

THE EARLIEST LAKE SHIP PHOTOGRAPH?

In our issue of November, 1992, we reproduced a photo of the sidewheel steamer BANSHEE at Bowen's Wharf, Kingston, which was taken in 1856. In the accompanying article (Ship of the Month No. 199), we remarked that although the BANSHEE picture was a very early view, the earliest known photographic image of a Great Lakes ship was a daguerreotype of the steamer SOUTHERN MICHIGAN, which was taken in 1853. Since we printed that statement, however, we have come to know that the SOUTHERN MICHIGAN view is NOT the oldest lake ship photograph!

Thanks to member C. Patrick Labadie, of Duluth, we are able to present on our current photopage a picture of the early sidewheel steamer MAY FLOWER. It will be noted that the steamer is lying close in to a fairly inhospitable shoreline, and her starboard smokestack is canted outward at such an angle that it looks as if it soon will disappear over the side. What could be the explanation of this unusual view?

The wooden-hulled MAY FLOWER was 288 x 35 x 12, 1242 tons, and was built in 1849 by J. Lupton at Detroit, Michigan. She was the first ship owned by the Michigan Central Railroad Company, and provided part of that line's daily service between Buffalo and Detroit in those days when direct rail connection had not yet been established between the cities. MAY FLOWER was one of the first of the big "palace steamers" that operated briefly on Lake Erie before the rail lines were completed.

The key to the circumstances of MAY FLOWER's distress illustrated in the photograph can be found on Page 141 of Early American Steamers - Volume II by Erik Heyl, 1956. Therein, Heyl notes that MAY FLOWER sailed from Buffalo at 10:00 p.m. on December 15, 1851, in extremely heavy weather. After midnight, she was turned and headed back for Buffalo, but with the seas running high, her master was afraid to get too close to shore and turned west again. At this time, a rudder chain parted, although repairs were made successfully. A hog chain also parted during the storm.

Finally, at about 11:00 a.m. on December 16th, MAY FLOWER struck shore five miles below Conneaut, Ohio, near Elk Creek. The steamer quickly settled to the bottom in shallow water, and all the crew and passengers were able to make shore safely. The steamer's superstructure began to break up, however, and one of her smokestacks went over the side. MAY FLOWER finally was salvaged in May of 1852, and extensive repairs lasted until 1853, when she re-entered service. MAY FLOWER lasted until November 20, 1854, when she stranded to a total loss on Point Pelee.

Although there are some discrepancies between what we see in the Labadie Collection photo of MAY FLOWER and the description of the Conneaut stranding reported by Heyl, there can be no doubt that it was while she was aground that the photograph was taken. It might have been early in 1852, but because the stack has not yet fallen over the side, we must assume that the photograph was taken very soon after MAY FLOWER's December 16, 1851, accident.

As a consequence, the MAY FLOWER photo must pre-date the SOUTHERN MICHIGAN view by almost two years - almost certainly making it the earliest known photographic image of a lake vessel, and undoubtedly done by daguerreotype.

It is not, however, the earliest North American ship photograph. That honour goes to "The Cincinnati Daguerreotypes", which is a series of eight images which form a panorama of the Cincinnati riverfront which were taken on September 24, 1848. They were made from a vantage point on the Kentucky shore across the Ohio River, and all of the images contain splendidly sharp and clear views of assorted river steamers moored along the levee, as well as a magnificent view of the city itself.

We are indeed indebted to Pat Labadie for his extreme generosity in sharing the historic MAY FLOWER photograph with our readers.