

White Hurricane : A Great Lakes November Gale and America's Deadliest Maritime Disaster

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In early November 1913, not quite 19 months after the loss of the Titanic in midatlantic, an autumn gale descended on the Great Lakes. "Gales of November" - like the one that sank the Edmund Fitzgerald in the 1970s - are a fact of life for Great Lakes mariners, but this one was anything but ordinary. Meteorologists now believe that a blast of cold polar air met a warm, moist air mass entrained in a low-pressure cell moving up from the Gulf of Mexico through the U.S. heartland, and the result was a violent weather "bomb" and the worst recorded storm in Great Lakes history. The storm lasted four days, with sustained winds as high as 75 miles per hour, freezing temperatures, white-out blizzard conditions, and mountainous seas. Though the U.S. Department of Agriculture's weather bureau (forerunner of the U.S. Weather Bureau) issued storm warnings on Friday morning, November 7, the warnings contained no hint of anything more than 50-mile-per-hour winds for Friday and Saturday. Most ships were making their final trips of the season; their captains knew that as autumn turned to winter the weather would only get worse, and then the lakes would freeze. Across the Great Lakes, hundreds of ships left port that weekend, heading directly into the jaws of what became a survival storm. On the ocean, with sea room, a well-found ship can often survive by running off before a storm until it blows out. On the Great Lakes there is never sufficient sea room. In the driving snow, ship masters could only guess where the treacherous shores lay. Ships iced up and became topheavy; some turned turtle. By Monday evening 19 ships had sunk, another two dozen were driven ashore, and at least 238 sailors had lost their lives. The city of Cleveland, buried under 22 inches of snow that drifted up to second-story eaves, and facing shortages of milk, bread, and meat, was confronting the worst natural disaster in its history. White Hurricane recreates the four-day storm with narrative intensity and factual depth. To make sense of this big, sprawling, multifaceted story, author David Brown develops it chronologically and focuses on the most exciting human dramas. One or two ships in each of the four hardest hit lakes - Superior, Huron, Michigan, and Erie - carry the narrative, while other disasters are reported more briefly as they occur. The featured ships are those that left in the newspaper archives and other original and secondary sources the richest, most exciting, most mysterious, and most humanly moving stories. The destructive impacts ashore especially the privations in Cleveland - weave another narrative strand. On Lake Huron, for example, we meet the Regina, a small Canadian package freighter, as it takes on cargo Thursday at Port Huron. On Sunday, despite gale-force winds, the Regina, the Charles S. Price, and the H.A. Hawgood all leave the sheltered St. Clair River to steam north on Huron. The Regina gets as far north as Saginaw Bay before turning back. The Price and Hawgood also turn around. By dark, the Hawgood is stranded on a Canadian beach and the other ships are missing. Residents of Harbor Beach, Michigan, hear the whistle of a ship in distress just offshore, but can do nothing. The Revenue Cutter Service (forerunner to the U.S. Coast Guard) sends its only Lake Huron rescue vessel to Lake Erie to aid a vessel that, it turns out, doesn't need help. Later, the bodies of Regina's crew and the wreckage of one of her lifeboats wash ashore on the Canadian side of the lake. Intermingled are bodies from the Charles S. Price, one reportedly even wearing a Regina life jacket - leading to an enduring mystery concerning what exactly happened out there. On Lake Huron, for example, we meet the Regina, a small Canadian package freighter, as it takes on cargo Thursday at Port Huron. On Sunday, despite gale-force winds, the Regina, the Charles S. Price, and the H.A. Hawgood all leave the sheltered St. Clair River to steam north on Huron. The Regina gets as far north as Saginaw Bay before turning back. The Price and Hawgood also turn around. By dark, the Hawgood is stranded on a Canadian beach and the other ships are missing. Residents of Harbor Beach, Michigan, hear the whistle of a

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