

wind kept on increasing and the sea making all the time. The master and first class pilot, John B. Gamble, concluded to turn back for Erie harbor, at the same time giving orders to sound different compartments to see if the vessel was leaking, or the cargo shifting, that caused the list. It was found that the vessel was making water so fast that she had evidently sprung a leak, for the water was gaining very fast in the amidship compartment on the starboard side. All the pumps and syphons were put in use and still the water gained.

"At 10:00 p.m., the master then concluded to let go anchor with 40 fathoms of chain, and stop the propeller so as to get all the steam to the pumps and syphons. Statements made in investigation that low steam in boiler added to the disaster, but by cutting in the forward boiler gave sufficient steam for all pumps and syphons (to operate) to their full capacity, but the inflow of water was too great to overcome. Until the list of the steamer became dangerous, the engineroom crew were able to attend to their duties until called on deck.

"The list to starboard kept increasing and the vessel laboring heavily. At 11:30 p.m., the starboard side of the vessel was submerged to nearly amidships. At 1:30 a.m., the 21st, the crew were ordered into the lifeboats (metal boats of 16 persons capacity each). Each man had on a life preserver. The lifeboats were tailed astern of the vessel with lines of 250 and 300 feet each. At 2:30 a.m., the vessel rolled over on her starboard side and sank in about 8 or 10 fathoms of water."

The numerous press reports concerning the loss of the steamer indicated that, in their struggle to survive, the GERKEN's crew had been trying desperately to signal for assistance. Flares were burned, lights were trained on the U.S. Coast Guard station at Erie, and an S.O.S. was tapped out on the GERKEN's wireless radio. The passenger steamer NORTH AMERICAN received the distress call but could not assist. The only shore radio station to pick up the signal was in Hamilton, Ontario, and the operator there managed to relay the message around the end of the lake by telegraph to the New York Central Railroad dispatcher in Buffalo, who sent the message to Erie at 5:55 a.m. on Saturday, August 21st. The crew of the sinking steamer had also placed a mattress atop the roof of the after cabin, soaked it in kerosene, and set it ablaze. They repeated this signal with two more mattresses.

The bright flares of the burning mattresses were seen by Capt. T. H. Heyman of the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Navigation Company railroad carferry MAITLAND NO. 1. Heyman normally was first mate of the big ferry, but on this particular trip, he was in command of the steamer. MAITLAND NO. 1 had departed Ashtabula with one of her many loads of coal cars bound for Port Maitland, Ontario. Due to the severity of the weather and the beam seas, Heyman had decided to sail a few miles south of his normal course. When the flares from the sinking GERKEN were sighted, the course of MAITLAND NO. 1 was altered to close in upon her. The wind was blowing up to 82 miles per hour at the time, and Captain Heyman calculated his position to be six miles off Erie. The shore lights, however, were obscured by rain and hail, which may explain why the Erie Coast Guard station crew did not observe any distress signals.

The anchor which had been let out by the GERKEN broke away almost immediately and the ship continued to be driven away from the south shore. As MAITLAND NO. 1 was closing on the GERKEN, water began pouring into the firehold of the sandsucker. The order to abandon ship was given and the crew assembled on the boat deck as the lifeboats were cleared away for launching. They experienced some difficulty due to the darkness of the stormy night, but no panic ensued. Trailing behind their sinking ship in the lifeboats secured by long ropes, they watched as she listed more to starboard. The boom of the derrick had broken free of its lashings and swung outboard as the ship rolled onto her starboard side. Her generator was still running and all her lights were on as HOWARD S. GERKEN disappeared beneath the waves.