

1879: ON A CAKE OF ICE: The Terrible Predicament a Sinking Boat Left Its Passengers In

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It has been said by some of Mr. Geo. W. Gardner's friends that the reason he was defeated in the Republican convention for Mayor was because he was not in the city for several days previous to the primaries. But it is known to only a few - why he was not in the city or where he was. As will be seen further on, but for a good Providence he would not be in the city, or even in existence, today.

It is well known that he is largely interested in Ballast Island, a beautiful islet in Put-in-Bay archipelago, which is thickly dotted with beautiful summer cottages, owned by wealthy citizens of Cleveland and elsewhere. In the midst of these cottages is a large, finely appointed club house where the summer dwellers take their meals and have their dances. This club house is kept by a steward and stewardess in the employ of the club association which owns the island.

In order to have everything ready for the season, Mr. Gardner left Cleveland on Monday, March 24, and on the same afternoon left Sandusky on the ill-fated little steamer Golden Eagle¹, to accompany Mr. and Mrs. Bixby, the newly engaged steward and stewardess, to Ballast Island. Mr. Warren Corning, of Cleveland, was also on the boat, which had a considerable number of other passengers besides a crew numbering six persons. Among the passengers were four ladies and four children. One of the ladies, Mrs. Smith, (widow of the man who kept the boat house near the Beebe House), had twin babies and another child, and another lady, whose name Mr. Gardner does not know, was also accompanied by a child. The other ladies were Mrs. Bixby, who was on Lake Erie for the first time in her life, and a Miss Smith, of Middle Bass Island.

The voyage from Sandusky to Kelley's Island was made without mishap and the passengers and freight for that island was safely landed. The little steamer, which had made so many voyages and carried so many thousand passengers between Put-in-Bay and Stacey's², then turned about and started for Ballast Island, all the ladies being still on board. But she had not gone far before she began to have trouble with the ice, which was drifting with the current of the lake and interfered with the backing of the boat to get headway to bunt into the ice ahead.

When about a mile from shore Mr. Gardner discovered, by signs which an experienced steamboatman only would detect, that the boat was leaking. About the same time the cook reported to the Captain that water was coming into the Kitchen. It was soon found that the boat would inevitably sink, and that all that could be done was to get the people and freight out on the ice as quickly and promptly as possible. So Mr. Gardner informed the ladies that they had better take their light baggage and get on the ice, as they would probably have to walk ashore. The Captain then blew

¹ The small steamer Golden Eagle was launched in 1872 by Andrew Wehrle, owner of the Golden Eagle Winery on Middle Bass Island. During the summer it operated primarily as a regular shuttle between Middle Bass and Put-in-Bay but also made many trips to other places in the off season, as well as to Ballast Island during the summer.

² Stacey's Pleasure Hall, at the Golden Eagle Winery which was at today's location of the Lonz Winery on Middle Bass Island

his whistle for aid from the island and caused lamps to be swung to indicate the whereabouts of the party.

The twenty-five passengers were got out on a cake of ice about thirty feet square, and were then informed what the trouble was. The metal lifeboat of the Golden Eagle was also landed on the ice, and the women, and children were put into that.

There were four peddlers among the passengers, and one of them attempted to get into the boat with his pack weighing 125 pounds, but Mr. Gardner slung it out without ceremony, and informed its greedy owner that the women and children would be cared for first, the baggage last. Another of the peddlers tried a like trick when a change of boats was made later, and met with the same treatment at the hands of one of the Islanders.

In the course of what must have seemed a very long time, a boat with runners, used in winter for transporting the mails to and from Kelley's Island, was pushed out to meet the wrecked party — who were pushing along very slowly and laboriously in a necessarily zigzag roundabout course over the ice, Mr. Gardner ahead in the darkness, feeling with an oar to avoid open water. At one time the boat was launched into an opening and shoved across, while the men walked around and with much difficulty again pulled the boat up on the ice. Here it became necessary for the lady in the bow of the boat, Mrs. Smith, to get out in order to have the craft pulled on the ice. Mr. Gardner offered to take the babe she held while she was held out, but the mother would not let her darling go from her protection, and was assisted out still clinging to her little one.

But, as said above, the party of Islanders, with lanterns and the mailboat, at length met the wrecked party and lent their aid in helping the passengers to shore over the broken and drifting ice.

It was exceedingly fortunate that no wind was blowing, or the ice would have been broken in smaller cakes and the danger (sufficiently great as it was on account of the current constantly heaving, breaking and shifting the ice) would have been more than doubled.

It was a toilsome and hazardous journey from first to last, accomplished in darkness except for the light of a few lanterns part of the time. But, to cut a long story short, it was safely ended, and all landed, without serious accident, on the east point of the island, where they at once appropriated a fish shanty for the ladies. Afterward the inhabitants opened their houses and made all comfortable.

The baggage was taken from the Golden Eagle by the crew and by islanders dispatched to the scene and was put upon the ice. One worker would take a piece of baggage to a spot where he thought it would stay until some one should take it further ahead and would then return for something else. And so it came about that the very last article taken off the boat, sewing machine belonging to Mrs. Bixby, was the only article of baggage or freight which reached the shore that night, for the ice drifted so that when a man returned to where he supposed he had left a trunk or whatnot he found nothing and supposed some one had forwarded what he had left to shore. Thus it was that every article (except the light “traps” the ladies and men took with them) taken off the Golden Eagle floated off down the lake on the drifting ice except the sewing machine mentioned.

The next day men sent out in boats for this baggage succeeded in recovering everything, piece by piece, some of which drifted four and five miles away, but it took them really all day to do it.

During all the perils of the night, Mr. Gardner says the ladies were heroines; cool, collected and

ready to do just what they were told. The same cannot be said of some of the men.

On Tuesday word was telegraphed to Sandusky to send a boat to take some of the passengers to Ballast Island. The little *Mystic* was hurriedly got half ready and put out, taking Messrs. Gardner, Corning and others to Ballast Island, then returning immediately to Sandusky. No boat appeared on Wednesday, and Mr. Gardner was naturally uneasy to get back to his political vineyard, so urgently in need of his husbandry. On Thursday, impatient to start home, Mr. Gardner started with Mr. Corning in a small boat for Put-in-Bay, in hope to get passage from there to the main land.

With much labor, and after hard fighting with and over ice, they reached Put-in-Bay, and while there descried the little steamer *Louise* headed for a neighboring islet. They succeeded in getting word to her and received answer that the boat would lay where she was over night, and the next day would call for them. On Friday, therefore, Mr. Gardner sailed on the *Louise* for Sandusky, and on Saturday landed in Cleveland. It was then too late to regain the political ground lost, by his absence, but he no doubt sincerely congratulated himself that he had safely passed through extreme maritime dangers and reached home alive and well. — Cleveland Plaindealer

Digitized by Michael Gora, Middle Bass Island historian, 2012