

THE CHRISTMAS SCHOONER

Book by John Reeger. Music and lyrics by Julie Shannon.

This critically acclaimed holiday treat tells the true story of a Michigan shipping captain who braves the deadly winter weather to bring Christmas trees to homesick German American families in turn-of-the-century Chicago. His voyages become a yearly tradition despite his wife's misgivings - until a fateful voyage makes her realise the true importance of his mission. With its powerful story and exquisite score, *The Christmas Schooner* is family entertainment at its best: hearty and wholesome.

THE STORY:

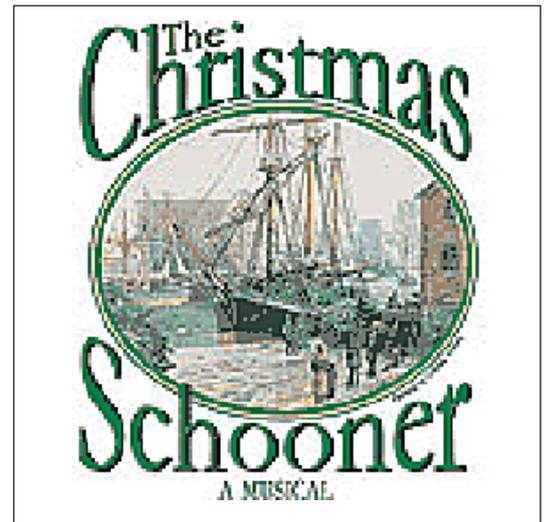
ACT ONE

The stage is bare when the audience enters. Only a large decorated evergreen is visible. As the lights dim, a ship's bell is heard. The lights come up and the entire company talks directly to the audience. We learn that we are going to hear the story of the Stossel family, a German family, now living in America in a little lumber town, Manistique, on the north coast of Lake Michigan. It's also the story of a schooner they called the Molly Doone - and the story of a letter that changed their lives.

The scene is then transformed to a bitterly cold Christmas Eve night, 1881. Gustav, the grandfather, enters carrying an armload of wood. He is met by his grandson, Karl, a boy of nine. In another room, Karl's mother, Alma, questions her son to see that he has done all of his assigned chores. Karl talks with his grandfather in German as they both decorate the tree. Alma quickly enters and reminds them that they shouldn't talk in German for they now live in America where everyone speaks English. Gustav jokes with her, reminding her that she's just jealous because she isn't German. She is Swiss, and Switzerland is full of a variety of languages. Gustav and Karl finally win out by realizing that America is the best of both worlds--the old and the new.

The father, Peter, returns from work and shakes off the snow. Greeting her husband, Alma gives Peter a letter from his cousin, Martha, who lives in Chicago. Before he has a chance to read it, the rattling of cans, ringing of cowbells, and cracking of whips are heard. Four men ceremoniously enter shaking the bells and having a wonderfully joyous time as they run around the house driving away evil spirits as part of an old German tradition. These men are crewmen who work with Peter aboard his schooner, the Molly Doone. As soon as they are finished with their rituals, the men take off their coats and sit down for a glass of good schnapps. Gustav tells everyone the story of the first Christmas tree, the Tannenbaum, a famous German tradition.

Alma enters with the goose and everyone sits down for a delicious Christmas dinner. There is a small evergreen branch at Peter's place setting which he picks up and proceeds to pass from person to person as everyone prays and remembers the Baby Jesus. As they all eat, Peter returns to the letter from Cousin Martha whom they visited last summer on their trip to Chicago. Yes, she enjoys her life in Chicago, but she misses the beautiful German Christmas traditions from her hometown of Bremen. Peter reflects on those days. Martha's letter finishes with her commenting how lucky Peter and his family are to have so many Christmas trees. In Chicago, the trees are few and far between, making the Christmas holiday seem incomplete.



Peter then tells Alma that while on the Upper Ridge he noticed there were a variety of small pines that were simply getting too thick. If the trees aren't cut down and the area thinned, they'll choke each other and die. Wouldn't it be wonderful, if he could take those trees to all the Germans in Chicago who haven't had a tree since they left home? Alma thinks it is a crazy idea; however, she knows her husband and how he loves to help people. As they sing carols and finish decorating the tree, Peter can't stop thinking about Martha's letter and her wishes for a Christmas tree of her own.

After the holiday season finishes, routine returns to the Stossel home. The men prepare for another shipping season on the now frozen lake. During the winter, they worked as lumberjacks. The thoughts of the Tannenbaum keep turning over and over in Peter's mind. The shipping season of 1882 comes and goes. When it appears that all the ships should be put to rest for the winter, Peter asks that his ship be filled with Christmas trees and sail to Chicago. Though the others try to convince him that the weather may be fierce, Peter has his mind made up. He wants to take Christmas trees to Chicago so that his cousin, Martha, and her friends and neighbours can experience a bit of a German Christmas tradition.

The scene opens on November 23rd in the woods. It is evening and a campfire glows as Gustav finishes making stew for the hungry men who have been chopping and hauling trees all week. The men eagerly eat their dinner, and though they have all agreed to work with Peter, they still think it's crazy to haul Christmas trees across Lake Michigan to Chicago. After dinner, the men go to bed. Peter returns from work and talks with his son, Karl. It appears that many of the kids at school think Peter's Christmas tree idea is crazy. Even Alma, thinks this is a stupid. Whatever the case may be, Peter believes in what he is doing and wants to go forward. Also, he knows that his son understands.

The following day, Peter talks with a silent Alma who really can't understand why he wants to bring Christmas trees to Chicago just because a cousin wrote him a letter. He explains that he simply wants to bring the joy of the Tannenbaum to all the people who miss it. Alma agrees to let him go, and he leaves her. Left alone, Alma wonders why her husband is the way he is and why he follows the call of the sea.

The ship finally casts off for Chicago. The journey is not an easy one. Ice forms on the tackle block and cleat. Storms rage as they move forward. As the ship continues its journey, Alma and the others wait and pray for their men to safely return. It is not an easy time for any of them.

It is November 28th and the Molly Doone continues to make its way to Chicago. It is foggy and the crew is tired and cranky. Peter begins to wonder if Alma was right and if anyone will care about the trees. Luckily, the fog lifts and on December 1st they pull into the dock. There, they can see a crowd of people eagerly waving at them. When they arrive, Martha runs to Peter and Gustav eagerly telling them that she got their letter, and that everyone she has told wants a Christmas tree. Soon people rush to the dock and excitedly purchase trees.

Back home, Karl and Alma pray for the Molly Doone's safe return.

ACT TWO

In Chicago, on December 2nd people are eagerly celebrating the Chicago Winterfest. Peter looks for a present to bring back to Alma and finally decides to get her a grandfather clock. He runs off to buy it while the other men are bamboozled into purchasing fake watches from street swindlers.

Back home on December 11th, Alma is in the midst of preparing a Christmas fruitcake. Karl hurts his fingers as uses a hammer to crack the walnuts Alma needs for the cake. While Peter has been gone, Mother and son have shared a very nice time together. ("Loving Sons")

Karl hopes that his father will bring him a present from Chicago. Alma reminds him that if the weather holds out, the ship should return by December 15th. However, no sooner does she say this than Peter appears in the doorway. The journey was so successful that, in fact, the trees they thought would take four days to sell sold in less than one day.

The men deliver the grandfather clock, and an excited Alma thanks her husband. As she prepares to get some strudel for everyone, Peter unties her apron and takes her into his arms. Alone with her husband, Alma admits she is proud of him, and loves him very much.

The men tell Peter they believe that if some of the planking on the ship was removed they could probably double the load of trees for next year. An alarmed Alma hears this and questions her husband. He promised that he would only risk a journey like this once. Peter explains that since the people were so happy, he had to do it again. Alma is only concerned about her husband's safety - not the happiness of the people of Chicago. Peter remembers he has a present for his son and produces a new pair of single-blade skates, which excites the young boy.

The following November and for six to follow, the Molly Doone sails to America with the Christmas trees. All the journeys are safe ones. Time moves on to 1887, and Karl, age 15, is finishing his chores while Alma works around the house. Suddenly, the door bursts open and Gustav is helped in by Peter. It appears that a rope snapped, and many trees fell on him - breaking his arm in two places. The ship is loaded and ready to make its journey; however, there is no way that Gustav can go. Without him they will be one man short. Karl suggests they take him along; however, Alma is adamant that her son not go on a winter voyage. In reality, they do need his help, and Alma finally gives in. Karl can go with them. As Peter and Alma help Gustav to bed, the boy imagines what it must be like aboard a schooner. He is in ecstasy! He goes and tells the other sailors the news; however, they tease him unmercifully. Though he has sailed across the lake, he's never experienced a winter voyage. He's going to be a winter sailor now!

On November 27, 1887, the Molly Doone sets sail once again. It appears that the ship is heavier than ever before and Peter wonders if it can carry all the trees; however, the crew assures him that everything should be fine.

On November 30th just outside of Bailey's Harbour, Wisconsin, the ship is hit by a fierce winter storm with strong winds and blinding snow. The hatch covers blow off and water pours in. The trees wash overboard, and the ship tears apart.

On December 8th Alma and Gustav arrive at the rescue hospital at Bailey's Harbour. They have taken the train and a short ferry ride there. Karl runs to his mother and grandfather. He survived the storm; unfortunately, Peter didn't. The other men come and try to comfort Alma telling her that they wouldn't have survived had it not been for Peter.

Alma also learns that hundreds of trees washed up on the shore - all across the bay. Alma tells the other sailors to get rid of them. She never wants to see another Christmas tree again! However, the men have voted to load the trees on another available schooner and sail to Chicago saying that's what Peter would have wanted them to do. Karl, too, wants to go with them. They can make it to Chicago in two days. Alma is dead set against this, but Karl persists in trying to reason with her. Left alone with Gustav, Alma ruminates about the situation. She is angry, hurt, and upset about all that has happened. Gustav tries to tell her that he understands how she feels for he has lost a son just like she lost a husband. Alma finally relents. She will let Karl and Gustav set sail with the ship; however, she is coming with them. If the journey meant so much to her husband then she wants to experience it as well.

On board the new schooner, Alma sails to Chicago with the men. On December 17th night, the ship pulls into Clark Street Harbour and Alma gets off the ship. A small Irish girl asks if the ship is the Christmas Schooner. They've all been waiting for it all week even though they heard it sunk up north. The little girl tells her that no one will believe that the ship wouldn't make it. Alma is amazed to see just how many people want one of the trees. She gives the girl a branch from one of the trees and tells the girl to let everyone know that yes, the Molly Doone went down, but that trees will be delivered this year and every year from up north. Come back tomorrow morning! The excited girl runs off.

Gustav joins Alma as she recounts her conversation with the little girl. He then goes to bed. Left alone, Alma thinks about all her husband has done and all that she will continue to do. For the next 25 years she saw that the Christmas Schooner sailed into Clarke Street Harbour each and every Christmas season. The names of the schooners changed, names long forgotten by most. But what can't be and shouldn't be forgotten is the courage of the men who risked their lives and set sail on a lake, so others could know the joy of Christmas.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

1. We All Have Songs
2. That's America
3. The Mummers Are Here
4. The Blessings of the Branch
5. The Letter
6. Another Season on the Water
7. When I Look at You
8. What Is It About the Water
9. The Christmas Schooner
10. Song of the Hungry Peasants
11. Winterfest Polka
12. That's What Loving Sons Are For
13. The Strudel Waltz
14. Hardwater Sailors
15. Questions

CAST (may be expanded): 7 men, 4 women, 1 boy, 1 girl

- Instrumentation: piano

DISCOGRAPHY:

- Cast Album- Louisa May - Alleycat Music LMAM-0010