Wreck of the L. J. Conway

Submitted by
Barbara Bedau Brow

On March 16, 1992, it was reported in the White Lake Beacon that a section of a sunken ship was uncovered on the shore at Meinert County Park. At the time of the discovery its identity was unknown. Since then the wreck has been identified on maps as that of the L. J. Conway. Here is the story of how the ship came to its final resting place.

Beacon photo by Sally Girard

(An excerpt from Beyond the Windswept Dunes by Elizabeth B. Sherman)

Hundreds of ships were making late-season runs around the Great Lakes when a vicious snow-laden gale roared across the region on November 17-19, 1886, taking down a number of vessels. Hurricane-strength winds, clocked at sixty to seventy –five miles per hour, snapped telegraph lines around the lakes, and ship owners anxiously waited for reports to come in once communication was reestablished, knowing that the casualties would be high and dreading word that one or more of their own would be noted as missing. Just before the southwester struck, a large fleet of lumber schooners, lightened of their loads, headed out from Chicago. The lucky ones eventually rolled heavily into ports, their hulls, rigging, and sails sheathed in ice. Those unable to withstand the towering seas and icy blasts came ashore in masses of splintered timbers, all hands lost.

While many of the vessels that left Chicago just before the storm struck were sailing light, one schooner, the *L. J. Conway*, was returning to Muskegon with a load of grain: 3,735 bushels of corn and 1,332 bushels of oats. The two-masted *Conway* left Chicago on Tuesday, November 16, after filling her hold at the Illinois Central elevator and was not heard from after that time. Henderson and Peterson, the Muskegon lumber firm that owned her, expressed concern for the welfare of their ship, Captain Thomas Smith, and his crew of four. On Monday, November 22, the *Muskegon Daily Chronicle* was the first to

get the sad news in a dispatch that arrived from Whitehall: The *L. J. Conway* had been wrecked near Flower Creek, seven miles north of that port, with all hands lost.

The *Conway* which had been built in Manitowoc in 1873, had sailed in the lumber trade for some years, becoming a fixture in the Muskegon Harbor for the last few years of her career in the service of Henderson and Peterson. On this trip, she was returning to her home port after delivering lumber to Chicago, her hold now filled with grain harvested in the Plains states.

David Smith, the captain's brother, traveled from Muskegon to the site to investigate the wreck and, if possible recover the body of Captain Smith. He found the *Conway* had grounded about one hundred feet from shore in four to six feet of water. Both he her masts had been snapped off, the upper works were nearly gone, and one side of the hull had been town away. The cabin lay some distance from the wreck. Much of the rigging floated about the ship's remains, and the surrounding waters were thick with corn and oats. Two miles north of the wreck site, an empty sailor's bag was found with the name "E. M. Kensmann"; Edward Kensmann was one of the Conway's crew. Apparently in an effort to keep the ship from being blown ashore, the crew had put out three anchors, which were still holding as the wreck lay stranded with her stern resting on the shore. David Smith's heartbreaking mission fell short on one key point—the bodies of his brother and the rest of the crew could not be found. It was believed that the men, so close to shore, had either taken to the yawl, which had been found washed up nearby, or had tried to swim the short distance to the beach. There was nothing to indicate that they ever made it to land.

Details about the *Conway's* last hours drifted in to the *Daily Chronicle* and raised disturbing questions. The newspaper first got word about the wreck on Monday, November 22, when they learned that two farmers in the vicinity of Flower Creek came upon the wreck of the *Conway* on November 18. For some reason the farmers did not report their discovery. On November 21, several employees of a lumber mill at White Lake were strolling the beach when they discovered the schooner's yawl and further along found the wreck. They contacted the authorities in Whitehall who, in turn, notified the Muskegon newspaper.

Only on the late date of November 26 did the *Daily Chronicle* report that witnesses had seen the *L. J. Conway* and her crew shortly before the disaster: "It now comes to light that farmers and others living near the coast where the 'Conway' was wrecked, saw the distressed vessel and the four men upon her. They state that the men seemed to take turns in coming on deck, two at a time. For all this no attempt was made to help them from the shore, nor did they even kindle a fire to cheer the poor fellows through the night. Had they but done so, some of them might perhaps have been saved." A reported for the Chicago Tribune spoke with one of the farmers who saw the ship in distress and added the following details: "The vessel was first seen by a farm-hand last Thursday afternoon. She was then rolling heavily in the trough of the sea, and he could hear her crew shouting wildly for help. He made no effort to save them, and the vessel was soon lost sight of in the blinding snow-storm. The farm-hand says that when he last saw the schooner before she struck the beach she was heading out into the lake and the seas were sweeping over her." Such news must have provided David Smith with cold comfort and added a good measure of cynicism to his sorrow.

Captain Thomas Smith had moved to Muskegon with his wife and four children only three years before. The thirty-eight-year-old Smith had been master and managing owner of the *L. J. Conway* for a brief two months but had sailed other lake boats for some years.

Beside Captain Smith, the *Conway's* crew consisted of a Norwegian named Jimmy, who was first mate, John Gooten, and Edward M. Kensmann. Also aboard was twenty-five-year-old Captain Charles McGraw, the master and owner of the schooner *Eliza*. Captain Smith had approached him onboard the *Eliza* while both ships were in Chicago and requested a piece of plank. He explained his center board box was broken and leaking badly, and he needed the wood to patch it. The *Eliza* captain was glad to oblige. In addition, when Smith mentioned that he was shorthanded and asked him if he would join him on the run to Muskegon, McGraw agreed. He left his father and brother in charge of the *Eliza* and joined the *Conway's* crew.

Captain Smith was shorthanded because his first mate had left the ship while she was docked in Chicago, the reason for his departure unknown (a possible premonition?). Whitehall happened to be the mate's hometown and he was there for the duration of the storm. When the news broke of the *Conway's* loss so near his home, he went to the wreck site and remained there several days, keeping vigil in the hope of recovering the bodies of his former shipmates.

The list of casualties – vessel and human – grew as news came in from as far north as Marquette in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and as far east as Goderich, Ontario. On November 22, the *Chicago Tribune* printed the tally of losses from the three-day gale: thirty-six ships foundered or driven ashore, eleven gone to pieces, several still missing. Forty-seven sailors were known dead and the final number was expected to go as high as sixty. Financial losses were reported to be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The full extent of the storm's destructive blow had yet to be realized when a Muskegon newspaper writer, sensitive to the fears and deadly dangers faced by sailors on the lakes, was moved to express his thoughts. By painting a dramatic scenario, he reminded the people of Muskegon of the risks taken by those who sailed the treacherous waters and the great debt owed to the local seamen:

> How easy it is to sit by warm fires and, watching the storm, to give a pitying thought to vessels in distress and the drowning seamen. And yet we do this in a superficial way, which really amounts to nothing, and is but a shadowy passing thought, a dim and indistinct vision of so terrible a reality. Do we picture vividly the raging waters reaching up with powerful arms to grasp the devoted vessel; the white manes tossing as these marine war horses rear and prance in ceaseless charges; the keen wind, laden with blinding snows and icy particles beating upon the struggling mariners; the terrible doubt growing into a more terrible certainty as the fated crew approach their doom; the clinging for life, with benumbed bodies and despairing souls, to broken rigging and spars; the thoughts of home and loved ones which strike a colder chill through the heart than that of the storm; the slow hours dragging their weary length along while despair watches over its victims and desolation mocks them in the voices of the angry deep; the sinking at last into dull insensibility but to awake struggling in the grasp of giant waves, from which a few may escape, or all go down to a terrible death. Then, a few days later, disfigured and storm beaten corpses flung contemptuously upon the beach by the waves which are tired of their ghastly playthings, and a grave watered with loving tears, or sadder still, an unknown tomb in some strange and lonely land. This is what the recent storm meant to hundreds of those who make sea and lake traffic possible, and the men who dare all this are those who tread our streets daily, often unnoticed and almost unknown. Muskegon should give many a kindly thought to her mariners. (Muskegon Daily Chronicle, November 20, 1886, p. 2)