

Helen and the Blizzard of 1886

By Barbara Bedau Brow



The two-masted, ninety-foot vessel was built in Milwaukee in 1874 and originally christened the *Ulster*. Later, in 1881, she was rebuilt and renamed the *Helen*. Her flat-bottomed hull and retractable centerboard made her an ideal sailing vessel for visiting shallow harbors and she was very economical to operate. Pictures of sailing vessels from that era are rare and the *Helen* was lucky enough to be photographed during her short career.

One of the many smaller sailing ships in the booming lumber business, the *Helen* worked the Lake Michigan route between Chicago and the mill towns along west Michigan, apparently making good money for Captain Von Thaden, who was her owner as well as master. Von Thaden was a jovial man, well-liked by Lake Michigan sailors, who called him "Captain John." The captain's wife Lina was popular in her own right and active in the daily operations of the business, accompanying her husband on board ship, managing the ship's finances, hiring the crew, and making sure her husband maintained his sobriety. The couple had three children who apparently accompanied their parents on an occasional trip aboard the *Helen*.

As the first storm clouds rolled into Chicago, the captain of the schooner *Topsey* turned to Mrs. Von Thaden and urged her not to sail. She had already sent her three children – Anne age 11, Charles age 9, and William age 7 - ashore; why not stay behind with them? She laughed and explained that she could never do that. It was hard enough keeping Captain John sober when he was where she could keep an eye on him. If she didn't sail with the *Helen*, she said there'd be no freight, money or vessel left once it reached White Lake. And without the *Helen*, the family would be penniless.

The *Helen* had delivered a cargo of lumber to Chicago and was headed back to the sawmills on White Lake for more. It was a run the *Helen* had made countless times.

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the *Helen* had left Chicago for White Lake on Wednesday, November 17, 1886, headed for the Whitehall-Montague ports for a load to transport back to Chicago. On board for this trip were Captain Von Thaden, his wife Lina, and a crew of five, including a boy.

Careful readers of the day's edition of the Muskegon Daily Chronicle took note of a one-paragraph item on the paper's back page headed, "A Blizzard on Its Way." It warned of an approaching "second-class storm of considerable magnitude and force."

The storm blew in from the southwest, beginning with a light drizzle. Plummeting temperatures and strong winds quickly turned the rain into driving snow. Soon, the winds were strong enough to blow stacked lumber in Muskegon Lake and stop streetcars in their tracks.

The great storm of 1886 overwhelmed the *Helen* sometime during the night of November 17-18. She was probably leaking from the heavy pounding she was taking from the heavy seas. Despite the furious efforts of seasick crewmen at the hand pumps in the hold, she became waterlogged.

During the early morning of November 19, as the surfmen scanned Lake Michigan, they spied wreckage tossing in the waves near the channel – broken masts, spars, and rigging along with part of a hull were strewn for a mile on either side of the piers. More wreckage was found three miles north of the channel and a hundred yards from shore – an overturned hull surrounded by spars and other timbers from a lost schooner. Among the pieces near the channel were a yawl (small skiff or lifeboat) with the name "*Helen of Chicago*" painted on the stern and a quarterboard from a vessel called the *G. B. Mansfield*. The Muskegon Lifesaving Service sent a telegram to authorities in Chicago to inquire about the two ships. They learned that no ship named the *G. B. Mansfield* hailed from Chicago. However, the *Helen* was well-known in that city and the news of her loss with all hands, including her popular captain, John Von Thaden, and his wife, saddened many.

Scow schooners like the *Helen* had flat bottoms which allowed them to take on cargos in the shallow water ports along West Michigan. It also made them hard to steer, even under the best of conditions. Captain Von Thaden may have been running for the safety of Muskegon Lake, or may just have been running for shore when the *Helen* foundered roughly 3 miles north of the Muskegon Channel. When she struck, 100 yards offshore, Von Thaden and the crew had two choices – take to the rigging and hope the lifesaving crew found them before they froze to death, or swim for shore through freezing water in waves 12 feet high or higher.

On November 20, a man's body was washed ashore three miles north of Muskegon Channel. A local farmer discovered the body and notified the Lifesaving Service, which brought it back to Muskegon. It was believed the man had been a sailor onboard the *Helen*. Confirmation came a short time later: The body was that of Captain John Von Thaden. Upon hearing the news, his brother-in-law, F. P. Mayer, came up from Chicago to make funeral arrangements. Captain Von Thaden was buried in Muskegon's Oakwood Cemetery.

For several days following the storm, the lifesaving crew had the grim duty of patrolling the beaches along the Muskegon shoreline, looking for any remains washed from the wrecked ships. On November 24, the body of a woman was found on the beach one mile north of the harbor entrance. Over her dress she wore a sailor's jacket, and in her pocket was \$25.45 in gold, silver, and paper bills. The woman was

later identified as Mrs. Von Thaden. The captain's body was exhumed and both were sent to Chicago for final burial in Forest Home Cemetery in Forest Park, Illinois.

The storm sank at least 10 ships and drowned as many as 39 men and women before it finally subsided. In an era when a vessel like the *Helen* was worth about \$4,000, shipping losses from the November 18 storm reached nearly \$640,000.

In September 2002, the wreckage of a scow schooner, 90 feet long, was discovered in shallow water about two miles north of Muskegon Channel and sixty feet from shore. Two researchers from the Michigan Shipwreck Research Association were called in to investigate the hull. While the vessel's identity cannot be proven beyond doubt, they believe it is that of the *Helen*.