

The White Lake Connection  
Submitted by Barbara Bedau Brow

From  
Ghost Ships of the Great Lakes by Dwight Boyer

Chapter 17  
*Our Son . . .* and E.S.P.

Beginning early on the morning of September 26, 1930, a series of singularly curious and inexplicable events occurred on gale-wacked Lake Michigan. Three new, one ashore, two at sea, miles apart, were directly involved. The somewhat eerie chain of events that took place between dawn and mid-afternoon still defies rational and reasonable explanation. Old-timer sailors might describe what happened merely as a man "following a hunch." Others would proclaim it an outstanding example of extrasensory perception. One of the three men concerned termed it "three-way mental contact." Whatever the analysis, it saved the lives of seven sailors.



It began with Captain Fred Nelson, seventy-three years old and a man about to lose his vessel, the schooner *Our Son*. The battered three-master was not of great value, dollarwise. She was fifty-five years old and tired. And as if she were transmitting her burden of weariness to her master, a psychological surge of sympathy, Captain Nelson was suddenly beginning to feel his age.

The westerly gale had developed suddenly on the evening of the twenty-fifth as the *Our Son* had been romping along quietly enough and minding her own business. She was carrying pulpwood to the Central Paper Company (formerly the S. D. Warren Mill and later Sappi Paper Company) at Muskegon, Michigan, and would have arrived there the following afternoon had fair winds held. Before the crew of six could muster forces, the westerly winds, accelerating quickly to near hurricane force, had stripped the schooner of her aged canvas. It was all over in a moment or two...a great booming like nearby cannon fire. Then there was only the clatter of now useless mast hoops and the strumming of the gale in her shrouds and stays.

A sailing ship without her sails is prey to all the malevolent tricks the sea can play, and, one by one, out *Our Son* fell heir to them. No longer maneuverable, she lay supine in the troughs of the great gray seas which, abuilding the full width of Lake Michigan, now reared twenty and thirty feet above her bulwarks. Many of them broke over her, sweeping the deck and seeking out her most vulnerable defenses, her hatches. They were bell-battered down, for Captain Nelson was a cautious and thorough man. But he had expected a routine voyage, nothing like this. The boarding seas, like a clumsy puppy at play, had swept the *Our Son's* deck gear -- cordage, spare lines, boxes, and barrels -- into a huge tangles pile, a sliding, smashing avalanche that roved at will from rail to rail as the schooner rolled perilously. The tones of water dropping over her counter put more strain on the old hull than she could be expected to withstand for long. Captain Nelson could sense a growing sluggishness in her movements. He knew that her seams were opening.

"There's water in the hold, lots of it," one of the crew reported.

Captain Nelson was realistic, as well a cautious. He knew the *Our Son* was done for, and what he should properly do as prescribed by regulations and centuries of tradition. He should promptly order the ship

abandoned. But the realistic part of Captain Nelson told him that to attempt to launch the schooner's single yawl boat into the maelstrom would be the end of all of them. He knew, too, that his ship had been driven far out of the shipping lanes, that she would be unlikely to encounter another vessel before it was too late. It would not be reasonable to expect rescue from any of the conventional ore, coal, or limestone carriers. They would be on the usual downbound or upbound courses, either to the east, on the Manitou Passage, or, considered the deplorable weather, far to the west, hugging the lee of the Wisconsin shore.

"Anyway," he commented to Peter Olsen, "that's where I'd be tonight . . . if I had me a steamboat."

There was really no choice but to stick with the slowly sinking schooner and to pray that dawn would bring moderating weather that would permit the launching of the yawl. Sometimes, when the wind shifts, there is a brief period of calm. This would be the opportune moment to muster the crew and lower the boat, which hung from davits over the schooner's stern. That would be the proper time to order "abandon ship," Captain Nelson decided. Just in case a distant vessel might see them when morning came, the Captain had the ship's flag hoisted to the top of the aftermast, upside down, the international distress signal. Again, it was proper procedure.

The *Our Son* had no radio or wireless, but Captain Nelson, a firm believer in the Almighty, was sending out some powerful and personal signals of distress, praying that, come daylight, some errant vessel, far from its prescribed course, would happen upon them. What a potential rescuer could do to help was problematical. The seas would still be too high for them to launch a boat. His own yawl would very likely be swept under the schooner's counter and smashed to splinters. Still, Captain Nelson was hoping fervently that help would come from somewhere. When and if such assistance appeared on hand he would know instinctively what to do. Whatever the direction of the winds he would have no choice but to order "abandon ship."

Unbeknownst to Captain Nelson, far to the north and west, the Valley Camps Steamship Company's self-unloading steamer *William Nelson* was bound down Lake Michigan with a cargo of sand for South Chicago. Coming through the Straits of Mackinac and meeting the gale head on at dawn, Captain Charles H. Mohr didn't like the weather a bit. He had observed the seas breaking over St. Helena Shoal and had already concluded that later, after hugging Lansing Shoal and the Northshore off Summer Island and St. Martin Island, he would anchor in the lee of Washington Island until the gale moderated or the winds shifted.

It was then that something strange and unexplained happened. It was as though a compulsive but subconscious force was directing him. Against all the accepted rules of cautious seamanship, common sense, tradition, and the procedures normally dictated by the existing weather conditions, he heard himself ordering the course altered drastically . . . to take his ship down the east shore of Lake Michigan, the dreaded Manitou Passage. Once headed for Grays Reef and the "gut" between Middle Shoal and East Shoal, the seas, building up the whole width of Lake Michigan, began to punish the *William Nelson* unmercifully. They rose as high as the steering pole and swept her broadside with agonizing frequency. She rolled abominably, smothered with white water every few seconds. In the galley, dishes cascaded from their racks. The pans on the old coal range slid off on the deck. In the firehold the men were hard put to keep their footing, let alone feed their boilers. Loose coal slid from side to side in miniature avalanches that swept up the slice bars and spare shovels. The crew must have been confounded by Captain Mohr's decision. It just didn't make sense. Nevertheless, the *William Nelson* wallowed on down the fearful passage beyond Big Sable Point and Ludington, sustaining damage with every mile. Her

afterhouse was jolted with every sea that came calling. Glass in the portholes was shattered. Watertight doors, even though “dogged down”, were sprung. The bulkheads were bent in. Forward, the steel companionways between the Texas deck and the pilothouse had been wrenched loose.

On the eastern shore of Lake Michigan shortly after noon on that day, a group of people were watching the effects of the awesome gale and the tremendous seas it brought thundering and breaking on the beach. One member of the party was an old friend of Captain Mohr, a Mr. Joseph A. Sadony,<sup>1</sup> a gentleman who had often puzzled people with his ability to discern or know what was happening in distant places and to predict future happenings with astounding accuracy. Nowadays it is called extrasensory perception. Mr. Sadony, who had spent his lifetime studying this personal phenomenon, had often demonstrated this “sixth sense,” to the amazement of others.

As the gale raged and whipped clouds of white sand around them, one of the party wondered aloud if any ships were caught out on the lake.

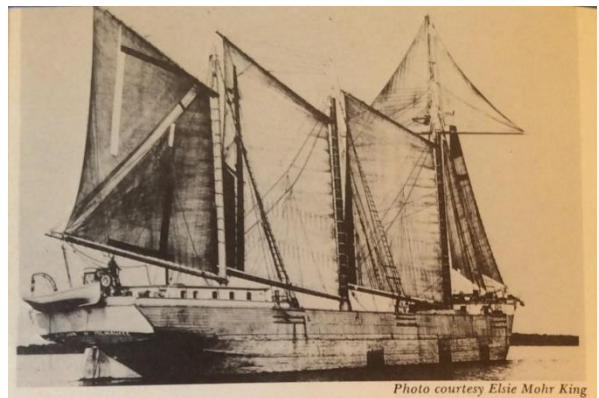
“There is one sailing ship to the northwest I would not want to be on,” said Sadony.

Another commented that he didn’t believe there were any sailing ships still plying the Great Lakes.

Sadony, however, insisted that his vision was correct, further describing the vessel’s sorry plight . . . her hold filling steadily, her sails shredded, and the rigging hopelessly fouled. He also remarked that the ship was far off the normal course of any other vessel, but he also sensed the presence of a cigar-shaped ship, which, if her captain followed his hunch, would come across the sinking schooner.

On the *William Nelson*, the unexplained forces that had compelled Captain Mohr to take the dangerous east-shore course, manifested themselves again. South of Ludington he once more altered course drastically, hauling hard to starboard and steering directly west towards the far-distant Wisconsin shore. Butting into the huge seas that now assaulted her head too, the steamer suffered still more damage. Her fo’c’sle deck was pushed inward about six inches, bending the stanchions and beams. Then the pilothouse windows were plucked out, one by one, by the wind and seas boarding her over the bow. Captain Mohr, still guided by that strange and subconscious force, kept her headed due west.

Daylight had failed to produce a rescue vessel. The *Our Son* was still wallowing deep in the troughs of the seas, her torn sails trailing over the starboard bulwarks. There was plenty of time for a reflective Captain Nelson to brood over the fate of his ship and dwell upon her past. To him she was much more than a creaking old wind-grabber . . . she was practically the last of the Great Lakes sailing ships, a dying symbol of the “glory days” of sail when nearly two thousand such craft spread their canvas to the winds and brought home the cargoes that nurtured industry at a hundred ports. Only because she was such a “handy” ship to sail had she outlasted all but one of her kind.<sup>2</sup> Her name itself, and its bestowing, was history. She was built at Lorain, Ohio, in 1875, by Captain Henry Kelley. One of Captain Kelley’s small sons, playing near the slip where the schooner was being completed, fell into the Black River and was drowned. In his honor the captain had christened her “*Our Son*”. Strangely, too, although she had



several owners in her over half century of service, her name was never changed. Whether sentiment and the memory of the tragic event that inspired her name influenced her subsequent owners is not known. One hundred and eighty-five feet long, with a beam of thirty-five feet, she could carry one thousand tons of iron ore or 40,000 bushels of grain. With a favorable breeze she could make from twelve to fifteen knots, faster than many steamers of her day. When she could no longer compete with the growing fleets of big steel bulk carriers, she took to other cargoes –salt, lumber, shingles, fence posts, saw longs, and pulpwood. She sailed on her first voyage with one-armed Captain Hugh Morrison, of Milan, Ohio, in command. Now a victim of the worst gale of the season, she was about to end her days in the vast loneliness of Lake Michigan, with Captain Fred Nelson and his crew of six perishing with her.

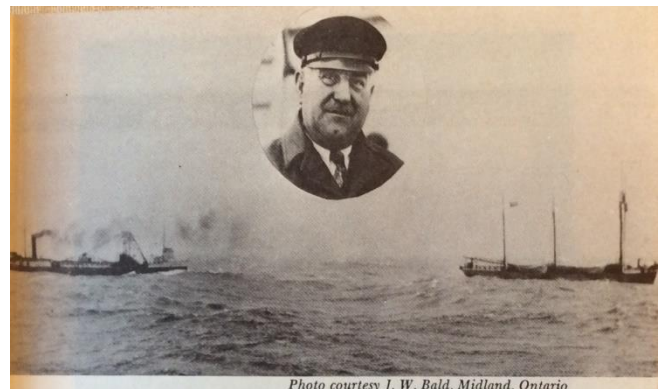


*The crew of the schooner Our Son. Left to right: Walter Schalbert, Charles Schroeder, Peter Olsen, Thomas Larsen, Alfred Peterson, John Olsen and Captain Fred Nelson.*

Aboard the schooner, where, above, the distress flag still snapped taut in the howling wind, the men were doing the idle, seemingly senseless things men do when waiting for the end, but not knowing when it will come. One toyed fretfully with frayed bits of rope and rigging, as if subconsciously wanting everything in order for a supreme final inspection. Another, with detached dedication, picked steadily at the putty around a cabin window that had long since surrendered its glass to the sea. Others just hung on a stared out over the heaving gray seas, lost in a myriad of private thoughts and treasured memories. Down below, the cook, Tom Larsen, up to his knees in water, kept fishing out pots and pans, moving them to the top of the ancient galley stove. Every roll of the ship dislodged them again, and Tom, muttering to himself, patiently retrieved them. He had refused to leave the galley when Captain Nelson had pointed out the futility of staying there. But, the captain had decided, there was no point in pursuing the matter. They were going to be lost anyway, and the galley was as good a place as any to meet the Supreme Navigator.

And so, at three o'clock, and in such a state, the *William Nelson* found them.

*This rare picture, taken from the car ferry Pere Marquette No. 22, shows the steamer William Nelson nearing the sinking schooner, Our Son. Note the schooner's flag, flying upside-down, the international distress signal. Insert, Captain Charles H. Mohr, who was awarded a Congressional Medal for the daring rescue of the schooner's crew.*



It really shouldn't have surprised Captain Mohr to see the sinking schooner ahead. The hero of many rescues, he seemed to be in the right place at the right time, although, in that connotation, the present situation left room for doubt.

In June of 1922, when he was skipper of the *E. W. Oglebay*, he saved two men, two women, and three children from a sinking yacht in Georgian Bay. A devoted family man himself, the event had made a deep impression on the Captain.<sup>3</sup>

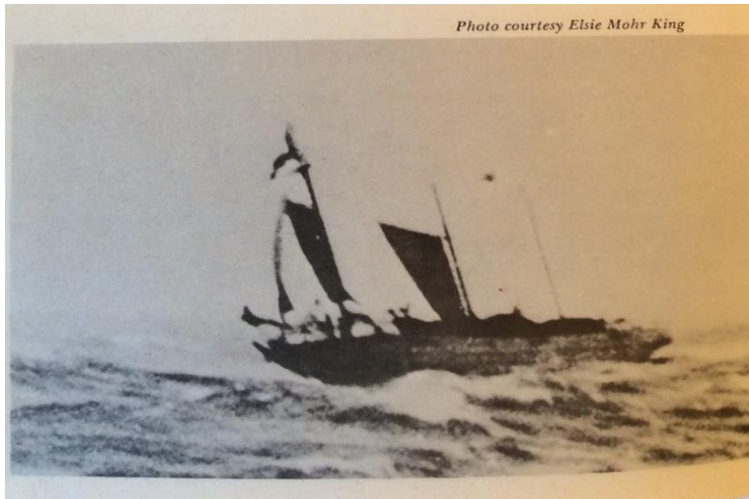
In November, four years later, as master of the *E. G. Mathiott*, he saved three men on a disabled yacht in Lake Erie.

The following year he had rescued the crew of the yacht, *Mildred*, in a Lake Erie snowstorm. There were three almost naked men aboard the *Mildred*. They had soaked their clothing in gasoline to make flares and signal torches, meanwhile drifting helplessly for three days.

In July of 1929 he happened upon and rescued four men and two women, adrift after their yacht had capsized. Again it was in Lake Erie, near Kelleys Island.

Now, the *Our Son* was out there before him, toiling sluggishly as though the burden of water and pulpwood in her hold would finish her at any moment. She was tired, very tired, and her slow, agonizing recoveries bespoke a vessel ready to lay her head down on the bosom of the seas to seek her eternal rest. Captain Mohr knew that saving the people of the *Our Son* would be far different from any of the other rescues. His own ship was already damaged, and he envisioned more before the day was done. He wasn't quite sure he could pull it off. The people on the schooner were in no position to help themselves. Launching the *William Nelson's* lifeboats in such a lather of towering seas would be suicidal. No, if he were to get them off, he would have to go right in beside her, risking fatal damage to his own ship should they crash together as both rolled heavily. There was the distinct possibility that both vessels might go down.

As soon as his decision was made, Captain Mohr sent out an SOS. He was quite certain that he would need help for his own ship ere long, and wanted another vessel standing by, just in case. The *Pere Marquette Car Ferry No. 22* flashed word that she was coming to his assistance with as much speed as the heavy seas would permit. When the smoke from the oncoming car ferry could be seen, Captain Mohr prepared to spread storm oil. Slowly circling the battered schooner, the steamer spread a film of oil on the water, taking the crests off the breaking seas. Captain Nelson anticipated what Captain Mohr had in mind. He was going to bring his steamer up against the schooner for brief seconds . . . seconds in which he and his men must leap for their lives. He gathered them on the port side, abaft the foremast, even reluctant Tom Larsen who had finally left his beloved galley. Slowly, as the crew of the circling car ferry watched entranced, the *William Nelson* came on. In those frightening seconds of contact, when the steamer's starboard bow nuzzled up against the rolling schooner, with a sound of splintering wood and tortured plating, they leaped. Then, with a blast of triumph from her whistle, the steamer backed off.



Last moments of the schooner *Our Son*. This photo, taken from the deck of the rescue steamer *William Nelson*, was snapped minutes after the schooner's crew had been snatched from certain death.

Minutes later in the pilothouse of the *William Nelson*, Captain Fred Nelson, wringing the hand of his rescuer, was most graphic in describing the *Our Son's* plight.

"The waves were thirty, forty . . . yes, and some fifty feet high. But still Tom

Larsen wouldn't come out of the galley until I told him a ship was coming to save us."

Resuming his course to the west, Captain Mohr reached the lee of the Wisconsin shore after dark and hauled to port, on the South Chicago track. He and his battered ship were safe now. Elsewhere the gale was taking its toll. North of Muskegon the stone barge *Salvor*, under tow, went ashore when the heavy towing hawser between her and the tug, *Fitzgerald*, snapped. Five persons on the *Salvor* died that night. South of Muskegon the fruit boat, *North Shore*, St. Joseph to Milwaukee, with 10,000 baskets of grapes, foundered with a loss of six lives. All along the Michigan shore, from Ludington to Sleeping Bear Point, as the lake was churned into frightful wrath, the breakers brought ashore timbers from a hundred old wrecks. Joining them were some from the *Our Son*, and a quantity of cordwood from her last cargo.

Word of the rescue, wirelessly by the *Pere Marquette No. 22*, brought the press and radio people out in force when the *William Nelson* docked at South Chicago at 5:30 on the afternoon of the twenty-seventh. Captain Mohr, Captain Nelson, and the *Our Son's* crew were interviewed extensively. Captain Nelson, a shy, modest man, was finally pressed into telling of the long, black night of horror as the cold seas swept over his vessel and her torn sails snapped in the gale like pistol shots.

"There would be times of silence," he recounted, "when we were down in the deep valleys or troughs between the seas. The crests would be high above us on either side and the wind would be whistling over them. But down where we were, it was awful quiet at times."

Captain Nelson had been a sailor all his life, and knew another real sailor when he met him. Of Captain Mohr's daring rescue he could say only: "A magnificent feat . . . the kind only a superb shipmaster like Captain Mohr could carry out."

As a result of his fearless action in rescuing the crew of the *Our Son*, Captain Mohr was later given a Congressional Medal for what was termed "One of the most daring pieces of expert seamanship in the history of navigation." The medal, awarded by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, by authorization of Congress, was presented to Captain Mohr, with suitable ceremonies, in the clubrooms of the International Shipmasters' Association in Cleveland. It was the only such medal ever bestowed on a Grand Lakes shipmaster.

It was some time later that the Captain learned from his good friend, Joseph Sadony, of his “mental visions” of the sinking schooner and a rescue vessel that afternoon of September twenty-seventh, as the group stood near the shore, watching the storm.

Sometime earlier, during a long conversation, the Captain and Sadony had agreed that each would follow his hunches, and someday compare notes. Their recounting of visions, action, hunches, and events of that particular day would have left the casual listener dumbfounded. One thing was certain, be it extrasensory perception or something equally unexplainable, it was weird. But for Mr. Sadony’s vision and the strange, unaccountable forces that compelled Captain Mohr to deviate from the accepted route down Lake Michigan, the *Our Son* would have become another “ghost ship” of the Great Lakes.

“In this case it was three-way mental contact,” maintained Captain Mohr.

Mr. Sadony’s convictions, inspired by his unusual mental powers, were purely impersonal. One day many years earlier, he had stated to John A. (Lex) Chisholm, a Muskegon newspaperman, that he (Sadony) would die in his eighty-fourth year – 1960. He did.

Notes:

Pictures added to this article were located in other areas of the book.

1 Joseph A. Sadony’s experiences and documented accounts of his strange “sixth-sense” or extrasensory perception are recounted in his book, *Gates of the Mind*, published by Exposition Press, New York.

2 The *Our Son* is often referred to as the last of the Great Lakes sailing ships. She was not. The *J. T. Wing*, another three-master, served as a commercial carrier in the sawlog and pulpwood trade until 1937 or 1938. She was later donated to the Detroit Sea Scouts and renamed the *Oliver H. Perry*, after the Great Lakes naval hero of the War of 1812.

3 Captain Mohr was the father of two children, Addison Mohr, now of St. Louis, Missouri, and Mrs. E. J. (Lee) King, Jr., of Montague, Michigan.