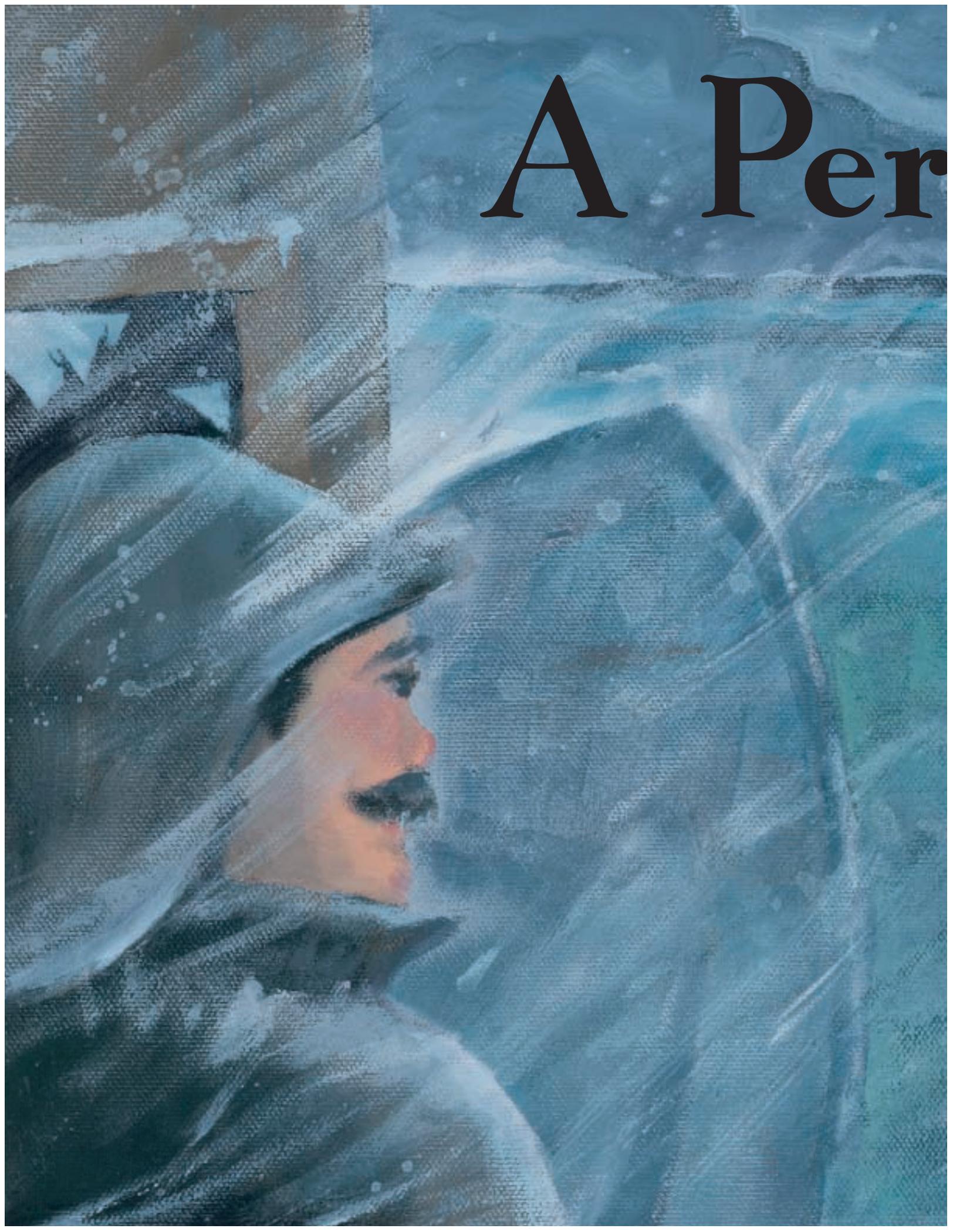


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Perfect Storm

by STEPHANIE GILLETT

ILLUSTRATIONS CAROLYN DAMSTRA

On November 10, 1913, the *J. H. Sheadle*, captained by S. A. Lyons, lumbered toward Fort Gratiot. Lake Huron had not been kind to the 530-foot straight-decker these past few hours. Blinding snow and winds upwards of seventy miles an hour had almost beaten her crew into submission. “Rough seas” did not begin to describe the thirty-five-foot waves that punished the steamer’s superstructure. A few hours before, Captain Lyons, a former St. Clair County resident, was dangling from the top house wall, his legs parallel with the floor, while his ship turned to avoid running aground. Though Lyons hoped the worst was over, lying in the path before him was a grisly sight. A steel freighter had “turned turtle” in the storm and was floating upside down, just north of the St. Clair River. Oil barrels and other wreckage floated about a quarter of a mile leeward.

Lyons passed the hull of the wreckage at a distance of about a thousand feet and tried not to study the bobbing mass too closely. He feared there were no survivors.



Three days earlier, a gale was far from the minds of sailors preparing to embark on the lower Great Lakes. The weather was mild and clear, nearly sixty degrees, and held promise that ships would make their last run of the season without incident. Though it was early in the month, November was providing an unseasonably warm end to the 1913 shipping season, one of the safest since the turn of the century—only ten deaths that year, far safer than the several dozen lives the Great Lakes usually claimed.

The storm blowing on Lake Superior was hardly more than a two-sentence news item in that day's paper thanks to downed communication lines all over the Upper Peninsula. Sailors south of Sault Ste. Marie had no idea that a gale was coming from the west. But they may have heard about the storm building in the south. Mentioned as an after-thought in most newspapers, the low-pressure system in Virginia was said to be heading north, intensifying over the Appalachian Mountains. In 1913 weather forecasting was as much luck as it was science. Weather bureaus did not see that these two systems were set on a deadly course over the Great Lakes, where blinding snow and hurricane force winds would claim many ships and their crews.

In the early hours of November 9, the *Charles S. Price* was sneaking out of the mouth of the St. Clair River, a load of coal in her cargo hold due into a Lake Superior port a few days hence. It was starting to snow, but Captain William Black and crew proceeded undaunted. Though many sailors kept a skeptical eye on the western horizon in November, the *Price* was not home to a superstitious lot. At least, not anymore. Just four days before, first assistant engineer Milton Smith resigned his position because of a "feeling of foreboding" and headed home to the wife and six children waiting for him in Port Huron. This same feeling was not weighing heavy on the minds of the twenty-eight sailors remaining on board. They only wanted to get this last run out of the way so they could return to their families.

Captain Edward McConkey of the S.S. *Regina* was readying the 235-foot package freighter to make her last run of

the season, delivering hay, wooden matches and sewer and gas pipe to the Georgian Bay. Though wind was picking up and the temperature was dropping, the *Regina* still departed at 7:30 on Sunday morning, November 9.

The *J. H. Sheadle* had spent her early morning hours taking on fuel near Alpena, and then continued southbound on her way to Erie, Pennsylvania, with a load of grain. By 11:30 A.M. Sunday, Captain Lyons found himself changing his ship's course just to keep her on track, as the seas were kicking up. Winds were blowing due north at about forty miles an hour and seemed to be picking up speed.

Four hours into his journey, the captain of the *Regina* reconsidered this northern path. Much like the *Sheadle*, his freighter was being battered by suddenly rough waters, and McConkey thought it prudent to head back to the St. Clair River. The pipe he carried made the turn potentially dangerous, as it became frozen to the deck by waves coating the boat with deadly sheets of ice. The package freighter could roll like a log with the help of the top-heavy cargo, but their chances in this worsening storm did not look much better. With his ship's engines revving, McConkey tempted fate and won. His ship was badly jostled in the heavy seas, but stayed upright as it turned southbound. However, swirling snow impeded visibility and McConkey could neither see shore nor sea as he headed in the general direction of what he thought was deep water.

Weather-wise, the southern low-pressure system was pushing against the gale headed south and east from

Lake Superior. The two systems never actually met, but by mid-afternoon on November 9 the result of their atmospheric interaction was a fury of snow, wind and sea. Both storms gained energy from the still-warm waters of the Great Lakes. The product of these clashing systems was whiteout blizzard conditions and winds that climbed to seventy miles per hour.

Captains McConkey, Black and Lyons had been, until now, navigating in bad weather. Now they were trying to find their way to safety in a cataclysmic meteorological event. The *Sheadle* was suddenly experiencing vicious high seas, "one wave following another very closely," later Captain Lyons later reported in *The Marine Review*. "Owing to the sudden force of the wind, the seas had not lengthened out as they

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usually do when the wind increases in the ordinary way.” These sudden raging waves thwarted the crew’s attempts to have supper. Windows and skylights broke. Volumes of water cascaded into the cabin and washed their provisions away, leaving them with a ham and a couple of potatoes. The bulkhead of the cabin was buckled and the working boat on top of the after cabin was washed away.

Lake Huron’s waves battered the men of the *Sheadle* with such force that they fought against being swept overboard as they tried fruitlessly to shutter the windows of the ship. Two of the men stood throttling the engines, water drenching them as it cascaded through the skylights. “I do not think it ever happened before when these two men had to stand by these two positions constantly,” recalled Captain Lyons. The ship was so burdened by the waves that at times “her revolutions were decreased from 75 to 35 turns per minute.”

Having decided to follow in the footsteps of the *Charles S. Price* and head back for the mouth of the St. Clair River, McConkey was blindly navigating the *Regina* when he heard a thump, a dreaded noise that probably had his heart sinking to the pit of his stomach. He feared the ship had run aground. It had been nearly impossible in the storm to see where he was going and, with only a compass and his sailor’s intuition, the *Regina* had made her way into too-shallow water. Quickly, the wheelsman must have turned the boat into deeper seas, but the *Regina* was

already taking on water. The crew immediately began pumping the water intake out. In an act of desperation, McConkey gave the order to throw out anchor, hoping to save the steam pressure to work the bilge. The iron chains made their way to the bottom of Huron. Miraculously, it caught, and the *Regina*’s engine stopped.

In spite of the heroic attempts by the *Regina*’s twenty-man crew, the ship became quickly waterlogged. McConkey, one of the youngest captains on the Great Lakes, ordered the ship abandoned. He watched at least one of the lifeboats get off from the ship, heading toward shore with some of the *Regina*’s crew. In order to alert someone—anyone—to the lifeboat’s presence on the stormy waters, the ship’s whistle blew steady, a distress call still recognized on the Great Lakes today. People on shore reported hearing it for at least an hour, though they were helpless in the raging storm to do anything about it. His men safely deployed from the damaged vessel, McConkey sat alone on his ship and waited for the inevitable.

On the *J. H. Sheadle*, Lyons had his own set of problems. Depth sounder readings were cause for alarm. Unable to locate land or the Fort Gratiot light in the storm, he made the decision to turn the ship and head out to sea. A ship run aground in this kind of sea was doomed; waves would pound the ship to pieces. At 10:00 Sunday night, Lyons gave the order to turn the *Sheadle* north half east, aware that a shift of her cargo during the turn could mean





a rollover. The binnacle, a heavy stand for the ship's compass, broke loose during the turn and created a hazard for those in the pilothouse. By midnight on November 9, land measurements in Port Sanilac measured wind velocity exceeding 80 miles per hour—hurricane force. A ship off Harbor Beach in southern Lake Huron reported 90-mile-an-hour gusts.

Constant use of the *Sheadle's* deepsea lead during this foul weather made Captain Lyons fairly confident of his position. At 4:15 A.M., in the midst of hurricane force winds, he turned the ship again to keep it from running aground. This time, the rolling was so severe that the captain was lifted right off his feet. "Only by the greatest effort were the second Mate and myself able to hold onto the stanchions on the top house, our legs being parallel with the deck most of the time," he reported.

When the *Sheadle* turned once more a couple hours later, the wind had finally died down some, and the seas, though still rough, did not give the ship too much trouble. The storm had blown for nearly twenty-six hours. Exhausted and shaken, ship and crew headed toward Fort Gratiot and the mouth of the St. Clair River where they hoped to put thoughts of their harrowing experiences behind them. Instead, floating upside down in the water was a gruesome reminder of how their last shipping run could have turned sour.

In the eerie calm that followed the massive storm, Michiganians wondered at the extent of the damage this four-day storm caused. Streetcars were snowbound and telegraph and power services were disrupted. A casino in the Port Huron area was totally destroyed. But nothing was so disheartening as the thought of all the men that could be lost at sea. Quickly all eyes turned to the lakes in hopes that Michigan's sailors would return home safely.

It was not to happen. As lines of communication were repaired from one end of the state to the other, grim reports rolled in.

Near Port Frank, Ontario, Lake Huron began to give up its dead. Frozen bodies washed up onshore, some in lifeboats, some just spit out of the sea in life preservers emblazoned with their ship's names. With each new body came the solemn realization that yet another ship had been lost. An entire lifeboat came ashore with two bodies aboard, dead from exposure. Their preservers read, "*Regina*."

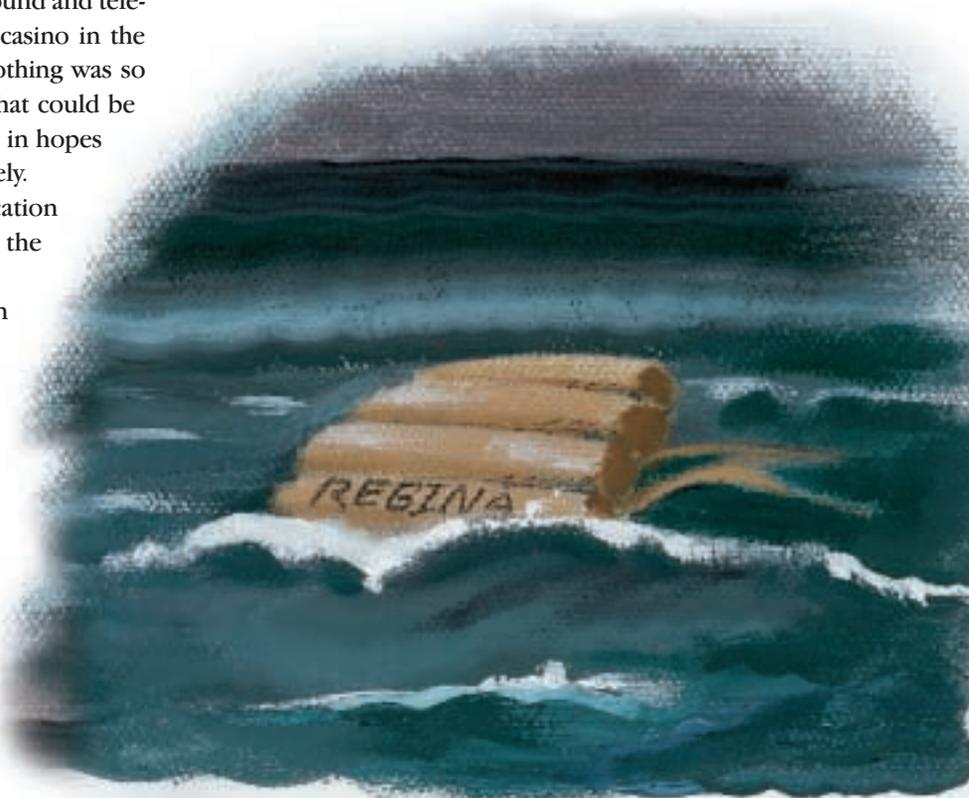
Oddly, bodies of men from the *Charles S. Price* were also washing up on shore,

and one was also reported as wearing a life preserver that said "*Regina*" as well. Other sailors were found from each of the ships, their bodies entwined as if they had clung to each other in their final agonizing moments. Had these two ships met? Had they collided? Speculation ran rampant as a makeshift morgue was created in a former furniture store in Thedford, Ontario, and the identification of victims began.

One man in Port Huron was breathing a sigh of relief. Milton Smith, whose feeling of foreboding made him leave the *Charles S. Price*, was suddenly confronted with the task of identifying the frozen and contorted bodies of his former shipmates. Even he speculated that the *Regina* and the *Price* collided before sinking, telling reporters of the *Port Huron Times-Herald* that he was certain that "something of a sudden nature" had occurred on the boat, as ship's steward Herbert Jones was found still clad in his apron, indicating he'd had to leave the ship in a hurry.

As attention was turned to the "mystery ship" floating upside down in the mouth of the St. Clair River, many speculated the one afloat was the *Regina*, and that another ship would be found directly underneath it as proof of the mid-storm collision. A total of seven freighters were reported missing, and this ship could have been any of them. The best diver in Detroit was brought in to solve the mystery.

William Baker was sent out on the salvage tug *Sport* before dawn on Saturday morning, November 15. An expert at handling the currents of the Detroit River, Baker





had his skills put to the test in Lake Huron's rough waters. At just after 6:30 A.M., he dove with high hopes of discovering the identity of the mystery ship.

Sediment was still astir from the storm and Baker could not see more than a foot or two in front of him. He felt down the sides of the ship for about twenty feet as he descended. "There was a round railing on the edge of the bulwarks and I went around that railing until I ran across her name," he later told reporters of the *Port Huron Times-Herald*. "There I stopped and took my time."

The ship was the *Charles S. Price*. Baker stayed down a bit longer to see if he could spot signs of a collision. "I was under the water in all about an hour and the length of the wreck that I investigated was about 48 feet of the starboard bow," Baker told the *Times-Herald*. "I had secured her name and also the fact that the boat had not been struck forward, that is at least not on the starboard side."

The *Price* continued to settle and is today on the bottom of Lake Huron. A salvage of the wreckage was never attempted. We do know, however, that there is no wreckage of another ship underneath it, and there is no sign that the *Price* collided with any other vessel.

The body of Captain McConkey washed ashore in August, 1914, near Lexington, Michigan, supporting the theory that he went down with his ship. The *Regina* itself was discovered in 1986, also overturned in about eighty feet of water between Port Sanilac and Lexington. She still rests there today, though items off the package freighter have been salvaged, including whiskey, champagne and jars of blueberries. A three-foot-long hole exists near the forward cargo hold, and her anchor is still lodged, the chain taught. Evidence shows that at least one lifeboat was launched, but there is no indication of any link between the *Regina* and the *Price*.

The mystery still remains as to how the crews of the two ships became intermingled as the bodies washed up on shore. One suggestion is the possibility that the *Price*, upon turning north at the foot of Lake Huron, actually spotted some of *Regina's* men in the lifeboat and tried a rescue attempt. In bringing the ship around to create a

kind of wake from which the men could be retrieved, the *Price* could have overturned, her own crew of twenty-eight suddenly thrown into the water where the "rescuees" in the *Regina* lifeboat suddenly became "rescuers."

Or it could be there's no mystery at all. "Historians have tended to debunk as myth the claim that the *Price's* chief engineer was found wearing a *Regina* life preserver," David

G. Brown wrote in his book *White Hurricane*. Because of looting and the general disorder in the temporary morgue, there is no way to determine with certainty who was wearing what when the bodies started washing ashore.

The *J. H. Sheadle* pulled into port at Erie, Pennsylvania, on November 12, having put the storm behind her. She was one of just two steamers on southern Lake Huron to survive this storm. In just four days, a dozen ships on the Great Lakes were lost with all hands. Another twenty-four boats were stranded, either in need of repairs to be restored to working order or declared a total loss. The 1913 Lake Carriers Association reported a final cost of hull and cargo to be \$4,782,900.

Even worse, the death toll was enormous. Because records were not

kept with a single agency, numbers vary from source to source. Reports range anywhere from 238 to 274 lives lost. Most bodies were never recovered and many of the bodies that washed ashore could not be positively identified.

On November 7, 1913 was the among the safest shipping seasons in recent Great Lakes history. By November 11, it was one of the deadliest on record. One four-day blow swept from western Lake Superior all the way across to Lake Erie, providing a gruesome reminder that nature is a factor in shipping that will not be controlled. Sailors are reminded of this every time they turn west to see a dark and ominous horizon on a cloudy November day. mh

STEPHANIE GILLET came upon a story about the Great Storm of 1913 while researching the shipwrecks of Thunder Bay for a travel article. A travel writer, theatrical reviewer and novelist, she resides in Ann Arbor with her husband.

* For a past article on the storm of 1913, visit www.michiganhistorymagazine.com

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