



Montague House Burns - 1873

CHAPTER XVII

GREAT FIRES AND DIRE DISASTERS

The Montague Area has had its share of troubles, and some of them are a definite part of our historic past.

An early settlement in the Michigan Pine Forest, surrounded by unbroken resinous wilderness, was in constant danger of fire, the most dreaded scourge of the time.

Some of the great fires of the area were: The Montague House, our grand hotel, which had frontage of 188' x 50', four stories high, burned on February 21, 1873. In the fire of September 23, 1875, the new opera house of Sorenson, Turnbull and Rahaleys' boiler shop burned. Many of the saw mills on White Lake burned, also: Montague Opera House, November 4, 1912, Cider Mill, August 22, 1913, Montague School, November 7, 1919, Cherokee Lodge, June 2, 1940, Rochdale Inn at Fruitvale, December 23, 1944, Struven's Dowie House, August 2, 1948, Kessler barn and 50 head of cattle, July 30, 1955, Arrow Foundry, February 20, 1958, Chimont Machine Shop, February 26, 1960, Franklin House, February 26, 1961.

It is to the everlasting credit of our Fire Department and those

of our neighbors who never failed to respond in times of need, that the Montague Area never had a truly complete destruction by fire, as happened in so many other lumbering communities.

Our closeness to, and dependence on, the waters of Lake Michigan for transportation gave rise to several shipwrecks on our shores.

The first of which is not recorded as a wreck; however, it is recorded that in 1837 Dr. Charles Shepherd of Grand Rapids came over fifty miles through the wilderness in the late fall of 1837 to amputate a number of legs from sailors, who were cast on this almost desolate shore at the Mouth, due to the wreck of their vessel. They had frozen their limbs and amputation was necessary.

A wreck occurred in December of 1855, when the schooner North Yuba owned by I. E. Carleton loaded with supplies for the long winter ran into a vicious December gale and foundered on the beach. One man was lost and the effect of the wreck was felt by the entire area, for all of the winter supplies had to be bought in by boat and all were lost.

The schooners, Abigail, Kent, and Magie were wrecked and wintered on the beach in 1856-57. The first was overhauled and rebuilt by Captain Sims, her owner. The schooner, G. Barber, wintered on the beach in 1857-58, but was repaired in the spring. In 1868, there was a tidal wave which rose 6 feet, washing over the docks and playing "hob" generally. The people thought Judgment Day had come. The wave set a lighter on end 30 feet above its level, put out fires in the mills in Muskegon and extended below Grand Haven.

After several years, more or less successfully spent on the turbulent waters of Lake Michigan, Capt. James Dalton found himself one morning late in the fall of 1860 clinging to the rigging of his schooner, the "Blue Bell" loaded with White Lake lumber off the port of Racine. The crew were rescued during the day and the vessel was righted and gotten into port. Shortly after this, the captain concluded that it would be more comfortable living ashore.

With a background of lake windjammer sailors in their family history many a Montague Area boy sailed the Great fresh water seas as part of his education of life. The most famous Montague Area Sailor was Captain Charles H. Mohr whose exploits on the lake earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor, the only one ever issued to a civilian Captain of the Great Lakes, his story is told in this article from a recent issue of The Muskegon Chronicle.

Do you believe in extrasensory perception? Don't answer until you have read this column.

In September of 1930 the late Capt. Charles H. Mohr, formerly of Montague, was downbound on Lake Michigan in one of the worst storms ever to have swept the Great Lakes. His ship, the freighter William Nelson, was bound for south Chicago with sand.

In the westerly gale Capt. Mohr's logical course would have

been down the more sheltered Wisconsin side. In fact, he had considered anchoring in the lee of Washington Island, off the tip of the Green Bay Peninsula, to ride out the storm.

He didn't. Against all reason, Capt. Mohr made for the Michigan side, then proceeded down shore, the ship taking the full force of the gale broadside.

South of Ludington he again headed across lake for the Wisconsin side. This was Sept. 26.

About 20 miles west Capt. Mohr came upon the three-masted schooner, Our Son. Gale battered, with sails in shreds, her flag upside down at the mizzen peak, the last of the Great Lakes wind-jammers was sinking.

The crippled vessel was bound for Muskegon with pulpwood for Central Paper Co., now the S. D. Warren Mill. On the schooner were the captain, Fred Nelson, and a crew of six men.

As the 73 year old captain said after being saved:

"Waves 30, 40, yes and 50 feet high were breaking over our ship. When we were sighted by the William Nelson I went below to get Tom Larsen, the cook, who had refused to leave the galley. I found him wading around in water, and told him to get up on deck - that a boat was coming and we might all be saved.

"I told him to go on deck, as we never would have a chance below. I already had issued an order for the ship to be abandoned. I stood on the keelson and the water came to my chin."

Capt. Mohr's vessel had been damaged. The pilothouse windows had been stove in, and stairways carried away. The forecastle deck was sprung inward about six inches, bending beams and stanchions underneath. He was proceeding with engines checked, at slow speed.

Coming upon the Our Son, Capt. Mohr was faced with the gravest choice that can come to a ship master - confine his efforts to saving his own ship and crew, or take the long chance against virtually hopeless odds, and attempt to rescue others certainly doomed if he did not.

As Capt. Mohr told the story:

"Owing to the tremendous seas and the difficulty of giving aid to the Our Son, we were not certain that we would stay afloat ourselves. I sent out an SOS, so that we could get help should we require it. The Pere Marquette (now Chesapeake & Ohio) car ferry No. 22 came to our assistance and stood by.

"We then circled the Our Son and poured oil on the waters to calm the breaking waves. We rolled something awful, and shipped tons of water.

"At this time the Our Son was settling in the water, her canvas blown to shreds, her cargo hold nearly full of water.

"Her crew huddled just abaft the foremast. The sea was too heavy to launch a lifeboat, and the car ferry too high out of the

water to be of any use.

"We ourselves could not last long. I decided to go alongside the Our Son and try to get the men off that way. I realized the difficulty in doing so, owing to the rolling of both vessels.

"After maneuvering for position, I rammed the bluff of the Nelson's starboard (right) bow against the port (left) side of the Our Son, and with aid of the crew managed to save the crew of the Our Son.

"We then backed away, and proceeded on our voyage, battling heavy seas until long after midnight, when we reached the lee of the Wisconsin shore. We arrived in South Chicago at 5:30 p.m. the next day."

What has that to do with extrasensory perception?

The late Joseph A. Sadony, Valley of the Pines, Montague, had spent a lifetime in study of the "sixth sense." He and Capt. Mohr were friends.

Why did Capt. Mohr follow the course, he did, against all reason? I'll relate the story as told by Capt. Mohr in a radio broadcast Feb. 20, 1938:

"Account for it: To my mind it was a case of three-way mental contact between myself, the crew of the Our Son, and Joseph A. Sadony, of Montague.

"Some years before, during a conversation with Mr. Sadony, we agreed to follow our hunches and some day compare notes.

"Following the Our Son incident I got an interesting story from Mr. Sadony.

"He and a group, including members of his family, were standing on the shore of Lake Michigan north of White Lake that day watching the storm. Someone in the party wondered if any ships were out in it.

"Mr. Sadony said, 'There is one sailing ship to the north-west I would not want to be on.' He described the ship, its sinking condition, torn sails, and fouled rigging.

"Someone in the party said there were no more sailing ships on the Great Lakes. Mr. Sadony insisted his vision was correct.

"Mr. Sadony said the sailing ship was far off the course of any other vessel, but he also sensed the presence of a cigar-shaped ship, which, if the captain followed his hunch, would come across the schooner. He did not know it was my ship he sensed."

The Sadony conversation took place shortly after noon. The rescue was effected about 3 p.m.

Extrasensory perception? Many were puzzled about Mr. Sadony, because they did not understand what he was doing. Some 15 to 20 years before his death in 1960 Mr. Sadony remarked to me he would die in his 84th year.

He did.

Capt. Mohr's feat, capping a series of four previous rescues,

involving 20 persons, has been termed one of "the most daring pieces of expert seamanship in the history of navigation." It earned Capt. Mohr the only congressional medal ever bestowed on a Great Lakes shipmaster.

The medal, awarded by the U.S. Department of the Treasury by authorization of Congress, was bestowed on Capt. Mohr at an event in the clubrooms of the International Shipmasters Association in Cleveland.

The Our Son feat climaxed a series of five rescues by Capt. Mohr, involving 27 lives. The Our Son rescue took place Sept. 26, 1930.

Near the end of the lumbering era there occurred a major disaster on the Covell lumber railroad, which locally at least rivalled the famous wreck of "Casey Jones".

One cold morning in April of 1894 the town was startled by a vague report that there had been a terrible smash-up on the Staples and Covell logging road near New Era. Doctors were dispatched in haste and D. E. Staples, D. W. Covell, C. W. Chick and others at once drove furiously over the fourteen miles to the lumber camp of the firm. Arriving there at the house formerly occupied by Adolph Shelander, engineer of the road, they met a sight that froze their blood in their veins and caused the stout hearts of the doctors to quail.

Creeping around on the floor covered with blood and with sightless eyes were seven human forms colliding with one another and the walls and crying out in agony for help. The floor was covered with blood, torn garments and patches of human skin. As soon as possible the victims were got on bunks and opiates administered to relieve their sufferings. Their wounds were cleansed and they were found to be Adolph Shelander, aged 40, Frank Shippey, aged 35, Martin Lynch, aged 49, Gust Anderson, aged 30, Frank Wolfe, aged 18, Allan Critchett, aged 22, and Fred Chalker, aged 25. Emory Stearns was there with hands badly injured in saving the others, but otherwise all right. Anderson was already dead, Shelander dying, and one by one the others expired until seven, or all but Stearns and Chalker were relieved of their agony by death.

How such a charnel house came to exist was found by going about 300 yards away on the logging track where down an embankment 16 feet the road locomotive was found turned on its back and across the track were spread the branches of a fallen tree. Then the facts began to come together.

These men and Ed. Hanson composed the railroad crew. They had been down to the river with a load of logs, and as it was noon-time, had all, with the exception of Hanson, huddled into the engine cab to back to the camp without the cars for dinner. Hanson, seeing the cab was crowded, said he would walk and thus averted a terrible fate: The throttle was pulled open by Engineer Shelander and the

locomotive bounded over the rails toward the camp. Around a slight curve, just before reaching a high trestle and on a down grade, with no warning other than his quick eye, the engineer saw a tree lying across the track. Quickly he put down the brakes and shoved the lever over but it was too late. The wheels struck the fallen branches, bent the tree back against the skidway and then unable to overcome the obstruction, the locomotive lunged up in the air, turned over on its side and rolled bottom upwards to the bottom of the ditch. Stearns stood so he was hurled out of one of the windows and Chalker was able to crawl out with difficulty. In an instant the others were buried in burning coal and hissing steam that came from the fire pit and broken pipes.

By their own efforts and with the help of Stearns, all managed to get out of the seething cauldron. Fireman Anderson ran blindly against a stump, leaving hair and blood on its surface, and then fell over and died. Shelander crawled across the trestle work and others drew themselves through the ravine over which it was built. Then a handcar came from the camp and the victims of the horrible accident were taken to the house. Anderson had several terrible cuts on the top of his head and died almost instantly.

Shelander was awfully burned about the neck and was the next one to succumb, saying to Mr. Chick a short time before his death, "I guess I've got it this time, Charley." Shippey recognized those about him, although his chest was literally cooked. He had managed himself to partially disrobe and the skin hung in shreds around his limbs. Then the seared eyeballs began to lose vision and the death-seal was set one by one on the patient sufferers. By night six had passed away and the morning saw the last one expire.

The doctors worked untiringly but all they could do was to alleviate the sufferings.

It was thought Chalker would go as he was badly burned about the back but it is now thought that he will survive. Shelander, Lynch and Shippey all had families in Whitehall, and their wives were taken to the scene but were not permitted to see the bruised and burned bodies. The others were single men.

Undertaker Moog cared for the bodies and the coroner of Oceana County held an inquest, the jury returning a verdict in accordance with the above facts without blame as it was clearly an unforeseen accident. The set brakes and closed throttle on the engine tell of the effort to avert the terrible calamity to no avail. Wolfe and Crichton were taken to their homes in Oceana County. The other four were brought to Whitehall.

The funeral of Martin Lynch was held this afternoon, Frank Shippey's remains were taken to his wife's home in Branch County Wednesday evening. Gust Anderson was an Odd Fellow but his relatives objecting to the Order burying him, his funeral and that

of Adolph Shelander will occur tomorrow from the Norwegian church. The latter had \$2,000 insurance in the Scandinavian Benefit Co., of Galesburg.

The men were all above the average of working men, hale and hearty, and their untimely end cast a gloom over the whole community. Their employers feel keenly the sorrow of the moment. The mill was shut down and it will be a long time before this most terrible accident of the east shore will be forgotten.

On November 29th, 1901, it appeared that the Village of Montague had suffered a major financial disaster.

Some here today will recall the day when the Montague Bank failed to open its doors for business. On Thursday, November 21st the banker had gone to Detroit with the announced purpose of making some private investments and attending to business matters. He had left his son in charge of the bank while he was gone and nothing was thought of the latter's absence until a letter was opened on the 28th from him enclosing two trust deeds assigning the bank business to William D. Nufer of Whitehall and Chris L. Streng of Montague as trustees, also the following statement in explaining his actions.

"I being of humble birth and lowly spirit, unhappily find myself bearing responsibilities which wear me and rob me of my time which I feel I ought to have the liberty to spend in more congenial employment. Nobody will be able to understand my difficulties or appreciate the condition which drove me to adopt a course of action which may be considered cowardly, if not dishonorable. Neither can any one know what pain it gave me or how keenly I realized what sacrifice I am making, or how deeply I regret the trouble I am making for my friends and patrons. But I have shaped matters so as to fully protect every interest, and am absolutely confident that nothing worse than temporary inconvenience will result to any customer of the bank as I have left \$15,000.00 in excess of all liabilities. The cashier does not carry away a dollar of anybody's money. Therefore, let no man say 'I' am a defaulter, a bank wrecker or a thief. I have the utmost abhorrence of such a reputation, a fate which suspends over every private banker doing business alone, however, honest or smart I may be. No man ought to have the care of the money of a community. Such a care will stagger any man sooner or later; kill him or wreck him; work him to death or enslave him if he succeeds, and blast his life if he fails, banks ought to be incorporated.

"The businessmen of Montague, through ignorance, cowardice, folly and jealousy, turned down a project to incorporate the Montague Bank. Let them now awake to the importance of action in this direction. I hope that by assigning and placing himself out of touch that arrangements can and will be made to continue the business with but little interruption. As there is no reason for any anxiety whatever about the funds, let all depositors view the matter sensibly

and philosophically and allow the worried banker to take a vacation the first in 20 years. The gossips will go into hysterics, of course, and there will be plenty of abuse and ridicule, for the milk of human kindness is not given equally to all, but there are those whose memory and conscience will compel to speak charitably of the absent banker, and there are those others who will loyally defend him out of pure friendship and sympathy. He goes bearing malice toward no one, sincerely regretting my weaknesses and errors and repenting my offenses, and remembering gratefully the kindness extended to me and my family during 20 years of life in Michigan."

The banker left his family, a wife, daughter and son saying he now was a "wanderer on the face of the earth" that they would never see him again and that he would never return to Montague which as of this date was a true statement for he never did return.

For twenty years he had run his private bank and borne the reputation for honesty and integrity holding the high esteem of the people and was a very enterprising businessman.

He did leave \$15,000.00 more than the liabilities and while the depositors had a few anxious days their money was safe in his bank. Assets at this time were \$80,000.00. The bank re-opened as a National Bank.

The pressure of operating a private bank and being a successful businessman became greater than he wished to bear, this with other reasons caused his demise.

The pressure on a businessman was there then as it is today.