



The Edmund Fitzgerald and Baseball

Canadian Baseball History Conference

November 2, 2025 Bill Sproule

Over the next couple of weeks, there will be several presentations and stories about the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. It was 50 years ago on November 10th, 1975, that the *Fitzgerald* sank in Lake Superior. Over the years, thousands of ships have sunk on the Great Lakes; why is the *Edmund Fitzgerald* so famous? It was the last ship to sink on the Great Lakes, having been preceded by the *Daniel Morrell* (in Lake Huron, on Nov. 29, 1966; 28 died, 1 survived) and the *Carl D. Bradley* (also in Lake Huron, on Nov. 19, 1958; 33 died). It's still a mystery. And Gordon Lightfoot's song.

Who is Edmund Fitzgerald?

The Fitzgerald family had been involved in Great Lakes shipping ever since Edmund's great-grandfather immigrated from Ireland in the 1830s and settled on a farm near Port Huron. There were six brothers in the family – all became captains on Great Lakes ships. The oldest brother opened a shipyard in Port Huron and served a term as Port Huron's mayor.

Edmund Fitzgerald



- born 1895 to William and Jessie Fitzgerald in Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- father was president of Milwaukee Drydock Company
- served in WW I, graduated from Yale University
- long career with Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company - served as president and CEO

Three brothers moved to Milwaukee. John, the youngest brother, built a shipyard, the Milwaukee Dry Dock Company. John's son William (Edmund's father) took over the shipyard in the late 1890s when John passed away. Edmund was born in 1895. He served in WW I, graduated from Yale in business, and had a long career with Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company as President and CEO.

When Edmund was 6, in 1901, his father William died in a gas explosion at his home. A close friend of his father had a ship built and named in his honour in 1906, the *W.E. Fitzgerald*. It was 440' (135 m) long and had a long career on the Great Lakes until it was scrapped in 1971. It was known as the

W.E. Fitzgerald – “Little Fitz”



“Little Fitz” after the “Big Fitz” (the *Edmund Fitzgerald*) was launched.

In the 1950s, Northwestern Mutual invested in several iron and mineral industries, and would purchase ships that would be operated by other companies. In 1957 they contracted with Great Lakes



Engineering to design and build a new ship. It would be the largest ship on the Great Lakes at the time. The Northwestern Mutual Board proposed that the ship be named after Edmund, but he did not

want it named after him. By means of procedural maneuvers, the Board

named the ship after him when he was out of the room. The ship was christened on June 7, 1958, by Edmund’s wife Elizabeth. After fitting and testing, it went into service in the fall of 1958.

Elizabeth Fitzgerald christened the S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald on **June 7, 1958**



A few facts about the *Edmund Fitzgerald*: It was 729’ long (222 m), 75’ wide (23 m), and could carry 26,000 tons of taconite iron ore pellets, a

S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald

- designed and built by the Great Lakes Engineering Works, River Rouge, MI
- largest ship on the Great Lakes in 1960s
 - 729 feet long and 75 feet wide
 - could carry over 26,000 tons of taconite (iron ore) pellets between Minnesota Iron Range mines and steel plants in Detroit, Toledo, and other ports
- owned by the Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company, operated by Oglebay Norton Corp. as the flagship of its Columbia Transportation fleet

volume the equivalent of 200 railcars or 1200 large trucks. It cost \$8 million to build, and could travel at speeds up to 16 mph (25 km/h, or 14 knots).

It had several nicknames, including “Big Fitz”, “Mighty Fitz”, “Toledo Express”, and “Queen of the Lakes”. It would take more than four hours to load, and 14 hours to unload. A round trip between Duluth and Toledo would take 5 days; the *Fitzgerald* would make almost 50 such trips each year.

The *Fitzgerald* was a favorite of boat watchers or nerds. I was born and raised in Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, and often saw it on the St. Mary’s River or going through the Soo Locks: the MacArthur Lock (built in 1943), the Poe Lock (built in 1968), and the Davis (1914) and Sabin (1919) Locks. Today, 1000 footers are self-unloaders and can carry over 70,000 tons. These are the equivalent of 3 or 4 old Great Lake ships, so that fewer ships pass through Soo Locks today.



By freighter standards, the *Fitzgerald* offered luxurious accommodation, with two suites for guests. Edmund and his wife Elizabeth would often host guests, including children Edmund and Elizabeth, on the ship.

The Fatal Voyage

On the afternoon of November 9, 1975, the *Fitzgerald* left Superior, loaded, and headed for National Steelworks on Zug Island, near Detroit. It was

November 9, 1975 – Fitzgerald loading taconite pellets in Superior, Wisconsin for a trip to a steel mill on Zug Island, near Detroit



S.S. Arthur M. Anderson



Capt. McSorley's retirement trip. The *Fitzgerald* was followed by a second ship, the *Arthur Anderson*. The latter, a U.S. Steel ship, is still operating on the Great Lakes today. It launched in 1952 at 647' (197 m), and was lengthened to 767' (234 m) prior to the 1975 season. It became a self-unloader in 1981. (Recall that the *Fitzgerald* was 729' (222 m) long.)

The weather was nice when the two ships left Superior. The next day, November 10th, both ships were caught in a severe storm on Lake Superior. Near hurricane-force winds, waves up to 35 feet (10-15 m), and snow reduced their visibility. The *Anderson* fell behind. At 3:30 pm, the *Fitzgerald* (Capt. McSorley) reported to the *Anderson* that she was taking on water. At 7:10 pm, the *Fitzgerald* reported to the *Anderson*, who was about 9 miles (15 km) behind, "We are holding our own."



"We Are Holding Our Own"
SS Edmund Fitzgerald - November 10, 1975

The *Fitzgerald* was never heard from again. All the crew, 29 men, died. It is still a mystery as to what happened. Theories that have been put forth include:

- large wave,
- structural failure,
- cargo shift,
- hatch covers/clamps,
- off course and hit a shoal,
- inaccurate weather forecasts,
- any combination of the above

Of the numerous books written about the wreck, the latest was released last week by John U. Bacon, an author from Ann Arbor. The book is currently on the *New York Times* best seller list. Note that Edmund Fitzgerald's wife's name was Elizabeth Bacon Fitzgerald: Bacon was her maiden name.

A search began soon after the *Fitzgerald* disappeared. It was found four days later, on November 14th, about 17 miles (25 km) NNW of Whitefish Point, at a depth of 530 feet (160 m). The ship is in Canadian waters. The Canadian government mandated that no one could take or recover



anything from the ship (a grave site), threatening a large fine of \$1 million or more. The ship split in two, as depicted artistically above.

Great Lakes
Shipwreck Museum
Whitefish Point, MI



Valley Camp Museum
Sault Ste. Marie, MI



Relatives of those who died approved recovery of the ship's bell, which is on display at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point. Several items were found on the shore, and they are on display at the Valley Camp Museum in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. In 1974, the *Fitzgerald* lost its bow anchor on the Detroit River, near Belle Isle; this

too was recovered and is on display at the museum on Belle Isle. Annual memorial services for the dead are held at the Shipwreck Museum and Mariners' Church in Detroit.

As for Edmund Fitzgerald himself, he retired in 1960, and became involved in the arts and numerous civic projects in Milwaukee. The co-founder of the Wisconsin Maritime Historical Society, he died in 1986 at the age of 90.

Some feel the fame of the *Fitzgerald* is due to the 1976 ballad "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*" by Canadian folksinger Gordon Lightfoot, first released on the "Summertime Dream" album. While there may be some truth to this, the song says that the *Fitzgerald* was bound for Cleveland when in reality it was headed for Zug Island in the Detroit area.

The Baseball Story

Edmund Fitzgerald's son, Edmund Bacon Fitzgerald, or "Young Ed", is part of the baseball story. Milwaukee-born, Young Ed forged a successful career with the electrical products firm Cutler-Hammer, which had been founded by his grandfather, Frank Bacon.

Edmund Bacon Fitzgerald

“Young Ed”



- born in 1926 in Milwaukee, WI
- graduated in engineering from the University of Michigan
- served in WW II and Korean War
- career with Cutler-Hammer, Northern Telecom (Nortel), and Vanderbilt University

The 1950s were an exciting time to be in Milwaukee, especially for baseball fans. In 1953, the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee, and won the World Series four years later, defeating the NY Yankees. They won the pennant again in 1958, but lost the World Series to the same Yankees. However, In the early 1960s, attendance started to decline, and there was talk of moving the Braves to Atlanta.

In an effort to keep the Braves in Milwaukee, a local group, “Go to Bat for the Braves”, was formed. Their objectives were to boost season ticket sales, secure better radio and TV packages, and so on. The group was headed by “Young Ed” Fitzgerald, Milwaukee car dealer “Bud” Selig, and Herb Kohl, whose family owned the Kohl department stores. Selig and Kohl were childhood friends who had been roommates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“Go to Bat for the Braves”



Edmund B. Fitzgerald



Allan “Bud” Selig



Herb Kohl

Their efforts were not successful, as the Braves moved to Atlanta following the 1965 season. Following the Braves’ move, the group arranged for

several league games in Milwaukee, and in 1970, they purchased the Seattle Pilots, moved them to Milwaukee and renamed the team the Brewers. (The Seattle Pilots operated for only one season (1969). Seattle was awarded a new franchise in 1977, beginning play as the Mariners.)



“Young Ed” Fitzgerald was a General Partner and Vice President of the Brewers until the early 1980s; he

also served on Major League Baseball's Executive Council. In the early 1980s, he moved to Toronto to become chairman and CEO of Northern Telecom. While there he met Gordon Lightfoot. He later taught at Vanderbilt University, retiring in 1990. He authored the book *Edmund Fitzgerald: the Ship and the Man* (2001). He died in 2013.



Edmund B. Fitzgerald



Allan "Bud" Selig



Herb Kohl

Bud Selig was the majority owner and President; he would later become MLB Commissioner (1988-2015), and was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2017. Kohl served on the Brewers Board. He would later own the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks (1985-2014) and was a U.S. Senator (1989-2013). Kohl died two years ago. As well, Fitzgerald's brother-in-law, Richard Cutler, assisted with legal work and was Secretary of the Brewers in the early years.

Almost 50 years after the fact, the *Edmund Fitzgerald* remains a fascinating story, and now you can add an interesting connection to baseball.

Bill Sproule
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