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TWIN CITIES

Friends tell 'poignant and evocative' story of Edmund Fitzgerald in new radio play

Friends, most in their 70s and 80s and recovering alcoholics, hope their recently recorded radio play on the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald can find a broadcast home in time for its 50th anniversary.

By James Walsh
The Minnesota Star Tribune
NOVEMBER 8, 2024 AT 1:46PM

The Edmund Fitzgerald on the St. Marys River in May 1975. (Bob Campbell via Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center)

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It's amazing how finding a way to retell a tragic tale can infuse friends in recovery with a new sense of purpose.

What started in May 2023 with retired pals puffing on cigars and sharing their favorite Gordon Lightfoot songs soon after the singer's death later became a gripping radio play that gives the 1975 sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald a dramatic retelling.

Lightfoot immortalized the "Fitz" in a 1976 hit song. Sunday is the 49th anniversary of the shipwreck.

The radio project, said narrator and retired newsman Dave Nimmer, gave a group of friends in their 70s and 80s something good and meaningful and real.

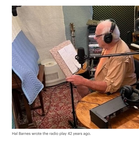
"We're a bunch of guys who are recovering alcoholics who want to get someplace," said Nimmer, whose voice once invited viewers into his stories at WCCO News. "Yeah, I want to get someplace. I want to be happy. So you do what you do. And I tell stories."

Dave Nimmer, a former TV reporter and journalism professor, narrated.

The wreck

According to the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, the SS Edmund Fitzgerald began its final voyage on Lake Superior about 2:30 p.m. Nov. 9, 1975, from Superior, Wis., with Captain Ernest M. McSorley in command. It was joined later by the Arthur M. Anderson, captained by Bernie Cooper, out of Two Harbors, Minn. The ships, which were in radio contact, were anywhere from 10 to 15 miles apart.

On Nov. 10, weather conditions continued to deteriorate, with high winds and rough water. As the day wore on, McSorley radioed about damage to the Fitzgerald and said that its ballast tanks were taking on water. At 7:10 p.m. Nov. 10, the two ships had their last radio contact. At 7:15, the Fitzgerald's radar signal disappeared. All 29 members of its crew were lost.


Hal Barnes wrote the radio play 42 years ago.

The script

The radio play project actually started 42 years ago, when Hal Barnes wrote a script about the "Fitz" based on a report from the National Transportation Safety Board, including transmissions between the doomed ship and the Anderson. He was living in Duluth at the time and had been intrigued by the shipwreck.

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"The more I researched it, the more I was compelled to make it right," Barnes said. "Make it good."

The script — dog-eared and dusty — had been stowed away until Barnes told his friends about it that night in May 2023. Nimmer said he was wowed by the opening lines.

Several weeks later, Nimmer, Barnes and Gary Mueller-lelle, a veteran actor in community theater, met at a picnic table in Afton to begin exploring whether they could really make something more out of Barnes' script.

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They decided that the voice actors would come from their cadre of friends, all retirees in their 70s and 80s — and nearly all of them recovering alcoholics. Then they needed to find a sound engineer and producer.

Gary Mueller-lelle played Capt. McSorley.

The recording

In June 2023, Nimmer went fishing with Ron Riley, a retired sound and visual communications guy who'd worked with Nimmer while they were at the University of St. Thomas. Riley called Tom Forfitt, a St. Thomas graduate he'd mentored, who agreed to join the project in between his sound work for corporate clients.

Between July 2023 and September 2024, they recorded the play over several sessions.

Mueller-lelle, who played Capt. McSorley, said what he learned about the captain and crew's last voyage gave him chills.

"I learned that he remained pretty damn calm through the midst of it, even at the end, when he had his final conversation with his first mate, McCarthy," Mueller-lelle said. "He knows that they're doomed. Yeah, and he didn't panic. He just said, 'We have to keep trying to save ourselves, the ship and the crew.' I mean, that was an incredible strength. He didn't give up."

He added: "He was committed to his crew and to his ship. Even when he was going down, he says, 'Come on, baby, come on, baby.' And that was so powerful."

Barnes said the ship's propeller was still driving as it plunged beneath the waves. Its stern snapped.

Now, the men who created the play are trying to find it a radio home. Matthew Brown, executive director of WTIP/North Shore Community Radio in Grand Marais, said he was recently made aware of the radio play and "we're definitely interested in doing it. Anything involving Lake Superior or the Edmund Fitzgerald has a lot of interest for our listeners."

Cathy Wurzer, who hosts Minnesota Public Radio's "Morning Edition," recently had the men in studio to talk about the project.

She said MPR will link to the radio play, which at 35 minutes is too short for its own broadcast, on its website. Wurzer aired her interview with the men on "Morning Edition" Friday.

Wurzer said she's long been fascinated with tales of Great Lakes shipping. As a young reporter at KSTP radio in 1985 or 1986, Wurzer said, she interviewed Bernie Cooper at his home in Duluth. She applauded the friends, all of whom live in the east metro area, for pursuing the radio play project.

"I think that the story is still so poignant and evocative," Wurzer said. "Keeping those 29 guys alive is so important. And I think these friends telling it is so appropriate."

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James Walsh is a reporter covering St. Paul and its neighborhoods. He has had myriad assignments in more than 30 years at the Star Tribune, including federal courts and St. Paul schools.
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