

The Legend Lives On:
The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*

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Gordon Lightfoot opens:

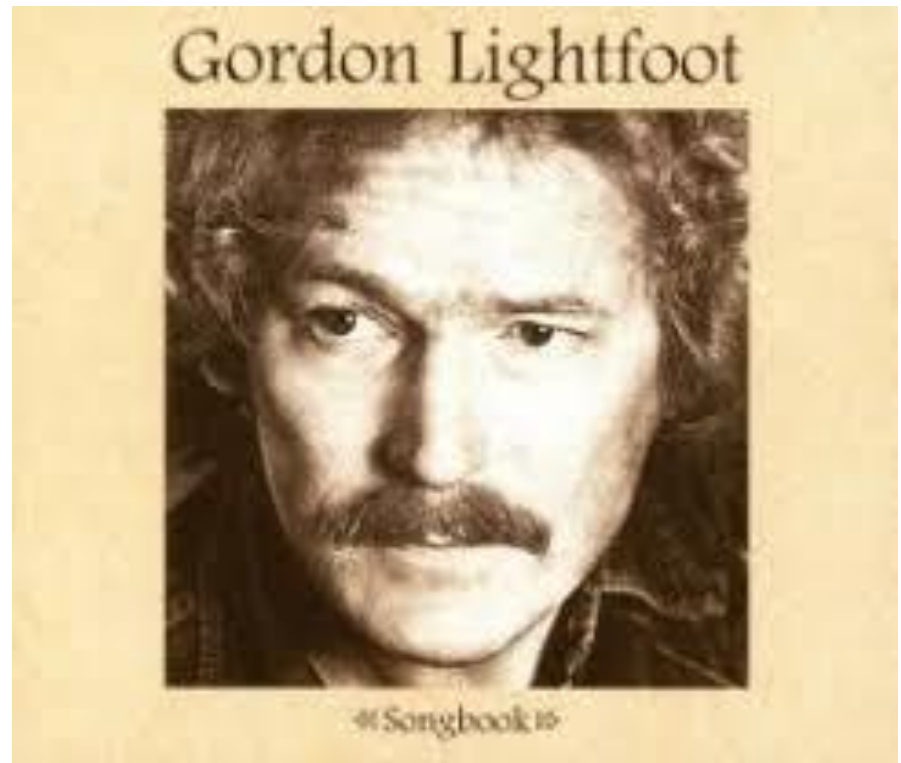
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgl8bta-7aw>



Gordon Lightfoot
Born November 17, 1938

Gordon Lightfoot

- Born and raised in Canada, he started singing both in a church choir and in high school
- He studied music in LA, and said his influences included Pete Seeger, Ian and Sylvia and the Weavers



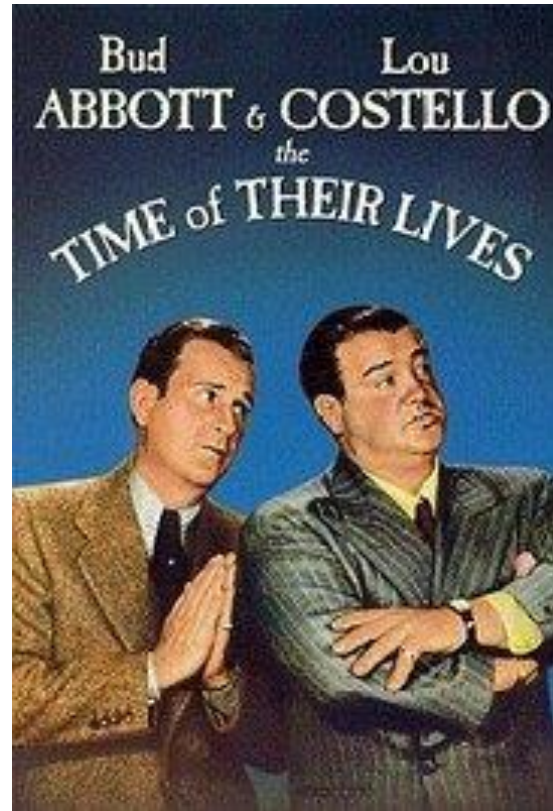
Gordon Lightfoot

- His early years were more as a songwriter than performer
- After recording in Canada and Europe, he signed a contract with Albert Grossman, who managed many folk artists, in 1965

Gordon Lightfoot

- His debut album for United Artists in 1965 included the hit “For Loving Me”
- After two more albums for UA, he transferred to Warner Brothers, where he had the hit “If You Could Read My Mind”
- Question: What was the “old time movie about a ghost in a wishing well?”

Time of Their Lives



Gordon Lightfoot

- He continued to have a series of hits:
 - *Carefree Highway*
 - *Sundown*
 - *Did She Mention My Name*
 - *Rainy Day People*

Gordon Lightfoot

- Among his honors:
 - *Canadian Music Hall of Fame*
 - *Order of Canada*
 - *Songwriters Hall of Fame*

Gordon Lightfoot

- In the November 24, 1975 issue of *Newsweek*, there was a story read by Lightfoot about the *Edmund Fitzgerald*
- The first line of the story was:
According to a legend of the Chippewa tribe, the lake they once called Gitche Gumee 'never gives up its dead'
- Sound familiar?

Now

On to the *Edmund
Fitzgerald!*

First:

- Who was Edmund Fitzgerald?
- Edmund Fitzgerald (1895-1986) was Chairman of the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company
- This company also took an interest in shipbuilding



First:

- When the *Edmund Fitzgerald* was built, it was named after the company's Chairman
- He was still alive when his namesake sank



The Ship was the Pride:

- Great Lakes Engineering Works of Michigan designed and built the ship
- While it was to ply the Great Lakes it also had to fit in the soon to be completed St. Lawrence Seaway
- Keel plate was laid on August 7, 1957



The Ship was the Pride:

- Dimensions:
 - 730 feet long
 - 75 feet wide
 - 25 foot draft

The Ship was the Pride:

- The ship was launched on June 7, 1958, not without mishap
 - Elizabeth Fitzgerald christened the ship by smashing a champagne bottle over the bow, it took her three attempts to break it.
 - A delay of 36 minutes followed while the shipyard crew struggled to release the keel blocks.
 - Upon launch, the ship created a large wave, dousing the spectators then crashed into a pier before righting herself.
 - A man watching had a heart attack and later died.

The Ship was the Pride:

- During its lifetime, it carried up to 27,000 long tons per trip
- Also had berthing for VIP passengers

The Ship was the Pride:

- Carried taconite from Duluth MN to Detroit and Toledo.
- What is taconite?
 - *a variety of iron formation, an iron-bearing (over 15% iron) sedimentary rock, in which the iron minerals are interlayered with quartz, chert, or carbonate.*

The Ship was the Pride:

- This trip normally took 5 days
- During the season (obviously not during the winter) the Fitz averaged 47 trips per year
- Set seasonal haul records 6 times
- Truly, the Fitz “was the pride of the American side.”

Captains:

- Bert Lambert – first captain, 1958
- Newman Larson – 1959-1966
- Peter Pulcer – 1967-1972
- Edward McSorley – 1972-1975

Crew and Good Captain Well Seasoned

- Crew of 29 on the *Fitz*
- Small crew for so large a ship
- Captain, first mate, second mate, engineer, third mate, 24 crewmen
- Mix of young and experienced hands

Good Captain Well Seasoned

- Born in 1913 in upstate New York, dreamed of working on ships he saw in the St. Lawrence River
- First went to sea at 18 on an ocean going vessel but soon entered service on the Great Lakes



Good Captain Well Seasoned

- Rose through the ranks and took his first command in 1951
- In 1970, took command of the *Armco* and two years later took command of the *Fitz*
- Was described as quiet and business like – did not fraternize with the crew
- His wife had a stroke and was in a nursing home, so McSorley was contemplating retirement

Staff

- First Mate – John Henke McCarthy, 62 (had been first mate on the *Armco*)
- Second Mate – James A. Pratt, 44
- Chief Engineer – John Hull, 60
- Third Mate – Michael Armagost, 37

Staff

- The other 24 crew included engineers, deckhands, oilers, cooks, wheelsman, and maintenance men
- Varied in age from 22 (deckhand) to 62 (first cook)

November 9, 1975

- The *Fitz* left Superior WI at 2:15 PM on November 9, with 26,000 tons of taconite, heading for Detroit
- She was joined by the *Arthur Anderson*, heading to Gary IN
- Weather forecast was not unusual for early November, with the prediction of a storm south of Lake Superior on the 10th

November 9, 1975

- The *Wilfred Sykes*, not trusting the forecast, headed north in Lake Superior to use the coast to protect it.
- The *Fitz* and the *Anderson*, based on the forecast, took the normal route through Lake Superior heading to Gary IN
- By 7 PM on the 9th, the weather forecast had changed first to a gale and then a storm, with predicted winds of up to 50 knots.

November 10, 1975

- Initially, the *Fitz* was sailing behind the *Anderson* but by 3:00 AM the *Fitz* pulled ahead.
- The gale force winds shifted from northeast to south to northwest
- Snow then began to fall, and the *Anderson* lost sight of the *Fitz*

November 10, 1975

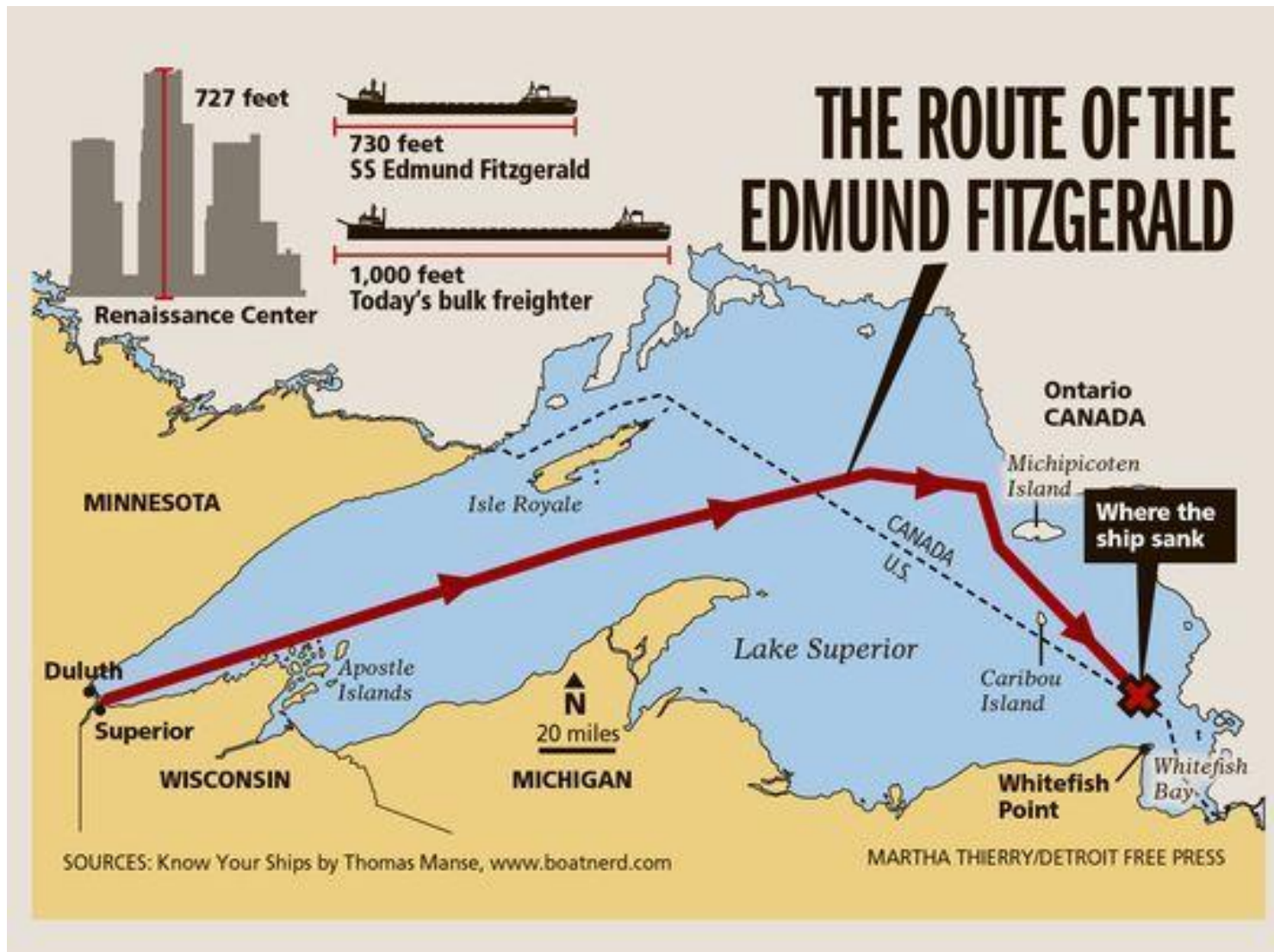
- By 3:30, the *Fitz* had water coming in, (and the good ship and crew were in peril!)
- McSorley would slow down so the *Anderson* could come to his aid
- The *Fitz* also lost radar, so in the dark and storm was sailing blind
- The *Anderson* directed the *Fitz* to the shelter of Whitefish Bay, where the light but not navigation beacon were functioning

November 10, 1975

- In a 530 PM communication, McSorley notified another Captain:

I have a 'bad list,' I have lost both radars, and am taking heavy seas over the deck in one of the worst seas I have ever been in.

- At 710 PM, McSorley replied to the *Anderson* “We are holding our own.”
- That would be the last word heard from the *Fitz*



The route of the *Fitz*

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Waves and weather theory
 - Simulations were done by the National Weather Service and NOAA
 - These simulations showed winds in the area of the sinking in excess of 40 knots
 - Winds at this level would produce waves of at least 25 feet on the night of the sinking

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Waves and weather theory
 - Additionally, the simulations showed a 1 in 100 chance of a wave in excess of 36 feet, and a 1 in 1000 chance of a wave in excess of 46 feet.
 - The *Anderson* reported winds in excess of 54 mph, with gusts up to 86 miles per hour

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Waves and weather theory
 - Such winds and such waves would have clearly caused the *Fitz* to roll heavily and could have caused her to capsize

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Rogue wave theory
 - Lake Superior storms sometimes give rise to rogue waves, known as “three sisters.”
 - These are three waves in succession, each more than 35 feet in height

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Rogue wave theory
- The second wave hits before the water accumulated from the first can wash away, and the third adds to the wave total on deck
- Such a wave pattern was spotted near the *Fitz*, and given the list from wave and winds, the accumulated water could have capsized the *Fitz*

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Cargo-hold flooding theory
 - A USCG report held that the hatch closures were not properly secured, resulting in slow flooding during the final days.
 - This was a controversial finding, as both the families and the shippers argued that the *Fitz* was equipped with modern and effective hatch closures.

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Cargo-hold flooding theory
 - The NTSB, in a study in 1978, concluded that the hatches collapsed under the immense weight of the seas, not gradually because of hatch closure issues, resulting in a sudden sinking.
 - A dissent to the NTSB argued that the sinking was due to shoaling.

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Shoaling theory
 - As noted, the Whitefish radar station was not available at the time of the wreck, and there have been questions as to whether the light was available
 - This theory is that without these aids, the *Fitz* raked a reef

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Shoaling theory
 - USCG inspection of the hull showed no evidence of damage consistent with shoaling
 - A subsequent theory held that a rogue wave combined with a grounding to cause the hull to be punctured mid body.

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Structural failure theory
 - In this theory, the larger winter loads made it possible for waves, not necessarily rogue waves, to cause a stress fracture in the hull
 - Underwater investigation showed the two pieces of the *Fitz* to be about 150 feet apart

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Structural failure theory
 - The question comes up whether the ship split on the surface or when it hit the lake floor
 - The fact that some of the taconite spread out on the floor would argue the split took place on the surface

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Structural failure theory
 - Obviously, the *Fitz* could not be analyzed on the bottom of the Lake
 - However, a sister ship, the *Arthur Homer* was being lengthened (a procedure planned for the *Fitz*) so the thought was to analyze this ship

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Structural failure theory
 - However, Bethlehem Steel refused the NTSB permission to review the *Homer*
 - The *Homer* was laid up in 1980 and broken up for scrap in 1987, without any further study
 - Hence, no definite conclusions can be reached on this theory

Possible Causes of the Sinking

- Topside damage theory
 - With the winds and waves, there is conjecture that either something like a rail or vent broke loose, or a log hit the *Fitz*
 - This could have cause rupture of the ballast tanks, which, in conjunction with waves, would have led to the sinking.

Conclusions

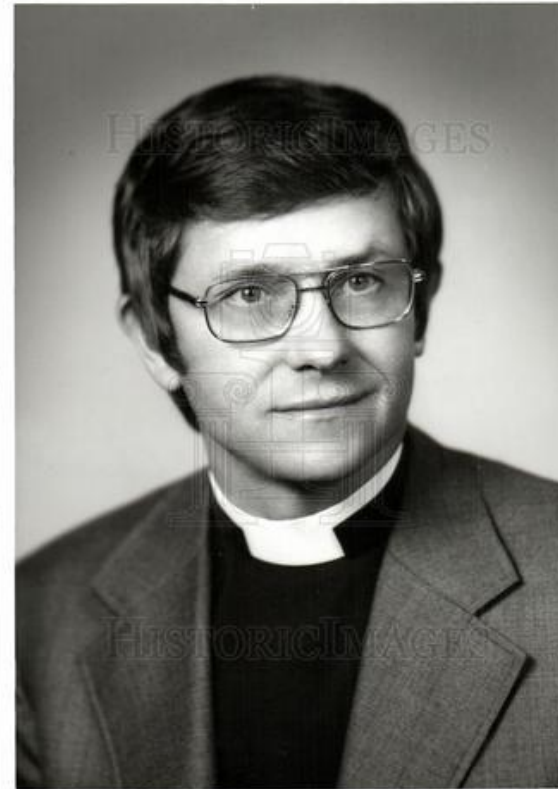
- A 2006 NOAA study showed the *Fitz*, by sailing north in Superior, steamed directly into the higher waves and stronger storm
- However, the *Anderson* sailed the same route and survived.
- NTSB in 2000 concluded that unlocked hatch covers were the cause

Conclusions

- The shoaling theory has some support among Coast Guard researchers
- Bottom line – there was no one reason for the sinking, and we will never truly know what combination doomed the *Fitz*

Mariners Church of Detroit

- Father Richard Ingalls was pastor of the Mariners Church in November 1975
- Early on the morning of November 11, he received word “There’s trouble with the *Fitzgerald*.”



Mariners Church of Detroit

- Understanding what “trouble” meant, he immediately left for the Church, ascended the bell tower, and rang the bell 29 times “for each man on the Edmund Fitzgerald.”
- The church became a center of prayer for all of the men on the *Fitz*.



Search for the *Fitz*

- Almost immediately after the wreck, on November 14, a Navy search plane found the wreckage of the *Fitz*.
- As part of the Marine Board hearings, a cable controlled underwater research vehicle (CURV) was to be dispatched to the wreckage, but needed to wait for spring
- In May 1976, the CURV made 12 dives, spending 56 hours at the site and providing over 43,000 feet of television coverage

Results of the CURV

- Gaping holes in the bow of the ship
- Twisted steel through the bow
- 200 feet of the *Fitz'* midsection were gone – broken into debris and scattered on the Lake's floor
- Pilothouse was totally destroyed
- No bodies visible
- No conclusions as to why the ship sank

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Further Dives

- As noted, the Marine Board reached conclusions, and for the Coast Guard and NTSB, no further exploration was required.
- In 1980, a French expedition under the leadership of Jacques Cousteau planned to visit the site.

Further Dives

- However, the senior Cousteau was more interested in tracing early French explorers to Canada, so the *Fitz* dive was entrusted to his son, Jean-Michel
- The crew only spent about two hours at the site, and only explored the bow section.

Further Dives

- It would be almost 10 years, in 1989, before another expedition was mounted.
- This would be a much larger and better organized expedition, with support from The University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the National Geographic, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service

Further Dives

- Using more up to date technology, the Remote Operated Vehicles (ROV) took more and better films of the wreckage
- The biggest surprise was a large hole in the starboard bow
- Even with this additional data, “The mystery is still intact” the expedition leader reported

Further Dives

- Further dives took place in 1994.
- In one of them, Frederick J Shannon took a new approach – investigate like a crime scene
- Might not have made news, but for the discovery of the body of a crewman, and the hint that Shannon might use this footage in a documentary or book

Further Dives

- With this, the families, who had been generally silent with regard to past dives, now demanded the government put the wreckage site off limits
- The families turned to the Shipwreck Society to secure the ship's bell and replace it with a memorial bell

Further Dives

- In April 1995, the Shipwreck Society secured the bell and turned it over to Michigan State University for restoration after being underwater for almost 20 years.
- The bell was replaced by a memorial bell
- The original bell was placed in the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, Whitefish Point Light Station

Further Dives

- A bill was passed by the Michigan Legislature banning publication or display of human remains without permission of the next of kin
- Canada seemed more reluctant to declare the wreckage site off limits, so the families decided to take matters into their own hands

Further Dives

- In July 1999, in a ceremony witnessed by the families of the men who went down on the *Fitz*, the wreckage site was formally consecrated as a gravesite
- Father Ingalls, of the Mariners Church, assisted by family members, once again rang a replica of the ship's bell 29 times

The Bell – it rang 29 times

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AB3Dn_8IHPM

(start at 9 minute mark)

So how did Lightfoot do?

- Actually, quite well
- *With a load of iron ore, 26,000 tons more* – The *Fitz* had 26,116 tons of cargo
- *Coming back from some mill in Wisconsin* – left Superior WI, but was heading to, not leaving a mill
- *When she left fully loaded for Cleveland* – Actually heading for Detroit

So how did Lightfoot do?

- *When suppertime came, the old cook came on deck* – The cook was actually the oldest member of the crew (but only sailed because the regular cook was sick)
- *The captain wired in, he had water coming in* – At 530, McSorley radioed “am taking heavy seas over the deck.” 90 minutes later, the last transmission was “we are holding our own.”

So how did Lightfoot do?

- *In a musty old hall in Detroit they prayed*
– A parishioner wrote Lightfoot that the church was not musty – in live performances, Lightfoot now sings “in a rustic old hall”
- *The Maritime Sailors’ Cathedral* – As noted, the name of the church was the Mariners Church of Detroit, but I would argue Lightfoot’s name is more poetic.

- If you feel like toasting the *Fitz* (or the course or the instructor) might I suggest The Great Lakes Brewing Company Edmund Fitzgerald Porter
- Available at Giant Food Stores



- If you are looking for something non alcoholic, try Mitchell's Homemade Ice Cream, which uses the GLBC's leftover porter to make a flavor known as Edmund Fitzgerald Chocolate Chunk.

