

Mayday! London, Ontario's tragic maritime horror

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - May 2024

Our March column (The calamitous Canadian death of an Irish Empress) generated comments from a number of readers. Most expressed surprise at being unaware of a Canadian maritime disaster that resulted in the deaths of 1,012 souls. The sinking of the Titanic two years earlier and the advent of the Great War only months later had managed to eclipse the Empress disaster from the Canadian memory.

One reader from London, however, had an intriguing query. He asked whether we were aware of another historic maritime disaster much closer to home. We were not.

Prior to 1952, Victoria Day was always celebrated on the exact date of the old Queen's birthday -- May 24. In 1881, that date and the resultant holiday arrived on a Tuesday. Many people chose to spend part of the day at Waterworks Park (today Springbank Park) which offered steamboat tours on the river. A dam had made a four-mile stretch of the Thames perfect for boating, from Waterworks Park to the foot of Dundas Street. Three steamboats operated on the river -- the Forest City, the Princess Louise and, fittingly for this particular holiday, the stern-paddlewheeler Victoria.

The countdown to the tragedy began when Princess Louise ran aground on a sandbar. She was able to continue her voyage shortly afterwards but, by then, the interlocking schedules of the three steamboats and their programmed stops at Ward's Hotel and Woodland Cemetery had been thrown completely awry. As late afternoon approached early evening, crowds at Waterworks Park, anxious to return home, became increasingly impatient. When the Victoria finally arrived and began boarding passengers, crowds rushed to get aboard. Consequently, a vessel that would have been crowded with 500 passengers now staggered under the weight of 640.

Much lower in the water than usual, Victoria tore her hull on a rock in the river and water began seeping into the lower deck. Passengers there soon found themselves ankle-deep in water. Many moved to the already crowded upper deck, making the vessel increasingly top-heavy. To make matters worse, rowdy boys began racing back and forth from side to side, causing Victoria to rock dangerously close to capsizing.

Alarmed by the increasingly precarious situation aboard, Victoria's captain attempted to reach an approaching sandbar, deciding to beach the steamboat to take her out of danger. Unfortunately, the unlikeliest cause of the approaching catastrophe now appeared in the form of two sculls from the London Rowing Club. During the late 19th century, single-seat scull racing was Canada's most popular spectator sport. Only two years earlier, thousands had flocked to Sarnia's International Park (now Canatara Park) to witness a display of sculling by the great Ned Hanlan, our country's world champion.

Spotting the approaching steamboat, one of the scullers on the Thames shouted to the other, "Let's give them a race!". Noticing the scullers beginning to race towards Victoria, someone aboard the steamboat shouted, "Here's a race!" Most passengers aboard rushed to the vessel's starboard side to see the scullers, causing Victoria to lurch precariously towards the river. Sensing danger, the crowds now rushed back to the port side of the boat to compensate.

Dan Brock of the London Historical Society recounts what happened next. "The vessel rolled over on its left side; the boiler, not fastened, came loose crashing into the supports and causing the top deck to crash onto the people on the lower deck. Many were scalded, trapped, or crushed to death while many others drowned."

Although no final list was compiled, it is estimated that almost 200 people died in the Victoria Day disaster on the Thames in 1881. By the end of the decade, the popularity of steamboating on the river had plummeted, and this type of excursion on the river disappeared. The expansion of the London Street Railway in 1895 also provided safer travel options for Londoners.

Although the Victoria disaster is mostly forgotten today, and is even unknown to most Londoners, it ranks as Ontario's worst maritime disaster. This Victoria Day, let us give a thought to those unfortunate fellow Canadians who died while celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday.