

*Disaster on Isle
Royale*

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Disaster on Isle Royale

By FRED LANDON

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Eighty years ago, on November 7th, 1885, the steamer *Algoma*, of the Canadian Pacific Railway's newly established Great Lakes fleet struck hard on the shore of Isle Royale, in Lake Superior, stranded, broke in two and was completely wrecked. Eight passengers and 29 of the ship's crew perished in this, the most serious marine loss of that year.

It was really a double tragedy which befell the great Canadian railway on that November day of 1885. Only a few hours before the *Algoma* met her fate, directors of the C.P.R., and men closely associated with its construction, had stood about a remote point in the Canadian Rockies to witness the symbolic driving in of a spike to mark the completion of the huge enterprise. To Donald A. Smith, the later Lord Strathcona, had been accorded the honor of driving in this spike, not a golden one as had been used by some American railroads after Civil War days, but a plain rough spike. In more than one instance where a golden spike had been used, bankruptcy had been the unfortunate sequel. These Canadian railroad financiers and builders were for the most part canny Scots and were taking no chances with golden spikes and ensuing bankruptcy! Had they known what had taken place only a few hours earlier on the rocky shore of Isle Royale their caution might have been even more marked.

The element of tragedy in the loss of the *Algoma* was made greater by the fact that she was only in her second year on the Lakes. The *Algoma* was one of three steamers which had been built in 1883 for the C.P.R. on the Clyde River in Scotland and in 1884 had sailed under their own power to the Canadian port of Montreal. There, the three, all bearing distinctive Canadian geographic names, *Algoma*, *Alberta* and *Athabasca*, were cut in two amidships so that they might be taken through the St. Lawrence canals and the Welland Canal to Lake Erie.

At the port of Buffalo the divided sections of the three vessels were put together, and at Port Colborne on Lake Erie they were outfitted for service. In May they were on their way to Owen Sound on the Georgian Bay which was to be their home port until 1912 when it was transferred to Port

McNichol where extensive terminal facilities in docks and elevators had been erected.

Nothing like these three new passenger boats had been seen on the Lakes when they docked at Owen Sound, took aboard passengers and freight, and headed north for distant Port Arthur. They were alike in dimensions and in appearance; 270 feet in length, with beam of 38 feet. Each had 130 first-class cabins, bunks for 200 steerage passengers, and had cost \$300,000.00 each. The Toronto Globe commented that their excellence consisted “not in gorgeousness of furniture or in gingerbread decoration but in their superiority over all other lake craft in model, construction and equipment and for their adaptability to the business in which they will engage.” Each of the three ships had six watertight compartments and were regarded as practically unsinkable. So soundly riveted were they that when cut in two at Montreal, to be taken through the canals, the bulkheads of the compartments were strong enough to complete each section and keep them afloat all the way to Buffalo, where the halves were joined together and became complete vessels.

All three new ships arrived in their new home port, Owen Sound, early in May and all three were on their way northward in the next few days. The *Algoma*, which had been the first to arrive, was also the first to leave on May 11 with a huge cargo of freight and with 1,100 passengers, mostly immigrants from the British Isles and from Sweden, who had been waiting impatiently for the opening of navigation. The *Alberta* left on May 13 and the *Athabasca* two days later. Thereafter there was to be a tri-weekly service out of Owen Sound.

All three vessels had successful seasons in 1884, both in passenger business and in freight. The second season, opened in April of 1885, again had all the business they could handle and had no mishap until that which brought about the loss of the *Algoma* in November. The *Algoma* left Owen Sound on Thursday, November 5, with five cabin passengers, six steerage passengers and 540 tons of merchandise for Port Arthur. She passed through the Soo canal early on Friday and at midnight was thought by her commander, Captain John Moore, to be about fifty miles from Port Arthur. The *Algoma* had two masts which carried sail to be used when needed. Captain Moore had had the sails spread when crossing Lake Superior, and, running with what seemed a strong breeze, was probably making 16 knots an hour. At four o'clock on Saturday morning, with the wind now almost of gale strength, the captain ordered the sail taken in and decided to head back into the Lake. Rain and sleet and occasional snow was making visibility bad.

At half past four the sail was all off except the fore trysail and it was partly in. The wheel was put hard starboard and the vessel hauled up to west by south.

The *Algoma* had almost completed altering course and was rolling wildly when the ship's stern struck with a fearful crash on rocks, crumpling up the steel rudder and leaving her quite unmanageable. In a minute the vessel began to pound on the rocks, and seas broke over her decks, smashing her lifeboats like eggshells.

Captain Moore's first thought was for the safety of his passengers and crew. He rushed through the ship calling the crew who were below, and ordering the steam valves opened to prevent an explosion. Most passengers had crowded to the spar deck, and the captain had a lifeline rigged from the mainmast aft, telling the people to cling to it and not become panic stricken. At that moment a cabin came crashing down, pinning the captain under, while the man who was working with him was washed overboard. First Mate Joseph Hastings at once took charge and the captain, badly injured, was carried to the stern where passengers crouched for safety. Hurt as he was, Captain Moore asked those about him to join him in prayer for safety. All this time the wrecked vessel was being heaved by the waves and then dropped like a great hammer on the rocks, She was likely to break in two at any moment. The battered stern offered the only prospect of safety.

At six o'clock on Saturday morning the end came while it was still dark. The pounding vessel broke in two and the whole section forward of the boilers plunged bow under and disappeared in the waves. The survivors, little more than a dozen in number, were left clinging to the lifeline along the sloping afterdeck. Only sixty feet distant were the rocks upon which the *Algoma* had struck.

With daylight it became possible to do something about getting the survivors off the stern section of the vessel, which was all that remained. A few of the crew members managed to get a lifeboat overboard and, though upset, almost immediately managed to reach shore. But this did not mean that the others could follow. Instead, the group huddled on the windswept deck had to remain there all of Saturday and through Saturday night. Nothing was in sight but the grim wreck about them, the black rocks nearby constantly swept by rollers off the Lake, and the corpses of the drowned bashed on the rocks and then swept back by the undertow.

During Saturday night the gale began to blow itself out, and with the seas quieting a little it was possible by morning to prepare a small raft on

which all reached shore. Some were almost more dead than alive, but island fishermen who had come to the scene took them to their shanties.

The place where the *Algoma* had struck was on the southeast or lake side, of the big island and within a mile of the Rock Harbor Lighthouse. Rock Harbor itself has been described, not improperly, as “the best harbor on Lake Superior.” From the entrance it extends 13 miles. More than two-thirds of its length is formed by a chain of islands. There are really two entrances which would admit any vessels afloat on Lake Superior, and there are places where a battleship might lay alongside the rocky shore with plenty of water under its keel. The Rock Harbor light was the first, and for many years the only, lighthouse on the island and its white tower is a noted landmark.

The problem facing the survivors on that Sunday morning was, how long would they have to wait before a search would be made to find out what had happened to the *Algoma*. The Port Arthur authorities would ordinarily have expected to see her smoke appearing at Thunder Cape by Saturday morning, if she had not arrived during the night. Any incoming vessel would be questioned as to whether she had sighted the missing vessel. There was no wireless telegraphy at that time, and in stormy November vessels were often delayed by bad weather. The sister ship *Alberta* left Port Arthur downbound Friday night and passed within a few miles of the wrecked *Algoma*. Her captain had probably expected to see the *Algoma* headed in for Port Arthur. Instead of that she was lying a helpless wreck on the shore of Isle Royale.

Curiously, all three vessels of the C.P.R. fleet were on Lake Superior on that Monday morning. The *Alberta* was headed for the Soo after a terrible night which had covered her with ice up to her mastheads. The *Algoma* was a wreck on the shore of Isle Royale, and the *Athabasca*, which had left Owen Sound on Saturday, was headed for Port Arthur.

It was the *Athabasca* which first discovered the *Algoma*'s plight. When her master approached the Passage Island channel at about noon on Monday, he sighted the battered stern of a ship, and through his glass saw signals of distress from the shore. Quickly boats were put over the side and the group of survivors were taken aboard the *Athabasca* which carried them to Port Arthur. There Captain Moore's first duty was to report at a legal office and file what is known as a “protest,” being a statement of what had happened to his vessel. This was signed by himself and his First and Second Mates and declared before John M. Munro, solicitor. The original document is today in the possession of Mr. W. F. Langworthy, K.C., who, back in 1885, was the office boy in Mr. Munro's office. Mr. Langworthy very kindly brought the

document from the safe and showed it to the writer of this article a few years ago.

From Port Arthur telegraph wires carried the news of the marine disaster to the East, and immediately arrangements were made for a group of Port Arthur citizens to go out to visit the scene of the wreck. Aboard the tug *Hattie Vinton* with Captain Harry Servaia, were a Baptist clergyman, Rev. Mr. Tapscott; J. F. Cooke, a photographer; and several business men. The party set out at 10:30 on Monday night, but did not get back for two days as the tug had some trouble on the return trip, and those aboard had to spend the night on Silver Islet. They brought back two bodies with them. At the scene of the wreck they found much cargo scattered about the beach. Mr. Russell Brown of Port Arthur recalls that his father brought back from the wreck a dining room chair which he still has, and also the keyboard of the ship's piano.

Salvage operations, which began in the Spring of 1886, resulted in the recovery of the *Algoma's* boilers and engines, which had been made in Scotland in 1883. These were taken to Owen Sound and in 1889 were placed in a new steamer, given the name *Manitoba*, which was built there by the Polson Shipyards. To take the place temporarily of the *Algoma* the C.P.R. chartered the steamer *Campana* from the Collingwood-Lake Superior Line and used her until the *Manitoba* was placed in service in 1891.

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The *Alberta* and *Athabasca*, sister ships of the *Algoma*, were later lengthened at the Collingwood Shipyards in 1910 and 1911, respectively, and in 1914 they received new boilers at the Port Arthur Shipyards. Meanwhile, two new vessels had been added to the C.P.R. lakes fleet, the *Keewatin* and *Assiniboia*, built on the Clyde in 1907 and entering service in 1908. The two older vessels now carried freight only, the passenger service being provided by the *Manitoba* and the two new ships. The *Alberta* and the *Athabasca* were scrapped in 1947 after 63 years' service during which neither had suffered any serious mishap. When the *Manitoba* ended her sailing days a few years later, the C.P.R. presented her steering wheel to the city of Owen Sound, to be hung in an honored place in the city hall.

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The end of passenger service on the Upper Lakes by the remaining two of the fleet's vessels came in early October of the present year, with the announcement that at the conclusion of this sailing season the *Keewatin* and *Assiniboia* would cease to carry passengers, but that the *Assiniboia* would

continue in freight service. This is taken to mean that the *Keewatin*, 58 years old, will either be sold or scrapped.

For the last few years there have been recurrent rumors of the likelihood of such action by the C.P.R. Since the burning in 1949 of the *Noronic* at Toronto, with a great loss of life, government regulations with regard to boats carrying passengers have become so rigid and costly that changes to older boats would be ruinous. The C.P.R. realized this and so 1965 marks the end of a service that, beginning in 1884, lasted 81 years.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Disaster on Isle Royale* by Fred Landon]