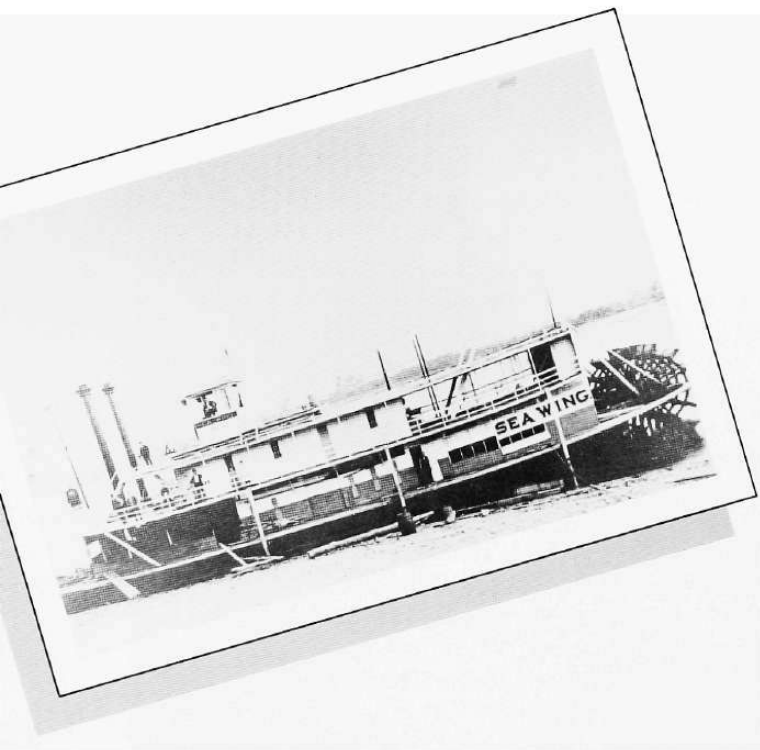




UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES OF THE *Sea Wing*



THIS SUMMER Minnesota observes the centennial of the state's worst river disaster, the capsizing of the steamer *Sea Wing* and the subsequent loss of 98 of its passengers. The *Sea Wing* overturned on July 13, 1890, during a violent storm on Lake Pepin, a widening of the Mississippi River 60 miles south of St. Paul. The tragic story stunned the state and horrified Red Wing, the small river town that had been home to 77 of the victims.

Four years ago the Goodhue County Historical Society published Frederick Johnson's book, *The Sea Wing Disaster*, the first detailed account of the accident. Since publication, the author has received information including old photos and letters, family histories, and documents that have provided more details and helped answer some of the questions raised by his original research.¹

The sudden and terrible end to the July excursion of the *Sea Wing* sent a wave of shock and revulsion reverberating through Minnesota and the nation. Ninety-eight were dead. Whole families had been killed. Of the 57 females on board, 50 had drowned. There were rumors that incompetence and drunkenness on the part of the ship's captain and crew were to blame.²

Frederick Johnson, a Red Wing native and teacher in the St. Paul school system, has an abiding interest in the history of the Goodhue County area. His article on Congressman Francis H. Shoemaker appeared in the Spring, 1989, issue of this journal.

¹ All such material is now in the *Sea Wing* files, Goodhue County Historical Society, Red Wing.

² Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster* (Red Wing: Goodhue County Historical Society, 1986), 83; *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 14, 1890, p. 1; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 15, 1890, p. 9.

Using lurid headlines, newspaper editors attempted to capture the scope of the calamity: "A Voyage of Pleasure That Ended on the Shores of Another World"; "The Sea Wing Becomes a Floating Sepulcher for the Pleasure Seekers in Its Cabin"; "The Tornado on Pepin's Treacherous Bosom the crowning calamity of all Minnesota Annals"; "Whole Families Forced Into the Darkness of Another World Clasped in Each Others Arms"; and "Fifty Miles of River Line Plunged Into the Bloom of Mourning for the Fearful Death of Loved Ones Lost." The newspapers also provided the first details of the tragedy. Reporters at the accident scene produced the basic facts underlying the disaster, focusing upon causes while awaiting results from the extraordinary efforts to recover victims still submerged in Lake Pepin. But the accuracy of the newspaper coverage proved to be inconsistent, with rumor and innuendo sometimes reported as fact. Within these unsubstantiated reports lay misconceptions that were later to become a part of the *Sea Wing* legend.³

The *Sea Wing*, a 109-ton steamer based in Diamond Bluff on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi, was returning from a pleasure cruise to Lake City when a storm struck. The vessel, with the barge *Jim Grant* lashed alongside, was carrying over 200 passengers and crew. David N. Wethern, the ship's pilot and co-owner, steered to meet the storm, but his top-heavy craft was capsized by the winds. Those passengers who had crowded into the ship's small cabin were trapped and drowned, while others were thrown into the water and lost. Early reports indicated that nearly half of those aboard the vessels had been killed. Considering the magnitude of the losses, it is surprising that the *Sea Wing* story was largely forgotten in the years that followed. Newspapers occasionally printed an anniversary

feature, but those reports contained little that was new and often perpetuated errors from the 1890 accounts.⁴

A PHOTOGRAPH from the private collection of W. E. Boyes of Minneapolis, the grand-nephew of Captain Wethern and his wife, Nellie Boyes Wethern, answered one lingering question: Where was the barge *Jim Grant* in relation to the *Sea Wing* when the vessels were under way? The question is significant, since the barge was thought to be a stabilizing factor—a protection against capsizing—for the shallow-drafted steamer. The photograph shows the two vessels carrying a load of passengers, with the barge attached to the port side of the *Sea Wing*'s bow. The picture was not taken on the day of the accident, but it seems reasonable to assume that Wethern would have used the same configuration on the ill-fated trip.⁵

A letter from Carol C. Lees of Vadnais Heights, the daughter-in-law of *Sea Wing* survivor Dr. Arnold F. Lees, provided more commentary on the barge and its role as a stabilizer. The letter contained a 1949 clipping from the *Minneapolis Star*, which included a brief biography of Dr. Lees in its territorial centennial observation. Lees told of his decision to jump from the *Sea Wing* onto the barge. He recounted the advance of the storm and how the steamer "capsized . . . instantly. The ship flipped over either three or four times while seemingly being held in one place in the river by the twister. The barge was ripped loose . . . and somehow stayed upright."⁶

Just when the two vessels were separated had become a matter of contention in the years following the accident. Reports at the time were contradictory. The *Red Wing Journal* quoted a barge passenger as calling for the lines to be cut just moments before the steamer overturned. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that the barge had been cut away but the following day changed its story and claimed that the *Jim Grant* had "broken loose" after the capsizing.⁷

Captain Wethern came down on both sides of the issue. He wrote a letter to the *St. Paul Dispatch* three days after the accident giving his account on the disaster, stating, in part: "The barge was not cut loose until the steamer capsized and then only to save it from being swamped also." In a 1926 interview Wethern changed course, charging that the *Sea Wing* would not have turned over "had the barge not been cut loose."⁸

Those claiming that the barge was separated before the steamer capsized outnumber those on the other side of the issue, but the question remains. Wethern's 1926 revision could be viewed as self-serving, since he implicitly blamed those who freed the *Jim Grant*. Lees was on the barge, and his story squares with the captain's first story and that of another passenger, George

³ *Pioneer Press* and *St. Paul Daily Globe*, both July 15, 1890, p. 1.

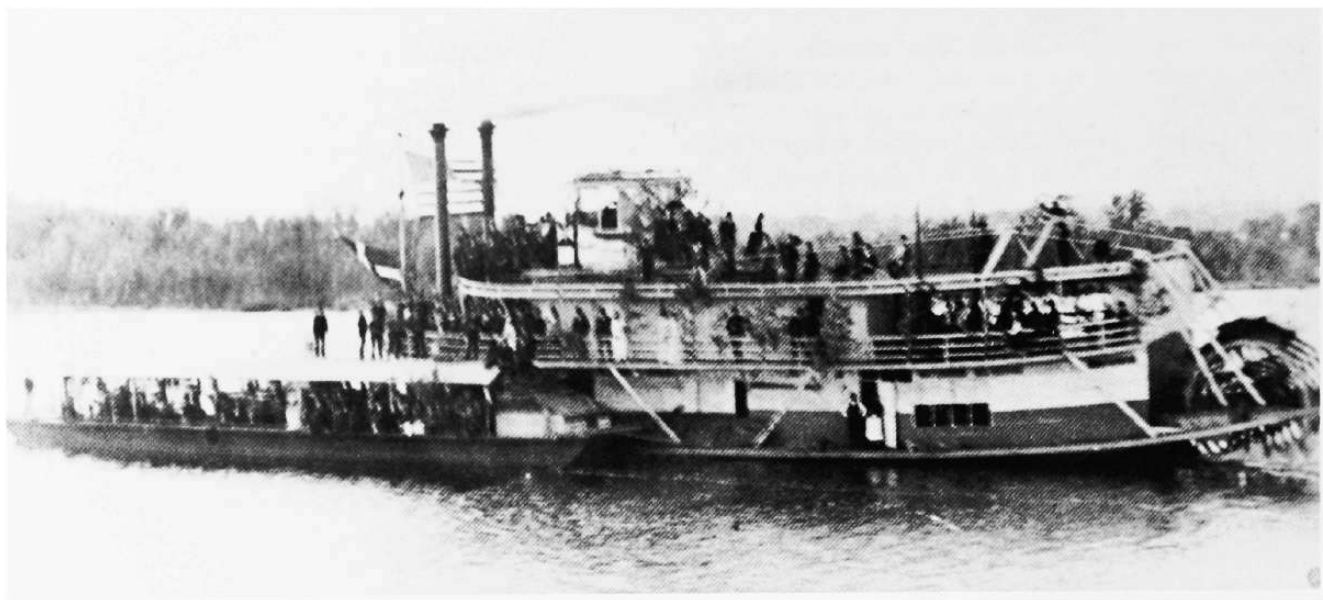
⁴ Johnson, *Sea Wing Disaster*, 19–25.

⁵ The Boyes photo also confirms that the unidentified image by R. W. Hubbell in the Goodhue County Historical Society's file on steamships is indeed the *Sea Wing*. The two photographs were obviously taken within minutes of each other. Both views are of the port side of the steamer, and close examination shows that some passengers are in the same position for both exposures. The Goodhue County photograph was captioned "an unidentified steamer that appears to be the *Sea Wing*" in Johnson, *Sea Wing Disaster*, 6. Boyes also corrected the historical record on his grand-aunt's maiden name. August B. Easton's *History of the St. Croix Valley* (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr., & Co., 1909), 1:516–519, listed it not as "Boyes" but "Boyce," a spelling that this author consequently adopted.

⁶ *Minneapolis Star*, April 27, 1949, p. 18.

⁷ *Red Wing Journal*, July 16, 1890, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, July 14, 15, 1890, p. 1.

⁸ *Dispatch*, July 17, 1890, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, June 13, 1926, p. 7.



SEA WING, STEAMING ALONG WITH THE JIM GRANT
LASHED ALONGSIDE

Smith, who vehemently stated, "So many said that the barge was cut loose before the boat went over, but it wasn't until afterwards. I've had arguments on this point but I wasn't excited and I was right."⁹ Lees's newly found account gives greater credence to the assertion that the *Sea Wing* rolled over before separating from its barge.

Another Wethern family member also improved the photographic record. Dallas Wethern Pritchett of La Puente, California, a grand-niece of Captain Wethern, sent copies of pertinent items from her family album. Among them was a photo of the captain and his family taken before the accident. Part of that portrait appeared in J. D. Kellogg's remarkable composite print, made shortly after the disaster. Kellogg, a Red Wing photographer, had advertised in the local newspaper for "picture[s] of the drowned ones" and obtained photographs of nearly all. Since some of the dead were pictured with others not killed in the accident, the photographer carefully overlapped the images, leaving only the victims visible. Thus, for the Wetherns, Kellogg showed the captain's wife, Nellie, and their youngest son Perley, while covering Wethern and eldest son Roy. Besides showing the entire family grouping, the Pritchett photo provides an excellent likeness of David Wethern. It is the only image found thus far that shows him as he appeared at the approximate time of the accident.¹⁰

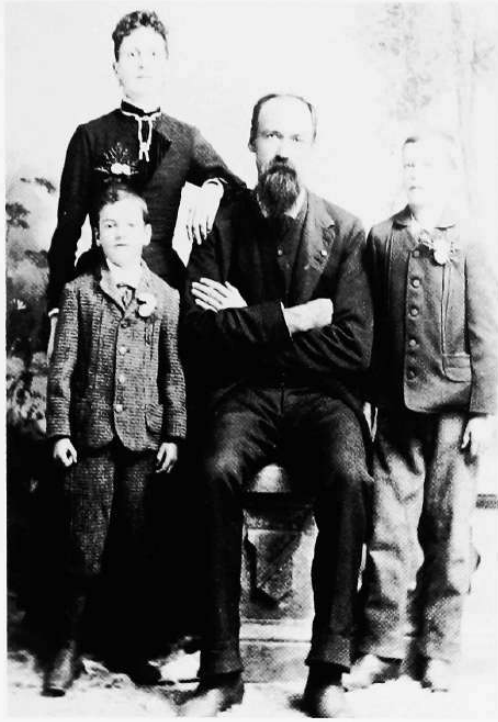
IN 1986 Thomas A. Hodgson, meteorologist and principal race officer of the White Bear Yacht Club, completed a detailed examination of how weather and river conditions would have affected the *Sea Wing*. In "A Meteorological Look at the *Sea Wing* Disaster," Hodgson analyzes the eyewitness and newspaper accounts of the storm and uses present-day knowledge of major trends of frontal thunderstorm systems to formulate his hypothesis. His conclusion: "the strong probability is that the wind that capsized *Sea Wing* was a line squall that preceded an extraordinarily strong thunderstorm cell."¹¹

Hodgson also considered the actual location and topography of the scene. Accounts at the time were confused on this point. Wethern's report, made three days after the accident, noted that the ship had "proceeded up the lake about five miles." But newspaper reports named Central Point, approximately one mile from Lake City, as the accident site. It is likely that

⁹ For more on the barge controversy, see Johnson, *Sea Wing Disaster*, 84; George Smith interview, *Sea Wing* files, Goodhue County Historical Society.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Sea Wing Disaster*, 52–53; *Red Wing Daily Republican*, July 19, 1890, p. 3.

¹¹ Hodgson, "A Meteorological Look at the *Sea Wing* Disaster," 1986, unpublished paper, 1–3, copy in *Sea Wing* files, Goodhue County Historical Society.



NELLIE, PERLEY, DAVID, AND ROY
WETHERN



J. D. KELLOGG'S COMPOSITE, SHOWING NELLIE
AND PERLEY WETHERN, UPPER LEFT

some reporters assumed the steamer had overturned off Central Point since many bodies were placed there in a temporary morgue. Using his first-hand knowledge of the lake and careful analysis of the storm track and eyewitness versions, Hodgson charted the likely path of the *Sea Wing* and the location of the accident:

The preponderance of the testimony shows Captain Wethern altering course to port to meet the storm coming off the Minnesota shore. This leads me to believe that the *Sea Wing* capsized in mid-channel about two miles upriver from Central Point, about one half mile downriver from Maiden Rock.

It is likely that the *Sea Wing* capsized in mid-channel, for there would have been few other locations on Lake Pepin that would allow a steamboat to turn turtle without touching bottom.¹²

The study concludes with a look at the drift of the *Sea Wing's* wreckage. After careful evaluation of wind and current, Hodgson concludes with the theory that the capsized steamer and barge would have drifted at two-to-three knots and would have reached Central Point less than one hour after overturning. (The accident occurred before modern improvements in the wa-

terway, so the current would have been slower than today's average of four knots.) Hodgson's calculation of the time that elapsed squares very nicely with the accounts given by the survivors.¹³

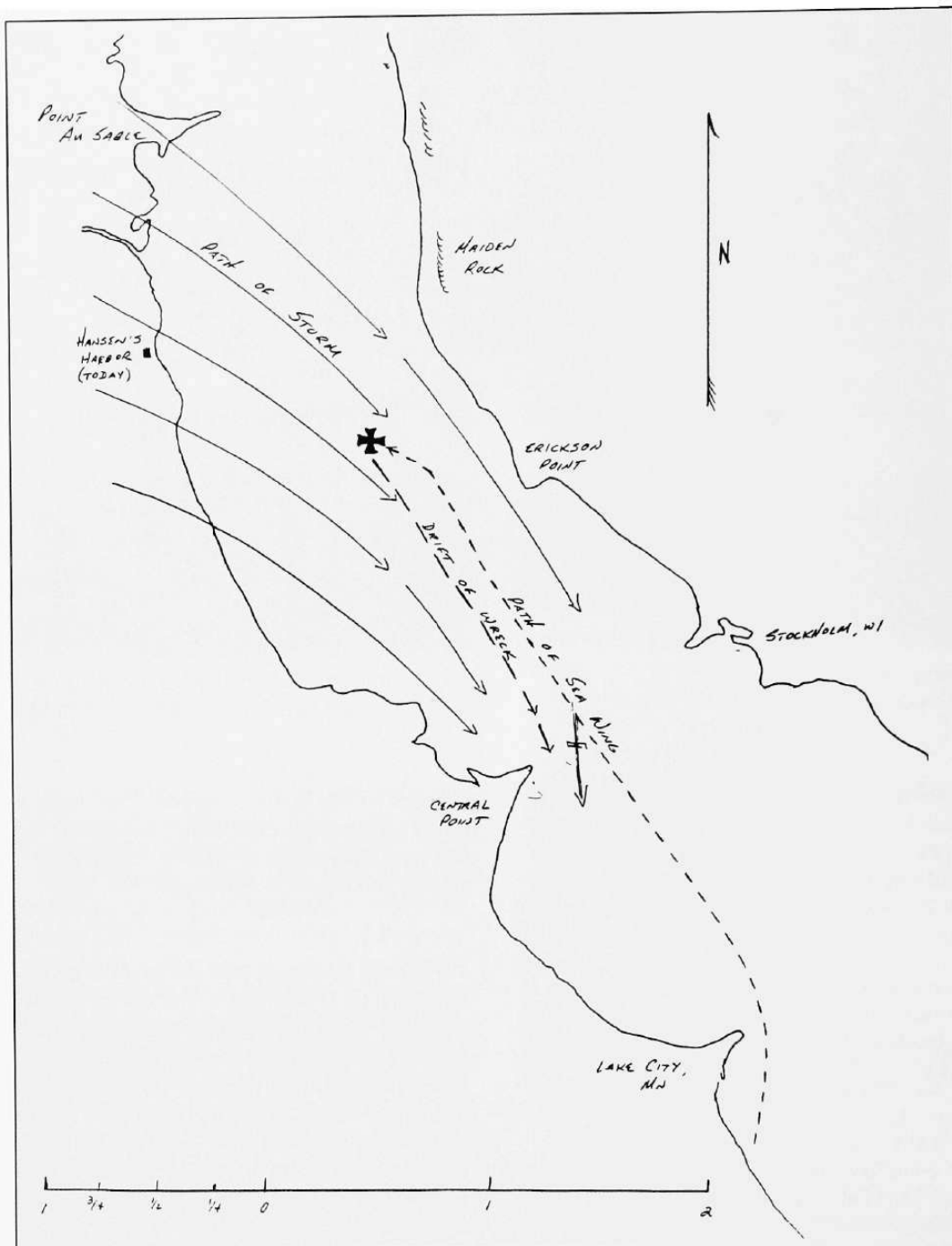
FINALLY, copies of a series of family letters recently donated to the Goodhue County Historical Society serve as a poignant reminder of the human toll claimed by the *Sea Wing*. Little was known of drowning victim Eliza Jane Crawford, reported to have been an Ohio native who had been teaching school in Holden Township. After reading *The Sea Wing Disaster*, Marilyn Crawford McClure of Sepulveda, California, a niece of Crawford, sent the letters, written in 1890, along with a brief biography of Eliza.

Eliza Crawford was born in Graysville, Ohio, in 1863 and took a job teaching school near Red Wing in 1890. Her mother's brother, H. W. Keller of Hay Creek, just south of Red Wing, was Eliza's likely link to the job. In a May 7 letter to her 15-year-old brother Willie, Eliza told of her pleasure in teaching "those little Norwegian girls and boys." She had 32 students and was just completing the first month of school, earning \$30 for her efforts.

Eliza's family received the tragic news of her death in a letter from Keller, which was dated two days after the accident:

¹² *Dispatch*, July 14, 17, 1890, p. 1; *Pioneer Press*, July 14, 1890, p. 1; Hodgson, "Meteorological Look," 4.

¹³ Hodgson, "Meteorological Look," 4-5.



THOMAS A. HODGSON'S MAP

Eliza is among the missing ones & has not yet been found. I was up all night & today & have not as yet been able to find her. I entertain no hopes whatever of her safety. I have deferred to telegraph you, in hopes that she might be found. She may be found soon & it may be many days yet. We are nearly overcome with grief & fatigue. Do not take it too hard for there is no blame to be laid on any one, except the captain of the boat.

There are whole families lost. As far as known there were only 5 females saved. There were life preservers on the boat but few availed themselves of them. . . . There is mourning in Red Wing as nearly all were from there.

God only knows the sorrow it has and will cause. We mourn not as those who have no hope. Liza was a good girl & has made many friends in so short a time. You do not know what a painful task this is. Such a



MINNESOTA NATIONAL GUARDSMEN, PULLING VICTIMS FROM THE
WRECKAGE OF THE SEA WING

disaster has never befallen this country. . . . May God help you to bear up is my sincere prayer.

On July 27, Keller wrote another letter and provided information on the mass memorial service in Red Wing two days earlier (more than 5,000 attended). The letter also takes care to mention that the propriety of Eliza's decision to take part in the Sunday excursion was not a concern. It noted that there were "many good people on the boat who lost their lives" and that Eliza's companion, Miss Katie Burkhard, was of "unquestionable character." The letter also details the recovery of Eliza's body after several days in the water: "She was not recognizable. Her dress that she was drowned in was left on for it could not be taken off also her shoes were left on. They might have been taken off. Her earrings were left in & I think one finger ring."

Keller paid all of his niece's expenses. He carefully detailed many items including the \$5 cost for her grave and \$1 deed for the lot in Red Wing's Oakwood Ceme-

tery. He then promised to send all of Eliza's things back to Ohio. Among her effects was to be one item recovered from the accident scene: "The hat which she wore on the Excursion we found and will send."

THE DIFFICULTY of rediscovering and then researching a 100-year-old story only roughly chronicled in its day compels the historian to recall Emerson's words—"Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts." Despite limitations inherent in this kind of research, such attempts need to be made.

As the response to the publication of *The Sea Wing Disaster* indicates, time will not erase the effect of such a calamity. The families involved in such tragedies keep their own records—in their letters, their photographs, and their hearts.

All illustrations are used courtesy of the Goodhue County Historical Society.



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