



Foundering Of The Indiana

By James Donahue

Among the early steamships operating on Lake Superior was the Indiana, a 146-foot wooden vessel owned and operated by Frank Perew of the People's Line in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Indiana was not the first, but may have been among the first ships to pass through the new locks at Sault Ste. Marie, linking Lake Superior and Lake Huron, in June, 1855. She was launched in 1848 at Vermilion, Ohio, and remained on the lower lakes serving as a package freighter until the locks were opened.

After this, the vessel was heavily used as an ore carrier. She was downbound with ore in her holds on June 6, 1858, when the ship blew a propeller seal and split its sternpost.

The Indiana was among the early propeller-driven vessels on the lakes and the point where the propeller passed through the hull was known as the sternpost. The revolving iron rod passing from the steam-driven engine to the propeller was local below the water line so a protective batting was used where the propeller passed through the hull to keep the water out.

When that seal failed, which happened frequently in the early days, the ship was in immediate danger of sinking. There was usually a heavy volume of water that rushed through the breach. So it was when the Indiana broke her seal.

The sailors on her decks said the ship foundered so fast the pressure blew the cabin off. They said it floated for a while on its own, its interior gas lights still burning. The crew and four passengers, including Frank Perew, escaped in the boats and safely came ashore somewhere in the wilderness of Northern Michigan.

Her captain on that fateful journey was William McNelley.

The survivors camped out the first night, then sailed one of the lifeboats to Whitefish Point where they met the schooner St. Paul. From there the schooner carried them on into Sault Ste. Marie.

The sinking of the Indiana carries at least two milestones in Great Lakes history. Its cargo was the first load of iron ore lost on a sinking ship. Also its engine, which was recovered by divers in 1978, is said to be the oldest marine engine in existence that was built in North America.

That engine now rests in the Smithsonian.