The Wreck of the Conneaut
Armistice Day, 1940·

The Conneaut[1] was part of the Wyandotte Chemical Line, a group of lake freighters that hauled cargo throughout the Great Lakes and the Welland Canal. She carried coal in from Pennsylvania to all the major cities in the Great Lakes and carried limestone out from Calcite, the biggest limestone quarry in the world, to the steel works in Detroit. The lake freighters were coal burners and their smoke trails followed them for miles. Our dad, Jack Olson, was an "oiler" on the Conneaut, the person in charge of maintaining the engine rooms. As far I as I can determine, that was the merchant marine equivalent to a warrant officer. I know it was important to us children that he had eaten in the officers' mess. Frank says that he had actually written for and passed the engineering exam, but had never taken an engineering job because he would have had to leave the Conneaut and the other boats on the Wyandotte Chemical Line mostly hauled coal from Pennsylvania to Detroit and didn't make the run up to Alpena and Rogers City. Taking an engineering job on another boat would have put him too far away from his family.

Lake freighters are longer than ocean-going vessels, often riding on four or five waves. An ocean-sized wave would set a lake freighter up and pivot it, probably breaking it in two. The cabins of a lake freighter are on the end while an ocean freighters cabin is in the middle. We learned these tidbits of information from Daddy as we drove along the Lake Huron shoreline on US. 23. He loved to look at these great ships, check the weather flags flying over the post office in Alpena and wonder at the St. Lawrence Sea Way which connected shipping to the world beyond the Lakes. But he seemed to have little regret at leaving the boats and his skilled job as an oiler for his factory job in Alpena. A strong impetus for leaving "the boats" was the Armistice Day storm of 1940.

If the Conneaut came in loaded, it usually came to Alpena. Unloading and loading took about sixteen hours so there was a good chance that Daddy could come home for a few hours or even over night. But if it came in light, it would be in port only about four hours. Then, whenever possible, we went to meet the boat, which was always a big adventure. Few of the sailors had children, so we were special commodities. I (Helen) went to meet the boat for the first time at two weeks, having been to church that morning. Mom said all "the guys" came out to the car to see me. That was also the first time Daddy was to see me. In fact, the first new-born baby he ever saw was Johnny, his fourth child.

We three older children all have neat memories of our trips to meet the boat. I knew that if you worked it right, you could have to go to the bathroom, which meant you got carried up the ladder onto the ship and then got taken down to the galley to visit the cook who always seemed to have a cookie. I remember looking the long way down into the water from the crook of my

---

[1] This story is excerpted from a conversation on audio tape between Frank (aka Sonny), Kathryn, and Helen (aka Honey) that was taped during Frank's retirement vacation at Harrisville State Park on July 7, 1995. Copies can be made of the tape for a real taste of Olson conversation. We Olson siblings, including our younger brother John, are all guilty of that Norwegian habit of punctuating all conversations with multiple little reinforcers: "um," "yeah" (pronounced on the in-breath), "huh," repeated words from the conversation, chuckles, laughter. Some of the facts about the storm were supplied by a Captain Ted Richardson, Retired, whom Sonny and Nancy met in Port Huron. Captain Richardson has researched Great Lake shipping history and sailed on the Conneaut, though not at the time of the wreck.

Dad's arm as he carried me up, but I don't remember being frightened. A special benefit was that the single guys tended to give us their change, nickels and pennies, so we had more money than most of the kids in the neighborhood. And we got to go to the Coney Island, where the hot dogs cooked on a rolling grill and we could drink soda pop. Often while in Alpena waiting for the boat, we'd go to the public bathrooms that were always well-maintained and had a kind of lounge upstairs where we could wait and a drinking fountain where the water came out like a bubble.

Mom had a rule that if we hadn't seen Daddy in two weeks, we went to meet the boat wherever it came in and no matter what time of day or night. We all remember the time the boat was coming into Calcite, which is about sixty miles north of Spruce, at night. She made a kind of bed in the back seat for Kathryn and me and put Sonny in the front with her. Of course Kathryn and I thought it was a great adventure and wiggled and giggled all the way to Calcite, while poor Sonny nodded off in the front seat. Mom thought that was really funny and we remember her telling family about it.

Usually, however, when the boat came in at night we were left with Grandma and Grandpa Piper to sleep under piles of blankets in their tall beds upstairs in the stone farmhouse. Grandma wore her long flannel nightgown and had her "knot" unpinned and hanging down her back in a long braid when she tucked us in or came to comfort us in the night. That was where we were during the Armistice Day Storm of 1940.

The Conneaut was due in to Calcite from Milwaukee. The storm had come up the Mississippi and then jumped over into Lake Michigan. The Captain knew there was a storm coming; everybody knew there was a storm coming. But the Captain was always "pushing." In fact, he had pushed down the Detroit River so many times in the fog that he went aground at least once almost every year trying to go through with virtually no visibility. This time he had been warned to take the boat into the nearest safe harbor. But, over the protests of the first and second mates, he had pushed on, thinking he could beat the storm to Calcite. He had never not reached his port of destination and he was determined to maintain that record. By the time the storm was halfway up Lake Michigan it was running over eighty miles an hour. Before the night was over, the anemometers at the Soo, Alpena, Mackinaw City and Mackinaw Island would all register 125 plus, which was as high as they would go.

Mom took us to Grandma and Grandpa Pipers. Even though Grandpa tried to dissuade her, she started out. Kathryn remembers sitting in the window looking out at the "bad storm" and feeling scared. She knew that we children were safe, but she didn't know what would happen to our mother. She got blown off the road before she reached the highway less than half a mile away. She came back and was going to start out again, but for the only time after she married, Grandpa Piper put his foot down as her father and said, "no." It was simply too dangerous for her to be out and Grandpa assured her that the boat would have put into port somewhere. Sonny remembers that the wind was so strong that the stone walls of the farm house actually trembled.

The direction of the wind switched so it was coming out of the northeast by the time it caught the Conneaut west of St. Ignace. When it hit, it just devastated the ship. It ripped the rudder off first; then, hard as it is to believe, it tore the propeller off. They dropped the big anchors which had about as much effect as dropping a string. The wheel house ripped off; the top deck ripped off; the dining area went. The life boats were all smashed up. They were totally helpless.

Uncle Art (Unk) Piper had a short wave radio and was listening to the marine band. The SOS's were coming in from a number of boats. He heard the Conneaut put out an SOS once and never heard it again, because the storm tore off its mast and antennas. That's all Mom and the family knew for about forty-eight hours because the telephone lines went down all over the northern part of the state.

Daddy was on his off shift and sleeping in his room. He awoke to an ax chopping away the ice that had sealed him in his room. They all crawled on their hands and knees to the engine room and pulled the fire out of all but the "little" boiler, the one they used on shore to run the generators for heat and electricity.

People do strange things in such times. One guy came down with all his jackets and coats on but no pants, just his underwear. Another brought down all his coffee cans full of money, change he had been saving. He was going to try to save his money. Another went back up to the cabins for his watch, even though they were threatening to "go" any minute and did eventually get torn off. About half of the men put on life-jackets even though they couldn't have survived more than a few minutes in water so cold.

Only one person was hurt. The wheelman broke some ribs when the wheel threw him as he was trying to control the ship from the set of wheels in the aft end of the boat. They had lost power from the wheelhouse in the front, so he had tried to steer from the back. There was nothing to steer with, because the rudder was gone, but he had tried. Of course a fair amount of praying went on, lots of converts. A lot of people changed their lifestyle for at least a few days. A number of rosaries were said. And they waited.

They were sitting there waiting to see if the ship was going to break in two or not. And the wind screamed and howled, while the ship itself was creaking and groaning and snapping and popping.

When the ship finally hit, it hit sand and not rocks. If they'd hit into rocks, they probably would have broken in two immediately. And they hit the sandy shore bow first, which is unusual. If they had gone in sideways, she would have rolled over right up on the beach and probably smashed to pieces. Dad said suddenly they felt that first hit, and then the boat was just pounded up the beach. Every wave that came in carried them a little further up the beach until finally the boat wasn't moving. The back end was thrashing around and bouncing up and down, but the front end was hard up. Lots of people were giving lots of thanks because they figured at least they would survive.

Mother came downstairs in the morning after a sleepless night to find her father sitting with his ear pressed up against the radio speaker. He was trying to listen without her hearing it. Two ships had gone down and bodies were washing up on shore. There was no report of the Conneaut. It had not been heard from or sighted since the SOS of the night before.

The day dragged on. Sonny and Kathryn remember the long faces and the quiet eerie feeling in the house. Finally Mother went into Alpena to wait with a friend whose husband was also on the boat. She later said that it was the longest twenty-four hours of her life, because they were getting no news at all. They didn't know if they were widows or not. Mostly, they were numb.

When the wind died down, the Conneaut was practically on dry land, but they had new problems to deal with. The first was how to get word out to the world that they were still alive because their radio was out as were all the phone lines in the area. They managed to get a

lifeboat that was still in one piece over the side and sent someone in to tell people they were OK. Then there was the concern that the boat could turn turtle because of the ice build-up; it was several feet thick in some places.

Finally the word came into Alpena that the Conneaut was aground and that everyone had survived. Mom wasn't a widow; we weren't orphans; and Daddy was all in one piece. But his life as a Great Lakes Seaman was nearing an end.

Three of the biggest tugboats in the Great Lakes were brought in to "walk" the Conneaut off the beach, pulling back and forth as they literally inched it back into the Lake. Then it was towed to Wyandotte and put into dry-dock and repaired. While it was in dry-dock, we three children and Mom went down to visit and spend the night on the boat, in a bunk. Our cousin Bernice says that the Conneaut is still sailing, having been converted to diesel power.

No charges were ever brought against Captain Yates, though it would seem they could have been because he certainly did endanger the boat and the lives of his crew. Sonny remembers him as known for being "screwy." He used a wheelman who lived just north of Spruce and who was legally blind. When the weather was really bad or they were going down the Detroit River in a fog, this wheelman could tell where they were by the echo-back on the horn. Of course, every once in awhile, he'd miss-calculate and they'd go aground. But for Captain Yates, pushing through was the most important thing and poor visibility was not about to stop him.

Leaving home to go back to the boat became harder and harder for Daddy. We all remember the terrible leave-takings. Usually I started to cry the minute the green coupe owned by a fellow sailor pulled into the driveway to pick him up. By the time they would be backing out, Daddy would be crying, too. It simply became too hard to leave us. Then one day while exiting the boat, Daddy collapsed. They thought it was a heart attack, but tests showed his heart to be just fine. Nonetheless, he continued to feel dizzy and unwell at times. Modern medicine would probably show these spells to be anxiety attacks, but no one knew about such things then. Daddy also later developed high blood pressure, so these may have been early signs. What was clear is that Daddy had reached the point after that he simply couldn't be an enthusiastic sailor. In fact, he was known to remark that he didn't even want to drink water, and he certainly didn't ever like to go sailing or swimming. Then our brother John announced his pending arrival and when Dad took his yearly winter furlough at the end of 1942, he didn't go back. Johnny was born in the midst of a huge storm on the Ides of March, 1943 and Daddy saw and held a brand new baby for the first time.

(Helen Olson, 1999)