

The Seabird

An Historical Essay

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Introduction

Essays on historical objects, such as the *Seabird*, have been done many times before. The purpose of this essay is not to add another version, but instead it is to make available as comprehensive and accurate a history of the *Seabird* yet available, to take all the information that could be found, in the many disparate places, to try to reconcile the contradictions, and to put them together in an understandable and readable form. How well this writer has done will, of course, be up to the reader.

It is the belief of this writer that the history of a shipwreck, or of any historical object for that matter, is primarily the history of people. Without a human side the story remains nothing more than a chronology of dates and events of an inanimate object. With a human side, the shipwreck takes on a life and meaning. It becomes something that has impacted the life and times of many individuals. It is easy to forget that side-wheel steamers were a dominant form of transportation through the Great Lakes in the latter half of the 19th century. They played a major role in the development of the region and in the lives of people. Yet it probably is the most neglected part of our history. Even today, to this writer's knowledge, there exists only two intact walking-beam side-wheel steamers in the United States, the Eureka and the Ticonderoga. Neither of them are operable. This is a sad neglect of our history.

While it may not rank as one of the most important pieces of American history, the story of the *Seabird* paralleled the development of the Great Lakes region and the immigration of settlers, looking for opportunity and the promise of a new land. It paralleled the stories of growing towns such as Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Newport, St. Joseph, New Buffalo, Chicago, Milwaukee and Manitowoc. It was part of the opening of travel to the Great Lakes Region and to the West, first by overland stagecoach, then by ship and rail. The *Seabird's* history was affected by the relentless onslaught of the railroads into this new land, shipping in the Great Lakes being first aided and then hurt by the railroads. It was the tragedy of the lives of the people that suffered the final disaster that befell the *Seabird*. It was the 10th worst disaster in loss of lives in the history of the Great Lakes.¹ It was the "sixth greatest funeral pyre in Great Lakes history."² It was the third passenger steamer to have burned at sea since the settlement of the west. The *Seabird* and the *Niagra* were the only two to burn in the 20 years preceeding 1868.³

The Ward Empire

The story of the *Seabird* was also the story of its two owners, Eber Brock Ward and Albert Edgar Goodrich. Eber Brock Ward and the beginnings of the *Seabird* started in the town of Marine City, Michigan. This town is roughly 30 miles north of Detroit in St. Clair county, Michigan. It is located on land where the tiny Belle River empties into the St. Clair river, the major link of Lakes Erie and Huron. In the early 1800's it was predominantly an area of French settlers. They called the community La Belle Reviere. Into this primitive area came Captain Samuel Ward, a sailor and shipbuilder who was born in the State of Vermont and had moved to Conneaut, Ohio. He visited in 1818 on an exploring or trading visit, and he foresaw the potential for the development of the region. The Great Lakes Region was wide open with natural resources for supplying the

¹"Historic Shipwrecks of the Great Lakes," by Dana Thomas Bowen, as published in *Inland Seas*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 1952, P. 5, a publication of the Great Lakes Historical Society, Vermillion, Ohio.

²*Great Lakes Shipwrecks and Survivals* by William Ratigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1960.

³*The Daily Milwaukee News*, April 11, 1868

nation with lumber, coal and iron ore, as well as furs, produce and meat products. He saw that shipping was beginning to play a large role in this development, since the waterways of Lakes Erie, Huron and Michigan provided passage of people and freight that was far superior to the overland routes. The State of Michigan had just put on the market some of the land surrounding La Belle Reviere, so Samuel Ward purchased some of this now public land, and in the following year he and his family sailed there on his schooner, *Salem Packet*, to make a home. A year later he had already established a shipyard, one of many to flourish prior to the 1900's. With *Salem Packet* and another schooner that he built, the *St. Clair*, he started a business of supplying produce and merchandise along the lake shores, and of building ships. Discovering brick clay in the area, he started manufacturing brick. He also built a sawmill in 1837. In 1834 he platted the village as Newport, and in 1865 it was incorporated as Marine City.

Samuel Ward lost no time enticing his relatives and his wife's relatives to also settle there and to form a Ward dynasty. One of these relatives, his brother Eber Ward, arrived in 1832 and settled with his family, including his daughter Emily and his son Eber Brock Ward. It was Eber Brock (referred to as E. B.) who would ultimately construct the *Seabird*.

In 1840 Samuel Ward made his young nephew, E. B., captain of his newly built steamboat, *Huron*, which traversed the St. Clair River between Detroit and Port Huron. Working with his uncle, E. B. helped to build the Ward interests into a shipbuilding and transportation empire that traversed the Great Lakes, even extending to routes to Chicago. Sometime before 1854, E. B. Ward moved to Detroit. On February 4 of that year, his Uncle Samuel died, and, it is said, without the knowledge of the other relatives, E. B. took possession of uncle Samuel's properties and thus control of the shipping and shipbuilding empire.⁴

E. B. Ward's shipping interests covered most of the Great Lakes. These interests included his own shipping line consisting of his own boats and ones he leased to other lines. The core of E. B.'s shipping line always revolved around Detroit, but he also operated a fleet of small white-bowed steamers between St. Joseph, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois, carrying the U.S. mail. This route across Lake Michigan filled a gap in a route of travel that spanned all the way back to New York City. In the mid-1830's, the best way to travel from New York to Chicago would be to take a boat to Albany, then by railroad or a barge through the Erie Canal (opened 1825) to Buffalo, travel by ship up Lake Erie to Detroit and catch a Michigan Central train across Michigan. Part of the way would be by stagecoach, and the roads were bad around the southern tip of Lake Michigan to Chicago. So the last leg, by steamer from St. Joseph, was a very successful route for E.B. Ward. It would later foster the start of the shipping career of the second owner of the *Seabird*, Albert Goodrich.⁵

The Birth of the Seabird

In 1859 construction was completed on a new sidewheel steamer, the *Seabird*, in the Ward shipyard in Newport. Robert C. Conwell was the Master Carpenter, who later built the *Comet* and the *Wave*.⁶ According to one description the *Seabird's* "hull was composed of oak, riveted together by an improved bolt. The braces and knees were of the same material, and likewise riveted. She had two decks, each of oak plank four inches thick. The lower one was used for freight, and on the upper or hurricane deck the cabins were situated. They were two in number---the one aft being for ladies and families, and the forward one appropriated to gentlemen. Each cabin contained about fifty staterooms, in each of which were two bunks, affording ample accommodations for about two hundred passengers. Directly forward of the cabins, and between them and the pilot house, was the hurricane deck proper." This description might not be accurate at the time of building, because it was given at the time of the *Seabird's* loss, and some renovations to the steamboat happened during its existence.⁷ The hull dimensions were, at the time of construction: 191 feet, 6 inches in length, 27 feet, 9 inches in width, 12 feet, 6

⁴A Short History of Marine City by Frank McElroy, published 1980 by Marine City Rotary Club.

⁵Red Stacks Over The Horizon, James L. Elliott, 1967, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

⁶A Short History of Marine City and the Institute for Great Lakes Research, Perrysburg, Ohio.

⁷The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

inches in height, and a 638 ton capacity. These dimensions changed slightly during her life due to repairs and refitting. In Detroit in 1860 it was 190' x 27.6' x 11' and 585 tons. In Chicago in 1865 it was 190.8' x 27.25' x 10.9' and 444 tons. Its sidewheel propellers were 26 feet in diameter, and it was powered by a single, low-pressure, vertical-beam steam engine.⁸ This engine had a bore of 44 inches and a 10 foot stroke.⁹ One report claims it was salvaged from an older steamer, the *Sam Ward*.¹⁰

The Sam Ward

Here are a few notes on the *Sam Ward*. It was built in Newport, Michigan in 1847 by John L. Wolverton for the Ward interests with a registration number of 22371. Her machinery, and consequently the *Seabird's*, was supplied by the Novelty Iron Works in New York. She was double-stacked, another listing had her engine as 40 inches diameter with a 10 foot stroke. Her wheels had a 38 foot diameter.¹¹ Her first year saw service on routes from Buffalo. In 1848 she was portaged across the Soo to Lake Superior (the next paragraph will explain this procedure). In 1851 she ran the Soo rapids and took up routes from Detroit. In 1852 she badly mauled the schooner *Aurora Borealis* with which she collided. In 1855 when the Soo locks were completed, the *Sam Ward* returned to Lake Superior. In 1859 her engine was removed and put in the *Seabird*. In 1861 she was rebuilt as a bark and in 1872 was a tow-barge for lumber.¹²

A Background on Lake Superior Shipping

It should be noted that, prior to 1855, no ships could sail into Lake Superior waters, unless they were first hauled overland, a very daunting task. The reason for this was that the St. Marys River, running through the small village of Sault Ste. Marie, had a series of rapids that dropped the waters of Lake Superior down nineteen feet to the level of Lake Huron. Ships carrying freight and passengers were forced to unload their cargoes and have them portaged overland for a mile to the other lake, where another ship picked them up. Sidewheel steamboats often were able to shoot the rapids on a downbound trip because of their shallow draft, but they risked damage in doing so. In 1853 an enterprising young agent for the Fairbanks Scale Company of Vermont made a contractual agreement with the State of Michigan to construct a canal and locks around these falls. On June 18, 1855, with much fanfare and many dignitaries, the Soo Locks were opened and the first steamboat, the *Illinois*, passed through them into Lake Superior. It was captained by the beloved Jack Wilson, who was to meet his fate five years later on the *Lady Elgin*.¹³

The Seabird's First Service

After completion the *Seabird* was assigned a U.S. Registry number of 22368.¹⁴ From Newport she was moved to Detroit. The following is contained in the official Enrollment Document at the Port of Detroit:

"In Conformity to an Act of Congress of the United States of America, entitled 'An Act for Enrolling and Licensing Ships or Vessels,' &c., passed the 18th February, 1793, and 'An Act to Regulate the Foreign and Coasting Trade on the Northern, North-Eastern and North-Western Frontiers of the United States, and for other purposes,' passed the 2d March, 1834, and Acts passed the 7th of July, 1838, and the 3d of March, 1843, regulating Vessels propelled in whole or in part by steam; also, an Act entitled 'An Act to provide for recording the conveyances of Vessels, and for other purposes,' passed July 29th, 1850, Emily Ward of Newport, Michigan, by Eber B. Ward of Detroit her agent having taken or subscribed the oath required by the said Acts, and having sworn that she is the owner of five eighths (5/8), C. G. Blodgett of Detroit of one fourths (1/4), and David Gallagher of Newport of one eighths (1/8) convey that they are Citizens of the United States, sole owners of the Steam Boat or vessel called

⁸Early American Steamers, by Erik Heyl.

⁹>From a clipping in the Eber Ward scrapbook, courtesy of the Great Lakes Historical Society, Vermilion, Ohio.

¹⁰The Mariner's Museum library, Newport News, Virginia.

¹¹Early American Steamers, Vol. III, by Erik Heyl.

¹²The Herman G. Runge Collection, Milwaukee Public Library, Wisconsin.

¹³A Pictorial History of the Great Lakes, Harlan Hatcher and Erich A. Walter, Bonanza Books, New York, 1963.

¹⁴University of Detroit, Marine Historical Collection & Canal Park Marine Museum, E.N. Middleton Collection.

the Sea Bird of Newport, whereof C. C. Blodgett is at present Master; and, as he hath sworn, is a Citizen of the United States, and that the said Steam Boat or vessel was built at Newport, Mich. in 1859, as appears by the certificate of R. C. Conwell, Master Builder dated May 10th, 1859, and on file in his office. And H. J. Knapp (?) Special Surveyor having certified that the Steam Boat or Vessel has one deck and no mast and that her length is one hundred and ninety one feet, six inches, her breadth twenty seven feet, six inches, her depth twelve feet, six inches, and that she measures six hundred and thirty eight tons, forty two ninety-fifths; that she is a Steam Boat, has no gallery and no figure head; and the said Emily Ward having agreed to the description and admeasurement above specified, and sufficient security having been given in conformity with the terms of the said acts, the said Steam Boat has been duly enrolled at the Port of Detroit (dated May 16, 1859)

Given under my Hand and Seal, at the Port of Detroit, this
Sixteenth day of May in the year of our Lord one thousand
eight hundred and fifty nine

M. Mounaker

Collector"¹⁵

It's interesting that Mr. Ward made his wife, Emily, the co-owner of the *Seabird* rather than himself. Did it have something to do with his complicated financial entanglements at the time? Also noteworthy was that the name of the steamer was written in two words, Sea Bird . Though this writer will spell it as one word, as most contemporaries do, the spelling of that time was two words.

With its arrival in Detroit the *Seabird* was heralded in a number of the newspapers of the time:

"A new steamer, called the Sea Bird, came down the river on Sunday, on her experimental trip, and is now at our docks. She was built by E. B. Ward at his shipyard at Newport, and is designed for the route between Cleveland and Buffalo. Her equipments are complete, and, as she has been built with express reference to this route, she is probably strong and seaworthy. Her length is 210 feet, and she has an engine of full capacity. She will be commanded by Capt. C. C. Blodgett, formerly of the OCEAN, and will take her place in the line immediately."

"This steamer built by Capt. E. B. Ward, at Newport, during the winter, arrived here on Sunday, and will leave here for Cleveland this evening to take her place in the Buffalo and Cleveland line. Her dimensions are as follow: Length 210 feet, breadth of beam 26 feet, and depth of hold 11 1/2 feet. The engine is an excellent one, the bore being 44 inches, and the stroke 10 feet. Her model and appointments are good throughout. The following are the officers, as far as appointed: Master, C. C. Blodgett; Clerk, Mr. Lillibridge; Steward, Walter Adams; and Engineer, B. F. Owen. We wish the SEA BIRD many a prosperous 'fly' and an excellent patronage."

"This new and beautiful steamer, built by Capt. Ward expressly for the Cleveland and Buffalo Route, leaves for Buffalo this evening. Capt. Ward has completed arrangements for a permanent line between Cleveland and Buffalo. The Boats charge \$2.50 cabin and \$1.50 steerage, which is half the Railroad fare. They arrive at Buffalo in time to take the morning trains east, either by N. Y. & Erie or N. Y. Central roads - passengers can go by steamer to Buffalo and thence by Railroad to New York for \$7. The public may rely on a permanent and reliable line of steamers as Mr. Ward has a number of first rate low pressure Boats, that in case one should break down, he can always supply her place by another in a short time."¹⁶

Until 1857 Lake Erie was the home of several large "Palace" steamers, such as the *Metropolis* and the *City of Buffalo*, but then a financial market panic ensued with a subsequent depression, and these large steamers were laid-up indefinitely, being too expensive to operate in those hard times. Ward saw the opportunity for a

¹⁵The National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶Clippings from the Eber Ward scrapbook, courtesy of the Great Lakes Historical Society, Vermilion, Ohio.

smaller (and cheaper) steamer, such as the *Seabird* and another Ward steamer the *Gazelle*, to take their place. It started operation under the name of the Buffalo and Lake Erie Steamboat Company although ownership remained with Ward.¹⁷ Other reports had the *Seabird* running with the propeller steamer *Forester*, built in 1854.¹⁸

A Change of Route

The Cleveland to Buffalo route was short-lived, because in October of the same year, 1859, with no official explanation, the *Seabird's* service was discontinued. One theory of the move was that "three of the five directors of the Buffalo and Lake Erie Steamboat Company were also officers and directors of the Buffalo and State Line Railroad connecting Buffalo with Erie, Pennsylvania, and points west. In turn the Buffalo and State Line Railroad was very closely tied up with the New York Central Railroad between Buffalo and Albany, New York. The New York Central Railroad had been running a line of propellers, mainly for freight, though with passenger accommodations between Buffalo and Green Bay, Wisconsin, with stops being made at the various way ports, especially on Lake Erie."¹⁹ The *Seabird* and *Gazelle* transferred to the Cleveland, Detroit and Lake Superior route, which included Lake Huron and Lake Michigan waters. Captain C. C. Blodgett remained in command of the *Seabird*.²⁰ Their successors on Lake Erie were the *Rocket* and *Comet*.²¹ How these two steamboats were able to take over is unclear.

A First Mishap

During the season of 1860 the *Seabird*, met with the first of a number of incidents. A serious accident to her engine nearly ruined it, and she received an almost entirely new engine after that.²² In the following year of 1861, "she was engaged in the Chicago and Lake Superior trade, and at one time narrowly escaped destruction by fire, while passing through the straits of Mackinac. She had caught fire on the port side, just forward of her wheel house. Capt. Blodgett was in command of her at the time, and on discovery of the flames, he stopped the engine and commenced backing her as strongly as possible, at the same time 'trimming' her down so that her guard dragged in the water. By this means, and the water thrown by her wheel, the flames were extinguished without a passenger on board knowing the peril they had been in."²³

Early Superior Routes

It is not completely clear what routes the *Seabird* took in its movements on the Great Lakes. Even though the previous newspaper report said she was engaged in the Chicago and Lake Superior trade, a Soo Locks manifest of 1862 seemed to indicate that she made runs between Cleveland, Ohio, and Ontonagon, Michigan, on Lake Superior. It also seemed to indicate that the skippering of the *Seabird* changed hands from Capt. C. C. Blodgett to Capt. J. Dougall:

"May 1, 1862 - Steamer SEA BIRD of Detroit, 535.50 tons, Captain J. Dougall. Bound from Cleveland to Ontonagon, \$32.13 toll. Carried 40 tons of iron bars, 60 barrels of beef, 40 barrels of port, 232 tons of merchandise, 45 head of cattle, 67 tons of R. R. Iron.

May 5, 1862 - Steamer SEA BIRD, of Detroit, 535.50 tons, Captain J. Dougall. Bound from Ontonagon to Cleveland, \$32.13 toll. Carried 170 tons of copper ore."²⁴

¹⁷Early American Steamers by Erik Heyl

¹⁸The Herman G. Runge Collection, Milwaukee Public Library, Wisconsin and The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868.

¹⁹from Early American Steamers, by Erik Heyl.

²⁰The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868

²¹from Early American Steamers, by Erik Heyl.

²²The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868, and The Herman G. Runge Collection, Milwaukee Public Library, Wisconsin.

²³from The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868.

²⁴Canal Park Marine Museum, C. Patrick Labadie, Duluth, Minnesota.

Is it possible that the Civil War, raging at this time, had a temporary effect on the shipping contracts of these steamboats? It should also be noted that the former skipper, Capt. C. C. Blodgett, relinquished his ownership interest in the *Seabird* and Florence Brindle, no address, bought into it.²⁵

One Employee's Account

The previous mishaps were not the only ones to befall the *Seabird*. James John Hagerman (1838 - 1909), a Newport native, spent most of his life employed by the Wards on a number of their boats. In his memoirs of 1908 Mr. Hagerman gives an account of another mishap, and of life in general, aboard the *Seabird*:

"In the year 1862, I was clerk on the Sea Bird, a new side-wheel steamer which ran from Chicago to Lake Superior ports. She was about the same as the Planet in size and accommodations. Her captain was a chump, a coward, and a whiskey drinker, but I attended to my business and managed to endure him without any quarrels. The Planet and Sea Bird each had a large saloon which rented at a big price to the saloon keeper. I never went into them except when I had to, and never drank a drop of whiskey or other liquor in them. I made up my mind not to contract the drinking habit, and stuck to it. On these boats were many queer characters, both men and women, and temptations to go wrong and contract bad habits were numerous, but I left them entirely alone.

On the early morning of October 20th, 1862, the Sea Bird was heading from the Manitou Islands for Sheboygan, Wisconsin. When we were a few miles from land the engine broke down and we were helpless. The wind was dead ahead and it soon increased to a gale. Soon we were in the troughs of the seas and having a bad time of it. Before night the wind was a regular hurricane, and the seas came up under the guards on the weather side and knocked the deck planks loose, so the water came on the main deck in the solid blue. It ran down into the hold through many openings; the steam pumps could not keep it clear, and all hands, passengers included, had to man the hand pumps. In spite of this, by morning the boat was nearly ready to sink. Luckily we drifted into the passage between the North Manitou Islands and the mainland, in sight of a harbor where several propellers were stormbound, and one of them came out and towed us to shelter. Our captain, Douglas, was a coward and before the night of October 21st was half over, he gave up and was ready to say his prayers. The first mate was a trump. He and I saved the boat and about 200 passengers. My job was to drum up the men passengers and make them work at the pumps. They would desert in despair and go to console or pray with their wives, and had to be expostulated with and made ashamed to induce them to work and save themselves. The women had often more grit than the men. When all was over, the passengers wrote a statement to Captain Ward, which they all signed, denouncing the captain as a coward and giving me the credit of saving the boat. They saw less of the mate, Pat Carney, than they did of me, but I am sure that he and I did save the Sea Bird that awful night. For twelve hours I was as wet as water could make me and the wind was almost freezing cold. I took no harm from it. That night ended Douglas' career as a steamboat captain."²⁶

These accounts by Mr. Hagerman were given from a 46-year perspective. There were no other accounts of this mishap that this writer has found. It also seems, from Hagerman's account, that some time after May 5, 1862, the command of the *Seabird* was passed from Capt. J. Dougall to this Captain Douglas. Yet, in the following year, 1863, a reference was given to a Capt. Dougal commanding the steamboat for the Milwaukee, Chicago & Two Rivers line.²⁷ Was that another name for the Goodrich Steamship Company, the next owner of the *Seabird*? Could Douglas and Dougall be one and the same person? To make things more confusing, Mr. James L. Elliott, in his book Red Stacks Over the Horizon, refers to two captains in the Goodrich line, Captain

²⁵Early American Steamers, Erik Heyl.

²⁶Unpublished autobiography of James John Hagerman, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

²⁷Milwaukee Sentinel, May 2, 1863.

W. E. Douglas and Captain William Dougal. Do they have any relation to the previously mentioned men? At any rate during 1863, ownership of the *Seabird* passed from E. B. Ward to Albert E. Goodrich.

The Beginnings of Albert E. Goodrich

In 1818 Russel Goodrich and his new bride, Comfort Marvin, had settled in Hamburg, New York, not far from Buffalo, and made a living operating their own little tavern. They were blessed with seven children, the sixth being Albert Edgar Goodrich in 1826. Albert had an uncle, Captain Wessel D. Whittaker, a well-known shipmaster in Buffalo, who nurtured Albert's early interest in ships. The Captain taught him about the lakes, and Albert proved to be a good student. In the fall of 1834 Captain Whittaker's schooner, *Post Boy*, was caught in a storm in southern Lake Michigan, ran aground on a beach near Michigan City, Indiana, and became a total loss. After having survived the night aboard the battered schooner, Captain Whittaker and his men came ashore and found transportation to the major port of St. Joseph to report the loss to insurance underwriters. On the way Captain Whittaker paused where the Galien river runs into Lake Michigan. He recognized that this point could be an ideally located shipping port. After taking care of business in St. Joseph the Captain headed to Kalamazoo, got details from the Michigan Land Office about this area at the mouth of the Galien and then returned to Buffalo. With the help of some investors from Buffalo, Captain Whittaker bought a large tract of land around the mouth of the Galien and subdivided it. They called the future community "New Buffalo." Russel Goodrich saw an opportunity, purchased two lots, and moved there in 1836 with Albert and the family. It was a thrill for Albert, because the passage was made by boat through the Great Lakes. His father opened a hotel and tavern, and when Albert was old enough he became a clerk at the hotel. 1847 was an eventful year for the 21 year-old Albert Goodrich, because his uncle, Captain Whittaker, made him clerk aboard his steamboat *A. D. Patchin*, which was chartered by the Ward line. In the next five years Albert rose from clerk to captain on other Ward steamers put into service, *Pacific*, *Traveler*, and *Cleveland*. This started a long association with Ward.

Then the bottom dropped out for New Buffalo as a shipping port. The Michigan Central railroad, which had completed its line to New Buffalo in 1849, and, in the process, giving New Buffalo economic leadership over St. Joseph, in 1852 extended its line to Chicago. No longer was New Buffalo or St. Joseph needed for a smooth, fast trip to Chicago from Detroit. E. B. Ward decided to close his cross-lake routes, because of the dwindling traffic and concentrate his interests back in the Detroit region. However, a former Ward shipmaster, Captain S. Clement, saw the need for continued shipping from Chicago to points north. He chartered from Ward the *Traveler* and *Pacific* and, in 1854, started his own line. Albert Goodrich was a director on the board, but wanted to start his own company. In 1856 he left Clement, and with another former Clement Line director, George C. Drew, he started his own steamboat line.

The Beginnings of the Goodrich Steamboat Line

Goodrich's first steamboat was the *Huron*, a side-wheeler built in 1852 by Ward. It was not the same *Huron* that Ward had first captained in his youth. Goodrich prevailed upon Ward to charter this boat to him, which was formerly chartered to Clement. That same year of 1856 saw Goodrich buying some property along the Chicago river and opening a dock and office for the *Huron*. This dock would serve the company for the next seventy years and was the land extending from under the Michigan Avenue bridge to a block and a half east on the south bank of the river. The next year Goodrich bought the *Huron* from Ward for \$16,000. The *Huron*, even for its day a spartan steamboat for travelers, was the boat that made Ward. It served him well and without incident until it was sold in 1867. In the ensuing years Goodrich saw his shipping line continue to grow. He bought more boats, leased docks in Milwaukee and Manitowoc, expanded his routes as far as Lake Superior and built an empire. After the *Huron* Goodrich bought or leased, in succession, *Ogontz*, *Comet*, *Wabash Valley*, *Union*, *Sunbeam*, *Lady Franklin*---and the *Seabird*.²⁸

²⁸Red Stacks Over the Horizon, James L. Elliott, published 1967 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich.

Up to 1863 The Goodrich line had a charmed life. It suffered no major tragedies. There were some groundings. The terrible loss by another shipping line of the luxury side-wheeler *Lady Elgin* in 1860 caused a major slump in the passenger business, but Goodrich was able to weather it. His large volume of freight traffic enabled him to keep the scheduled lines running. There was the near-disaster with the propeller ship *Wabash Valley*. Bought in May of 1860 the *Wabash Valley* was running between Milwaukee and Grand Haven on November 21, 1860, but due to faulty harbor lights and a stormy night the ship ran aground near Muskegon and broke in two. Fortunately the cargo and passengers were all saved, including Goodrich himself, who happened to be aboard.²⁹

The charmed life of the Goodrich line ended on August 28, 1863, when the *Sunbeam*, built for Goodrich by the Bates Shipyard of Manitowoc in 1861, foundered and sank in a fierce storm off Copper Harbor in Lake Superior. All but one of the approximately 29 people aboard perished. This was the first great loss by the Goodrich company. The next major loss suffered by the Goodrich company was five years later with the *Seabird*.³⁰

Goodrich Purchases the Seabird

Captain Goodrich purchased the *Seabird* from Ward on April 21, 1863, for \$36,000. Goodrich intended to use her on a cross-lake route between Chicago and Muskegon. After only a month he abandoned that idea. During the 1862-1863 shipping season a sand bar had been building up in the entrance to the Muskegon harbor, and by the beginning of the 1863 season it had made the water so shallow that the entrance to the harbor was all but blocked. Steamers were striking the sand bar. This dangerous situation prompted Goodrich to discontinue all service to Muskegon. He transferred the *Seabird* to a west-shore run between Chicago and Lake Superior, with stops at Racine, Milwaukee, Green Bay and ports in Lake Superior. Even after Muskegon corrected the sand bar situation and again opened shipping to its harbor, Goodrich kept the *Seabird* on the west-shore route. She spent her winters in the Goodrich yards in Manitowoc.³¹

More Mishaps

Between 1863 and 1868, the *Seabird* provided popular service. She was not without her adventures and mishaps, though. In her first season, beginning May 1863, she was under the command of Captain Dougal. This writer believes this is the same Captain Dougal who perished in the *Sunbeam* disaster later in the year.³² Because shipping was such an important method of transportation in that era, it was the custom of shipping interests to push the seasons to their limits, until they could no longer navigate around the encroaching winter ice. Ships would sail the Great Lakes waters to December and beyond. After a full shipping season the *Seabird* suffered her first mishap in mid-December of 1863. She was blinded by a terrible snowstorm and ran aground at the North Point of Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, north of Milwaukee. Efforts to pump her out failed, so the *Seabird* remained grounded there until April 1864. A salvage contract was given to a Captain Kirtland who attempted to float it, but the efforts weren't successful until July 19. She was then taken to Chicago and repaired. So it wasn't until late in the season that the *Seabird* resumed her duties. In December of that year she had a collision with ice in Green Bay and almost sank.³³

Newspapers gave accounts of other events in the next years. On March 30, 1866, the *Seabird* was locked in an ice jam near Sheboygan. In May 9, 1867, she crowded ashore two schooners, the *Presto & Kewaunee*. On September 26 she rescued two people in the lake near Sheboygan, Jerry Wood and Michael

²⁹Red Stacks Over the Horizon

³⁰Red Stacks Over the Horizon

³¹Early American Steamers & Red Stacks Over the Horizon.

³²Red Stacks Over the Horizon & Milwaukee Sentinel, May 2, 1863.

³³Fire in the Lake by Kerry A. Trask (Univ. of Wisc., Manitowoc), published in Anchor News, Sept./Oct. 1991, a publication of the Manitowoc Maritime Museum, and the Milwaukee Sentinel.

Gorman of Manitowoc. In October she had an accident in Port Washington and was repaired. On December 9 she was damaged while cutting through ice.³⁴

The Beginnings of the 1868 Season

All these travails left the *Seabird* in pretty bad shape when she began her winter stay in Manitowoc. So the Goodrich Company decided to completely overhaul her in the G.S. Rand shipyard. The newspapers said she received many improvements for passenger comfort, and she passed the regulations of the time for fire extinguishment and passenger safety. She also was freshly painted inside and out.³⁵ The total cost of repair was estimated between \$7,000 and \$8,000.³⁶

At the beginning of April 1868 she started her shipping season. Her Captain was John Morris. Captain Morris had become a Goodrich employee in 1857 or 1858. He started as a helmsman and worked his way up to Captain by 1863. He was highly regarded as a competent and trustworthy seaman. One newspaper said the crew numbered twenty-five, including the Captain, two mates, two wheelmen, six or eight deck hands, two engineers, two firemen, two cooks, three boys, a steward, a porter and a bartender.³⁷ Later estimates placed the number between 17 and 21. There was disagreement among the newspapers of the time, but names mentioned were:

John Morris	Captain (Milwaukee, wife & 2 children)
Richard Hacklin	1st Officer
Leander Packard	2nd Officer (Sheboygan)
James A. Hodges	Clerk (Manitowoc, wife & 3 children)
Thomas Hannahan	First Engineer (Milwaukee, wife & 2 children)
John Morrison	Steward
Thomas Kirkland	Porter
Ulysses Hughes	Bartender
Joe Burns	Cook
Billy Burns	Assistant
Harry Simpson	Cabin Boy
John Brennan	Cabin Boy
Michael Morrissey	Seaman
John Glennan	Seaman
John O'Rourke	Seaman
James O'Rourke	Seaman
Michael Malone	Seaman

In addition to these names were the names of Charlie Ricker, carpenter; Sol. Labrisky; William Green and Charley Barber, which were listed later.³⁸ Seven of these crew members were from Manitowoc, including chief engineer Thomas Hannahan. One newspaper reported that Mr. Hannahan had "occupied the position since she (the *Seabird*) was first launched."³⁹ April 8 was to be the fourth trip to Chicago, but something unsettling happened to Thomas Hannahan. His wife had a disturbing premonition about that day's voyage, and she pleaded with him, almost hysterically, not to go. He went anyway.⁴⁰

About a week prior to the April 8 departure of the *Seabird*, something happened in Two Rivers, near Manitowoc, that would later have a connection with the *Seabird* disaster. A fire broke out one evening in the

³⁴Milwaukee Sentinel, as listed in an index in the Runge Collection, Milwaukee Public Library.

³⁵Fire in the Lake, by Kerry A. Trask

³⁶The Daily Milwaukee News, April 10, 1868.

³⁷Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

³⁸The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868 and The Chicago Times, April 10 & 11, 1868.

³⁹Chicago Times, April 10, 1868.

⁴⁰Pete Caesar, Lake Michigan Wrecks III, Green Bay and Ludington, Great Lakes Marine Research, 1989, p. 13.

paint shop of the Joseph Mann pail and tub factory. The nearest fire-fighting equipment being in Manitowoc, the townspeople were helpless as everything burned to the ground. All that was saved were some newly finished and painted wooden pails. It is believed that these tubs were later put on the *Seabird* for shipment to Chicago.⁴¹

On the morning of April 8 the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper ran a news item and a small ad about the *Seabird*:

City Items

----- For Chicago

The Side Wheel Steamer SEA BIRD, Capt.
John Nouris (sic), will leave Goodrich's Steamboat
Docks, foot of Main Street, WEDNESDAY
EVENING, April 8th, at 7 o'clock, for Chicago,
touching at Racine. Fare One Dollar Less
THAN by R. R. No Charge for State-Rooms.

This ad was accompanied by a long, complimentary article about the Goodrich Steamship line and its new season. Besides starting the new season with a fanfare, it seemed to be the policy of the newspapers to write very positive articles about their advertisers. It is rumored that the newspapers were even paid for this.

The Seabird's Departure

Very late Tuesday, April 7, the *Seabird* had returned to Two Rivers from her third trip to Chicago, and the crew immediately prepared her for her fourth trip, picking up freight, including the pails salvaged from the Joseph Mann factory fire. The next morning, April 8, she departed Two Rivers at 6 o'clock. Arriving in Manitowoc mid-morning, the *Seabird* docked at Johnston's pier. She was loaded with half a full cargo of freight. The crew loaded, among other things, 200 barrels of flour, 51 packages of tobacco, 30 hides, 25 sacks of turnips, 22 packages of furniture, 30 bags of peas and 370 packages of hardware.⁴² A marine intelligence report, upon her arrival in Milwaukee, listed her cargo as 132 bags grain, 35 rolls of leather, 68 dozen tubs, and 5 bags of potatoes.⁴³

According to one report roughly 35 passengers, including nine children, boarded the *Seabird* in Manitowoc for the trip southward. These included:

N. T. Nelson, 43, a mariner himself with a captain's rank, who was headed to Chicago to purchase a tugboat to be used in Manitowoc's Harbor. He had a wife and seven children.

Captain John Sorenson, 40, a mariner and a carpenter, who had just sold his interest in the schooner *Walhalla* but had to journey to Chicago to correct some errors in the paperwork. He had a wife and two children.

James Hodges, the clerk of the *Seabird*, who had asked Goodrich to be transferred from the *Orion*, when it was moved to an east shore route, so that he might stay close to his wife and four children. He saw time as a military prisoner in the Civil War.

George W. Emery who had left Manitowoc to open up a shipping and merchandising firm in the Lake Superior region, but had to contract for goods shipment in Chicago. He had a wife and three children, who he visited regularly in Manitowoc.

Joseph Doucett, a boarding-house keeper, who was severely injured in the Civil War and on his way to Chicago to oversee his application for a pension. He had a wife and two children.

⁴¹Manitowoc Pilot, April 3, 1868 & Fire on the Lake by Kerry A. Trask

⁴²Milwaukee Sentinel & Chicago Times, both April 10, 1868

⁴³The Daily Milwaukee News, April 10, 1868.

Franz Klemmer, who resided in Chicago but had come to Manitowoc to collect the last payment on a farm he had sold.

James Leykom, 21, a shoemaker, was on his way to care for his sick brother in Chicago.

Patrick Denahae, 28, married less than a year, with a child, had left his business in Chicago to meet with his wife and purchase a lot of land. When he got to Manitowoc, the land had already been sold, and so he was returning with the money.

Wenzel Havlichek, a farmer in nearby Mishicott had a wife and three children.

Henry Pfeffer, a young tavern keeper had planned only to go to Milwaukee, but he decided to extend to Chicago to keep his friend James Leykom company.

Charles Riechan was a master carpenter in Goodrich's yard, with a wife and a child.

Miss Terene Oleson a seamstress at Jolinson's tailoring establishment, had immigrated from Norway last year and was going to visit some friends in Chicago.

August Wilde, Amos Myer, Fred Flosbach, Henry Nieman and John Foucks, who were reported by the Manitowoc Pilot to be deck hands but were not listed in the Chicago papers.

John Walla, his wife, and his four children. They were Bohemians who had emigrated to the U.S. last fall and were on their way to buy a farm in Nebraska. John was planning to quickly visit his sister in Milwaukee during the *Seabird's* short lay-over.

These and other souls were unaware they had a date with destiny.⁴⁴

The *Seabird* fired up its boiler, raising the steam pressure. The crew cast off the lines, the captain sounded the whistle, and the side wheels began to turn. The familiar chugging sound and the rocking back-and-forth of the walking beam signaled the steamboat was under way. Stops were to be made at Sheboygan, Milwaukee and Racine enroute to Chicago. It was around 12 noon, when she left Manitowoc that Wednesday.

The Journey to Milwaukee

The beginning of the journey started well enough. Lake Michigan was calm on this early spring day, but as the weather is very changeable this time of year, the winds began to pick up. Before too long a squall had formed and the going got rough. It wasn't until about 3 in the afternoon that the *Seabird* finally reached the port of Sheboygan, its first stop. As later accounts will indicate, it was rough even at the dock. The gangplank couldn't be lowered; passengers had to jump aboard; and freight had to be tossed. An estimated 10 to 20 people got aboard. One was a furniture dealer from nearby Sheboygan Falls by the name of Albert C. Chamberlain. He was on his way to Chicago to make some purchases. There was Edmund Hennebury, a 22-year-old sailor, who was going to Chicago to be a deck hand on another lake boat. Among the women who came aboard was the 20-year-old Miss Sprague. She was on her way to La Crosse to visit some relative of hers. When all passengers and freight were safely aboard, the *Seabird* hurriedly returned to the storm-tossed lake to continue southward. The next stop was Milwaukee.⁴⁵

It was slow going and many passengers had become seasick. It wasn't until after 9:30 p.m., over two and a half hours past her scheduled arrival, that the *Seabird* finally made it to Milwaukee and docked at the foot of Main Street.⁴⁶ After an afternoon and evening of being tossed on the Lake, several passengers decided to take their leave of the *Seabird*, either having business elsewhere or deciding to finish the journey by train. Drs. Hahn and Rock had business in Port Washington, as well as Mrs. E. G. Sharpe and H. A. Gaylord and his wife. Mr. William G. Mallory and Michael Winters also departed.

Among other notable departures were Mr. D. C. Daggett and Miss Sprague. Mr. Daggett was a master mechanic in the shops of the Sheboygan and Fond du Lac Railroad Company. He was on his way to Chicago. While the *Seabird* was docked he decided to look around the city for a short time, but the ship's purser stopped

⁴⁴The Manitowoc Pilot, April 17, 1868

⁴⁵The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868

⁴⁶Fire on the Lake by Kerry Trask.

him and asked if he would escort Miss Sprague to a hotel, where she could stay until she could catch a train to LaCrosse. Mr. Daggett escorted her to Milwaukee's Cream City Hotel. After that, he decided to visit the home of his father, Mr. S. S. Daggett, and stay overnight. Thus they missed their fate with the *Seabird*. We will later see that Miss Sprague's friend, Albert C. Chamberlain, was unaware of her departure.

The Bohemian gentleman, John Walla, on his way to Nebraska with his family, also got off the *Seabird* in Milwaukee to see a sister who lived there. He didn't get back to the boat in time before it departed with his wife, Rosalie, and their four children. That was the last time he would ever see them.⁴⁷ One newspaper had a different version of this. It said the Bohemian was Yahn Wale, who began his trip in Milwaukee with his wife and two children, but rushed back to a hotel to get a third child and missed the boat.⁴⁸ This writer believes the former account to be the correct one, having been written at a later time, in a hometown newspaper, and containing more details.

Newspaper reports indicated, at first, that few passengers boarded, one reporting that G. Hermos, Mr. Goodrich's agent in Milwaukee, had telegraphed that there were only twenty passengers on the *Seabird* when she left.⁴⁹ Another newspaper the next day quoted the agent as saying it was not less than twenty.⁵⁰ Eyewitness accounts will later give a larger number. Among those Milwaukee citizens who boarded were:

George B. Davidson, 29, served in the Civil War and was promoted to Captain and serving under General Custer at his discharge. He was employed by the city as a deputy collector of customs.

George Neumann, an elderly German with a wife and four children. He drove a horse team owned by Mr. James Bonnel. One of the horses had died, and he was taking the other horse aboard the *Seabird* to Chicago to find a proper match for him.

Edwin Neighbauer, 35, unmarried, an Englishman, had been in the country five years. He had just come from an employment in New York three days prior and was taking a trip to Chicago.

Mr. J. E. Goss, a young resident for three years, was employed as a bookkeeper in a lumber office.

C. H. Abbott, 40, was a general agent for an iron foundry. He was on his way to visit some friends in Chicago.⁵¹

One of the other people who boarded was James H. Leonard. He had traveled to Milwaukee on Monday, April 6, aboard the *Seabird*, when it had made its first trip of the week. Now, after staying a couple nights, he was re-boarding the *Seabird* to complete his trip to Chicago. Mr. Leonard was on his way there to purchase a grocery store. He and his wife, Martha, had been married a year and were hoping to start a business of their own. At 29 James Leonard had seen a lot. Originally a schoolteacher for a year in 1861, he enlisted in the Fifth Wisconsin Volunteers to fight in the Civil War. He saw action at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg and Rappahannock Station, among other places. He was badly wounded at Rappahannock Station but returned to see more action with his company. In 1864 he returned to civilian life and his teaching job. The pay was so poor that, after three years, he quit and went to work as a clerk in George S. Glover's store in Manitowoc. Now he had saved enough money to buy his own business. Within hours James H. Leonard would experience things as horrible as anything he encountered in the Civil War.⁵²

Heading To Chicago

After the *Seabird* hurriedly brought aboard passengers and freight, she steamed away from Milwaukee between 10:30 and 11:00 at night. At this time the weather had moderated and the waves subsided in the Lake.

⁴⁷The Manitowoc Pilot, April 17, 1868

⁴⁸The Chicago Tribune, April 12, 1868

⁴⁹Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868

⁵⁰The Chicago Times, April 11, 1868

⁵¹The Daily Milwaukee News, April 11, 1868

⁵²Fire on the Lake by Kerry Trask, utilizing archival material in the Manitowoc Historical Society, the Wisconsin Magazine of History, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

The going was much smoother, so most settled down for an overnight journey to Chicago. Sometime between 12:30 and 1:00 in the morning, the *Seabird* stopped at Racine. They picked up some freight but no passengers, and in less than thirty minutes were underway again.⁵³ That was the last time the *Seabird* would ever land at any dock again.

Indications of Disaster

It was half past 6 o'clock in the morning when some citizens of Waukegan had noticed a steamer passing in the Lake. As nearly as they could later estimate, she was about five to eight miles from shore. Suddenly she burst into flames, and, as one man said, seemed to be on fire from stem to stern in a few moments. They stood there watching, unable to see anything except that the steamer had changed her course and was running against the wind. They saw no boats and no signs of life. By this time, it was noticed, the wind had picked up from a northeasterly direction and the waves were becoming much stronger. It wasn't long before the beach was lined with people armed with opera glasses and telescopes trying to see this pillar of fire and smoke. None could be sure whether the vessel was a steamboat, a propeller or other vessel.⁵⁴

In a half hour a schooner came in sight and worked slowly toward the burning vessel. Then the schooner and vessel drifted southward, out of sight from the Waukegan residents. The fire and smoke drew the attention of people all the way south to Lake Forest. Some set out with wagons loaded with stimulants and food to see if they could aid anyone who might drift ashore from the wreck. During that same time an early morning train was passing the area, enroute to Chicago from Milwaukee, and passengers saw the burning wreck through the train windows.

There was a government life-boat on the beach, but because of the wind and the waves, none would volunteer to man it, fearing it too difficult and dangerous. This caused a lot of accusations. A few days later there was reprinted in the newspaper a couple of letters:

"Office of Collector of Customs

Custom House, Chicago, April 14, 1868

James W. Taylor, Deputy Collector, Waukegan

DEAR SIR:: Upon hearing that the steamer Sea Bird was on fire off Waukegan, a few days since, I had fully expected to hear from you that the life-boat of the government, under your charge, had been used to render aid in rescuing the unfortunate passengers and crew from the burning wreck. It was reported to be in full view of the lighthouse, where the boat is kept. I have been waiting ever since, in expectation of a report from you in relation to the service of this boat on the occasion of that melancholy disaster. I am still in expectation of your report on the subject.

This boat was put in full repair last summer, under your supervision, at a cost of \$67.

If the boat could render no assistance, on an occasion and under circumstances like these, it is but a useless expense for the government to pretend to keep and repair such a boat.

I hope I shall soon have your report, and know the reason, if any exists, why the boat was not sent to rescue the sufferers.

Your most obedient servant,
WALTER B. SCATES, Collector

WAUKEGAN, April 15, 1868

Hon. Walter B. Scates, Collector of Customs, Chicago

⁵³Manitowoc Pilot, April 17, 1868

⁵⁴accounts from The Chicago Times and The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868

DEAR SIR: I received your letter of the 14th inst. this a. m., and hasten to reply. I have made no report to you in regard to the burning of the steamer *Sea Bird*, because I had none to make, neither did I know that any was expected of me. The government life boat was not used, because it was thought worse than useless by experienced sailors to attempt to do anything under the circumstances.

The *Sea Bird* was about ten miles southeast from Waukegan when she was burned; she could not be seen from the lake shore, but from the high bluff on which the city is built she was plainly visible. A strong gale was blowing from the northeast, which about 10 o'clock changed to southeast. The life boat is a small four-oared boat, and in the teeth of that gale could not have reached the steamer in less than four hours. Still, she would have been put in requisition, but there was a large schooner within a few miles of the steamer, standing for her under a heavy press of canvas, and another a few miles north still nearer to the wreck than we were, running towards it with all the canvas she could carry, and the men who have always gone out when life was in danger, or a crew to be picked off a vessel were on hand, but said it was worse than useless to attempt to row ten miles in the teeth of that gale and expect to get there in time to render any assistance with a large schooner cruising about the steamer and another one making for her as fast as she could. I can assure you that there was no apathy on the part of the citizens here, but we felt ourselves utterly powerless under the circumstances to render any assistance; still, had there been no vessels near the ill-fated steamer an attempt would have been made with the only means at our command, namely, a four-oared lifeboat.

I don't know but I may have erred in not sending the boat out, but if I did every experienced seaman in the place indulged in the same error, and the men who would have manned the boat had she gone out---a brave and resolute set of fellows---who have risked their lives a number of times rescuing the crews of vessels which have stranded on this coast, said under the circumstances there was no use in trying it. I know there are some fair-weather sailors in town who say they did not know there was a boat here, or they would have gone out; but they knew perfectly well, and a few years ago, when a vessel stranded about three miles from here, and went to pieces in a gale, late in the fall, they utterly refused to go out, and some fishermen, who had formerly been seamen, went out three times and brought the crew in. The men who went out then were ready to go out again when the *Sea Bird* was burned, had they seen the remotest possibility of being able to do any good.

The life-boat at this place has been instrumental in saving the lives of a good many persons on this coast, when the attempt seemed to be almost hopeless, and the same men who have risked their lives before are willing and ready to risk them again in saving their fellows, should occasion require; but when those men say the attempt is useless, would you try to send off a crew of lands men, or would you submit to the judgment of those who have been brought up almost on the water? I have seen some severe strictures upon the conduct of the people here, in the Chicago papers, but they are false as they are foolish. I have also seen the statement that I allowed the boat to be destroyed, by neglect. She had laid outdoors for a number of years before I got her, but I had her repainted last fall; she has been housed all winter, is housed now, but can be set in the water in five minutes at any time, and is ready for use.

Very respectfully your ob't servant,
 JAMES W. TAYLOR
 Deputy Collector, Waukegan"⁵⁵

The Search

Someone in Waukegan must have suspected the burning boat was a Goodrich steamer, because a telegraph was sent to Goodrich's office sometime between 6:30 and 7:00 in the morning, describing the burning vessel and the schooner near it. Capt. Goodrich must have suspected it was the *Seabird* because he immediately

⁵⁵The Chicago Tribune, April 17, 1868

outfitted one of the ships in his fleet, the propeller *G. J. Truesdell*, to head up toward the area and search for the rescuing schooner and any survivors. Goodrich himself boarded the 9 o'clock train to Milwaukee to find out what he could. He left the same time the *Seabird* had originally been scheduled to dock in Chicago, 9 o'clock in the morning. Needless to say it never arrived.

The *G. J. Truesdell*, which Goodrich dispatched, had been part of the Goodrich fleet for a year. Previously, the *Truesdell* was owned and operated by the Ryerson and Morris company and operated as a combination lumber and passenger boat between Muskegon and Chicago in competition with the Goodrich company. In March 1867, however, the Ryerson and Morris Company sold out to Captain Goodrich, and along with it, the *Truesdell* was sold for \$50,000. The *Truesdell* was a 158 foot, 498 ton wooden propeller steamer built in Chicago in 1864. The same winter the *Seabird* was being refurbished at the G. S. Rand shipyard in Manitowoc, the *Truesdell* was also there being remodeled. Goodrich had her converted into a very comfortable night boat, and was using her in experimental overnight service on the west shore routes to test public reaction. This overnight service proved such a success that by 1872 the Goodrich company had service almost 365 days a year until the demise of the company in the early 1930's. The *Truesdell* was sold on April 7, 1881 for \$20,000 to Lyon and Company of Ludington, Michigan.⁵⁶

On the morning of April 9, however, the *Truesdell's* mission would be a grim one. Her commander, Capt. Perritt, launched the steamboat from its dock at the Rush Street bridge, put a full head of steam on her, and made it to the area of Lake Forest, some 30 miles away, within two hours. Searching for bodies and survivors the crew of the *Truesdell*, spent three hours traversing the waters in every direction. Remnants of a wreck were seen everywhere, including gang planks, doors, boxes, barrels and other items which were bound around by heaving lines. Fifteen or twenty caps and hats were seen floating, but not one human form was seen anywhere. Finally, the captain and crew gave up and headed back to Chicago. They wouldn't be able to report that they were utterly unsuccessful until they reached the dock in Chicago at 6 o'clock that evening.

Meanwhile Captain Goodrich was not having any better success. According to the Chicago Tribune, he went to Waukegan on the train, but the Chicago Times reported that he exited the train at Lake Forest (they spelled it Lake Forrest), the wreck having been reported some miles to the South. The Captain obtained precious little information when he was there, so the mystery about survivors still remained. Captain Goodrich returned to Chicago on the noon train. Earlier on the 10 o'clock train out of Waukegan, passengers had viewed the burning steamer and estimated that it had drifted four miles south of the town and one and a half miles from shore. Even though it appeared to be a perfect wreck they agreed that there was little cause for anxiety about the passengers and crew, because two schooners had been seen for several hours in the area after the burning steamer had been discovered. This seemed to somewhat calm the fears of anxious inquirers who had crowded the Goodrich steamboat office near the Rush street bridge. At any rate there was nothing to do but wait.

The Wait and the Suspense

Manitowoc was isolated from the news all morning, but late in the afternoon telegrams started coming into the telegraph office at Shepard's jewelry store on York Street. Mr. Shepard served double duty as store operator and telegraph operator. He was a busy man that afternoon. One of the first telegrams was an overly optimistic one. It was quickly taken to the town newspaper to be typeset for the Thursday morning edition. Too late to be corrected after updated news was telegraphed, the newspaper read:

STR. SEA BIRD BURNED!

We stop our press after working off part of our edition to announce that a dispatch was received this [Thursday] afternoon by Mr. HURSON, at Milwaukee, announcing that the steamer Sea Bird, which left here

⁵⁶Red Stacks Over the Horizon, James L. Elliott

Wednesday noon, was burned off Waukegan early this morning. All saved.⁵⁷

There could possibly a connection between this telegram and a sinking of another *Seabird* the same night, April 9. This one was a schooner that sank in 20 feet of water off Kelley's Island in Lake Erie. Unlike the steamboat, though, all aboard were rescued, and the schooner could be raised without much difficulty. The report of this schooner's sinking could have been telegraphed along with the steamboat's report, and the two might have been mixed up.⁵⁸ A Milwaukee newspaper had put the two reports one after the other in the same column. The schooner report was listed as having come from Sandusky, Ohio.⁵⁹

Another telegram from Captain Goodrich was delivered to his brother J. M. Goodrich who operated a store down the street from Shepard's jewelry. It, and subsequent telegrams, were less optimistic, and offered little information other than the burned steamer was believed to be the *Seabird* and possibly many lives were lost. About 6:00 in the evening the telegraph quit working, and despite the waiting and nervous crowd that gathered at the jewelry store, Mr. Sheperd could not put it back into operation until early Friday morning, when the real news of the *Seabird* was delivered.⁶⁰

The Seabird Sinks

During the day increasing numbers of people gathered along the Lake Michigan shore line in the vicinity of the burning wreck. Many came from Waukegan, but others had come by train and horse from all parts. The number grew to thousands. Some were fearful relatives and friends, some were curiosity seekers, and some undoubtedly had darker motives. Most picked up a relic or two of the pieces floating ashore. There were the outsides of the wheel houses, the upper braces, charred clothes pins, broken stools, piles of cordwood, boxes shipped from Manitowoc, empty flour barrels, lumps of flour resembling half-baked dough cakes with dry flour in the center, and hundreds of bushels of charred embers resembling charcoal. Curiously, it was reported, no furniture or personal property had been washed ashore, nor was there any sign of human beings, alive or dead. People with spyglasses kept a lookout, but little was seen other than a sailor on lookout in the rigging of a schooner, believed to be the *Merrimac*, which tacked about the burning steamer an hour or more. The hopes of survivors diminished with each hour. Slowly the burning hulk drifted further south and closer to shore.⁶¹

Close to noon the hulk had drifted nearly three miles south of Waukegan and a mile from shore. A reporter said it looked like a long, black streak in the water, but from the bluffs above the beach people could recognize projectiles, like paddle boxes, on either side, giving further confirmation it was indeed a steamboat. At noon it had drifted to three-quarters of a mile off shore about a mile and a half north of Rockland Station. There, as the reporter observed, it seemed to remain stationary for a long time, not moving out or in, as though stranded on a sand-bar. Suddenly the south end of it raised about ten feet in the air, and remaining poised for an instant, the whole suddenly darted beneath the waves. It was estimated to have sunk in twenty feet of water. During calm periods in the water, one could detect, with the eyes, a black projection.⁶²

At about 1:00 in the afternoon, a side of a paddle box washed ashore. Except for slightly charred ends, it gave no indication that it had come off a burning steamboat. The side was large enough to have supported twenty people if they had climbed aboard it. A group of people turned it over. There, on its bottom side, were the large, painted letters SEA BIRD.

⁵⁷Mantowoc Pilot, April 10, 1868.

⁵⁸The Chicago Times & The Toledo Blade, both April 10, 1868

⁵⁹The Daily Milwaukee News, April 10, 1868.

⁶⁰Red Stacks Over the Horizon by James L. Elliott and the Manitowoc Pilot newspaper, April 17, 1868.

⁶¹The Chicago Tribune and The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868.

⁶²additional information from The Chicago Times, April 11, 1868

More Waiting

In the early afternoon back in Chicago there was little to do but wait. Captain Goodrich had returned with little information, the propeller *Truesdell* was still out, and there was no new information from telegraphed or eyewitness reports. The one remaining hope is that a schooner, which was in the vicinity at the time of the fire, would arrive in Chicago with news. Anxious people continued to crowd the Goodrich offices on the south bank of the Chicago River just east of the Rush Street bridge. There were friends of the passengers and crew, merchants who had goods on board, newspaper reporters and others. Captain Goodrich and his clerks would try to reassure them, but as the time wore on, their doubts and fears increased.

Some people kept a continuous watch for all incoming vessels to the river. Those with eyeglasses scanned the vessels on the lake and others hailed each vessel passing the shore or coming up the river. The Goodrich office estimated the *Truesdell* to return around 2 o'clock, but it didn't. A cold wind blew steadily. Returning schooners had their shrouds covered with icicles from the spray of the lake. The seamen aboard the vessels all looked cold and exhausted. Each vessel's crew was asked about the *Seabird*, but none had any answer to give.

The Bad News Arrives

Finally at ten minutes past 4 in the afternoon, a schooner, with a flag of stars fluttering at her mast head, came up the river under the tow of a steam tug. A throng of people on both sides of the river, as they did with every other vessel, scanned the decks for *Seabird* survivors. One of Captain Goodrich's employees hailed her:

"Where do you come from?"

"The foot of the lake."

"See anything of the Sea Bird?"

"Got two of them here."

"Where are the rest?"

"That's all, these two."⁶³

The answerer pointed at two men clad in gray coats standing motionless at the afterdeck. The tug pulling the schooner kept its course past the Rush Street bridge and other bridges up the river. Crowds of unbelieving people chased after the boats asking repeatedly about the *Seabird* and receiving similar answers: "she is burned and all her passengers and crew are lost, saving the two men you see before me." Finally the schooner stopped at a mooring opposite the Lumber Exchange between Wells and Franklin Street.⁶⁴

The schooner was the *Cornelia*, a 298 ton vessel that carried lumber on the lakes. This day she was headed from Manitowoc to Chicago with a cargo of cedar posts. Now she was also carrying two survivors of the *Seabird* disaster. Some newspapers, including The Toledo Blade and The Daily Milwaukee News, got the ship's name wrong. They called it the *Cordelia*. The following day The Daily Milwaukee News got it right, but even to this day there are still some books which have misspelled it.

The *Cornelia* hadn't even finished mooring before it was swarming with people. Captain Goodrich had made it aboard too, and promptly started questioning one of the survivors. The names of the two men were Albert C. Chamberlain and Edmund Hennebury. The survivors, captain and crew were barraged with questions. Later they were extensively questioned by the newspaper reporters for the next morning's editions. Chamberlain was described in the newspapers as being a young man, of medium size, light complexion, and "well put together." He had on a grayish white coat with small spots where flakes of fire had fallen upon him. In his hands were a rope and a life-preserver, which he said he intended to preserve. Hennebury was described as more heavily built than Chamberlain, looking strong, rugged and robust. His fingers showed signs of frostbite. They had been frozen, he said.

⁶³The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

⁶⁴continuing accounts from The Chicago Times and The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

The best information about what really happened to the *Seabird* on the fateful morning of April 9, 1868, could only be given by the *Seabird's* two survivors and by the witnesses aboard the *Cornelia*. Anything else would only be conjecture based upon scant material evidence. The following paragraphs will be devoted to the statements they made to the newspapers of that time.

The Statement of Captain Yates

The account of Captain Yates, the skipper of the *Cornelia* was paraphrased by the newspapers. Yates was said to have described that when about three miles southeast of Waukegan, a thick smoke was seen to envelope a steamer about a mile distant, which had been in sight for a few minutes. Soon lurid flames began to leap from the deck and ports of the steamer, and the pilot of the *Cornelia* was ordered to port helm and make for the spot. Full sail was crowded on, and in a short time the schooner was alongside the burning steamer. By this time the passengers on the steamer had leaped into the water to escape burning, and several men, clinging to fenders, planks, and doors, were seen struggling with the waves. The yawl was immediately lowered, but, before the drowning men could be reached, they had succumbed to the benumbing influence of the cold, and had sunk to rise no more. The steamer was undergoing a swinging motion, with her engines in full blast, so that a near approach was highly dangerous. By means of the yawl the rescuers were enabled to get near enough to discover two men clinging to the burning ship, one at the bow, and the other hanging on the after davits. These were rescued, the first, Chamberlain, having lashed himself to the bow, with knife in hand and arms free, so as to cut himself loose in case the vessel should sink or the flames advance upon him; while the hands of Hennebury were found to be frozen stiff, and himself nearly exhausted. With the two men on board, the *Cornelia*, finding no other survivors to be rescued, put about for Chicago, where she arrived at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Captain Yates says that he would have cruised in the vicinity of the wreck all day if he thought there might have been the slightest chance of picking up any more, but, after diligent search, and from what the survivors told him, he thought further staying in the neighborhood useless.⁶⁵ We shall later see that Captain Yates' account differs from other accounts about where they rescued Hennebury.

The Statement of George Jacobson

Another account described by the newspapers was that of the *Cornelia's* second mate, George Jacobson. His description was similar to Captain Yates, but we will print it here anyway. He stated that at seven o'clock on the morning of Thursday, while about six miles northeast of Waukegan, being bound for Chicago with a deck load of lumber, those on board saw a steamer on fire, distant about eight miles in a southeasterly direction. There was a great smoke, and the blaze could be seen quite plainly. Captain Yates, of the *Cornelia*, at once put the vessel about on the larboard tack. She sailed on this tack for nearly two hours, by which time the wreck was three or four miles in shore. He had kept a lookout for persons floating in the water, but though he saw many pieces of the wreck, he descried no person until just as the schooner was putting about again, on the starboard tack, he saw a man standing on a plank, distant about three miles away. The man was standing erect and waved his arm. About ten o'clock the schooner brought to near the wreck, which was nearly burned out. A heavy sea was running, and it was difficult to let down the yawl. Mr. Jacobson and three of the crew got into the boat and put off for the wreck. They at first saw no one on board, but as they rowed around they saw a man lashed to the fore chains. They took him off and he proved to be Mr. Albert C. Chamberlin, of Sheboygan Falls. There was no one else on the wreck. The hull was pretty well burned out, and they could see the engine and her boilers. After getting Chamberlin on board the schooner, they put off for the plank, where they rescued Hennebury. The two men were properly cared for, and put on shore in Chicago shortly after 4 o'clock p. m.⁶⁶

The Statement of Edmund Hennebury

The next account will be from Edmund Hennebury. While his account was given in both the Chicago Times and the Chicago Tribune, he is directly quoted in the Tribune. This is the one this writer uses:

⁶⁵The Chicago Times, April 10 & 11, 1868.

⁶⁶The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868

"I am a sailor by occupation; am twenty-two years old, and I live at Sheboygan, where I spent last winter. At 3 o'clock on Wednesday afternoon I went on the Sea Bird to come to Chicago, as it was about time to look for a vessel to go on. There were eight or ten others besides myself who left Sheboygan on the Sea Bird. Among those were John O'Brien, a comrade of mine, aged twenty-one years, a man named Gallagher, and Piercy, who stopped in Sheboygan during the winter, but who lives in Detroit. There were two ladies, besides, whose names I do not know. There were about 100 people on board the boat, including the crew, I should judge. There were eight or ten ladies on board, and seven or eight small children.

"I went into my berth about 11 o'clock. At about 3 o'clock in the morning I remember we stopped at Racine, but I don't know whether anyone got on board. The cargo of the Sea Bird consisted of all sorts. There were many boxes and bales, several bags of wool, etc.

"I got up early this (Thursday) morning---about 5 o'clock. I had been up about an hour and a half, I should think, when I saw smoke arising on the main deck, in the port quarter, and just below the ladies cabin. The smoke I had hardly noticed when I saw a blaze spring up. The fire seemed to have been kindled right on deck. There were a lot of tubs and some straw lying near, and the fire got among them right away. I at once cried out "Fire! fire!" Several of the crew who were up came hurrying to where the fire was, the bell was rung, and the passengers who were not up before came tumbling out of their berths and state-rooms. Instantly there was great confusion, and with this the fire increased so rapidly as made me convinced that it must have been burning a long time before I discovered it. The fire was a long way aft of the engine and boiler in the port quarter. The flames sprung up, and spread almost instantly into the ladies' cabin overhead, throughout the freight on the main deck; it did not seem to take five minutes before the after part of the boat was all on fire. The fire spread into the ladies cabin so rapidly that I do not think all the women had time to leave it. I heard some one say that some of the ladies and children were burned.

"We all rushed into the forward part of the boat. Back of the engine the boat was all in flames. Some of the crew tried to get at the small boats, which were aft. I went with them, but we did not get farther than the smoke stack. It was no use trying; the whole after part was burning up, and the boats themselves were on fire. I was perfectly cool all the time. I knew the boat was "going up," and somehow or other I felt that I was all right. So I waited about ten minutes, I think, before I, with the assistance of five or six others, shoved the gangplank overboard.

"During this time the flames were making great headway, and in five or six minutes after the fire was first seen by me the engines stopped working. All the passengers had crowded into the bow, and some of them, the women and children, especially, were crying and wringing their hands and moaning in a way pitiful to see and hear. Six or seven of us shoved the gangplank over, just forward of the paddle boxes. I waited until the gangplank had floated past, and then I jumped. I was the first man overboard. I swam to the gangplank, and ten or fifteen other followed me. So many of us on the plank caused it to sink, and we all had hard work to keep it and ourselves up.

"I got along pretty well, until three or four, seeing that I was holding my own, got around by me and took hold of me. I shook them all off, except a colored boy, the cook's helper. He put both arms about my neck, and I could not shake him off. I then helped him to get on the plank, and one man, who was about twenty-five years old, and wore a mustache and whiskers, caught hold of my wrist and drew me on the plank. Johnnie O'Brien I helped on the plank two or three times. He was washed off almost as soon as I could get him on. We all struggled hard, but there wasn't a man said a word. I got hold of one of the gangplank ropes, and I stuck to it until I was picked off. I could see about me men having hold of boxes, chairs, fenders, and two men I saw clinging to a bag of wool. We floated past the bag, and one of the men said to me---he wasn't more than ten feet away---"You're going pretty fast." There was a heavy sea, and after we had

been in the water fifteen or twenty minutes, a swell lifted the plank and capsized it. All who had hold of it, except me, were washed away, and I did not see any of them any more. I was chilled through.

"The water was almost at freezing point. I was just able to climb on to the gangplank after the rest had gone, and I knew that if I staid in the water I could not live long. So I stood up on the gangplank and steadied myself by the ropes. I had all my clothes on, and these were soon frozen so they were stiff. As I stood on the gangplank, all alone by myself, I had no thought of death; the same confidence I had felt in being saved, from the first, still clung to me.

"I looked about me, and, though the sea was rolling heavily, I could see the lake's surface dotted here and there with pieces of the wreck, to many of which men were clinging. About half a mile away I saw one of the boat's fenders, and a woman was clinging to it. As I watching her I saw her disappear under a swell. I saw the fender afterwards, but she was gone. The boat drifted to the leeward, in shore, much faster than I on the gangplank. About twenty minutes after I had left her, I saw the crowd of passengers all gathered on the hurricane deck. Many of the men were stripped to their shirts. Nearly all of them had life preservers or were lashed to tables, planks, boxes and doors. This was about the last I saw of the boat. I did not hear any screaming or cries; the sea made a noise that drowned all that. The last I noticed particularly about the wreck she was burned almost to the water's edge, and the walking beam was just falling in.

"I was chilled through, and felt myself freezing. I did not dare let go of the ropes, for if I did I would be washed away. So I changed hands, although my fingers were soon frozen stiff. About 9 o'clock I saw a schooner bearing south, about two miles away, and under full sail. I know they saw me on board, and I know they must have seen the burning wreck; but they did not bear down on me, and kept right on. It was freezing just like winter, and I could not have held out much longer, when, about ten o'clock, I saw a schooner, which had been four or five miles to windward, tack about and bear down on me. This proved to be the *Cornelia*. She passed me first and went down to the wreck, to the leeward. She sent out her small boat, and took off Chamberlin from the forward netting, and then came back for me. About 11 o'clock they took me off. I was pretty near frozen. I went into the cabin where I took off my clothes and dried them. We arrived in Chicago about a quarter past 4, and I at once went to a doctor, who gave me something to take, and something for my hands, which were frozen."⁶⁷

The Statement of Albert C. Chamberlain

The final statement, and one which seemed to be the most quoted, was that of Albert C. Chamberlain. Captain Goodrich himself interviewed Chamberlain first, according to one newspaper. It is a long and dramatic account, since he was aboard the *Seabird* to the last. While both newspapers quoted his statement, the Chicago Tribune seems to have it more complete, which this writer uses:

"I got on board the Sea Bird at Sheboygan about 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon. There was a heavy sea on at the time---so heavy, in fact, that a gang-plank could not be put ashore for the passengers to go on board or walk off. The passengers jumped off and on, and the freight had to be thrown off and taken on by the same means. The Captain seemed to be in a hurry, no doubt fearing to do some damage to the wharf by coming in contact with it. He said to the crew and those who were going aboard "hurry up!" several times.

"There were about ten passengers got aboard at Sheboygan, including myself and three ladies, one of whom was a friend of mine named Miss Sprague from Sheboygan Falls. She was about twenty years of age and very prepossessing. She was on her way to visit some relatives at LaCrosse. Most of the passengers who got on at this place were bound for Chicago. Miss

⁶⁷The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868

Sprague secured a berth in the after part of the ladies' cabin, and I one in the forward cabin. We reached Milwaukee about half past 9 in the evening, put off some passengers and freight, and took some on. I suppose about fifty got off and about the same number got on.

"We left there about half past 10 and arrived at Kenosha about 12 o'clock. The weather had moderated somewhat, there was little or no sea on. Everyone on board was in good spirits, and no one had the least apprehension of danger being so near at hand. We left Kenosha in about half an hour, some passengers having gone ashore, and others got on board. When we started from Sheboygan supper was ready. All who could get seats sat down, but the table had to be set three times before all were accommodated. I think there were about 120 (?) persons on board, including the crew. Of these, one hundred were passengers. We reached Racine at 4 a.m., landed some freight, but took no passengers on board. I had stateroom No. 26 in the forward cabin, and retired about 11 o'clock. We remained at Racine some fifteen or twenty minutes, and then left. This I learned from my friend Hennebury.

"About half past six o'clock this morning, when about eight miles southeast of Waukegan, I was aroused by a loud cry. I could not at first tell what it was. I thought probably it was the crew fighting down below. There were loud knocks and indistinct cries. I got up and looked out the state-room door to see what was the matter. I saw the crew and passengers rushing forward through the cabin. The tables were all set, ready for breakfast. They had just finished setting them. I dressed and rushed out. I then heard someone cry, "Fire! Fire!" It was the watchman, who ran through the cabins to arouse the sleepers. Everything was confusion. The passengers were rushing forward, the ladies and children crying and weeping. They all seemed powerless to aid themselves or others. The men rushed around frantically, looking for some means to save themselves. The little children clung to their mothers, crying and impeding their progress towards the bow. The women implored the men to save them; some fell on their knees and prayed to God to save them.

"By this time the flames had gained considerable headway, and threatened with destruction the entire vessel. I looked towards the stern and saw the after cabin full of smoke and flames shooting upwards in different parts of it. The excitement and confusion became terrible. The passengers, in their hurry to escape from their state-rooms, had forgotten to dress themselves and were running around *in dishabille*, interfering with the few who had sufficient presence of mind to attempt to stay the progress of the flames.

"The flames were all the time increasing, and in five or ten minutes the whole upper portion of the boat was at the mercy of the fiery element, with the exception of the pilot house, and that portion of the deck forward, which had as yet not been reached by the flames. The lower decks had, up to this time escaped, but were full of smoke. Some of those on board endeavored to get below, but were driven back owing to the smoke almost suffocating them.

"Miss Sprague had complained of being sick from the rolling of the vessel and had retired early. It is my belief she was suffocated by the smoke, as I did not see her among those who rushed forward to escape from the flames. She was probably asleep, and had not been awakened, as the flames had extended to that portion of the cabin before the watchman had time to knock at her door. The fire broke out very near her state-room.

"As soon as I saw there was a probability of the vessel being lost I went to my state-room, and put my hand under the bunk to see if there were any life-preservers. I found two, and took them on deck. The flames soon reached where I was, and I went down on the lower deck---forward---to see what chance there was there to escape. The crew were hallooing to get out the horse---a valuable one which we had taken on in Milwaukee. They hoped they would be able to save themselves by clinging to the animal. I did not stop to see whether they got the horse out, on account of there being so much smoke. I left there, and went on the upper deck again and helped stave a portion of it, which kept the flames back for a short time. The second mate, Leander Packard, and I, worked as much as we could, breaking off stanchions and planks and everything that would add fuel to the flames, but we were driven back by the intense heat. We

worked away, notwithstanding, for some time longer, farther forward, but were at length compelled to desist. When I commenced to help the second mate I pulled off my overcoat and laid it down on the deck. When I ceased I put one of the life-preservers on, and my overcoat over that. A man seeing I had two life-preservers, asked me for one, and I gave it to him. I thought my overcoat would be a great benefit to me while I staid on the boat, as the wind was blowing very strong from the east, and it was very chilly. I thought, and rightly, too, that it would protect me from the cold weather.

"There was a heavy sea on at this time, and it was increasing. I staid among the crowd a few minutes, and, looking around, saw the Captain in his shirt sleeves, apparently dumb. He gave no orders that I heard, so utterly was he taken aback. He seemed to be very calm---in fact, was the only one on board who had entire presence of mind. He had no cap on, and stood there looking at the crowd as if riveted to the deck. I then made for the bow of the boat, and got as far forward as possible.

"At this juncture the passengers nearest the flames began to jump from the sides of the vessel into the lake. The mate and I threw the steps of the pilot-house overboard. Only a few jumped into the water. There were no ladies among them. The ladies and little children were in the extreme forward part of the vessel. There were three families aboard; six or eight ladies and about ten children. I saw them running around.

"When the cry of fire was first started some of the passengers said "head her ashore." The pilot attempted to do so, but turned the helm "hard a-port," which threw her off the shore. She turned around once and then remained headed towards the centre of the lake, drifting slowly down towards Chicago. The last wind blew her towards the shore. When she ceased turning the engine stopped. By this time the hurricane deck was all burned off, and the timbers falling in, set the lower decks ablaze.

"I did not see any of the passengers have any life preservers. I presume they did not know where to find them, or, if they did, were so terror-stricken that they were unable to go for them. Six or seven more jumped into the water about this time. This was about half an hour after I was aroused by the cry of fire. I took a position at the step of the flag-pole in the bow of the boat, and was able to see what was going on aft of me without any difficulty. I took out my knife and cut the halyards down, thinking they would be of some use. I doubled them four or five times, intending to tie them to a staple in the post and lash myself to the post, knowing that as long as the vessel remained above water, the post would also. There were two men below me hanging on to the plank projecting from the side of the vessel. Their fingers became numb from the cold, and losing their hold they fell off and were drowned. The second mate came to where I was then, and I assisted him to take out the flag-pole. He threw it overboard and jumped after it. I never saw him again. Looking overboard I could see planks, doors, benches, chairs, stools and other articles floating around. I observed a number of corpses hanging to some of them. The sight almost made me sick and I turned away. I thought I would soon be in their position and my heart almost failed me. Some of the men were hanging to the sides of the vessel, and every now and then one of them would give a shout and jump overboard, with his mouth wide open. He would go down, come up again, utter a faint cry, and go down again never to rise any more. The water entering their mouths would strangle them. Some of them acted very foolish, I think. If they had kept their mouths closed they might have succeeded in gaining possession of a plank or a box and kept themselves above water for some time, and probably have been saved.

"The excitement, which was all the while increasing, by this time had decreased considerably, owing to there being but a few on the wreck. I saw two men shake hands--their mouths moving as if bidding each other good-bye-and then jump overboard. We had by this time approached to within six miles of the shore. I still remained sitting on the post, but had lashed myself to it. It was very hot where I sat. I was south of the fire. The boat was headed south all the while, and the winds blew the flames aft, and not toward me. Sometimes it was very warm, but I turned my face away as far as I could in order to shield it.

"When the fire became too hot I lowered myself down a little, and was protected by the bow of the boat, standing on the projection. The others that I had previously seen hanging on to it, had dropped off, or jumped off, into the water, and were drowned. There were now but another man and myself on the wreck. This was about three-quarters of an hour from the time the fire was first discovered. This man was standing on the projection, just forward of the gangway, and about thirty feet from me. The fire had burned the side of the vessel out, on both sides of him, and on this small, trail portion of the side he clung. I think he was one of the crew, and assisted in the cook-room. He hallooed to me five or six times, for me to help him---to throw the rope I had to him---as he could not swim. I told him I could not do so, as it was not long enough. He jumped overboard, swam to the bow of the vessel, and caught hold of a rope hanging over the side, and fastened on the deck to one of the anchors. He held on for three or four minutes, but the water being so intensely cold, he became chilled, dropped off and sunk.

"I hauled up the rope that he had held on by, and fastened it in the anchor chains below me. I coiled it twice around my chest and lashed myself to the chains. The upper end of the rope by this time was on fire, and I reached up and tried to cut it loose. I burned my hand badly in the attempt. The rope finally burned off. The anchors on deck began to settle and draw the chain inward.

"I then spied a sail between the wreck and the land, about four miles off. She stood for the wreck, and then headed the other way. I thought she was going to pass. I braced my feet against the boat and leaned out and commenced swinging my cap as a signal of distress---to let them know there was a survivor on board. They evidently saw my signal, for the schooner was immediately hove to. She was then about half a mile off. A boat was lowered and approached the wreck. I now felt confident that I was going to be saved, and was so overjoyed that I almost fainted. I hung on, however, with a tight grasp. There were four persons in the boat---the first mate, whose name I did not hear, and three of the crew. In about twenty minutes they came up to the wreck. It seemed about twenty hours to me, so anxious was I to be rescued from my dangerous position. The swell was very heavy. They had to approach the wreck very cautiously, as there was a real danger of swamping the boat. They made two ineffectual attempts to reach me. When they were coming the third time, I said, "Have you got a knife? I will have to cut myself down." I could not untie the rope as I was too weak. One of them said, "I have a knife." The knife was handed to me when they got near enough. The swell carried the boat away some distance, but by dint of hard pulling they got quite near again. The mate caught hold of my coat tail and hauled the boat directly under me. I then cut the ropes which bound me, and fell like a dead man into the bottom of the boat. I was so weak that I could cut about half a strand of rope at a time.

"We then started for the schooner. The mate asked me if there were any alive about the wreck. I told him I was confident there was not, unless it was one man, whom I had seen clinging to a pine-plank, but had floated out of sight. He had thrown it overboard when the fire first broke out, and I saw him in the water on it from my post, standing up, holding on by a rope which was attached to it, and swinging the other hand in the air and bringing it against his body to keep himself warm. When he had swung one hand in this manner for some time, he would take hold of the rope with it and swing the other. He did this all the time I saw him. On our way to the schooner we saw him about a mile off, still standing on the plank. The men rowed as fast as possible toward the schooner, which was reached in the course of twenty-five minutes, and, putting me on board, they went after the other man and rescued him. He proved to be Edmund Hennebury.

"I had not eaten anything since the evening before, and was in a very exhausted condition. I went below after eating what was provided by the Captain, and went to sleep. We left the wreck about nine o'clock. Henneberry belongs in Sheboygan Falls. He is a sailor, and on his way to Chicago for the purpose of shipping. His fingers were frozen very badly when they brought him on board. He was wet through, and had no hat on his head. He threw the gangplank

over, and then jumped over and swam to it. He was very nearly dead when they reached him. When on board he was provided with dry clothing by the Captain, and brought to himself again by the use of restoratives.

"All those who jumped into the Lake were benumbed by the cold water, and consequently unable to swim any distance, but immediately sunk. If the weather had been mild there is no doubt but that many could have clung to the floating planks and boxes until aid had arrived. I tied the life preserver around my body, thinking if the boat would break in two, I might be able to keep above water and swim to a plank, and thus secure a position that I could retain until assistance came. I heard one of the waiters ask the second mate if he should take off his boots. The mate told him he could swim better by doing so---if he could get them off. They jumped over but were soon drowned. The boiler must have contained an unusual quantity of steam, as it was hissing terribly, and I feared the boiler would explode; but it did not. The corpses in the water presented a ghastly appearance. The faces and bodies were burned and scalded, and having no clothing on, were horrible to look upon.

"Captain Yates, of the schooner *Cornelia*, who rescued Hennebury and myself, acted nobly, and I wish to express my heart felt gratitude to him and the crew, for their kindness in rescuing me from the wreck and providing all that was necessary to make me feel comfortable while on board their vessel. There was an agent of Mr. Uhlrich, of this city, on board the steamer. I have a wife residing in Sheboygan Falls, and was on my way to this city to purchase furniture, being in that business at home. The schooner *Cornelia* arrived at this port at 4:15 p. m. today, and landed us safely. I am very thankful for my providential escape, and extremely sorry for the fate of those who took passage on the ill-fated steamer.

"In regard to the origin of the fire, I was told by some on board that just before the fire was discovered the porter was observed to take two buckets of live coals from the cabin above and throw them overboard. Directly under him were a large number of buckets and poles packed in straw. The supposition is that some of the coals fell among the straw, and it igniting, set the buckets, etc., on fire. The flames were first seen issuing from this part of the vessel. That is about the only plausible story in reference to the origin that I know of."

Evidently Mr. Chamberlain was unaware that his friend, Miss Sprague, had departed the vessel in Milwaukee, as this writer previously stated, and therefore he thought that she had perished in the flames. After he cleared himself from the crowd, Mr. Chamberlain hurried to the telegraph office to send a message to his wife in Sheboygan that he was alive.

The Origin of the Fire

There had been unconfirmed reports from people ashore that they heard a boiler explode on the *Seabird*, but the newspapers, upon hearing the reports of the two survivors, agreed that the fire must have been caused by a porter carelessly emptying out a bucket of live coals and ashes. The Chicago Times even added a note of racism, when it put the blame on "the culpable carelessness of a colored porter." Both Chamberlain and Hennebury agreed that a porter was seen to have a bucket of ashes mixed with live coals that had been removed from a wood-burning stove, possibly one in the ladies area, and instead of taking them to the place in the wheel house where they could have been safely thrown into the water, he carried them aft. There, above the quarter-deck he threw them overboard. Unfortunately his side of the vessel was the windward side, and the wind had picked up to fierce proportions. The coals blew back into the deck and ports below. In the aft section below were pails and tubs, the ones that this writer believes were salvaged from the fire of the Joseph Mann pail and tub factory in Two Rivers. This wooden-ware was newly varnished and packed in straw, a very volatile mixture. Chamberlain and Hennebury were positive the fire started clear aft. Most of the passengers were asleep at that time, and the crew, having no business aft and partaking of breakfast in the forward section, were unaware of the events. So the flames had a good chance to make headway before anyone noticed. Captain

Goodrich later stated that, because of this disaster, it was his intention to remove the stoves from his vessels and have them warmed by steam pipes, thus removing the possibility of accident.⁶⁸

Aftermath

After suffering this horror Mr. Chamberlain said that he would never go aboard a steamboat again if he can possibly avoid it. He will, in the future, patronize a sailboat for long or short journeys.⁶⁹ These feelings may have been mellowed somewhat, because it was reported that Captain Goodrich gave each survivor a lifetime pass on the Goodrich line.⁷⁰

On Wednesday evening a large number of citizens of Lake County organized patrols to protect the beaches from plunderers. Bonfires were lit for a mile of shoreline, and men were on watch that night and the next day for any objects washed ashore. Lake County's coroner also announced that he would be readily available for the grim task of identification. Those two days, however, yielded no bodies or clothing. It was reported, though, that mid-afternoon on Wednesday the body of a small terrier was washed ashore about a half-mile south of Rockland Station. Around its neck was a leather collar with a silver plate on which were inscribed the letters "G. W. E." The belief was that it belonged to George W. Emery, who had boarded the *Seabird* in Manitowoc.⁷¹ Thursday morning Captain Goodrich telegraphed Mr. M. H. Wright of Waukegan to get a team and four men and search the beaches as far south as Evanston. A sexton accompanied Mr. Wright.⁷² Much debris lay for days along the shoreline from Evanston to Waukegan. Here's one newspaper's account:

"Immediately opposite the point where the vessel was seen to sink beneath the waves, the shore is fairly littered with the accumulated fractions of the steamer. Here, within a distance of one hundred yards, can be seen the entire side of the wheel-house, of apparently recent construction, and with the words 'Sea Bird' scarcely tarnished. For some reason the men in charge of the district insist on keeping its name downward, but now and then a party of a dozen or more will come upon this portion of the wreck, and their curiosity will not be satisfied until they have seen the name with their own eyes.

"So to gratify their desire, a united effort is made to raise the huge piece of frame-work on end, which is attended with more or less success, according to the number engaging in the enterprise. But in case the feat is accomplished, each one will involuntarily read the name aloud, and after a long look, accompanied with more or less comment, the side is again lowered downward, and with a sigh, and the words 'awful, awful,' the party would mournfully turn away.

"Only a few feet further on, yet partially submerged by water, are two firmly riveted beams which did service in supporting the rudder. They had been fastened near the top of the lower deck, and when severed by the fire fell, almost uninjured, into the water, where the burning end next to the vessel was quickly extinguished. Within a stone's throw from this point, to the south, and not more than a dozen yards apart, lie half submerged the two ponderous deck-projections. They had been held to the sides of the vessel by four inch supports, which, when burnt off, let them into the water, and with them came, of course, the paddle-boxes. Then follows, at short intervals, parts of the upper-deck railings, fish boxes, & c., and sandwiched between these lie stranded cords upon cords of wood."

The newspaper went on to say that some people with telescopes could see a small portion of the wreck projecting from the water.⁷³

A Third Survivor

After the statements of the two survivors, Chamberlain and Hennebury, the newspapers thought that was an end to the tragic tale of the *Seabird*. Many subsequent historical accounts listed only these two as survivors.

⁶⁸The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

⁶⁹The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868.

⁷⁰Red Stacks Over the Horizon, by James L. Elliott.

⁷¹The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868

⁷²The Chicago Times, April 11, 1868

⁷³The Daily Milwaukee News, April 11, 1868

Unknown to the newspapers, and possibly overlooked by the historians, was what was to happen next. On Thursday morning, April 10, another survivor appeared, and with him an even more bizarre tale of survival.

At 4 o'clock in the morning in the town of Evanston, just north of Chicago, Mr. E. Adams, proprietor of a boarding house called the Evanston House, was awakened by a knock on the door and heard the voice of a man pleading to be let in. As one newspaper said, "upon opening the door he beheld a man encased with ice frozen fast to his clothing and presenting a very pitiable condition. The man stated that he was a survivor on the ill-fated steamer Sea Bird, which was enough to insure a hospitable reception at the hands of Mr. Adams. That gentleman immediately ordered supper for his guest, who demurred when he heard the order given. 'But you must be hungry,' suggested Mr. Adams. 'I certainly am,' was the reply, 'having had nothing to eat since Wednesday night. But I have no money, sir. I had some, but it was to the keeping of my wife, and she is gone--all lost.' And tears rolled down the cheeks of the sufferer. Mr. Adams kindly cared for him, providing him with food, lodging, and a suit of clothes." His name was James H. Leonard.⁷⁴

Word quickly spread to Chicago and Milwaukee, too late for the Thursday morning editions announcing the disaster and relating the stories of Chamberlain and Hennebury, but not too late for reporters to come calling at the boarding house door to get particulars from Mr. Leonard. One Chicago newspaper published in their Friday edition a quoted account by Mr. Leonard (portions with dotted lines were unreadable):

The Statements of James H. Leonard

"On Wednesday morning, with my wife, I embarked----the Sea Bird at Manitowoc for Chicago----that day nothing of interest occurred, but about midnight a stiff breeze--ing the boat roll heavily in the sea.,----rendering stoppage at intermediate----extremely difficult. I retired about----o'clock, Wednesday evening and remarked at the time to my wife that it was a terrible evening, an assertion which she acquiesced in with an apprehensive shudder.

"On Thursday morning I arose at 6:30, and went out on the deck cabin to get some air. The boat was rolling as in the night, the lake was extremely rough, and the wind high. On the guards I met the first mate and entered into conversation with him relative to the distance from Chicago, the weather, and the probable hour the boat would reach that city. He informed me we were then off the clay banks, between Lake Forest and Waukegan, and about 25 miles from Chicago. 'If nothing happens,' said he, 'we will reach Chicago about 10 o'clock.'

I repeat his exact words, because to me they now have a strange significance. I then returned to my stateroom, where my wife was still abed. A few moments later I heard the alarm of fire, and, rushing out to ascertain the cause of the alarm, I discovered the after part of the boat in flames, and rapidly involving the cabin which I had just left. I then made an attempt to reach my wife's room, but the intense heat compelled me to withdraw. I called out to my wife to get out. I got no response. The rapidity with which the fire extended drove the passengers forward. The scene at the time was of the most harrowing character. Women in night-dresses and frightened men rushed frantically about seeking agencies of escape. Some jumped overboard with planks, others with chairs, and no sooner had they touched the water than their agonizing shrieks told of their inability to keep above the treacherous element. When the heat compelled me, I too jumped in the water in the direction of a plank which was floating around. By vigorous swimming I reached it, and, fortunately, I soon clambered on a part of the paddlewheel box with which the waves brought me in contact. The piece was just large enough to sustain me, and for twelve hours I was heaved and tossed about. I prayed for relief, but none came, not a sail could I see anywhere. From my position I could hardly discern the shore and for hours I knew not whither I was going. I was chilled almost to death, and the wind blew with a piercing severity. My hands were numb, and I could hardly sustain myself. I saw about 28 persons jump into the water. Most of them sank immediately. I think there were about ten women on board. When the excitement

⁷⁴The Milwaukee Sentinel, April 11, 1868

was at its height we attempted to launch the small boats, but the flames compelled us to desist. The only persons on board I knew were George W. Emery and Joseph Smith, of Manitowoc, and Mr. Chamberlain."⁷⁵

The newspaper account was incomplete as to how Mr. Leonard saved himself. The newspaper was also very skeptical about the truth of Mr. Leonard's statement, saying that the length of time in the water and the direction in which he drifted tended to partially discredit his story. Mr. Leonard's truthfulness, however, was vouched-for by Mr. J. D. Cronant, a student at the Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston who was well acquainted with him.⁷⁶ The Chicago Tribune didn't even mention Leonard's story, and only a week later did they even mention Leonard at all, saying the people of Manitowoc vouched for him.

A week later on April 18th James Leonard made his way to Milwaukee enroute back home to Manitowoc. He stopped to tell an updated story to the Milwaukee News which was also published in the Chicago Times and the Manitowoc Pilot. This is their account:

"The last thing he remembers on board the boat, there was a general confusion and alarm among the passengers, and efforts were being made to knock down the partitions and doors to staterooms. A cry had been made to lower the boats, and a rush was made for that purpose; but it was too late. Mr. Leonard declares that there were four boats aboard, and they were all located aft the wheel-house. They might have been reached two or three minutes after the discovery of the fire, but not afterwards. When the alarm was given, the captain was abed, and the boat was in command of the first mate. The captain immediately appeared on deck, in his pants and vest. There was a cry from some one, at this time, to head the steamer toward shore, and he thinks the wheel was set for that purpose, and then abandoned. The steamer started toward shore and then went round in a circle. He saw the captain and second mate attempt to aid the passengers by getting over partitions and rubbish, after which the captain seemed bewildered, being utterly powerless to do anything further. He believes the officers did all they could under the circumstances, except the steamer possibly might have been stopped on the instant of the general alarm. Mr. Leonard put on a life-preserver and left the boat within ten minutes after the cry of fire. The boat was then covered with heat and flames, and he escaped by jumping to a plank floating in the water, with his clothes and overcoat on. About that instant a piece of the paddle-box, about eight or nine feet square, tumbled overboard. This he secured, and, taking his knife from his pocket, he cut two holes through it, and, with the small rope of his life-preserver, he bound one of his legs to it. A little later, he succeeded in protecting himself from the cold by cutting the cotton wadding from his overcoat, which, with the lining of his coat, he bound about his head and hands. In this manner, he first floated southward and then westward, till about dark, when he reached the breakers on the shore, about ten miles this side of (north of) Evanston. When the schooner *Cornelia* approached the wreck of the *Sea Bird*, Mr. Leonard was about a mile away, but was unable to attract her attention, though he made an attempt by swinging his hand. When he reached the breakers, he was coated all over with ice, and, in order to reach the shore, he was obliged to cut off his overcoat with his knife, when he jumped into the breakers, he found that he could touch the bottom with his feet, and soon reached the dry land. With one leg partially frozen, he clambered up the bank, and wandered along the shore in search of a human habitation, but found none until he approached Evanston.

"In explanation of the errors in his previous statement, Mr. Leonard desires to say that, when he reached Evanston, he was utterly exhausted, and he has but a faint recollection of anything further that occurred that night or the next day. Body and brain for the time being partially paralyzed. He says no person can describe the mental excitement and suffering he endured that

⁷⁵The Chicago Times, April 11, 1868

⁷⁶The Milwaukee Sentinel, April 11, 1868

long wintry day, with the icy water dashing over him, and with but a faint hope of rescue. These, and the reaction which ensued, were sufficient to explain all the discrepancies in his first account. He has no recollection of speaking of his wife, though she was uppermost in his mind throughout the perils he encountered. He has no recollection of many other parts of that statement, some of which are without foundation. He did, however, have a conversation with the mate about half past 6 in the morning, and about 15 minutes before the alarm of fire, in which the mate told him they were about 25 miles from Chicago.

"Mr. Leonard is 27 years of age, and has lived in Manitowoc since 1845, where he was a clerk in the store of George S. Glover five or six years. During the war, he was a member of the 5th Wisconsin regiment; and when going to Chicago on the *Sea Bird*, he was on his way to take possession of a grocery store he has recently purchased there. In all respects he is a respectable citizen, and all who know him may well rejoice at his singular and extraordinary escape from fire and flood."⁷⁷

Additionally The Manitowoc Pilot said that Mr. Leonard stated that the last person he saw jump off the burning steamer was James Leykom. He also saw Doucett, Denahae and Pfeffer, in the water, but the others from Manitowoc he did not see after the alarm was given.⁷⁸

It is strange that the only newspaper account mentioning James Leonard's stop-over in Milwaukee before boarding the *Seabird* again enroute to Chicago was in the April 17, 1868, edition of the Manitowoc Pilot. Also the story is unclear about Mr. Leonard's wife, Martha. Even though James mentioned in his early statement that his wife perished in the flames of the *Seabird*, he later denied having ever spoken about his wife. This writer can find no documentation that his wife ever went aboard the *Seabird*, stopped over in Milwaukee, or even left Manitowoc. The guess is that Mr. Leonard was either delirious or the Chicago papers took some liberties with the truth. There is, however no documentation that she didn't go along either.

In another early newspaper account James Leonard said he saw twenty passengers jump into the water. Some swam around for a time and others seemed to sink almost immediately. He saw no women jump overboard and saw no women in the water. He believed there were about ten women on board, all of whom must have perished in the flames. Leonard also thinks there were not more than thirty passengers, having estimated that a large number of passengers got off in Milwaukee.⁷⁹

Leonard reportedly returned to Manitowoc aboard the *Orion* on April 19th. He didn't complete the deal on the grocery store, but instead stayed in Manitowoc until 1874. Then he moved to Green Bay, taught in schools and became a superintendent of schools. After that he went into the insurance business and had some success. He died in Green Bay in 1901.⁸⁰

Another victim had the name John H. Leonard, who was from Chicago. When his brother learned of James H. Leonard's survival, he rushed to Evanston, carrying a photograph, to see for himself that this wasn't John. To his sorrow, there was no similarity between the two.⁸¹

Another Fire Panic

Panic from fire can happen anywhere, not only at sea. In an ironic twist of fate on the Thursday evening of April 10, Saint Mary's Catholic Church, located at Wabash and Madison streets⁸² in Chicago, was holding a

⁷⁷The Chicago Times, April 19, 1868 as taken from the Milwaukee News, April 18, and also published by The Manitowoc Pilot.

⁷⁸The Manitowoc Pilot, April 24, 1868.

⁷⁹The Milwaukee Sentinel, April 11, 1868.

⁸⁰Fire On The Lake, by Kerry A. Trask., as published in Anchor News, the publication of the Manitowoc Maritime Museum, September/October 1991.

⁸¹The Daily Milwaukee News, April 11, 1868.

church service. There was a settling of some foundation posts, which caused the wood floor to make a momentary snap. This startled the congregation, and just after that, someone in the gallery yelled "Fire." The people in the gallery panicked. They started running for the stairways. Before it was over, and everyone had calmed down, four women were trampled, three of them dead and a fourth gravely injured.⁸³

Placing the Blame

Needless to say Captain Goodrich and his company were devastated by the *Seabird* disaster. He immediately issued a statement to the newspapers on April 10th that in view of the probable criminal carelessness on the part of the porter, it would be his intention to remove the stoves from his vessels and have them warmed by steam pipes. This would remove one possibility of accident. He also explained that he had previously given standing orders to his captains that in the event of a disaster like this, that they were to stop the engines and man the lifeboats immediately. The crew of the *Seabird* failed to follow this order.⁸⁴

It seems that this was the concurring opinion of Alfred Guthrie, the Supervising Inspector of the 8th District. He later issued a report published in 1869 detailing his conclusions and the actions that he took:

"The first severe accident I have to record was the burning of the steamer "Sea Bird", off Waukegan, on Lake Michigan, on the morning of the 9th of April last, by which out of 70 or 75 persons on board only two escaped; nor has there been but one body recovered out of the whole number, it having a life-preserver on it. Of this fearful calamity I am anxious to give an extended account, in the hope that the lesson afforded may be used to others if any should ever be so unfortunate as to be in a like situation.

"The "Sea Bird" was a side-wheel steamer of about 500 tons burden---a stanch, safe and excellent steamer, in every way amply provided with life-boats, life-preservers, force pumps, and steam-pipes for the extinguishing of fires. The smoke stacks, boilers, and stoves were well secured to protect against danger of fire. The boat had been fully inspected and all these safeguards known to be on board.

"The fire was discovered about half-past six o'clock in the morning among a lot of pails and tubs being carried as freight, one pail or tub packed into another, forming stacks of convenient lengths for handling, and placed on the main deck-guards surrounding the ladies' cabin, quite to the stern of the boat, as secure from fire as possible, yet forming a very combustible freight, and made still more dangerous from having been recently varnished, and partially packed in straw, and which if once ignited, would burn with great rapidity. The steamer was then nearly off Waukegan, some several miles out in the lake, the wind blowing from the northeast quite fresh, with a heavy sea running, and the course of the steamer being nearly south along the shore towards Chicago.

"On the instant of the first alarm of fire an order was given from some person, now unknown, to 'port the wheel,' which would turn the boat toward shore; the flames at this time spreading with great rapidity were driven directly through the length of the boat from aft forward, and the wheel which had been put 'aport,' from some cause remained apart; and consequently the steamer swung around in a circle of perhaps one to two miles in diameter. The engine continued running until the steamer had run to windward on the turning point of the circle, when it became disabled and stopped.

"At the commencement of the fire, the schooner "Cornelia" was not far astern, bound also to Chicago. On discovering the fire she laid her course for the steamer in hopes of rendering assistance, but when the steamer had swung around to the direction of the schooner, the captain became alarmed, and thinking she was making for his vessel, he changed his course to avoid her,

⁸²The Daily Milwaukee News, April 12, 1868.

⁸³The Chicago Times, April 12, 1868.

⁸⁴The Chicago Tribune, April 10, 1868.

the steamer swinging down past him away to windward, where she stopped. The schooner was then obliged to beat up to her before any assistance could be rendered, which proved to be too late, except to find one person over the bows and one on a piece of floating wheel-house some way off in the lake, and these were the only persons who escaped.

"The most probable cause of the fire, as brought out by the investigation, was, that one of the porters took up some coal and ashes in cleaning out a stove in the after-cabin, and going out astern and throwing them overboard, the wind blew them in among the pails directly underneath.

"Captain Morris, the master, was off watch at the time; but when the alarm was given he came on deck, but seemed to have lost all power to act, giving no orders or taking the least measure to save the passengers or himself, sharing with all the common fate.

"Mr. Chamberlain, one of the survivors, seems to have been possessed from the first to the last with extraordinary presence of mind. He had early taken two life-preservers from his state-room, one of which he gave to some person asking for it, and adjusting the other to himself and putting on his overcoat, secured himself to the chains over the bows, where he remained until rescued by the 'Cornelia.' He says of all the passengers who were dropping away one after another, very few, if any, had life-preservers, though if they had, owing to the very severe cold of both wind and water, it is hardly probable that a single one would have escaped, but that all would have perished long before reaching shore, though the bodies would likely have floated until found.

"A fruitless effort was made to get down the life-boats, but too late and too feeble to be of any avail; otherwise there does not seem to have been any effort made to retard the flames or to save life.

"Captain Morris had been many years on the lakes, and was considered a prudent and capable officer; but unfortunately, when the trial came, he was found entirely incompetent for his position; and to this want of energy and self-possession, no doubt, in my mind, may be attributed the great sacrifice of human life in this disaster. I feel assured that, had Captain Morris acted with promptitude and instantly stopped his engine, and let the steamer head to the wind, as she would have done, there would have been ample time to launch all the life-boats and have embarked every passenger on board; or with the flames blowing overboard at the stern, and not fanned by the speed of the vessel into the wind, the fire might have been extinguished, or at least retarded, giving time to have cut down the hurricane-deck and upper chain to the main deck, and got them overboard. This would have afforded standing room for the passengers out forward without much danger of being burned, and with the pumps yet at command, the fire could have been at any rate greatly retarded (if not entirely extinguished), when they could have been rescued by the schooner then bearing down upon them.

"Believing most firmly that the great loss of life in this case, as well in a very great majority of other accidents by fire, was occasioned by not stopping the engine on the first alarm of fire, I earnestly recommend the adoption of a rule by the board, or the passage of some law by Congress, making it imperative upon the engineer in all cases of alarm of fire to stop the engine, and not to start it again until receiving a direct-order from the captain to do so. By this, certainly, no harm can be done, as it gives the master a moment for reflection---time to see the extent of the danger, and then to act as circumstances require. Then, if the captain should fail to give an order, it would be infinitely better not to move at all, especially in side-wheel steamers like this. This view is equally applicable even in a narrow river. Passengers are as often as anyway going overboard forward of the paddle-wheels, and are inevitably drawn under and broken up by the wheels. Even if the bow of the steamer should be on shore, and the wheels continue to be turned, the fate of those passengers near them would be as dire as fire could make it; then, again, the certainty of increasing the flame by the motion of the boat should be considered, and the consequences well weighed.

"In view of this fatal case, I at once took the responsibility of posting in the engine-room printed orders to the engineers, that in all cases on the first alarm of fire he shall stop the engine

and not start it again without direct orders from the officer in charge. This order is generally approved by owners and masters of steam-vessels in my district, but still it is assuming considerable responsibility, and I should prefer to have it approved by the board."⁸⁵

Only One Body Recovered

Mr. Guthrie referred to one recovered body in the early part of his report. This was the body of Robert A. Scott, an employee of George W. Wood & Company who boarded the *Seabird* in Milwaukee and whose body was reported washed ashore at Glen Cove (now known as Glencoe?) on the morning of April 13.⁸⁶ A minor scandal ensued when George Wood tried to find a temporary space for storing the remains of Mr. Scott. A man named Ayers refused them a space in the Highland Park station house and other locals were just as unwelcoming. Finally a man from Waukegan lent his assistance to have the body decently cared for. The body of an unidentified woman was also found a few miles south of Waukegan.⁸⁷ There was also a theory written as to why no other bodies were found. One newspaper gruesomely related a suggestion that drowned bodies generally float to the surface because of gas created in the stomachs by decaying bacteria. Because of the depth and the cold, however, this was prevented. Thus the bodies wouldn't float. A ship named the *Niagra* sank in 1815, and no bodies were ever found.⁸⁸

Salvage

On August 4, 1868, the Chicago newspapers reported that the propeller ship *Truesdell* traveled to the wreck site the day before (Sunday), reported to be three miles south of Waukegan. A diver was sent down and, walking about it, reported the hull had been broken in two about midship. No bodies were found. The anchor and safe were hoisted aboard the *Truesdell*, which headed back to Chicago about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. At that time the machinery was not removed.⁸⁹ In another newspaper report dated August 28, which this writer couldn't locate, stated wreckers were at work on the *Seabird*. The hull projected four feet above high water. The anchor chains, steam pipe and part of the machinery had been recovered.⁹⁰

Financial Blow

This disaster was another severe blow to the Goodrich Steamboat Line, coming as it did but five years after the loss of the *Sunbeam*. To make matters worse, while Albert Goodrich was able to recoup some of his losses with the *Sunbeam* through insurance claims, he recouped nothing with the *Seabird*. He told one newspaper that he valued the *Seabird* at \$50,000, and although he had intended to have the steamship insured very soon, he failed to do so at the time of its disaster. Why he didn't is a mystery.⁹¹ This lack of insurance also left him at the mercy of liability action. So on June 19, 1873, Goodrich filed in United States Circuit Court in Chicago for limitation of liability. The presiding judge, named Blodgett, refused to set an amount limitation but appointed appraisers to look into it. It was determined that the value of the *Seabird* was \$22,000. On July 30 Goodrich went back to court and won a limitation ruling for that amount. Despite this financial blow, business was good. It was so good that one week after the disaster, on April 18, Goodrich took advantage of a newly passed Wisconsin Incorporation Bill and turned his company into a corporation and sold stock in it. His new corporation would have an official port-of-hail of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, the location of his shipyards, but the corporate offices were in Chicago. The newly-formed Goodrich Transportation Company prospered, despite numerous ups and downs, all the way to the end of 1932, when it fell victim to escalating costs of operation and the Great Depression.⁹²

⁸⁵Alfred Guthrie, Supervising Inspector 8th Dist, 1869--Steamboat Inspec, pg 73/75, from Lytle list in the Mariners Museum Library, Newport News, Virginia.

⁸⁶The Daily Milwaukee News, April 14, 1868.

⁸⁷The Chicago Tribune, April 14, 1868.

⁸⁸The Chicago Tribune, April 17, 1868.

⁸⁹The Chicago Tribune, August 4, 1868

⁹⁰from the files of The Dossin Great Lakes Museum, Detroit, Michigan, crediting The Chicago Tribune, August 28, 1868.

⁹¹The Chicago Times, April 10, 1868

⁹²Red Stacks Over the Horizon, James L. Elliott.

Letter Found

Another footnote to the *Seabird* disaster in an April 26 newspaper of a letter purporting to have been written by a passenger:

"Day before yesterday afternoon, while a couple of gentlemen who are engaged as teachers in the Academy of L. M. Johnson, Esq., at Lake Forest, were walking on the shore near that place, they saw something in the water which looked like clothing. They procured a pole and succeeded in getting it out. It turned out to be a common cloth coat tied up in a knot with the sleeves. They opened it and found tied up in the coat itself a letter written in lead pencil on a coarse sheet of wrapping paper and done up in a piece of yellow paper, on which was written: "To owners boat." The writing on the paper is much worn and blurred, but all can be made out with the exception of a few words. It is as follows:

'On Board the Sea Bird..

'Whoever picks this up, will pleas have it publisht in some paper, or carry it to the owner of the boat. The fire caught in the engine room and then spred to some pails being on the deck. The captain give orders to stop the boat, but the flames would not permit any bode to go into the room. Everything was done by the captain that he could and the mate to. They are brave men, lots jumped into the water and are drowning and some are burning to death. The captain gave orders to stop the boat by throwing anker, but it still moves. I shall try to swim on a board to shore. I can't write much more the fire burns so fast. The captain has put all the money and some watches with a cask and thrown it over. Everything is marked.

Carl Bostwick

'West _____

'I think forty or 50 are burning in the cabin and no one can reach them. An attempt was made by Mr. _____ to pry off a piece of the cabin, but was driven back by the flames. Can't write any more.'

"In the breast pocket of the coat were found the following letters in ink, one of which obscurely hints at disreputable practices on the part of the writer.

'Ann Arbor, March 19, '68

'Dear C.: I received your last letter, and will do as you said in regard to all those old cloths. Most all of the men in town are supplied, and I cannot sell them, so that you must see that they are in time for the slow market. Your wife was over here last night, and she will be down to see Emma in a month or so. Tell Sam that we must have a new lamp and some flour. We have used almost all of it up, and cannot see where the next is coming from. I paid the bill that you wanted me to, and have all of the receipt in my darw(?). Come home as soon as you can, for we must have ___ new things, as well as that which I told you about. All of the children arr well, and the baby is in good health.

'Your sister,

Kelly

'Send me some of those horse bite, for I am in great need of them. The girl is _____, and we can keep them away from her they will do well. Four of the _____ were on my track but I gave them the slip. We must keep her until they offer a huge reward and we will give her up.

'D _____ brought __ two nice watches and a coat. Good for one night. All men on watch for * * * * and we will soon be rich men. Must stop. * * * *

'\$300

'On demand I promise to pay to the order of C. N. Storcks _____. Value received.

T. Bingon

\$100

"Received of H. Kicken, \$.60 for payment for wagon. March 10

T. Bingon

One water.....\$3.00

1 hat.....1.00

1 knife......60

1 book..... _____

_____ ,

"On the back of the last document to the following endorsement watch is in the same handwriting as that of the latter in lead pencil.

' Come to my bones(?), and I will see that those men were in. The most are in the jail the W. O. discovered. They have stole more than ___ of Tom.'

"The character of the gentlemen who found these letters is so high as to preclude any idea of deception on their part. The appearances of the letters, too, shows that they have been exposed to the water, and it is very possible that ___ actually belonged to, and one was written by a person on the Sea Bird.

"No such name, however, as that of Carl Bostwick appears on the list of passengers on the boat, and the other name mentioned by him, is undecipherable."⁹³

The Present Day

This seemingly ends the story of the *Seabird* disaster. It is a fascinating, though tragic, footnote in the early history of steamboat navigation and of the opening of the Great Lakes and ultimately the West to civilization and commerce. Some histories, though, never come to an end. They just lie dormant for many years. One hundred twenty-one years after the tragedy, the history of the *Seabird* began again, when in 1989 a Chicago salvor by the name of Harry Zych, of American Diving and Salvage Company, brought suit in Federal Court for salvage rights to the *Seabird*. It appeared that the steamboat was to be a test case to challenge the constitutionality of the 1987 federal Abandoned Shipwreck Act which gave states sovereignty over their territorial waters. The case was ruled against the salvor in 1993. Except for some occasional sightseeing divers, the remains of the *Seabird* once again lie forgotten at the bottom of Lake Michigan

⁹³The Chicago Tribune, April 26, 1868.