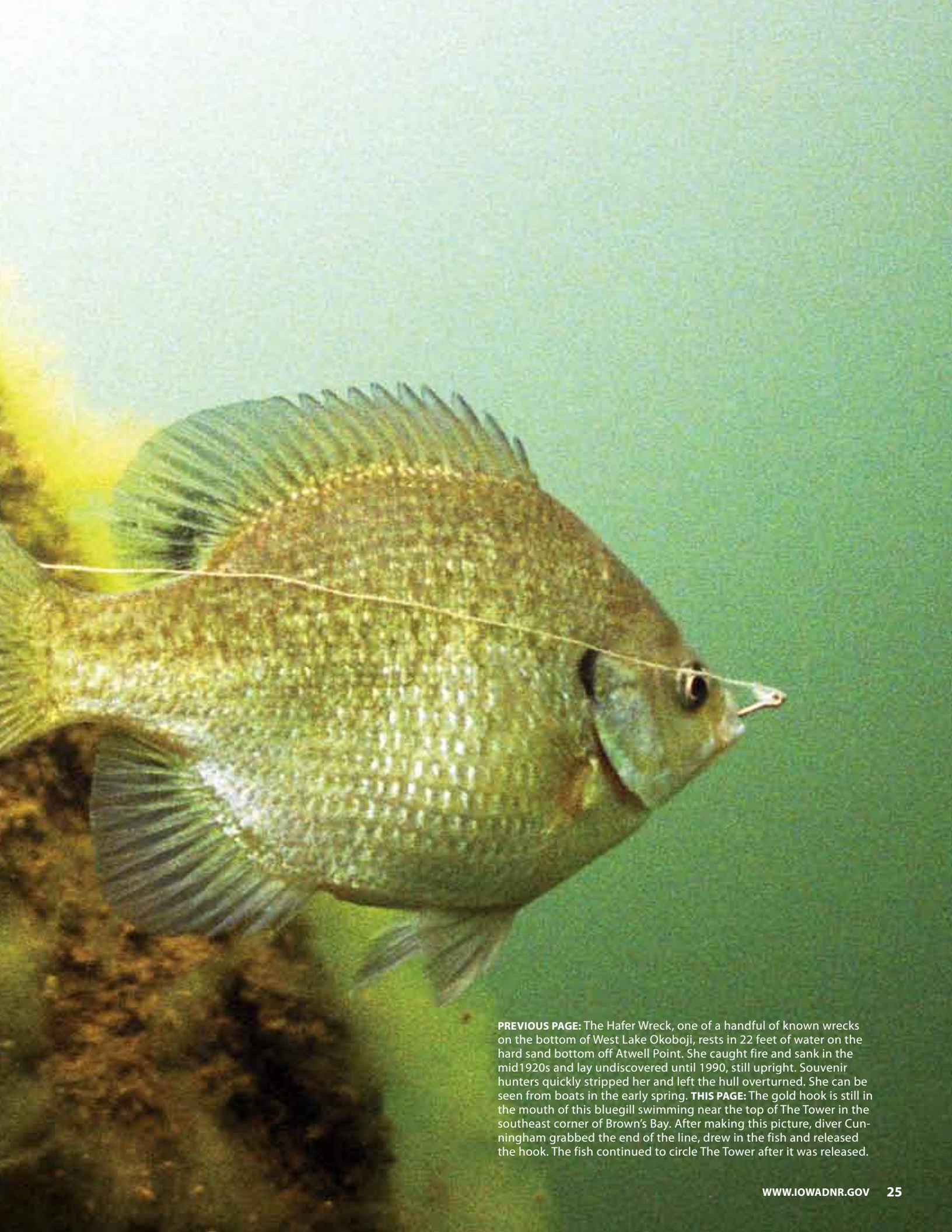
Beneath the cold thermocline is the clearest water. A light's beam may pierce 60 to 80 feet ahead yet it only

illuminates what it shines upon. Divers may pass within arm's reach of an important find and never see it.

Underwater, distance is measured in time. In this dark green twilight, the bright green dots of a luminous dive watch glow around the face. Sixteen minutes into the journey and passing eight feet above the bottom, the dive's destination—The Lost Sailboat—appears. Rolled onto its starboard side is the hull of a wooden sailboat. She seems small on the vast open bottom.

The boat rests on a gentle slope, bow to the east, without mast, boom or sails. She is 22 feet long. Her rudder is stuck in the bottom. The tiller is rusted to a stump. Years of cold-water soaking have worked at the joints and seams, leaving her wooden hull mushy to the touch. The upper deck has settled into the hull leaving a row of protruding ribs. Small perch swim through gaps in the planking. A small-mouth bass takes shelter in the center of the hull, chasing away competitors.

A light current washes over the bottom, so any close inspection is made downstream so a mishap with a fin kicking up sediment won't foul the water and obscure the hull. There is no finish left on the rotting wood, no nameplate or identifying parts. They have fallen away, perhaps buried in the sand. Touching the bottom to recover them would create opaque clouds of silt and sand, destroying the solemn scene. They are left to rest with the hull. Photographs are the only things taken now.



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** The Hafer Wreck, one of a handful of known wrecks on the bottom of West Lake Okoboji, rests in 22 feet of water on the hard sand bottom off Atwell Point. She caught fire and sank in the mid 1920s and lay undiscovered until 1990, still upright. Souvenir hunters quickly stripped her and left the hull overturned. She can be seen from boats in the early spring. **THIS PAGE:** The gold hook is still in the mouth of this bluegill swimming near the top of The Tower in the southeast corner of Brown's Bay. After making this picture, diver Cunningham grabbed the end of the line, drew in the fish and released the hook. The fish continued to circle The Tower after it was released.



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The return to shore retraces the route out, the north-south leg made in shallower water to explore new bottom.

When the sailboat sank and what happened to the crew remains a mystery. There are no records of one lost in the area. Discovered in 1996, she rests, slowly falling apart, beyond the reach of sunlight most of the year. She is not alone.

### *Window Into the Lakebed*

West Lake Okoboji was gouged from Iowa soil by the Des Moines Lobe of the Wisconsin glacier which reached deep into northwest Iowa 12,000 years ago. As it receded it left long fingers of tumbled stones connecting, if visible only underwater—Eagle Point to Pocahontas Point and Fort Dodge Point to Pillsbury Point. It lined many of the shores with more rock and left a massive reef spreading north from Gull Point.

The lake bottom varies by location and depth. Her major bays—Emerson, Miller, Smith and Cass—have hard sand-covered bottoms that vary in depth from 20 to 35 feet. Tall grasses grow offshore, providing nurseries for panfish and hunting grounds for northern pike and patrolling musky. Sadly one sees aluminum cans and glass and plastic bottles off popular beaches and beneath

boating areas and fishing hotspots.

The heart of the lake stretches from Terrace Park Beach in the south to North Bay more than five miles away. West Lake Okoboji is as much as two miles wide. In the deep water of Brown's Bay and from Omaha Point to Pike's Point there are reefs to 60 feet deep.

The holes of the lake—the deepest point is 138 feet—are layered in thick muck that can be more than four feet deep. Divers, seeing its surface and assuming it's hard bottom, have settled through the thick mass and struggled to release themselves. The muck is deep enough to hide the hull of small boats.

American Indians reported Iowa's great lakes to European explorers in the late 1600s. Okoboji appears by name on maps as early as 1839. Abundant game and fish brought trappers, traders and eventually settlers. The beautiful blue waters have beckoned travelers and vacationers for generations. Today, the area's population of 16,000 swells to 120,000 on summer weekends.

### *The Wreck of the Exploding Hazel Dell*

A little after 9 p.m. on Friday night on July 1, 1927 a large boom echoed through the center of tree-lined Smith's Bay. Hazel Dell, a private launch owned by summer



1) Diver Debbie Skarin of Spirit Lake, rubs the chin of a small-mouth bass. Bass, after spawning are curious fish and will gather around divers, even swimming up to their masks. Sometimes divers have to shoo them out of the way as they cross the lake bottom. 2 & 3) A small mouth bass patrols the remains of the City of Milford's water supply pipe that served residents with drinking water from 1915 to 1940. Up until 1960, daphnia and tiny freshwater shrimp could be seen in a glass of tap water, says David Coleman, the city water superintendent. "All those years you were drinking something moving in your glass," he says. "They were about the size of a pinhead." That ended with chlorination and filtration. Today's water comes from a larger pipe added in 1959 not far from the original. The pipe was installed in the winter, lowered into the water with ropes through a hole cut in the ice. Bluegill swim around the top, bass hide and walleye patrol the base. 4) In 1884, as many as seven steamships with names like Hiawatha, Illinois, Iowa, Des Moines and Okoboji, carried passengers to and from resorts around West Lake Okoboji. Some wintered on the beaches, others were pulled from the lake on carriages over these railroad tracks east of Green's Beach. The tracks begin in seven feet of water and extend offshore 75 feet. Last used in 1953, they provide gathering places for small fish after the spawning season.

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resident Leon Voorhees, had exploded and caught fire.

Earlier in the day Voorhees repaired a gas-line leak aboard the launch, then after supper took his wife, daughter and three friends for an evening's ride. Gasoline, floating above the bilge water under the floor, exploded near the bow. It enveloped the boat in flames.

The flames led Milo Hartman, pilot with the Eagle Boat Lines, to the scene from the docks at Arnolds Park. Other boats raced from shoreline cabins. The rescuers found the passengers in the water clinging to the burning boat. All six aboard were saved. Two suffered burns to their arms and hands and required medical attention.

The 35-foot launch burned to the waterline and sank three quarters of a mile south of Des Moines Beach. Efforts to recover the boat the following week were unsuccessful. She remains among others on the bottom of the lake.

### *Roaring Twenties Mystery Wreck*

Already sunk off Atwell Point was a cedar-strip runabout. She's known as The Hafer Wreck. News accounts of the sinking have been lost to history, but sometime in the mid-20s she, too, caught fire and sank in West Lake Okoboji. She set upright and intact on the bottom in 22 feet of water until Tim Fuhrmann and Tom Weishaar, divers from Fort

Dodge looking for another boat in the same area, found her in 1990. She was quickly stripped by looting divers.

The Hafer Craft Boat Company of Spirit Lake built the 22-foot runabout. The company went out of business in 1955 when wooden boats fell out of fashion. All that remains is her overturned hull, home to bass and walleye.

There was another Hafer on the bottom in Brown's Bay. She was a 22-foot double-ender, powered by a four-cylinder in-line engine. Jim Farrell, discovered her while diving with friends Dick Aplan and Marv Mamminga, in the spring of 1966. She was a few hundred yards off Green's Beach in 40 to 50 feet of water, two-thirds buried on the bottom. Another diver reportedly raised the boat, left the hull on the beach, and turned the engine into a glass-enclosed coffee table.

### *Built Ford Tough*

Among the wrecks on the bottom of West Lake Okoboji are two significant dive sites—one placed on the bottom, the other arrived by accident.

Divers knew the story of the accident. In 1948, a 1935 Ford truck used in ice harvesting, slipped into the water and sank into Smith's Bay. Searchers couldn't find


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**LOST AND FOUND** A 1935 Ford, covered in growth with windows up and good tire tread, sits at the bottom of Smith's Bay. Used for ice harvesting, the truck slipped into the water and sank in 1948. It eluded divers until 2000, before then, most assumed it had rusted away. Ice harvesting tools found on the truck bed are now in the Great Lakes Maritime Museum.






the truck and assumed it had rusted away until Debbie Skarin of Spirit Lake stumbled across it in 2000. She too was unable to relocate the truck. Summer resident, Jim Koenig of Charles City diligently searched the area for two seasons before finding and fixing its position on May 30, 2001. It rests in the middle of the bay on a hard sand bottom facing west-northwest in 20 feet of water.

### *The Water Tower*

About 150 yards off a small beach in the southeast corner of Brown's Bay is a 15-foot wooden tower that was built

**THE LOST SAILBOAT**, one of a handful of known wrecks on the bottom of West Lake Okoboji, rests in 52 feet of water on the hard sand bottom off Sunset Beach. Bow to the east and ribs rising above the hull, she is slowly falling apart. There are no records of a sailboat lost in the area. When she sank and what happened to her crew remain a mystery. She lies too deep in the lake for sunlight to reach most of the year.



on the ice, filled with stones, and lowered into 33 feet of water. It holds upright an eight-inch intake that provided Milford with drinking water from 1915 to 1940. Now, the tower provides shade and shelter for panfish.

Destructive divers and boat anchors have pulled pieces away from the historic structure which now leans to the east and unfortunately seems destined to fall apart.

### *Watery Collision, Rescue and Recovery*

The two most famous craft to rest on the bottom of West Lake Okoboji have both been recovered. Minutes before midnight Friday July 19, 1946, No. 30, a commercial speedboat owned by Frank Spotts of Arnolds Park, was stuck by Isabel II, a pleasure craft owned by Charles Spies of Emmetsburg. The No. 30, a 19-foot Chris-Craft,

sank within minutes into 60 feet of water just beyond the reef northeast of Gull Point. Rescuers from several parts of the lake arrived in time to save all six aboard.

Jim Koenig found the boat in 1994 and oversaw its recovery June 15th 1995. She is on display at the Iowa Great Lakes Maritime Museum in Arnolds Park.

### *The Missing and Deadly Miss Thriller*

Miss Thriller, a 28-foot Sea Sled was returning to the docks at Arnolds Park Sunday night July 28, 1929, with 17 aboard when she was struck and sank by another passenger boat, Zipper. Nine passengers aboard Miss Thriller died in the accident. She sank in 90 feet of water more than one-half mile south of Dixon Beach.

Miss Thriller was pulled to the surface, towed to Terrace Park Beach and hauled onto shore July 3, 1930 to salvage her twin airplane engines. What happened to her hull is not clear. Some say she was put on exhibit at fairs and carnivals. Other say a grieving parent doused her with gasoline and burned her up. There doesn't seem to be a written account to confirm either story.

There are, or were, other craft on the bottom of West Lake Okoboji—a sailboat that sank in North Bay in the early 1970s, and a fiberglass runabout discovered in 2005. There may be more hidden in vast depths of the 3,850-acre lake. All are part of the lesser-known but rich heritage of one of Iowa's most popular recreational lakes. 🐾