

# STATE NEWS

## Tragedy at Clear Lake is remembered

By LEES. DUGUID

People in wagons, buggies, and on horseback had left early from their homes for a holiday celebration. The whole Tri-State area was emerging from the log cabin era to frame dwellings, but we might be safe in saying that half the people were still using the former. Rail fences lined the narrow roads along the way and wheat was turning golden in color on that hot summer's morning. It was Monday, July 4, 1859. At that time America took its Independence Day very seriously (much more than we do today) with speeches, picnics, band concerts and all sorts of games, and an event that was becoming very popular in the region was steamboat rides and excursions

on the lakes.

A terrible tragedy occurred at Clear Lake on July 4, 1859 - Steuben County's greatest single holiday disaster (a boat capsized and 11 people drowned and since Reading Village and Woodbridge bore the brunt of it - Hillsdale County might claim the same.

I am a native of Clear Lake and when I was a small lad living on Uncle Will's farm, south across the road from The House of Seven Gables, he told me about that tragic Fourth of July celebration. According to him, his father, Alex (my great-grandfather), and Henry, his older brother (both excellent swimmers), assisted in rescues that

late afternoon. His father told him that some drowned in shallow water... that they could have stood up and waded to shore.

The reporting and recording of the whole event varies, to quite an extent, as to the description of the boat and as to the number of passengers in the boat. However, the four reports I've researched do agree on the number who drowned. Even the date of the event was listed for both 1858 and 1859 (it was 1859).

All of us who are familiar with Clear Lake know about its beautiful island. In the articles, the island is included in the boat's excursion trip. The lake's outlet is at the northwest part where it empties into Round Lake and in this area, the depth of the water varies greatly - some very shallow, but there are steep drop-offs in close proximity to where the boat sank.

In the four articles, considerable blame is placed on Captain Sines. He had been drinking excessively. Then too, another reason given was that a sudden strong wind arose and caused waves to wash across the deck and that when this happened, the passengers rushed to one side of the boat, causing it to capsize. It's most unlikely that we'll ever know the total story... it could have been a combination of these, plus the boat's having been too heavily loaded with passengers.

During the summer of 1975, I met a Mrs. Horral who lives in Angola. She gave me an interesting account relating to the disaster. "My grandparents were married on July 4, 1859, at Kinderhook, Mich., and following the ceremony they sped away in their new buggy for Clear Lake, to take the steamboat excursion ride (but fortunately for them, fate intervened). When they arrived too late, they were totally unprepared to witness a terrible scene - people drowning with rescues and attempted rescues and later the search for bodies."

**THE ANGOLA REPORTER:** "Monday, July 4, 1859, was a memorable day at Clear Lake in this county from the fact that on that day 11 people drowned by the capsizing of a boat. The boat was a scow decked over and had a wooden awning with seats along the sides of the awning posts and propelled by a wheel at the stern, which was turned by cranks by two men. A man by the name of Sines owned and had charge of the boat. There were 21 people on board, and as they were returning from the south side of the lake, a breeze sprang up and the waves washed over the deck which greatly

frightened the occupants. Several people being anxious to get out, crowded to the front of the boat, and when crossing the outlet, the boat capsized."

**HISTORY OF STEUBEN CO. 1865:** "At a picnic at Clear Lake on July 4th, 1858, a terrible accident occurred in which 11 persons drowned. This cast a gloom over the occasion, which is yet spoken of by those who were eyewitnesses of this sad occurrence, which was the result of carelessness on the part of the man in charge of the boat, who was under the influence of whiskey."

**DAWSON'S FORT WAYNE DAILY NEWS, Friday, July 8, 1859:** "There was a rumor last evening of the sinking of a sailboat on Clear Lake yesterday afternoon between 3 and 4 o'clock, and the loss of 11 lives. Mr. John Farley arrived early this morning from the scene of the accident and brings also a true confirmation of the report - 'After the ordinary exercises of the operation (July 4 - program) had passed off to the satisfaction of all present, a number of persons prepared to the lake for an excursion ride on a small sailboat. The boat was capable of holding 15 or 20 persons, but unfortunately, when she left the dock, she had 27 on board. She sailed around the lake, and on returning to the shore, when in about 25 feet of water, partially capsized and sank to the bottom, causing the death of 11 - 7 or 8 of whom were citizens of Reading. (The names of the victims followed.) There were three bodies recovered up to the latest intelligence - Miss Louise Turner, Mrs. Nelson Turner, and Mrs. Daniel Berry. This sad casualty brings grief to the hearts of numerous friends of the deceased. They were all respected and beloved by a large circle of acquaintances, who deeply mourn their loss.'"

**READING HUSTLER - CLEAR LAKE DISASTER:** "The Fourth of July, 1859, was made memorable by an awful disaster that occurred at Clear Lake, a pleasure resort, 10 miles southwest of Reading, Mich. A celebration was in progress and many Reading people had been attracted there for the day. An old scow had been fitted up into a crude

kind of steamboat and this was used in making pleasure trips to and from the island. As the boat was nearing the main shore after one of these trips, it suddenly capsized without warning and the load of about 30 people were thrown into the water. Eleven precious lives paid the toll of the accident and seven of these were beloved residents of Reading Village.

"P.S. A story handed down by survivors of this tragedy, relates that a drunk fell overboard, and that the passengers all rushed to one side, which caused it to capsize."

These sketches include the somewhat varying accounts of that tragic holiday of long ago. Floyd L. Haight, a Dearborn, Mich., historian, told me recently, "My Grandfather Haight took me through the West Reading Cemetery when I was a boy and he led me to the tombstone with wording on it, explaining that it marked the grave of one of the victims of the Clear

Lake disaster."

The preceding reports divulged the names of 10 of the 11 victims. The question has often been raised, over the years, as to the fate of Captain Sines, who was the owner and had charge of the boat. Answer: He drowned.

- THE VICTIMS**  
Reading Village
1. Mrs. William Turner
  2. Her adopted daughter, Estelle - 5 years old.
  3. Miss Louise Turner - a former student at Hillsdale College.
  4. Olen Turner - he and Louise were children of Nelson Turner.
  5. Mrs. Danford Berry
  6. Mr. Danford Berry
  7. Isaac Berry
- Woodbridge
8. Mrs. Lyman Steel
  9. Miss Lamson - a sister-in-law to Mrs. Steel
  10. Captain Sines (of Woodbridge??)
  11. Name not available

