

Argentinian seasonal production was soon expected to impact prices, leading to considerable insecurity throughout the market.¹²

The Event

The shipping season was winding down on the third Sunday in December. Many Great Lakes bulk carriers were laid up for the season, avoiding the growing fields of ice in the north and the risk of sailing the unsheltered lakes during one of the most dangerous parts of the annual weather cycle.

The weather that swept into the region from the southwest on 17-18 December 1921 brought hurricane force winds, snow, and ice. On Saturday, 17 December, the United States Weather Bureau at Toledo reported a falling barometer, a decrease of temperature from fifty-five to thirty-seven degrees Fahrenheit, and winds in the fifty to sixty miles per hour range by midnight. Cleveland reported a similar pattern, with winds around fifty-three miles per hour just after 1:00 am. Fortunately, winds from the south and southwest came over land and were broken by trees and buildings, mitigating the impact so that the “severe wind storm . . . did but little damage” in Toledo.¹³ Other areas were not as lucky.

The velocity of the wind picked up as the storm moved eastward, lashing shallow Lake Erie and picking up momentum as it moved northeastward. It reached Buffalo in the early hours of 18 December, bringing winds of seventy miles per hour that increased to eighty-four mph by 9:15 am and peaked at ninety-six mph at 10:15 am.¹⁴ The storm had reached hurricane strength as it descended upon Buffalo Harbor, where the breakwaters provided some protection from the waves, but not the force of the wind.

The effect on shipping was disastrous. On 18 December three Buffalo to Fort Eire ferries and ninety-four steel steamers – the most modern and efficient commercial fleet in the world – lay in Buffalo Harbor, most of the latter with fresh loads of storage grain. Sixty-two of these vessels lay anchored behind the riprap, bows toward the open lake beyond breakwaters in order to withstand weather from the southwest, the direction of the prevailing winds. Anchors set forward and aft and pilings driven into the lake bed provided “snubbing posts” to which hawsers were attached to further secure the boats.¹⁵ Most vessels had ship keepers – normally just one person per ship – whose duty was to care for the ships at their moorings.

Miracles” and “Board Upholds Grain Rate Cut,” *Detroit Free Press*, 17 December 1921; “Little Interest in Grain Market,” *Detroit Free Press*, 18 December 1921.

¹² “Little Interest in Grain Market,” *Detroit Free Press*, 18 December 1921.

¹³ 1921 (Toledo) Original monthly record of observations, 18 December 1921, GLMS-107 National Weather Service, Box 3, Folder 3, Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, Bowling Green University Center for Archival Collections; 1921 (Cleveland) Original monthly record of observations, GLMS-93 National Weather Service, Box 13, Folder 2, *ibid*.

¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Lake Carriers Association, 1921*, 128 and Sketch Plan Showing Position of Vessels.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; “95 Mile Gale Floods Buffalo; Niagara Rages,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 December 1921.