

THE ANNIVERSARY OF TRAGEDY

The Gales of November... Those words, long feared by lake sailors and shipping observers, but made familiar to the general public through a popular song written and sung by Canadian musician Gordon Lightfoot, bear a legacy of disaster through the annals of Great Lakes shipping. Our lakes being what they are, nasty storms can arise very quickly at any time of year, but November is the month in which the lakes' worst blows traditionally have developed. And those disturbances have a reputation for taking a terrible toll of both ships and their crews.

November of 1990 saw the eighty-fifth anniversary of what probably was the second most destructive series of storms in lake history. The "big blow" of November 28, 1905, wrecked many vessels, including the Pittsburgh Steamship Company's MATAAFA, CRESCENT CITY, WILLIAM EDENBORN, and the fleet's brand-new flagship WILLIAM E. COREY, all of them severely damaged, while the same company's big steamer LAFAYETTE and barge MADEIRA were lost. In all, no less than twelve lake vessels were lost or rendered constructive total losses in the storm.

Then, in the second week of November, 1913, there crossed the lakes a series of weather disturbances that together are remembered as "The Great Storm of 1913". That series of storms sank eight large, steel-hulled steamers on Lake Huron, where most of the fury of the weather struck, but also destroyed two steel steamers on Lake Superior, two barges on Lake Michiga, and the LIGHTSHIP 82 in eastern Lake Erie. In addition, six other lake ships were so badly damaged that they were declared constructive total losses, and many more were less severely damaged. Never before or since has one series of gales caused such extensive damage and loss of life.

Fifty years ago, a tremendous storm, sweeping out of the midwest after wreaking havoc in the Mississippi River Valley, struck the Great Lakes and caused much damage. It has been known ever since as "The Armistice Day Storm", for it struck on November 11, 1940. Most of the storm's fury was unleashed on Lake Michigan, where ships seeking shelter along the east side of the lake suddenly found themselves trapped on a lee shore and at the mercy of the storm. The Paterson canaller NOVADOC (II) stranded to a total loss near Pentwater, Michigan, while the upper lakers ANNA C. MINCH and WILLIAM B. DAVOCK were sunk in deeper water with the loss of all hands.

In recent years, the Gales of November have not taken nearly so great a toll of ships or lives, not only because of advances in weather forecasting and radio communications, but also because of the very nature of newer ships themselves. Nevertheless, November blows sank the CARL D. BRADLEY (II) in 1958 and the DANIEL J. MORRELL in 1966. Then, fifteen years ago, on the evening of November 10, 1975, the Columbia Transportation straight-deck bulk carrier EDMUND FITZGERALD foundered in heavy weather in Lake Superior, some fifteen miles off Whitefish Point. Downbound with taconite from Superior for Detroit, and almost into the shelter of Whitefish Bay, the 1958-built, 729-foot steamer took all 29 of her crew with her to the bottom of the lake. Although the wreck of the ship was located and has been much photographed and studied, not one of her crewmembers ever has been found.

Much has been written about the possible causes of the sinking of the EDMUND FITZGERALD, most of which is absolute tripe, but since we were not there when Capt. Ernest McSorley and his crew faced their last moments, we cannot know exactly what happened, any more than we can know what transpired aboard any of the ships that disappeared during the Great Storm of 1913.

All we can say for certain is that we hope that never again will the Gales of November strike down lake ships. Perhaps it is for his reason that we mark this significant November anniversary by means of an article appearing in the December issue...