



Region – Great Lakes

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US Life-Saving Service Heritage Association*

Braver Men Never Manned a Lifeboat

By Fred Stonehouse (Volume 1, Number 2)

Looking back over a century of time, it is hard for us to fully realize the difficulties the old U.S. Life-Saving Service faced and the simple, matter-of-fact way they met and overcame them. The surfmen had a job to do and they would do their best, regardless of the danger. Sometimes, in spite of their skill and bravery, they were not successful. A case in point is the rescue of the crew of the schooner-barge *St. Clair* on October 1, 1888 on Michigan's Lake Huron shore.

About noon the steamer *Lowell* left Harbor Beach (then called Sand Beach Harbor), Michigan, on the west shore of Lake Huron bound for Bay City, about eight miles to the northwest around Pointe aux Barques. During this period in Great Lakes history steamers were replacing sail and it was common to convert old schooners, barks and brigantines into hybrid vessels known as "schooner-barges." The idea was to convert obsolete sailing ships into barges that could be towed by a steamer. Generally, conversion involved cutting down the top hamper and leaving only enough sail to keep from being blown ashore. A small crew of five to seven men (sometimes including a female cook) manned the schooner-barge. The crews faced great danger if the tow line parted and they faced a lee shore, since available sail had been reduced to a minimum during conversion. Anywhere between one and eight schooner-barges were towed in "strings" behind powerful steamers. Among others in the *Lowell* string that day were the schooner-barges *Lillie Mae* and *St. Clair*.

That October day the wind was blowing fresh from the north with a moderate sea and for a while presented no special problem. As the afternoon wore on the wind and sea increased. By late afternoon, conditions were bad enough that the steamer *Lowell* and her fleet could make no progress, so she swung around to return to the port of Harbor Beach. By the time they reached the harbor, the sea was too heavy to allow them to maneuver through the narrow gap between the two breakwaters. With no other choice, the steamer left her barges outside where they all came to a safe anchor. The *St. Clair* dropped both anchors about a half-mile leeward of the south breakwater and three quarters of a mile off the beach. The steamer sought shelter inside the harbor. Her captain later asked a tug to go out and bring his schooner-barges in, but the tug captain refused. The weather had become too rough.

Seeing the potential for trouble U.S. Life-Saving Service Keeper George W. Plough of the Harbor Beach (Sand Beach Harbor) Life-Saving Station launched his lifeboat and rowed out to the anchored vessels to see if help was needed. The first schooner-barge he checked was the *Lillie Mae*. She replied all was well. Moving on to the *St. Clair* and knowing that she was "old, rotten and unseaworthy," Keeper Plough urged her captain H.C. Jones, to leave her without delay.

The *St. Clair*'s captain refused to abandon his ship. For a full hour Keeper Plough kept his lifeboat at the *St. Clair*, all the while trying to convince her master to leave her. In spite of the fact that the weather continued to worsen, the stubborn captain refused to go with the lifesavers. Torrents of sharp rain marched across the harbor and string gusts of wind buffeted the anchored fleet. Keeper Plough tried to convince Captain Jones that holding his crew aboard would make no difference when the storm struck, so they might as well get off while they could. The captain refused to heed the keeper's advice. One surfman later remembered the captain saying, "all he had was tied up in her and he would stick with her to the last."

Keeper Plough also asked if he could at least take the young woman who was the ship's cook to safety. She was Julia Greavreath of Sebawaing, a lakeshore community on Saginaw Bay. Seemingly taking her cue from the captain, she rejected leaving the ship. She would stick by her ship.

Since the captain steadfastly refused his pleas, Keeper Plough and his surfmen reluctantly returned to their lifesaving station. Having left hurriedly without donning their oilskins, the surfmen were chilled to the bone and the warmth of the station would be welcome. Returning to the station also gave the lifesavers the good tactical advantage of placing themselves windward of the fleet. Should their services be needed by one of the schooner-barges, they could reach her quickly. Before leaving Keeper Plough told Captain Jones that if he changed his mind, to burn a flare and they would return.

About 10 p.m., less than a half hour after returning tied and cold to the Harbor Beach Life-Saving Station, the lookout reported a torch burning on the *St. Clair*. It was the distress signal.

By now the wind had increased to full gale and a furious sea was running outside the piers. Knowing the extreme danger they were facing, the surfmen donned their oilskins and life preservers. Knowing the great risk they were facing, the surfmen each gave the keeper's wife their valuables to hold before they left. It was the old motto again. "Regulations say we have to go out, but they don't say anything about coming back."

Knowing that once they reached the *St. Clair* they would be unable to return to the station against the force of the sea, Keeper Plough decided he would have to run for the safety of the *St. Clair* River, sixty miles to the south and leeward of the schooner-barge. It would be a terrible trip, but it was his only option.

When the surfmen reached the rolling and pitching *St. Clair*, they had great difficulty working in alongside her. Finally, one of the men on the schooner-barge managed to throw a heaving line to the USLSS lifeboat and the sailors hauled the heavy lifeboat to the ship. Quickly the six sailors and Julia Greavreath jumped into the wildly tossing lifeboat. Once all were safely aboard, the lifesavers dropped the line and the lifeboat was swept out into the surging waters. Soon thereafter the *St. Clair* foundered.

What followed was an epic run over a wild and tumultuous lake. The surfmen started out under oars, but Keeper Plough soon had his crew set a reefed sail, steering with the tiller and two quarter oars. Time and again, the lifeboat was nearly smothered by a tremendous sea, breaking sharply and then rushing by on either side. For a time the Life-Saving Service cheated disaster. Finally, a monster wave broke over the stern, carrying away the tiller and nearly causing the boat to broach. Recovering rapidly from this near catastrophe, Plough lowered the sail and ordered his men to continue under oars.

All night long, frigid waves periodically swept into the lifeboat, soaking surfmen and sailors alike before streaming out through the boat's drainage ports. One of the waves put out the lantern, preventing Keeper Plough from seeing the compass. When he called for matches, only one man had some that were still dry. The difficulty of relighting the lantern on such a terrible night can only be imagined; stinging spray, a pitching and rolling lifeboat, numbed fingers fumbling with an ever decreasing number of dry matches. But finally that lantern was lighted and the keeper brought the lifeboat back on course.

To have lost that feeble lantern glow would have been disastrous. Just holding the lantern and keeping it out of the water was a difficult job. Several men tried, but their hands got so numb they could not keep it up. Finally, Julia Greavreath took over the job and throughout the night kept the vital lantern burning. This courageous young woman was helping to keep them all on course and alive.

Throughout this wild night the Life-Saving Service's lifeboat again earned its well deserved reputation for strength and seaworthiness. The lifeboat could not be defeated. But the people on board were only human and they had limits. When the gray dawn finally broke, everyone on board was exhausted and suffering from hypothermia.

In a desperate attempt to keep the seas clear of the boat, Keeper Plough trailed an oilcan. It did the trick, smoothing the seas enough to keep them out of the boat, at least as long as they were in deep water and the oil lasted. The oil was not used earlier because the can was stored under the deck and the keeper was afraid that if he tried to get it out in the darkness, an unseen boarding wave might strike and flood the open hatch.

With the dawn it was clear that both lifesavers and sailors, especially Captain Jones and Julia Greavreath, were exhausted and frozen to the bone. Going the full sixty miles to the St. Clair River at the southern extremity of Lake Huron was clearly out of the question.

Port Sanilac, however, was approximately halfway and when they arrived off the harbor at about 6 a.m., Keeper Plough decided they must try to land there. He would attempt to run the lifeboat into the lee of the 500-foot crib pier and onto the beach. Word of their epic run had preceded them and at least 200 people lined the shore to watch their life or death struggle. The crowd knew the storm warriors were out on the lake and coming their way.

The lifeboat soon arrived off Port Sanilac. Just as the lifeboat passed the end of the pier a tremendous wave, piled higher by the shoaling bottom, caught the lifeboat and broached it. Another wave smashed into the lifeboat, rolling the boat completely over and throwing everyone into the boiling surf. The heavy lifeboat rolled three quarters of the way back toward upright, but before coming around entirely it struck bottom.

Eight of the sixteen people on board managed to get back into the lifeboat and eventually rode it to shore. Three others swam ashore, but five souls perished, including brave Julia Greavreath. Those that made it to the beach owed their lives to the efforts of bystanders, several of whom dashed into the surf to haul them to safety. Two of the surfmen were so far gone that they had to be carried off to bed for medical treatment.

As a result of their arduous training and the fact that they wore the regulation USLSS life preserver, Keeper Plough and all of his surfmen survived. In the terrible minutes after the lifeboat capsized, it was literally everyone for themselves. The already weakened sailors were easy victims of the hungry lake. Besides Julia Greavreath, three sailors and Captain Charles H. Jones were lost. If Captain Jones had heeded the Life-Saving

Service's warnings off Harbor Beach everyone would have survived. Of Keeper Plough and his surfmen, the 1889 U.S. Life-Saving Service *Annual Report* wrote, "Braver men...never manned a lifeboat."