

PROLOGUE

THE BOAT WENT DOWN



AGNES

TAZEWELL COUNTY GENEALOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY (TCGHS)

AGNES SOADY NEVER FORGOT that warm July night. Not a moment of it. In fact, she would live to retell it for many years, even some 63 years to the day, in 1981, when a newspaper article featured her amazing story. By then, at the age of 82, Agnes had lived a full life. She married a local man who had served in the war and they started a family together. They stayed rooted in the town she grew up in. A town scarred by the events of that fateful July night. The night everything changed. Agnes Soady, née Smith, would never forget it. It started with a long walk home from work, a full mile-and-a-half hike along the cobbles and rutted dirt roads.

She was exhausted and disappointed.

The pretty but dowdy-by-design 19-year-old had a ticket to go on the steamer *Columbia* for a moonlight cruise on the Illinois River. It was an unexpected invitation from her neighbor John Diepenbrock, who asked Agnes to join him and his family for a night out. The event was sponsored by a local social club to which John belonged.

Agnes liked John, his wife Martha, and their three small boys,

Henry, Melvin, and baby Norman. She enjoyed watching them play in the yard. And they adored her singing. Agnes accepted their gracious offer and told the Diepenbrocks she would meet them around seven that evening at the dock on Court Street. She would have just enough time to make it after work.

For Agnes, her hours at Kreager's Drugstore in Pekin, Illinois, went by quickly as the anticipation of the cruise grew by the minute. Her excitement, however, was about to change to despondency. It was nearing 7 o'clock and Agnes could not leave. Her boss was running an errand, and Agnes had to wait until he returned. She kept looking at the clock on the wall. Time was running out. "Be right back," her boss had told her, heading out the door.

But he never returned. At least, not soon enough.

Agnes would not be going on the *Columbia* that night after all.

Saddened, she walked home and decided to make it an early night. In bed, Agnes kept thinking about all the wonderful stories she would hear about the *Columbia* the next day at work. Then finally, she fell asleep. That is, until the knock at the door jolted her awake.

A MAN AND HIS SON, both dripping wet, were on their way back to Pekin in the back of a taxi. The driver sped along the cobbled roads taking directions from the man in the back seat. The man was holding his son in a tight bear hug. They both looked frightened, the driver noticed. The boy was quiet and shivering.

"Turn here," the man told the driver, "that's my home."

The man asked the driver if he was going back to the river. Yes, the driver answered.

"Wait here then, please," he said, "I'll be right back."

The driver watched as the man and his son ran to a house across the street.

The house was dark, but soon a faint light appeared in the front window.

IT WAS LATE, well past midnight. Agnes thought, *Who would come calling at this hour?*

The knocking came again.

A light flickered on in a bedroom down the hall. Agnes could hear her parents whispering. Then she heard footsteps.

Agnes and her sister Maude sprang from bed and ran toward the door. Frederick Smith, Agnes' father, motioned for the girls to stand back. The knocking was persistent. Then she heard a cry for help. "Hurry, please!" came the voice from the other side of the door.

Agnes froze.

She recognized the voice.

Frederick fumbled for the lock, tensely turned the knob, and swung the door open. Standing on the other side, drenched from head to toe, were John Diepenbrock and his eldest son Henry. Agnes was startled by John's pale, shaken look. Henry appeared scared.

"The boat went down," John said, trying to catch his breath. "All I've got is Henry. Please, watch him for me. I beg of you." He turned and disappeared into the night.

Agnes took hold of young Henry Diepenbrock and watched as her neighbor ran back into the darkness. Then she pressed her hands to her mouth and gasped. A frightening thought ran through her head. She tried to shake it off but couldn't.

Where were Martha and the two other boys?

THE TAXI DRIVER waited and watched as the front door of the house opened and a family appeared. They looked like the sleep was still in them. The man left the boy with the family and ran back to the car alone. "I'm in a hurry to get back," he told the driver, "and find my wife and two sons."

The driver asked him to reconsider. The police were encouraging everyone to go home and stay home, he told him. "They asked me to bring people home safely," the driver exclaimed, "not take anyone back."

"I had my baby in my arms!" the man shouted. "Then the water came," he said, his voice now trembling. But he could not finish the sentence. The man slumped in the seat and said no more.

The driver understood. He turned the car around and headed back to the wreck of the *Columbia*.

TROUBLE AHEAD



THE STEAMER COLUMBIA
MURPHY LIBRARY UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

IT WAS LATE ON A FRIDAY, the day after the Fourth of July, 1918. Captain Mehl stood near the bow of the *Columbia*, which was filled with passengers on a midnight excursion on the Illinois River. The short, stocky 47-year-old German immigrant with the boyish-looking face wanted a cigar so badly he could taste it, but that would be a pleasure for later. The night's work would soon be over, he thought, another job well done.

The air had been clear upriver—a perfect trip—but now something had stirred up. It wasn't a full-blown fog bank Mehl noticed up ahead, but a slight, mysterious mist, the kind that gives a pilot fits and a captain a good case of the nerves. Mehl looked up at his trusted pilot, George "Tom" Williams, who stood 40 feet above the water. Williams must have seen it, too, Mehl thought. But it was hard to tell. A steamboat pilot shows few emotions. He stands next to the twelve-foot wheel, always looking straight ahead, rigid like a statue. Mehl considered calling up, but his voice might not carry over the sound of the orchestra in the dance hall. Best not to alarm the passengers, he thought—a yelling captain is bad for business.

There was no other choice. He tipped his hat to a fellow along the rail and hurried to the top deck.

Pilot Williams, universally called Tom for short, was a step ahead of his captain. He had yanked the bell-pull and alerted the engine crew below to ease up. Just then a voice came through the pilothouse door, an unmistakable voice with a thick German accent. "Take it on a slow bell, Tom," Captain Mehl ordered, without hesitation or explanation. But Tom knew.

"Can you see the bridges?" Mehl asked. Williams looked cautiously ahead. Yes, he could see them fine. The mist was not heavy enough to affect his vision, not yet at least. But there was trouble up ahead.

The Wesley City sand bar.

Bar 11 on the navigational map.

Williams hated the blasted thing.

The Wesley City sand bar was a large obstruction in the middle of the Illinois River between Peoria and Pekin. Oftentimes hidden by high water, the danger was present each time a boat passed through. There was only a narrow channel to navigate on either side. It was notorious for testing a pilot's skill—and wits.

More trouble, Williams thought.

The water was up from recent rains, and the current was running fast. This was not going to be an easy end to the night.

William's job as a steamboat pilot was to "read the river and steer the boat." Bar 11 was easy to spot, that was clear, and Williams knew it well, but piloting the boat around it took the skills of a good 'driver.'

"First thing you learn is how to steer the boat," explained steamboat pilot Walter Karnath in the book *The River's In My Blood*. "You stood on one side of the wheel and kept turning it one way or the other. There was a foot brake on the floor underneath the pilothouse. You'd step on that and hold the wheel, instead of holding the spokes all the time."

Some pilots missed the brake, and the spokes would spin back like a whirling fan, snagging the poor man's clothing and sending him flying like a ragdoll against the pilothouse wall, or worse, out the front window. "Once you learned to steer," Karnath continued,

"then you had to learn where to go."

Williams ran the scenario in his head as he had a hundred times before. He took his foot off the brake and turned the wheel slightly, testing its pull. Just as he anticipated, the ship's heaviest passenger, a full load of coal—100 tons of it—in the forward part of the main deck made the ship hard to handle, especially hard when turning. The passenger load was just over half-full to capacity, and the dance floor was packing them in up front.

By comparison, the boat's stern was light.

Williams had some decisions to make. A clear run would certainly help, he must have said to himself, as the boat inched closer to the Wesley City sand bar. He needed to see, too.

"Better keep it lit up then," Mehl directed.

Williams agreed. He reached for the knife-switch toggle and opened the electric current. Just in front of the pilothouse between the two smokestacks and directly ahead of the stage mast was the circular electric-arc searchlight. It warmed up, then fizzed on. Suddenly, a brilliant ray of light reached outward like a straight arrow that spread its "noonday glare" against the blackness ahead. Pointing forward, it looked like a rope pulling the ship. Mark Twain called a steamboat searchlight "daylight in a box."

A relatively new invention, the carbon-arc light was introduced at Chicago's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Sitting atop a massive building, the round searchlight was nearly ten feet tall and weighed more than 6,000 pounds. But it was that glorious stream of bright white light that wowed them. The much smaller version for river navigation was considered a safety intervention, and it was used sparingly and cautiously. The round housing itself was as hot as a burning stove on the inside. Even the outside glass envelope could reach 500 degrees F. The beam was so powerful it could stab a fellow sailor's eye blind.

In the prominent days of steamboating, pilots were reluctant to use the newfangled navigation aids, like the searchlight. "It was a question of honor," argued one veteran pilot. "Anybody who used a headlight at night to find out where they were was an old woman!" he wrote.

One stubborn pilot named Captain Jack actually used the sound of a barking dog to navigate through thick fog. At a dangerous spot in the river, Jack would ring the bell, and a farmer's dog would come running along the bank "barking his head off." Jack would listen to the dog's incessant bark and know where he was "to the very inch." One day he rang the bell and got no answer. No dog. No barking. He rang it again and still nothing. He thought they might be running behind schedule so he ordered the engine crew to move faster. Next minute, they were on the rocks. The dog had died the night before.

In time, and after too many unfortunate meetings with the rocky shore, common sense would override reckless bravado, and the use of the searchlight became more widespread.

"Best to just let it burn," Mehl ordered, reluctantly.

There was no other way around it. The Wesley City sand bar was up ahead somewhere in the mist. Williams nodded approval. From inside the pilothouse, Williams had a handle on both the current flow and the gear movement. He pulled the handle. The beam of light trekked across the bow from starboard to the shoreline just off the port side. Then it went back again. The hanging willows on the starboard side stopped the point of light dead. Too soon, Williams thought. The boat was drifting.

Allen L. Davidson was in the engine room when he received the slow bell signal from the pilothouse and ordered the crew to decrease steam and back off speed. As the ship's engineer, his job wasn't to question a pilot's will, only to follow it. But silently he questioned it. He wondered if there was something wrong.

In the cramped quarters of the engine room office, Davidson wiped the sweat from his brow and noticed the shadow of his arm on the wall briefly disappear. He looked up. The swinging light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered out and then came back on again.

That could only mean one thing.

The searchlight was burning.

A clear sign something was amiss, he thought.

Davidson ran outside to take a look.

PLACE IN TIME



CAPTAIN HERMAN F. MEHL
CHILLICOTHE HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

WHAT ENGINEER DAVIDSON, pilot Williams, Captain Mehl, the rest of the crew and passengers of the *Columbia* couldn't know was that in a matter of moments, a little farther downstream just beyond the searchlight's beam, was an underwater hazard that would turn all of them into a footnote in the history of the Illinois River.

Yes, a footnote.

Sadly, the wreck of the *Columbia* is a mostly forgotten chapter on the river today. Some people still know about it, but only a select few. For others, there may be a vague recollection about a boat sinking on the Illinois River—possibly heard passed down from generations—but many can't seem to remember the name, place, or any of the details. In most instances, however, the response is simply, "Steamboat wreck? What steamboat wreck?"

That wasn't always the case, however. Throughout the years, and especially in the mid- to late-20th century, local newspaper articles on the *Columbia* frequently appeared to mark certain milestones like the yearly anniversary of the wreck itself. The articles were mostly feature stories about survivors—many of whom were now