

*Loss of the  
Western Reserve*

Fred Landon

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# Loss of the *Western Reserve*

By FRED LANDON

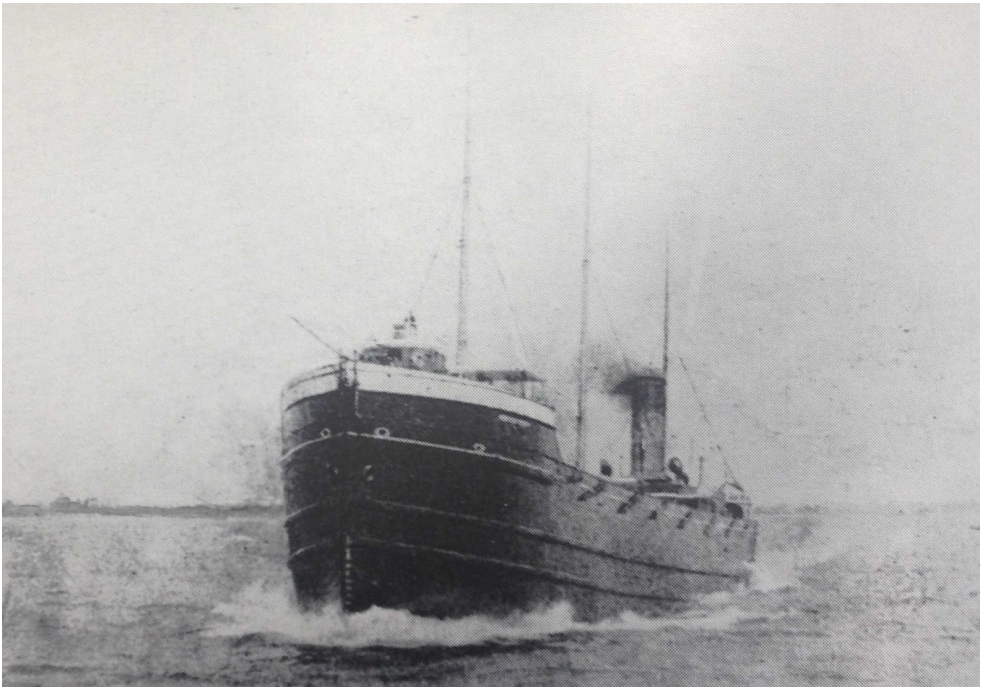
Inland Seas, Volume XX, #4, 1964

The loss on Lake Superior on August 30, 1892, of the steel steamer *Western Reserve* was the most serious marine tragedy of that year on the Great Lakes. Thirty-one people were drowned: six guest passengers, the captain and 24 of his crew. The one survivor was Harry W. Stewart, a wheelsman, of Algonac, Michigan.

The date, August 30, was early for a storm of such magnitude on Lake Superior. The fall equinoctial disturbances were not due for another three weeks and the passengers aboard might reasonably have looked forward to a pleasant late-summer holiday trip. They had boarded the steamer at Cleveland on Sunday, August 28, bound for Two Harbors to pick up a cargo of ore. Upbound, the vessel had travelled light with just enough water ballast astern to keep her propeller under water.

The *Western Reserve* (U.S. 81294) was a bulk freighter, one of the earlier lake ships of steel construction. She had been built two years earlier for the Minch Transit Company by the Cleveland Shipbuilding Company and was classified by Lloyd's as A1. Her dimensions were 300 by 41 by 25 with gross tonnage of 2,392. Her triple expansion engines, built by the same shipbuilding company, were of 24, 38, 61 diameter with stroke of 42. She had three masts with the wheelhouse set well forward.

The guest passengers on the ship consisted of the proud owner of the vessel, Captain Peter G. Minch, himself an experienced lake skipper, his wife and two children, Charles and Florence, his wife's sister, Mrs. Mary Engleberry, and her little daughter Bertha. The skipper of the *Western Reserve* was Captain Albert Meyer who was himself to be a victim of the disaster on August 30. His son Carl who was aboard was also drowned.



The *Western Reserve*. Rare photograph, collection of Rev. Edward J. Dowling, S.J.

Storm signals were flying and banked clouds showed darkly over Lake Superior when the *Western Reserve* cleared from the canal locks at the Soo. The storm broke even before the vessel had reached Whitefish Point, and Captain Meyer suggested seeking shelter, but Captain Minch, reluctant to admit that his steel ship could not weather any storm, urged him on. The ship was laboring hard as she entered the broad waters of the Lake and Captain Minch sought to reassure the women and children huddled in the cabin where furniture was sliding about and dishes were falling to the floor.

At about nine o'clock in the evening, when 60 miles above Whitefish Point, there was a terrific crash and the ship seemed to quiver and then stagger in her course. The main mast had fallen and the deck was beginning to buckle. Sounds like the fire of a machine gun could be heard as rivets in the hull cracked off. The vessel was rapidly breaking in two.

Stewart, the sole survivor, related later that he was in his bunk when the ominous crash came. He grabbed his coat, cap and boots, and started running aft. All was in darkness and halfway across the hatches he almost fell into a deep cavern. The deck had broken clear through and was separated four feet. Only the bottom plates were holding the ship together.

Stewart jumped and cleared the break. The wind was blowing on the port side and the tin yawl lowered there was quickly swamped. Those in it were drowned except Captain Meyer's son and the ship's steward who were picked up by the wooden yawl. This had been successfully launched on the starboard side. There were now 19 in that small boat including the women and children, Captain Meyer and his son Carl and some of the crew. The yawl was pulled into the wind and all rowed hard but were scarcely out of danger when the *Western Reserve* took her final plunge.

Stewart says that they rowed all night with the spray constantly breaking over them. Those who were not rowing were bailing with hats and the one pail which they had. Once during the night they saw the lights of a ship and shouted frantically for help but their voices were swallowed up by the wind which had been from the northeast when they first took to the lifeboats but later veered to the north making considerable sea. When daylight came a shoreline was visible and they all felt better. However, at 7 o'clock in the morning, when within a mile of the land, a huge wave suddenly rose over the little boat. As those in it almost unconsciously stood up the yawl capsized and all were thrown into the water.

Stewart said that he saw Mrs. Minch make a desperate effort to swim while clinging to one of her children. He himself seized a life belt floating by, managed to get it on and started swimming toward shore. Beside him was young Carl Meyer, the captain's son, like Stewart a powerful swimmer, but he soon became fatigued and sank from sight. Stewart had no choice but to swim on alone.

As he neared the shore he found himself repeatedly caught in an undertow which carried him forward and back. "I was so near and yet so far," he said afterward. "I finally threw away my life belt, dived under a wave and swam as hard as I could until I felt the next one coming in. I rode to shore on that one. There I dug my hands in the sand and hung on until the water receded, then climbed higher on the beach."

Stewart was completely exhausted and lay unconscious for a time. He was alone in a wild, uninhabited stretch of Lake Michigan shore with little idea of where he was or where he might find help. He tried first of all to guess his location from the position of the ship which had gone down 12 hours before. After resting a while he started walking eastward along the beach and late in the afternoon reached the Deer Park life-saving station. There he was able to report the wreck. A search which was promptly organized came upon the yawl boat pitched high in the sand. The body of

Captain Minch was also found and a little later the body of Mrs. Engleberry, his sister-in-law. No other bodies were recovered.

The loss of the *Western Reserve* is recorded in J. B. Mansfield, *History of the Great Lakes* (Vol. 1, p. 760) and was also the subject of a feature story in a Milwaukee journal (circa 1941). This article included Stewart's narrative of the wreck and some comment on the weakness which had contributed to the loss of the ship.

“Steel ships were sailing the oceans back in 1890,” said the journal article, “and steel ships were bound to come to the Great Lakes. Someone had to pioneer their coming and Captain Peter G. Minch was that man. He built his *Western Reserve* as a step in progress and gave his life in an attempt to prove his idea was right.

“His death was not wholly in vain for from his disastrous experiment builders of later Great Lakes steamers learned some vital lessons. They learned that the mighty strength of steel as then used was too brittle—that it shattered like glass in the grip of a heavy sea. The new ships were built of tempered steel—steel that was flexible so the ribs and keel could compromise with the angry buffeting of the waves.

“They also learned something about the distribution of the water ballast on a long, narrow ship. There was no doubt in the opinion of experts who studied the wreck of the *Western Reserve* that had she been loaded so her prow had ridden deeper in the water she might have outridden the pounding that broke her middle.”

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*The writer desires to acknowledge his obligation to Rev. Edward J. Dowling, S.J. for information in his possession on the loss of the Western Reserve, and for use of the rare photograph of the vessel.*

## 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 *Loss of the Western Reserve* by Fred Landon]