



Photo courtesy Richard J. Wright

Ill-fated car ferry *Milwaukee*, vanished with all hands on Lake Michigan, October 22, 1929.

A Matter of Professional Pride

By Dwight Boyer

As the final days of 1929 ticked relentlessly toward the end of another calendar milestone, a somewhat harassed gentleman, Dickerson N. Hoover, was spending long hours at his desk in Washington. Mr. Hoover, Supervising Inspector General of the Steamboat Inspection Service, was making out reports. A few blocks away, Mr. Hoover's brother, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the United States Department of Justice, was probably making out reports, too. His were of other matters and far more likely to arouse comment in the newspapers.

Mr. Dickerson N. Hoover's reports were directed to the Hon. Robert P. Lament, Secretary of Commerce, under whose department the Steamboat Inspection Service functioned. It was the continuing task of Mr. Hoover's many men in the several districts of the service regularly to inspect all United States flag commercial vessels as to their general seaworthiness, machinery, boilers, and safety-at-sea requirements as specified by federal law. Theirs was the responsibility of verifying that every such vessel was in proper condition to meet and survive whatever came in the way of hazards at sea, and to avoid as many as possible by holding to inflexible standards of maintenance and repair. When a ship came to grief, despite their meticulous examinations, their subsequent investigations were as thorough and painstaking as the periodic inspections of the ship had been.

Altogether, 1929 had been a rather deplorable year, particularly the months of September and October on Lake Michigan. First, there had been the poor old *Andaste* and her luckless crew,

missing over three months now, with not a soul to tell where or why she had gone down. Then came the case of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad's big car ferry, Milwaukee, lost with her entire crew of forty-seven, on the wild night of October twenty-second. Only a few nights later came the strange bit of business of the passenger and package freighter, Wisconsin, Chicago to Milwaukee, foundering off Kenosha. Like the Milwaukee she had departed her berth in northeast gale warnings and when only fifteen miles from Kenosha began to transmit wireless signals for help. The Wisconsin was scarcely on the bottom, when the Senator, a long steamer loaded with automobiles, groping through fog off Port Washington, was rammed and sunk by a big bulk carrier, the Marquette.

Mr. Hoover would undoubtedly have given a pretty penny to have had Captain Robert McKay of the Milwaukee and Captain Dougal Morrison of the Wisconsin on hand to answer some rather embarrassing questions. But both had gone down with their ships and he could do little but ponder on the reasons and, perhaps, the tensions and pressures that had influenced their decisions to leave port when every factor of weather, let alone common sense, should have ruled against it. This was particularly true in the case of the Milwaukee and the man who ruled her pilothouse. Beginning the report on the Milwaukee was simple:

Investigated and find that the steamer Milwaukee left the port of Milwaukee at 3 P.M. October 22, 1929, and has never returned to this or any other port. . . . Like most marine men of responsibility and authority Mr. Hoover was familiar with the car-ferry and package-freight business and the necessity for maintaining schedules when- ever possible. Still, there are times when the line of distinction between courage and foolhardiness is a thin and tenuous one. Perhaps men in his position may have felt that both skippers had gone beyond that line, far beyond.

The car-ferry operations on Lake Michigan were, in 1929, as they are today, a unique phase of American rail transportation. Between loading and unloading terminals on each side of the lake, three great railroads employed fleets of car ferries to shuttle freight cars across the lake. They were special ships—big, powerful, and broad-beamed. It is a demanding service for both ships and crews, and the result is a sort of esprit de corps that sets the car-ferry men apart. Unlike the iron-ore, coal, grain, and package-freight vessels, the sturdy car ferries operate the year round. Often beset by fields of wind-driven ice and lashed by wintry gales, they carry on in what approximates Arctic navigation. Obviously, too, the cargoes of railroad rolling stock require special safety measures to hold the cars immobile, even while the ships themselves are pitching and rolling atrociously. A system of big jacks, clamps, blocks, and heavy chains lock the cars securely on the four sets of tracks. These restraining devices are carefully attended to during each voyage because the mental picture of what could happen if the cars broke loose is forever in the minds of the car-ferry men.

Captain Robert McKay was a somewhat unusual individual. "Captain Bob"—or "Heavy Weather" McKay, as he was known in Grand Haven—had arrived in that city as a youthful emigrant from the Orkney Islands, with a Scots burr that he never lost. He sailed for years with Captain George Robertson and Captain Thomas Trail, two veteran Scottish skippers who treated him as a son. Under their tutelage and with his own resolute determination he held every rank but that of captain. Although obviously qualified he was reluctant to take out his master's papers, because he felt a vague premonition of evil and tragedy he could not overcome. This he once confided to a friend who later remembered the great pride he had exhibited when he finally passed the examination. Once, when first mate on the old Naomi, he was a hero. When the ship caught fire out on the lake, it was Robert McKay whose calm orders prevented panic and soothed the passengers while the lifeboats were being launched. He was definitely a man of dual personality.

Ashore in his favorite haunt, William Grunst's cigar store in Grand Haven, he was the picture of affability, yarning by the hour with old sailors and friends. Aboard his ship with the manifold responsibilities of his office he was another person. "Rough, tough, and gruff," was the way a one-time shipmate put it. And although all the mates on the Milwaukee had their master's papers, the captain was not the kind of man to welcome advice or counsel. Publicity was a thing he abhorred. On the occasion of his promotion and transfer to the Milwaukee, when the officers and crew of his former command presented him with a watch at an impromptu festive gathering, he stormed out of his cabin in a rage, driving off a woman reporter who had assumed she was about to chronicle a pleasant and touching presentation.

This was the man who, at noon on October twenty-second, had brought his ship into Milwaukee after a wild crossing from Grand Haven. Lake Michigan was being churned by a gale from the north that was to break all local records for continuity and velocity of wind. The enormous seas marched the length of the lake to their inevitable destiny with land and when they found it they left a trail of wreckage unparalleled even by the "big blow" of 1913. At South Haven, St. Joseph, and Benton Harbor, Michigan, piers and docks were swept away, small craft by the score were demolished, and beach cottages reduced to kindling. At Gary and Michigan City, Indiana, luxury beach homes along the dunes were swept away, and hundreds of families fled inland. Chicago's expansive shoreline boulevard was under water, adjacent parks were obliterated, and as far north as Milwaukee, along the Wisconsin shore, boathouses were dashed to pieces, roads were washed away, trees were ripped up and several 1300-ton sections of a new concrete breakwater broke up under the pounding of the seas. C. H. Hubbard, superintendent of the 12th Lighthouse District, was kept busy tabulating telephoned reports of damage to the district's installations. It was apparent that several lighthouses and Coast Guard stations, undermined by water and buffeted by wind and seas, would have to be rebuilt.

Under these conditions Captain McKay brought his ship smartly into its dock as a matter of course. Headed the other way, the Grand Trunk car ferry. Grand Haven, left Milwaukee at two A.M. on the twenty-second and arrived safely at Grand Haven at five P.M. the same day, taking fifteen hours for a trip which, under normal sailing conditions, took only six. Her captain reported a very hard passage with mountainous seas . . . seas that grew in height as the gale winds held from the north.

By three o'clock on the afternoon of the twenty-second the Milwaukee's car deck had been cleared of its inbound cargo, and a string of twenty-five eastbound cars, carefully broken up into "cuts" of two or three cars, was shunted into her cavernous four-track hold or car deck. There, while the experienced crew applied the restraining jacks, clamps, and chains. Purser A. R. Sadon checked the identifying numbers on the cars loaded and noted their contents on his manifest. It was broken down as two cars of lumber, three cars of barley, seven cars of feed, two cars of canned peas, one car of grits, one car of corn, three cars of salt, one car of butter, one car of veneer, two cars of bathtubs, one car of cheese, and one car of automobiles. For insurance purposes the contents were valued at \$100,000, the box cars at \$63,500.

The gale had reached such a crest of fury by the time loading was completed and the car-ferry's stern gate lowered that many of the crew and all of the shore gang assumed, without giving the matter a second thought, that the Milwaukee would stay at her dock until the weather moderated. Three of the crew were so sure of this that they had taken a streetcar to downtown Milwaukee to attend a movie.

In the pilothouse it was another matter. Captain McKay had given no indication of reluctance to sail, nor had any of the mates ventured to offer an opinion or ascertain his intentions. It may have

been that he considered his ship to be more than equal to the storm then raging and growing in intensity. On the other hand he had been ignoring weather conditions for so long, or at least paying slight heed to them, that he may never have considered waiting for the wind and seas to abate. Or it may be, as was later rumored, that the choice was not altogether his, even though in the final analysis it is the captain's prerogative to make the decision, or should be, since he bears the ultimate responsibility. In any event, promptly at three o'clock that fateful afternoon he signaled the engine-room to "stand by," ordered the hawsers cast off, rang for "half speed ahead" and maneuvered his ship from the dock. To some of the people in the railroad's trackside office and others working nearby, the ship's departure whistle brought incredulous expressions . . . complete disbelief in what their ears told them was happening. Yet, there it was, the big, black bulk of the Milwaukee lining up on a course that would take her through the harbor piers in a matter of minutes!

Many noted, significantly, that in their adjacent loading slips neither of the car ferries of the Pere Marquette line, one of which had arrived before the Milwaukee and another that had docked later, were making any attempt to leave port. Both had suffered hard passages inbound and wanted no more of Lake Michigan in her present mood.

Besides the three light-hearted crewmen who had seen fit to take in a movie, there were others, who, for one reason or another, were not at their appointed posts when the Milwaukee's engine-order telegraph jumped to "stand by." Thomas McNello, an oiler, was in Grand Haven taking a three-day relief break; his father, Philip, was aboard as a coal passer. Second Mate Elmer Hahn and his fiancée, Miss Nellie Gould, had chosen that date for their wedding. Both were in Milwaukee receiving the congratulations of friends and relatives when the ship sailed. In Milwaukee, too, safely abed in St. Mary's Hospital, was Joseph Shuntick, second assistant engineer.

The Milwaukee, already wallowing in the chop just inside the piers, passed within five hundred feet of the Coast Guard tower, where the Weather Bureau's northeast storm-signal flags had been stretched taut in the wind since early morning. Intermittent rain squalls were being recorded all along the Wisconsin shoreline. The last person to see her was the captain of the U.S. Lightship 95, stationed three miles due east of the Milwaukee harbor entrance. He logged her as passing to the north of the lightship, "pitching and rolling heavily." He noted, too, that she remained in view for about ten minutes until a combination of rain, mist, and sea took her forever from the sight of mortal man. At that time she was still on a typical "Heavy Weather" McKay course—due east instead of holding a little to the north, where his ship would have met the seas at a more favorable angle instead of exposing her high profile to them and sliding into successive troughs.

The hours following the Milwaukee's last sighting were among the most tempestuous in the lake's history, something that had to be experienced to be believed. In the dark of night the wind tore the crests from the tops of malevolent seas that had been building for a full day. Masthead lights of the unfortunate vessels sore beset in the storm described horrifying arcs. Black mountains of water climbed aboard to do their mischief every few seconds, pounding at hatches and thundering against deckhouses and cabin bulkheads. Down below the firemen were hard put to maintain footing in the fireholds. Loose coal, carpets of it, slid back and forth on the steel floor with every roll of the ship. This they disregarded although it was a constant peril, working desperately in the full knowledge that steam and steam alone would give their vessel enough power to keep out of the troughs of those murderous seas.

The package freighter Delos W. Cooke had unwittingly left Chicago before the storm warnings were hoisted, expecting nothing more than the usual nasty seas that are so typical of Lake Michigan

in the fall. Twenty-seven hours later she was back in Chicago, badly battered after a fruitless attempt to beat her way up the lake.

"We just took a long, terrible ride for nothing," recalls Willis A. Bruso, the Cooke's wheelsman and now a captain in the United States Coast Guard.

Interlake Steamship's 600-foot steamer, Robert Hobson, only two years out of her builder's yard, left Indiana Harbor at 9:10 P.M. on the twenty-first. She had bucked the seas up the lake to a point about fourteen miles abreast of Ludington and was making relatively good progress when her master discovered that she was "working" so much that rivets were loosening and shearing, and deck plates were beginning to crack. He ordered her turned immediately and finally put in at South Chicago, almost in sinking condition. A survey showed 25,500 rivets to be renewed and several plates to be replaced. The bill was estimated at \$35,000.

Not far away when the Hobson swung around was another big steamer, the Amasa Stone, downbound and running before the wind and sea with 10,000 tons of coal in her holds. Even so, she suffered heavy damage from seas that the master reported equal to those he had experienced in the big 1913 storm.

No particular apprehension or fear was felt for the safety of the Milwaukee, even when she became many hours overdue at Grand Haven. It is customary in severe weather for the car ferries to beat back and forth or up and down the lake, waiting for a lessening of the winds and seas to make their often tricky approaches to the harbor piers. Oiler McNello, on his three-day break, recalled a storm in which the Milwaukee steamed for thirty-eight hours in a full gale while the seas boarded her directly over the bow and shot spray over her twin smokestacks.

Only when the ship became thirty-six hours overdue was serious alarm expressed and this partly because another Grand Trunk car ferry, the Grand Rapids, departing Milwaukee four hours after the missing vessel, had safely arrived at her dock but had seen nothing of the Milwaukee. This could be accounted for, marine men said, because the Grand Rapids was newer, larger, and faster than the Milwaukee and would not have to make as many concessions to the gale. Captain McKay, they concluded, had finally altered his course and had steamed far up the lake, meeting the seas head on while waiting for them to abate. In fact, a report that a vessel had been sighted in shelter behind Beaver Island was accepted as evidence that "Heavy Weather" McKay had at last sought some measure of relief from his old adversary, the storm.

The seas had subsided to a gentle chop by the morning of the twenty-fourth. Captain Ray Hayward of the steamer, Colonel, downbound off Racine, was walking aft to the galley with nothing more important on his mind than breakfast when he was hailed from the bridge.

"Something in the water over there. Captain," called the second mate, pointing toward the distant Wisconsin shore.

Hayward and the mate looked through their binoculars at a wide field of flotsam that danced in the sea.

"Hard starboard, take us closer," Captain Hayward ordered the wheelman.

When the Colonel eased slowly up to the wreckage they found mattresses, furniture, and quantities of wood that had apparently once been part of a deckhouse or cabin. It was painted white, but this meant little since it was a common color on ships. But the Milwaukee was missing and her upperworks were white. With ropes and pike poles, the Colonel's crewmen recovered much of the wood but could find no identifying marks linking it positively to the car ferry.

It was grim news at Milwaukee. Captain Charles McLaren, Grand Trunk Western Railroad's marine superintendent, though he had professed optimism all along, immediately appealed to the

Kohler Aircraft Corporation to have one of their planes fly over the wreckage to see if the pilots could make out anything that would establish the wreckage as that of the car ferry.

The Kohler pilots did more than that. Although they could not find the wreckage Captain Hayward had reported, they crisscrossed the lake on a search pattern, going far to the north where Captain McKay would most likely have taken his vessel, assuming that he had finally bowed to the gale's will.

Out from the harbors of Racine, Milwaukee, South Haven, Holland, Grand Haven, and St. Joseph, fleets of Coast Guard search boats, alerted after the Colonel's find, began a systematic scouring of the lake. The three other Grand Trunk ferries continued their normal sailings, but mounted extra watchmen to look for wreckage. Superintendent McLaren was still hopeful, even though the vessel sighted off Beaver Island proved not to be the missing Milwaukee. The ship was aground and identified as a package freighter with a similar profile.

All doubts as to the big car-ferry's fate vanished the next morning with the finding of the bodies of two of her crew off Kenosha. Both had on life preservers marked "S.S. MILWAUKEE." The watch of one had stopped at 9:45, a fact that was later deemed important. Later in the day the Steel Chemist, out of Chicago discovered two more dead sailors, while the Albert Gary picked up one farther out in the lake. At dusk a Coast Guard boat recovered another pair. The next day a Coast Guard crew from St. Joseph, Michigan, under Captain Samuel Carlson, found one of the Milwaukee's lifeboats bobbing in a welter of wreckage. It contained four dead crewmen. Three were wearing life preservers, and the fourth, wheelman Arnold Moran, was huddled under a canvas tarpaulin. All had apparently died of exposure and exhaustion. Off Holland, Michigan, floating serenely near the shore, the Coast Guardsmen found another lifeboat. It was empty, and its canvas covering was still secured and taut, indicating that none of the crew had attempted to launch it. Inside, all the required equipment was safely stowed . . . flares, rudder, food, water, and oars.

Still later, on October twenty-seventh, as the search continued, surfman Francis R. Deto of the South Haven station was among a group investigating wreckage washed ashore. Another lifeboat. No. 3, was resting on the beach intact and obviously unused by the Milwaukee's crew. Also floating nearby was a pike pole and three life preservers. Surfman Deto spotted another object tumbling in the light surf. It was the ship's message case and inside was a note! It said:

S. S. Milwaukee, October 22, '29 8:30 P.M. The ship is making water fast. We have turned around and headed for Milwaukee. Pumps are working but sea gate is bent in and can't keep the water out. Flicker is flooded. Seas are tremendous. Things look bad. Crew roll is about the same as on the last pay day. [signed] A. R. SADON, Purser

The message was written on the official printed stationery of the Grand Trunk car ferries; the handwriting, according to Grand Haven people who knew him, was definitely that of Sadon.

The "flicker," mentioned by the purser, is seaman's language for their sleeping and living-quarters compartment. On the Milwaukee, it was under the car deck just aft of the boiler and engine rooms.

Tragedy often brings to the surface the unaccountable mental quirks that drive sensation seekers to strange and cruel actions. In the wake of the discovery of Purser Sadon's message came two more, both in bottles found on the beach.

The first, found not far from Muskegon, said:

This is the worst storm I have ever seen. Can't stay up much longer. Hole in the side of the boat. [signed] McKay

Mrs. McKay examined the note carefully but could not verify it as the captain's writing or signature. Neither could Marine Superintendent Captain McLaren who was familiar

with the handwriting of the Milwaukee's commander.

Another note, picked up near Holland, read:

Whoever finds this be sure and write. It is rather rough today. It keeps me busy hanging on, let alone trying to write.

Unsigned, it was dated September 10, 1929. Coast Guard officials classified it as a belated hoax relating to the disappearance of the Andaste.

Back in Milwaukee, when it became certain that a major Great Lakes disaster had taken place. Captain William A. Collins, head of the local Steamboat Inspection Service, announced that a complete investigation of the car-ferry's loss would get underway immediately.

Like most marine men, and even those who had no direct connection with the lake shipping industry. Captain Collins had noted that the Grand Trunk vessels continued to sail, even when the weather "outside" became so boisterous other ships stayed in port.

The masters of the Pere Marquette ships who had wisely stayed in port were interviewed and questioned about their reasons; their replies were almost identical: "On account of the weather" . . . "Too rough for us out there."

"We want to find out," Captain Collins told reporters, "if the sinking of the vessel was due to negligence of those who ordered the ship to clear port in the face of strong warnings, or if the manner of handling the ship was contributory to the tragedy."

The Grand Trunk commodore and marine superintendent, Captain McLaren, said his company welcomed any investigation that might be made into the unfortunate affair. "My company," he stated, "would not knowingly take any risks, either with the lives of its employees or with its property."

The task of the inspectors was not an easy one. It was tedious, time-consuming, and involved delving into personal and unpleasant areas. Still, their own reputations, in a sense, were at stake. They were the ones who had attested to the vessel's fitness for sea. But the certificate of seaworthiness was granted only after they had prowled through the dank double bottoms, crawled around her boiler casings, sounded her hull plates, tapped her rivets, observed her engines, tested the boiler tubes, operated her steering engine and rudder, and checked all her life-saving gear. They were, in effect, judge and jury in determining whether or not a vessel met the stringent requirements as set by federal law.

Many things could have happened to the Milwaukee as she pitched and rolled, and many of these contingencies came to the minds of the inspectors. First was her cargo. Had all the restraining gear failed under punishment it had never been subjected to before? Had the cars broken loose to plunge to and fro, and becoming derailed, piled up on one side of the ship? It was not beyond supposition to picture them crashing against the side of the ship, tearing her plates or even plunging through the hull into the sea. And there was always the question of a boiler failure or engine breakdown that would cause the ship to lose all motive power and thus fall, helpless, into the troughs of towering seas that would crash over her stern gate and quickly overwhelm her. Perhaps the steering engine had failed at a crucial time. It would obviously have been under great stress. And how about the flooded flicker mentioned by Purser Sadon? Only a thin bulkhead separated the flicker, which was above and just aft of the boiler and engine rooms. It was not difficult to imagine that bulkhead giving way to flood both. Either dread event, or a combination of several, could have sent her down. Or had the difficult Captain McKay simply expected of his ship what she could not give?

In their own office the inspectors hauled out the complete dossier on the vanished ship and poured over it with the attention to detail a doctor might give the case history of a seriously ill patient. In this case the patient was in absentia, so to speak, although various documents attested that her history began with her "birth" in 1903, in Cleveland, as a twin-screw vessel of 338 feet and a gross tonnage of 2933.

The Milwaukee's record showed that she had been inspected and certificated on June 8, 1929, by Captain Henry Erichsen, assistant inspector of hulls, and Abraham Auld, assistant inspector of boilers. She was reinspected by the Grand Haven inspectors on August 14, the report of which showed that the vessel and her equipment had been in good condition, with the exception of one broken deadlight glass on the starboard side of the flicker. This was ordered renewed. Captain McKay later told the inspectors that this had been done, and they, apparently, took his word for it. Prior to the 1929 inspections the records showed that she had been drydocked at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, on three separate occasions: in June of 1926, in May of 1927, and in March of 1928. During these periods the Grand Trunk people had expended \$33,532.65 for necessary repairs to hull, rudder, steering gear, and propellers.

The message signed by Purser Sadon, and further checked with samples of his handwriting in the Grand Trunk offices, has already established that the flicker was filled with water from an undetermined leakage, that the vessel had turned around and that the stern or sea gate had been bent in, allowing the seas to roam the car deck. Since his tragic account was written at 8:30 P.M., and the watch on the first body found had stopped at 9:45, it was concluded that the Milwaukee must have been afloat for approximately an hour and fifteen minutes after the purser had thrown the message case overboard.

Captain Owen D. Gallagher of the car ferry Grand Haven, when questioned, had his own theory. "Well, of course, my opinion is that, heading into that awful sea, she was filling herself over the stern. Captain McKay, probably knowing that he had to do something to avoid this, ventured to turn around. The stern swinging around against a heavy sea probably carried the sea gate away."

The inspectors agreed that Captain Gallagher's statement, in view of his long experience, was a reasonable one.

There had been ugly but persistent rumors that Captain McKay was overly fond of spirits. The inspectors, after talking to many of his friends and associates, found this to be absolutely untrue.

The inspectors were interested, too, in the vague implications that the masters of the Grand Trunk car ferries sometimes did not sail of their own free will and accord, and that there was an indirect desire on the part of the marine superintendent to have them go out in all kinds of weather. This was vehemently denied by Captain McLaren and could not be proved by the inspectors. Indeed, the shipmasters interviewed indicated their resentment of Captain McLaren's wiring and telephoning them about the weather and the movement of other steamers. The inspectors, however, felt it within the duties of a prudent and conscientious manager to keep his captains advised as to weather and other pertinent conditions.

It was the unanimous feeling of the Milwaukee inspectors that "stress of weather" was the cause of the car ferry's foundering and not any particular structural weakness that might have escaped notice. In this they had ample proof of the severity of the gale in damage and casualty records from other ships that had been at sea that terrible night. The captains of the steamers Neptune, J. J. Block, James E. Davidson, and the W. D. Calverly Jr.— the smallest 346 feet in length and the largest 604 feet—all reported heavy storm damage. The William F. Snyder Jr., a 590-foot vessel had to go into dry-dock immediately for renewal of 50,000 rivets in deck stringers and shear strakes.

Of particular concern, although the car ferries were known to be rugged, well-constructed boats, was the evidence contained in Purser Sadon's note, particularly the three-word sentence, "Flicker is flooded."

How did the flicker become flooded? There were watertight closures to keep any seas that reached her car deck from finding their way into the ship's compartments. Sometime during the storm, as the hull was bent and twisted in the pitching and rolling, something had happened to destroy the watertight integrity of the lower compartments, particularly the flicker. The inspectors and others were inclined to place the blame on the scuttle hatches. They were round, manhole like openings that permitted access to the after spaces of the Milwaukee for inspection of her shaft couplings and bearings. The coverings were of steel as was the deck itself and were held secure by wedging-action "dogs" that supposedly and under ordinary conditions would have sealed off any water that might wash over the stern. But conditions on the night of October 22 were far from ordinary. It took little imagination to envision the tormented car deck twisting in the throes of more stress and strain than it had ever before been subjected to. Flexing and bending as the seas mauled the car ferry, the scuttle hatches probably popped loose only to be swept away by succeeding seas; this could have been the coup de grace that finished her.

Those with long memories could recall the somewhat mysterious circumstances under which the Milwaukee's sister ship, the Pere Marquette No. 18, was lost in a storm on September 9, 1910. Like the vanished Milwaukee, she had gone down far out in the lake after filling from the stern. The owners of the Pere Marquette No. 18, however, had wisely equipped her with wireless, and a distress call quickly brought help from another vessel of the same line. Even so, there was a heavy loss of life, although none of those rescued could explain by what means the water had gained access to the after compartments. Unlike the Milwaukee, the Pere Marquette No. 18 had no stern gate, but with the Milwaukee's bent in, as Purser Sadon reported, she would have been in much the same position. In fact, after the last tragic message was written, there was every possibility that it had been carried away altogether.

One inspector commented in writing to a superior:

It is to be borne in mind in the use of the car ferries that they are probably being loaded more deeply than years ago when they first came out, due to the fact that the cars are bigger and heavier than they were then. There is less freeboard and there is no law or authority that this service possesses with reference to indicating what the freeboard shall be on the Great Lakes. The sea gate is provided for the purpose of breaking the force of the sea as it comes on board the stern in rough weather, but there is some question in my mind as to whether the sea gate as at present used on vessels of this type is properly located. Here we have a case of the sea gate bent in and undoubtedly the water that came aboard made its way forward and got down below through the hatches. This would explain what the purser meant by stating that the flicker, which is aft, was flooded. If the sea gate, instead of being so far aft, was constructed farther inboard, it is possible that even though the seas boarded the vessel on the stern, the water would not be able to make its way forward upon the car deck . . . this could be done with the stern end of car ferries closed in by a full gate of strength equal to the ship's superstructure and no openings in the car deck aft of this enclosure.

These and many more things were being considered by Mr. Hoover in his report to the Secretary of Commerce, the Hon. Robert P. Lament. Among his recommendations to prevent a repetition of the tragic loss of a ship and its entire crew, he wrote:

I recommend that consideration (insofar as the authority of the board of supervising inspectors will permit) be given to the matter of the requirements of the Wireless Ship Act.

Of the lessons to be learned from this disaster, one stands out clear, and that is the value of radio communication . . . we do believe that had radio communication been available from the Milwaukee, earlier search could have been made with the possibility of saving life ... as it was, the first signs of wreckage was not discovered until the morning of October twenty-fourth, approximately 30 to 36 hours after the Milwaukee sank, and even then it was not known that the wreckage was from the Milwaukee . . . the loss of this boat shows the necessity of radio and particularly of the ability of sending messages from the ship.

Mr. Hoover was quite critical of Captain McKay and was obviously not completely convinced that the matter of whether to sail or not to sail was entirely in the hands of the car-ferry skippers.

It is evident that Captain McKay of the Milwaukee knew full well the weather conditions when he started out on his last trip, having just crossed the lake a few hours previously, with the storm and sea of equal severity as when he left. Whether he went out of his own free will and accord we cannot positively state. The fact stands out quite clearly that each of the four Grand Trunk Ferries had left port and were out in the big storm of October 22, while car ferries of the other lines remained in port or did not venture out again until the storm abated. We have evidence of where the superintendent of one of the car-ferry lines even wired one of his masters during the time of the storm, to "take no chances." Perhaps if there had been such advice extended to Captain McKay, there would be a different story to tell today.

Of course, we all know that the Milwaukee should never have gone out, but it seems to us that from his past experience, the criticism of eyewitnesses to the Milwaukee's departure, all experienced sailor men, and the condition of the weather, that it was a foolhardy thing to do, and showed poor judgment on the part of Captain McKay . . . whether or not this sort of moral urge, as stated by the other Grand Trunk Masters, predominated in his mind over his better judgment, thinking that if the other fellow can go, I can too, influenced him to go out, we cannot say ... it may have been a matter of professional pride.

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See the authors other books: True Tales Of The Great Lakes, Great Tales Of The Great Lakes, Ships and Men Of The Great Lakes, and Strange Adventures Of The Great Lakes.