

IOWA HISTORY



The J.S.

Drunken Man Pays a Price

It was because of the “indomitable courage and heroism” of a “cool-headed old Mississippi River captain” that hundreds of lives were saved on an excursion boat near Lansing in the summer of 1910.

On an early summer evening in June the *J.S.*, a “handsome” steamer owned by the Acme Packet Company, was loaded with 1500 passengers and crew members. They were returning to Lansing, Iowa, after a sight-seeing trip to LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Captain John Streckfus was in command.

One of the male passengers had gotten “unruly” causing a commotion among the women and children. He was warned several times to behave, but when he continued his drunken behavior the captain had him thrown in the brig. It was located in the hull of the boat where barrels of oil

and turpentine were stored. He was told not to smoke, but he ignored the warning. He must have thrown his lighted cigarette into something that was flammable.

As night began to fall the passengers were enjoying themselves—laughing and singing on the deck. Suddenly the sharp clang of the fire gong pierced the air. There were cries, “Fire! Fire!”

Pandemonium reigned as men, women, and children rushed to the rails. Some were crying, others were praying. The glow of the flames lighted up the dark, muddy water. One woman jumped to her death into the swirling river. Before more could go overboard, a line of men formed in front of the rails—creating a cordon—to prevent others from plunging to certain death.

The steamer’s timber—“dry as parchment”—fed the flames. Surrounded with the noise of the crackling timbers and the shouts of the crew, “fear-crazed” men, women, and children rushed from one end of the steamer to the other. All the while the “hardy old captain” stood at his post—commanding, directing, and encouraging the passengers and crew.

Captain Streckfus first directed his pilot to attempt a landing on the Iowa side of the river, but a large raft of logs was in the way. It was decided to move over to the Wisconsin side—over a mile away. But as the *J.S.* approached the shore the pilot discovered the water was too shallow. Finally, Captain Streckfus ordered the pilot to head to Bad Axe Island where he was able to run the fiery floating inferno close to the shore.

“All ashore!” came the command, as passengers made a mad rush for the gangplanks that the crew had laid down. Although the water was only waist-high, people were injured as the crush of the crowd scrambled to escape the burning boat. Men formed human “bridges” to help women and children transfer from the boat to shore. It was reported that “Big Jim” Page, the boat’s policeman, caught at least 6 babies as their panicked mothers threw them over the rails into his waiting arms.

Help arrived at the island as people in all sorts of watercraft from nearby towns came to the rescue of the stranded passengers on Bad Axe Island. All night long boats carried passengers to Lansing. It was well into Sunday before the last person was removed from the island. Captain Streckfus was the last to leave.

People credited the captain and his very disciplined crew with saving lives. Four people died; many were injured. The *J.S.* was a complete loss. Insurance covered only \$25,000—half the boat’s value.

One of the dead was the man who got drunk and ended in the brig. It was reported that everyone forgot about him when the fire broke out and panic ensued.

Sources

“Narrow Escape of 150 on Burning Steamer,” *Bennington Evening Banner*, June 27, 1910.

“Four Lose Lives in Burning J.S.” *Rock Island Argus*, June 27, 1910.

The photo: “The Streckfus Steamboat Line ,” *Tulane University Online Exhibits*, accessed October 7, 2016, <http://library.tulane.edu/exhibits/items/show/828>.

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