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Schooner Days, XXII (22)
By C.H.J. Snider

Great Gales

Navigation of the Great Lakes is just as perilous as navigation of the ocean. If the seas there run longer and higher, the seas here run shorter and steeper. An added factor of danger in the lakes is the peril of the lee shore and lack of room. On the ocean there is at least room in the arena for the conflict between man and the elements. There the fighting ship may have a thousand miles of freedom. She may run from the assault and return to the conflict. All she has to do is to keep afloat. Here on the lakes it is always corner fighting. A few hours at most, and the rocks and sands of the shore join in the menace of the ship. This was particularly the handicap of the sailing vessel; and in the old days fourteen hundred sailing vessels carried the principal commerce of the Great Lakes.

The greatest "great gale" on the lakes, of which there is record, would appear to be the blow of November 10th and 11th, 1835, which is said to have piled the water of Lake Erie up twenty feet above normal level at Buffalo.

The wind raved from the west-south-west, right down Lake Erie, and the choked Niagara River could not carry the tawny waves away from the relentless smiter fast enough.

How many lives were lost in this gale is not known, for communication was slow and difficult a century ago, and the compilation of statistics in this continent was then in its infancy.

All over the lakes vessels were destroyed. On Lake Ontario two went down off the Ducks. In Buffalo, with the rising water and furious gale, schooners and steamers were carried up on to the main streets and left stranded high and dry uptown.

In those bad old days every gale claimed its toll of lives on the lakes.

For one thing there was little law compelling safe and seaworthy vessels. Any old trap that would float was allowed to carry freight and passengers, and anybody with sufficient hardihood could sail them.

It was forty years later before schooner captains had to have certificates of competency. Nowadays, thanks to rigid requirements by the underwriters, governmental inspection of vessels, examinations for masters and mates and engineers, and vastly improved lighthouses, fog horns and lifesaving stations, loss of life on the Great Lakes has been reduced to the vanishing point.

Some years no lives at all are lost by stress of weather. Another factor contributing to reduced casualty lists has been the change from sail to steam.

At first the result was just the reverse. In the early days it was the steamers which filled the obituary columns. They were the great passenger carriers, and when something happened to them the loss of life was frightful.

Sixty-nine lives were lost when the steamer *Antony Wayne* blew up in Lake Erie in 1850; two hundred and fifty passengers perished with the steamer *Atlantic*, in collision with the propeller *Ogdensburg* in Lake Erie in 1852; one hundred and sixty-seven passengers and sailors

lost their lives in four steamer wrecks on the lakes in 1856; two hundred and sixty-four passengers burned in the steamer *Montreal* on the St. Lawrence in 1857; three hundred sank with the *Lady Elgin* in 1860.

The list makes gruesome reading, but it is satisfactory to know that it is all or mainly in the past tense. Recent wrecks have taken few lives on the lakes, especially of passengers. The *Eastland* disaster at Chicago was seemingly due to overloading, not to weather.

Lake steamers are now well built to begin with, they are thoroughly inspected, they are competently manned, and they seldom come to grief: especially the passenger ones. In general, passengers are as safe in a lake steamer as in a train.

It was not like that in the olden days, and the annual loss of life was often appalling. In 1850 storms and fires took 431 lives on the lakes – but here again one passenger steamer was responsible for more than half the total. Two hundred and eighty-six persons perished when the steamer *G. P. Griffith* burned on Lake Erie.

In the year 1860, a bad year for storms, 578 lives were lost on the lakes, and the *Lady Elgin* was responsible for 300 of these. She was sunk in collision with a schooner. There will be more about this some time in “Schooner Days”. d. v.

November, 1869, was the time of a terrific gale which swept all the lakes for four days. In it 97 vessels, of 27,026 aggregate tons, stranded or foundered. They were worth \$1,267,800. Sailing vessels here suffered heavily: two barquentines, four brigs or brigantines, nineteen schooners, six sailing scows and two barges were total wrecks. In this gale was lost the *Robert Burns*, last true brig on all the lakes. As has been noted elsewhere, nearly all the “brigs” mentioned in lake navigation, reports were really brigantines.

The heaviest gale of our own times was that awful 13th of November blow in 1913, which strewed Lake Huron particularly with wreckage. Many freight steamers, built in the Tyne and brought successfully through the Atlantic gales to trade on the Great Lakes succumbed to the fury of this tempest along with their lakebuilt sisters. Sixteen steamers were lost, twelve were wrecked, one recovered. Two hundred sailors were drowned. Two hundred and twenty-five were rescued from wrecks. A million dollars worth of cargoes went to the bottom and \$2,500,000 worth of shipping was destroyed.

But while gales on the lakes have taken thousands of lives and destroyed millions of dollars worth of property, in the two centuries and a half since La Salle lost his little Frontenac near Niagara, it must be remembered that lake navigation has grown steadily safer and safer. It has now got to the stage where, as said before, passengers are as safe in a steamer as on a train. Here’s hoping – and it is a reasonable hope – that the season of 1931 will show a clean sheet.