

The storm claimed the S.S. Regina and its crew of 25.

The night 12 ships vanished on the Great Lakes

By Stoddard White / *The Detroit News*

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If you were a bosun or a deckhand, you might string stout manila line or cables along slippery decks to protect your passage from one end to the other of a ship two city blocks long.

Sailors are relatively complacent. But there will be half-jocular, half-apprehensive talk this November about the 83rd anniversary of the Great Storm on the Great Lakes.

The weather was bitter that November in 1913. It cost the lives of 248 men and women and sank 12 freighters without trace.

From November 7-12 of that year there raged the greatest storm ever to strike the Lakes--the greatest storm in the history of inland navigation and one of the grimmest on record anywhere.



The front page of *The Detroit News* on Nov. 13, 1913, as the extent of the disaster became clear. The final toll was 248 lives lost.

Quick and Disastrous

As Detroit historian Frank Barcus says, the Lakes are "larger, more dangerous and with dirtier weather than many a sea better known." Storms spring up quickly and--partly because of the relative shallowness of the Lakes--they form waves of disastrous proportions.



Stanley G. Harrison, a retired ship's captain, reads the historical marker in Sanilac, Mich., telling of the great storm of 1913.

"Each autumn, it seems, the brutal forces of nature gather to remind men that the Lakes are unconquered," said Prentiss M. Brown.

The forces of nature's evil gathered in mighty congregation that week in November, 1913.

On Thursday, November 6, the weather report in The Detroit News forecast rain for Detroit and "moderate to brisk" winds for the Lakes.

Ships already were experiencing difficulty and by noon the next day the U.S. Weather Bureau had hoisted the sinister square red flags with black centers which mean storm. By night--when, of course, the flags were invisible--it had raised accompanying lanterns signifying a hurricane, a wind of more than 74 miles an hour.

On shore blizzards paralyzed traffic. Streetcars were stranded in drifts. Telephone, telegraph and power service through much of Michigan and western Ontario was disrupted.

Cleveland was buried for two days under 22 inches of snow, and around Lake Huron there were four-foot drifts. A park project in Chicago that took eight years to build was destroyed in eight hours, and the seas destroyed an enormous new breakwater at Milwaukee.

Topped by Horse Story

By November 7 the Weather Bureau was forecasting, through The News columns, "brisk to high winds."



Wayne Brusate of Marysville is shown with some of the artifacts he recovered in 1987 from the wreck of the S.S. Regina off Port Sanilac in Lake Huron. They include a metal file, a jar of blueberries and other small bottles.

Saturday's News, November 8, had a significant item at the bottom of the front page.

It told of the "sand steamer Mary" being blown aground in the St. Clair River during a gale. But it was only six lines of type, and was given less prominence than the story of a wagon driver arrested for gouging out a horse's eye with a currycomb.

Far back in that day's paper was a note of 65-mile winds which had "driven all shipping from the upper lakes."

Fury had been unleashed, but the world was slow in learning it.

Radio communications were all but unknown on the Lakes, and ships made known their whereabouts and condition only when in port or a canal or passing a reporting station. And, remember, the storm had knocked out phone and telegraph communication in remote areas.

The world could not know what was summed up later in a review by the Lake Carriers' Association.

"Storms ordinarily of that velocity do not last over four or five hours," the report said. "But this raged for 16 hours continuously at an average velocity of 60 miles per hour, with frequent spurts of 70 and over." (Weather Bureau records show gusts of 80 at Buffalo -- a true hurricane.)

Shipmasters testified that they ran through waves at least 35 feet high. These seas were considerably shorter and more frequent than the waves formed by an ordinary gale.

In the midst of the storm, the wind on Lake Huron swung from northwest to northeast so that it frequently blew one way while the sea ran in the opposite direction. These forces subjected the ships to what the association called "incredible punishment."



**80-year-old bottles of Scotch whiskey
were recovered from the Regina.**

Incredible, indeed--the U.S. Life-saving Service later tabulated the disaster at 248 lives lost and 71 vessels lost or damaged sufficiently to require official notation.

So poor were communications that even on Monday, November 10, few had realized "Black Sunday" on the water.

The News on the 10th reported the storm had been critical and had "demoralized traffic from the Soo to New York." Even the Twentieth Century Limited had been stalled by snowdrifts.

But the Lakes, the paper reported only:

"Over a dozen lake steamers are reported ashore...but so far as is known no lives have been lost...none of the vessels is in great danger."

By Tuesday, November 11, the storm had abated "much to the joy of the masters and sailors of the steamers delayed," the paper said.

But the linemen had been restoring communications, and the full terror of what had happened on the Inland Seas began to reach the outer world. This was no ordinary November storm. Several of the ships sunk or pounded to pieces had been modern steel bulk freighters, 400 to 550 feet in length and up to nearly 8,000 gross tons.

The great three-year old American ship, the Charles S. Price, upside down and therefore, unidentifiable, floated near Port Huron for ten days before she went to the bottom with her dead.

The Price and the Regina were upbound a few miles from each other in lower Lake Huron on Sunday when they were last seen under steam. The hurricane was so furious, however, that it turned the Price around, so at their moment of loss, they were going in opposite directions.



Sylvan Humphrey, vice-president of Freedom Marine Ltd. of Vancouver, B.C., holds the compass from the Regina he recovered in 1988.

The Regina, last seen about 15 miles south of Harbor Beach, vanished without a trace.

The body of Chief Engineer, John Groundwater, of the Price, washed ashore and was taken to a provisional morgue at Thedford, Ontario, near Sarnia, and identified by a sailor who had left the Price just before the storm.

The body of the Price's engineer was wrapped in a life preserver from the Regina. Other bodies of men from the Price also wore life belts marked "Regina." But no Regina men were ever found with life belts from the Price. No one has ever found out why. Somehow, in the hurricane and blizzard, the crews must have met and intermingled on their way to a quick death in the freezing water.

Diver Investigates

Two men--one from each ship--washed ashore dead and frozen, their arms about each other.

Did the ships collide? A diver found no sign of collision, but he was not able to examine the whole vessel before, ten days later, the last air escaped from the hull-turned-turtle and the Price went to the bottom.

The body of the Price's steward, Herbert Jones, washed ashore with his cook's apron still on as though he had just started or finished preparing a meal. Therefore, it is assumed the disaster happened fast. Jones' wife was his helper, as was common in those days, but apparently he had no

time to assist her.


There was no reason to believe that the Price's crew had been picked up by the Regina--which would account for the life belts--because the two ships had been about 15 miles apart when last seen.

The suggestion has been offered that men of the Regina saw the Price turned turtle; that their ship ran to assistance; that the Regina's crew hurled life belts to the aid of the Price's men and then their ship was overcome in her turn.

No one knows. For that matter, for a week, no one knew the name of the great hulk that floated bottom up, every visible part of her coated with ice.

Finally, six days after she was discovered, William Baker, a professional diver from Detroit, managed to climb down the side far enough to cling to a railing and read the name on the hull.

He read it twice, he said, and then read it again. He wanted the widows, and the orphans and the owners, to be sure. She was the Charles S. Price.



Ship/Date	Location	Casualties
General Slocum June 15, 1904	East River, New York City	1,030 killed
Titanic April 14-15, 1912	North Atlantic Ocean	1,503 killed
Kichemaru Sept. 26, 1912	Japanese Coast	estimated 1,000 killed
Empress of Ireland May 29, 1914	St. Lawrence River	1,014 killed
Lusitania May 7, 1915	Irish Coast	1,198 killed
Provence Feb. 26, 1916	Mediterranean Sea	3,100 killed
Hsin Yu Aug. 29, 1916	Chinese Coast	estimated 1,000 killed
Mont Blanc and Imo Dec. 6, 1917	Halifax Harbor, Nova Scotia	1,600 killed
Hong Kong March 18, 1921	South China Sea	1,000 killed
Kiangya Dec. 3, 1948	South of Shanghai, China	1,100 killed
Toya Maru Sept. 26, 1954	Japanese Coast	1,172 killed
Dona Paz and Victor Dec. 20, 1987	Marinduque Channel, Philippines	estimated 1,480 killed

UPI Graphic

A sailor's snapshot of the overturned vessel--looking like a whale about to spout--covered most of the front page of the November 13 News.

It was a poignant photograph. Never before had a steel steamer turned completely over and floated, bottom up.

On Saturday, November 15, the fate of the Price, identified, was first made known to the world, and the News printed diver Baker's own account of what he had found.

Inside the paper were numerous stories of heroism and adventure, the many letters received by

grateful wives--most of the letters written while ships were on the rocks and delayed until a tug could come and get them to a post office.

Only two messages from the dying ships ever got through. The oddest was written in indelible pencil on a door panel of Lightship 82 which was lost near Buffalo.

Poignant Notes

Her master was Captain Hugh M. Williams, of Onekama, Michigan, who had sailed out of Manistee for 15 years. It was addressed to his wife in Manistee, and floated ashore in Buffalo Harbor: "Goodby, Nellie. Ship is breaking up fast. WILLIAMS."

The other message, undated, was found in a bottle five miles from Pentwater, Mich., more than a week after the storm. It came from Chris Keenan, United States Marshal in custody of a barge which had been abandoned in distress by a tug which was towing it. It said:

"Dear Wife and Children, We were left up here in Lake Michigan by McKinnon, captain (of the) James H. Martin, tug at anchor. He went away and never said goodbye or anything to us. Lost one man yesterday. We have been out in the storm 40 hours. Goodbye, dear ones. I might see you in Heaven. Pray for me. Chris. K.

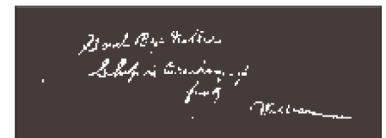
"P.S. I felt so bad I had another man write for me. Goodbye Forever."

When a great ship dies, her sisters lower their flags to half mast. Barcus writes the epitaph: "Somber and silent, wreathed in mist, a long procession of more than one hundred vessels passed Detroit ten days after that fateful Sunday.

"From the rigging of each hung, limp and damp, an American flag at half mast.

"It was a mute tribute to the victims of the storm. No planned demonstration could have equaled it. Multitudes on the shore instinctively bared their heads as they passed, so impressive was their mourning."

This story adapted from article in The Detroit News dated November 6, 1960 by Stoddard White. Vivian Baulch, Pat Zacharias, Jenny Nolan and Kay Houston contributed to this chapter.



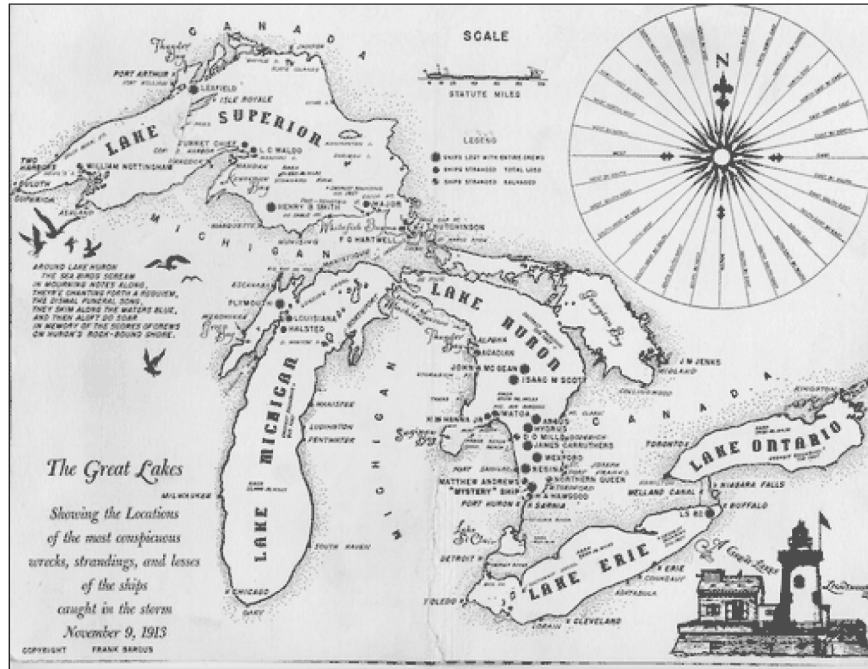
Lightship 82 Captain Hugh M. Williams, of Onekama, Michigan, left this message on a door panel to his wife in Manistee: "Goodby, Nellie. Ship is breaking up fast. WILLIAMS." It floated ashore in Buffalo Harbor.



On Tuesday, Nov. 11, 1913 the horror began to become clear

Ships Destroyed:

- Argus**, 436 feet long, 24 dead
- Charles S. Price**, 524 feet long, 28 dead
- Halsted** (barge), 191 feet long, 0 dead
- H. B. Smith**, 545 feet long, 23 dead
- Howard M. Hanna, Jr.**, 500 feet long, 0 dead
- Hydrus**, 436 feet long, 24 dead
- Isaac M. Scott**, 524 feet long, 28 dead
- James Carruthers**, 550 feet long, 24 dead
- John A. McGean**, 452 feet long, 23 dead
- L. C. Waldo**, 472 feet long, 0 dead
- Leafield**, 269 feet long, 18 dead
- Lightship 82**, 105 feet long, 6 dead
- Louisiana**, 287 feet long, 0 dead
- Major**, 303 feet long, 0 dead
- Matoa**, 310 feet long, 0 dead
- Plymouth** (barge), 225 feet long, 7 dead
- Regina**, 269 feet long, 25 dead
- Turret Chief**, 273 feet long, 0 dead
- Wexford**, 270 feet long, 18 dead



Locations of the ships caught in the storm of Nov. 9, 1913.

Source: [Detroit News Archives](#)