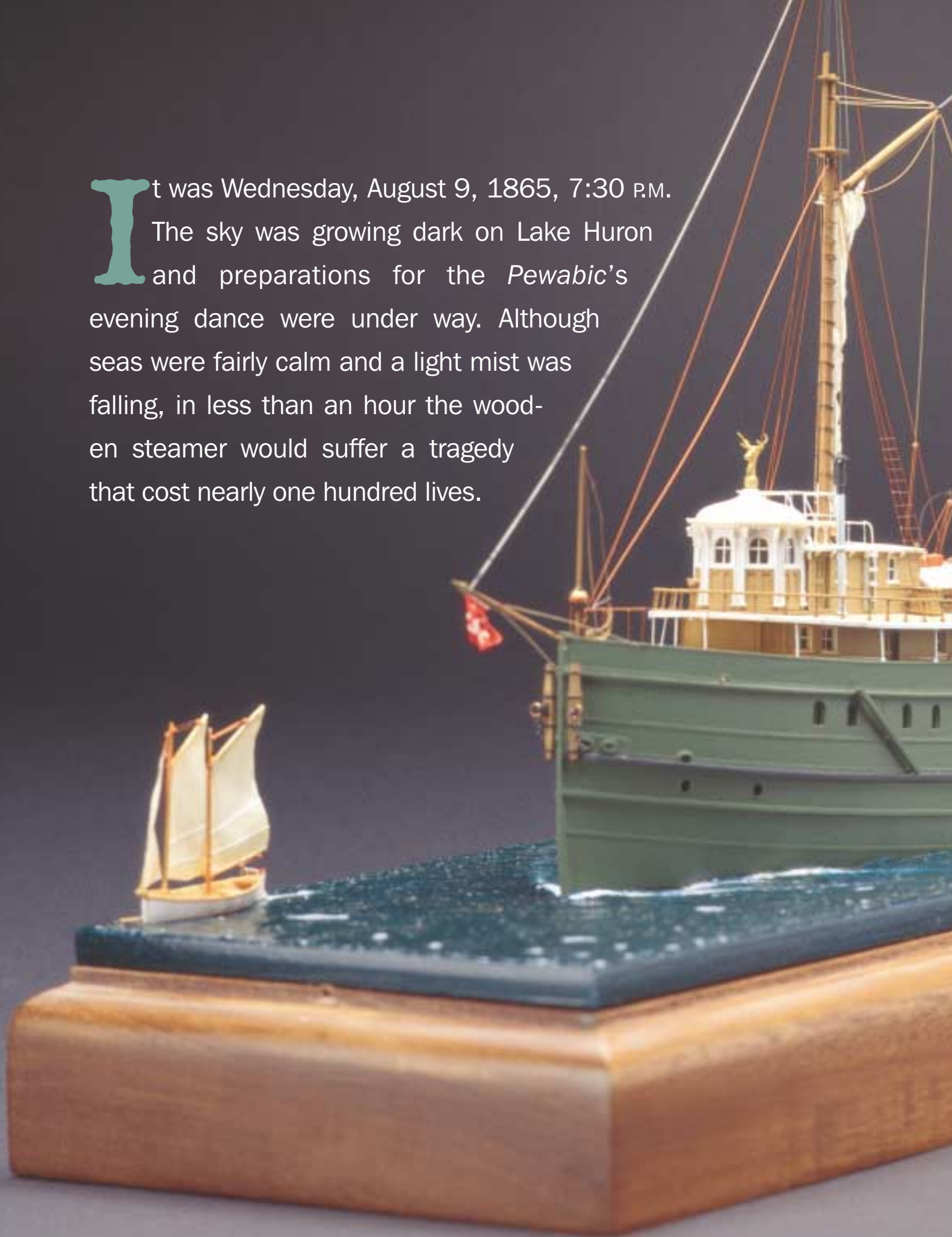


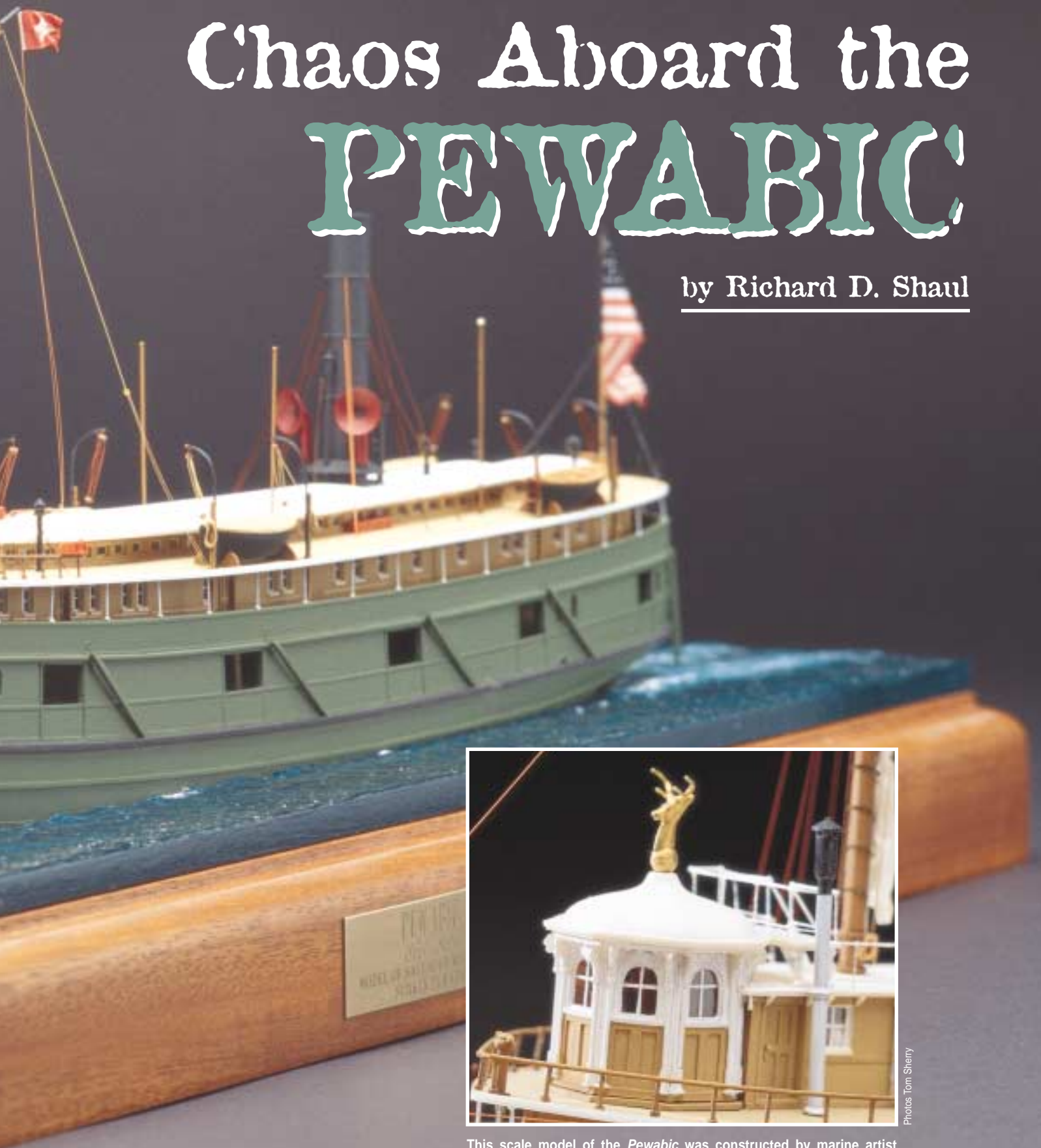
It was Wednesday, August 9, 1865, 7:30 P.M.

The sky was growing dark on Lake Huron and preparations for the *Pewabic's* evening dance were under way. Although seas were fairly calm and a light mist was falling, in less than an hour the wooden steamer would suffer a tragedy that cost nearly one hundred lives.



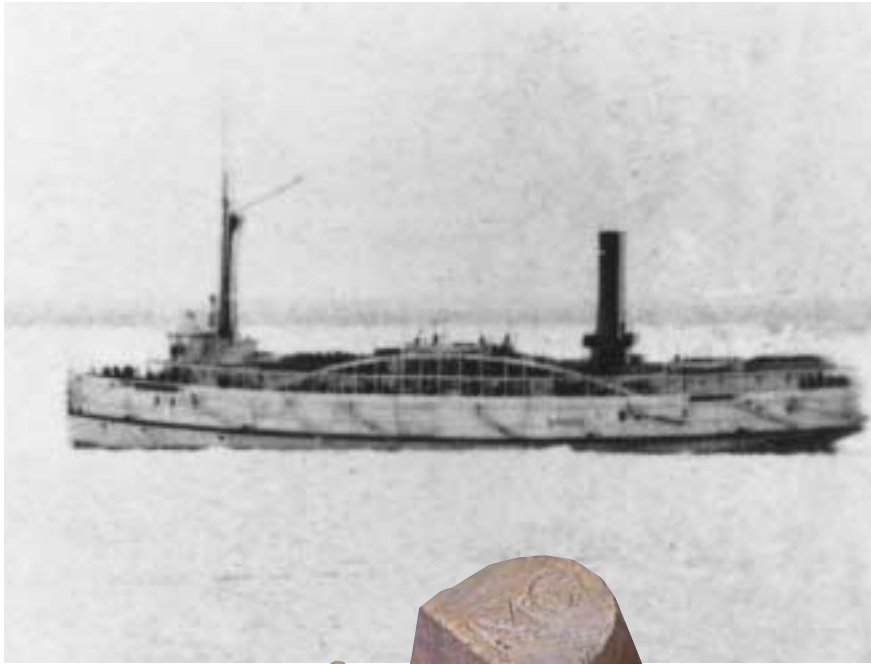
# Chaos Aboard the PEWABIC

by Richard D. Shaul



This scale model of the *Pewabic* was constructed by marine artist Robert McGreevy using wood salvaged from the ship. Most boats of this type had carvings of eagles atop their pilothouse. On the *Pewabic*'s pilothouse stood a stag's head (above), which reflected the captain's Scottish heritage.

Photos Tom Sherry



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The *Pewabic*, a two-hundred-foot-long passenger and freight carrier, was the pride of John T. Whiting’s Lake Superior Transit Company. Built in October 1863, the steam-propeller accommodated two hundred passengers in its ornately decorated cabins and comfortable steerage compartments in the decks below.

The *Pewabic*, which left Bayfield, Minnesota, on August 6, bound for Cleveland, Ohio, took on cargo and passengers along its Lake Superior route. Three days later, the *Pewabic* left DeTour Village on the eastern tip of the Upper Peninsula, loaded with freight that included 267 tons of copper, 179 tons of iron ore and two tons of potash. The next scheduled stop for twenty-seven-year-old Captain George P. McKay and his crew of twenty was Detroit.

## 8:00 P.M.

**THE PEWABIC** had just passed the Thunder Bay Island lighthouse near Alpena when John McKay, the lookout and father of the captain, sighted their sister ship, the *Meteor*, approaching from ten degrees or more off the starboard bow.

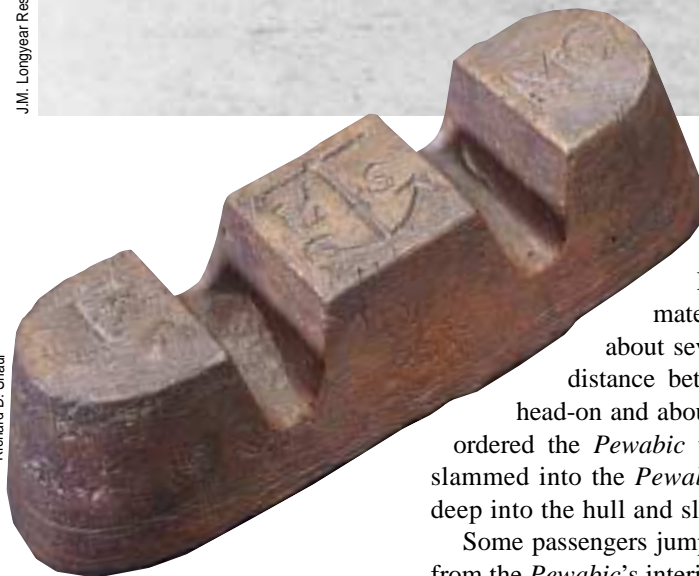
Roughly six miles separated the two vessels. It would be approximately fifteen minutes before they would pass out in the open water about seven miles off shore. As the two steamers neared one another, the distance between their courses narrowed. When they were moving nearly head-on and about one-and-a-half boat lengths away, first mate George Cleveland ordered the *Pewabic* to swing sharply across the path of the *Meteor*. The *Meteor* slammed into the *Pewabic* just below the pilothouse, cutting a gash ten to fifteen feet deep into the hull and slashing her below the water line.

Some passengers jumped to the deck of the *Meteor* as the steamer slowly ripped itself from the *Pewabic*’s interior and swung alongside the doomed vessel. Water quickly poured into the enormous opening. In less than a minute the *Pewabic* began to tip forward, causing the tons of copper ingots and iron ore to burst through the boat’s interior structure and push toward the bow. The lopsided weight of the water and cargo caused the ship to sink faster. Amid the thunder of snapping and crashing timber, panicked passengers yelled out for their children and spouses.

## 8:16 P.M.

**FIRST ENGINEER** Robert C. Jackson and his wife of less than one year were down in the *Pewabic*’s engine room when the collision occurred. Moments later, second engineer William Kennedy appeared and told Jackson, “Save yourself and your wife. I can swim and I have no one to take care of but myself.” Either out of devotion to duty or not realizing how serious the situation had become, Jackson remained at his post and told his wife, according to Kennedy, “to be calm, saying he would take care of her.” Neither of them emerged from the doomed boat. Kennedy survived by jumping overboard with his dog, although he was observed by another swimmer to be “minus an ear,” which was apparently bitten off by the frightened animal.

Surveyor William H. Russell was enjoying a cigar and a hand of cards in the *Pewabic*’s smoking room “when a few ladies passed through the cabin and said that we should go on deck to see the *Meteor*.” The men thought that the women “were referring to a meteor in the sky, so we kept our seats.” Shortly after, Russell said “there was a terrible crash . . . we were



Richard D. Shaul

The upbound *Meteor* (top) was loaded with lime, livestock and passengers when it struck the *Pewabic*. The letters on this copper ingot salvaged from the *Pewabic* stand for *Pewabic* (PW), Lake Superior Transit (LTS) and Mining Company (MC).

thrown to the deck and pieces of the wreckage dropped on us.” As the *Pewabic*’s stern was catapulted upward, the bow plunged deeper into the water. Planning to go to his cabin to get a life preserver, Russell remembered: “The deck was listing so much that I had to crawl and drag myself hand over hand along the cabin work. . . . I stopped to rest half way up the deck and watched the water creep closer. The water reached my feet so I forced my tired arms to drag myself toward the stern. A man next to me put his hand on my ankle and held so tight that I could feel his nails cutting my skin. . . . I dragged the two of us across the deck and collapsed on the stern. . . . I had just resolved to accept my death when someone from the *Meteor* pulled me off the deck and onboard the other vessel.”

Many of the *Pewabic*’s passengers, who had made their way to cabins below to obtain life jackets, were unable to escape the rushing torrents of water or to avoid being struck by falling beams. An unknown number of those who retired to the steerage sections before dark became trapped in their cabins as the boat’s smashed interior jammed their doors shut. After the collision, brothers Charles and William Greenfield hurried to their stateroom for their life preservers and to get their mother into one. She decided to put on her dress instead. Before the three could leave their cabin, they were carried underwater with the sinking vessel. Only the two boys were able to swim free of the boat and be rescued.

A young passenger named Samuel Douglas tried to leap onto the deck of the *Meteor*, about six feet away, but he fell between the two boats. “I found myself floating amidst a mass of debris and people,” he recounted. Eventually Douglas was pulled onto part of the *Pewabic*’s floating hurricane deck, then into a rescue boat where he observed “the lifeless body of a woman. . . . It was my aunt.”

Douglas’s younger brother had been asleep in a cabin when the crash occurred. He put on his hat and ran into the dark hallway and was carried atop a raft of debris into open water. When he was pulled aboard the *Meteor*, only his feet were wet.

## 8:20 P.M.

**AS THE WATER** around the *Pewabic* bubbled and churned, the boat’s eight-and-a-half-foot propellers were lifted high in the air—almost perpendicular to the water. A screeching

This painting of the *Pewabic* was created by marine artist Robert McGreevy.



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sound was made as the two blades slowly whirled before the vessel plummeted from sight. Crews from both steamers worked diligently, plucking survivors out of the water before dense fog settled on the lake's surface. Those who were fortunate enough to be pulled aboard the *Meteor* spent the evening searching for loved ones among the survivors.

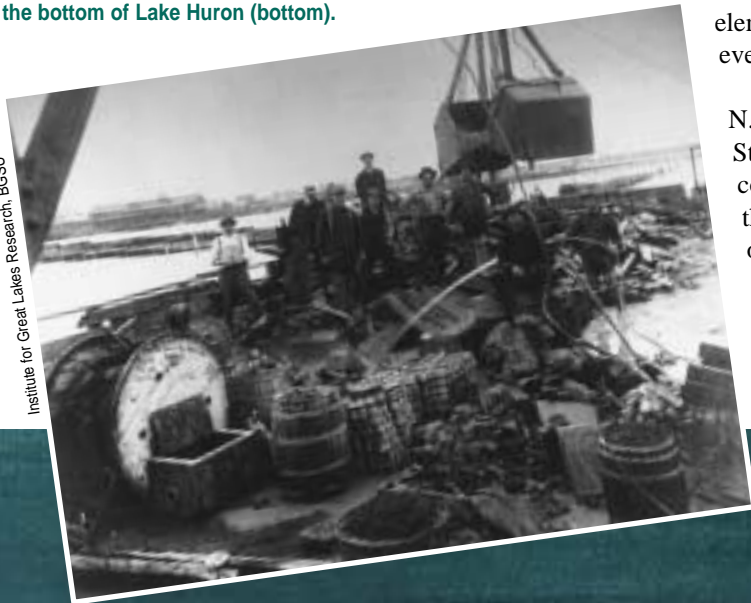
The slightly damaged *Meteor* remained at the site until morning when it was joined by the steamer *Mohawk*, downbound for Detroit. Once the survivors were transferred, temporary repairs were made and the *Meteor* headed north to Lake Superior. Before the vessel left, a makeshift buoy was attached to a rope floating on the surface of the water that was connected to the sunken *Pewabic*. A few days later, a tugboat traveling to Chicago found it necessary "to save a steering wheel and beer barrel" that the buoy was made of and carried off all evidence of the boat's location.

Eighty-five passengers and thirteen crew members were rescued from the *Pewabic*. Thirty-six were known dead. The estimates of the number lost varied from eighty to one hundred, since the passenger list went down with the vessel.

When news of the tragedy reached Detroit, the public became enraged. This was not, after all, an isolated incident. Before modern navigational systems, boats hugged the shores for safety and collisions were common. Newspapers also weighed in with harsh criticism. The destruction of the *Pewabic*, the *Jackson Eagle* stated, "would best be described as a monument to incompetence. The public has patiently allowed itself to be blown [*sic*] up, drowned, crushed, scalded and run over without complaint. There is more danger on the lake from collision than from the elements themselves, and it is becoming worse and worse every year."

A board of inquiry met on August 18 in Detroit, led by N.G. Isbel, a representative of the federal government's Steamboat Inspectors Office. Maritime law required boats coming head-on, or nearly head-on, to pass one another on their port sides and to cross in front of an oncoming boat only when safe to do so and after giving the proper signal. Approaching vessels a degree or more off their starboard sides were to keep this heading for safe passing. First Mate Cleveland testified that the visibility had been poor before the boats struck, that he was unable to

In 1917 the deck of the derrick scow *Eleanor* was loaded with salvage from the *Pewabic* (below). Material from the wreck was blindly scooped up by the clamshell bucket—which is evident in Robert McGreevy's painting of the *Pewabic* resting on the bottom of Lake Huron (bottom).



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tell in which direction the *Meteor* was heading and that he did not signal his intention to cross the *Meteor*'s path because he believed that the vessel was too far off to hear the whistle. The *Meteor*'s twenty-five-year-old captain, Thomas Wilson, acknowledged that "If both vessels had kept their course, we should each have passed about a mile or a mile and a half to the starboard of each other." Wilson's first mate, Byron Mills, said that he asked Cleveland why he crossed the *Meteor*'s bow. Cleveland's response was "that was his side and he would have it."

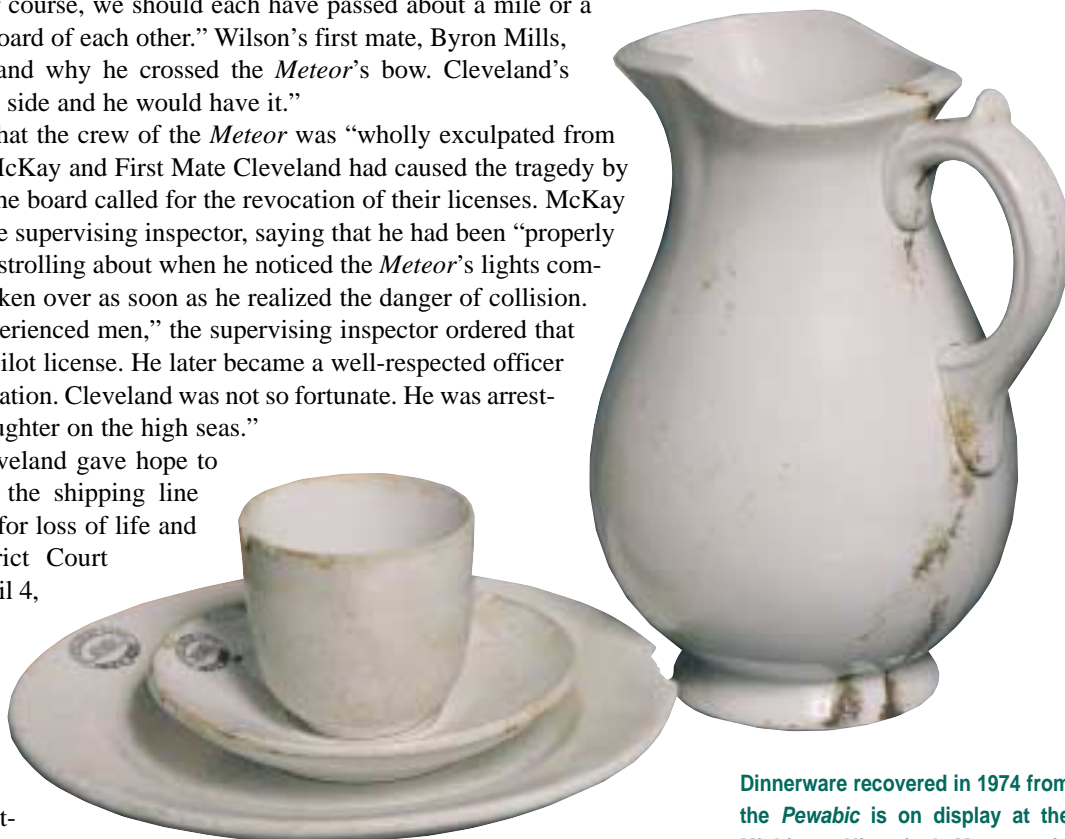
The board concluded that the crew of the *Meteor* was "wholly exculpated from blame," but that Captain McKay and First Mate Cleveland had caused the tragedy by their "mismanagement." The board called for the revocation of their licenses. McKay appealed the decision to the supervising inspector, saying that he had been "properly off duty" that evening and strolling about when he noticed the *Meteor*'s lights coming near. He said he had taken over as soon as he realized the danger of collision. After consulting with "experienced men," the supervising inspector ordered that McKay be granted a new pilot license. He later became a well-respected officer of the Lake Carriers Association. Cleveland was not so fortunate. He was arrested on a charge of "manslaughter on the high seas."

The charge against Cleveland gave hope to the victims' families that the shipping line might be held responsible for loss of life and property. The U.S. District Court convened in Detroit on April 4, 1866, with a jury of twelve men, "one half . . . well acquainted with boats . . . either being sailors or shipowners." Several respected ship captains said that Cleveland had conducted himself in a reasonable manner

if weather conditions were as described by some of the crew—testimony that conflicted with some of the passengers' descriptions of the weather. The U.S. attorney, H.B. Brown, argued that "it was strange that Cleveland had watched the lights of the *Meteor* fifteen minutes and could not tell which way she was bound," and that he had acted with "gross carelessness" trying to cross in front of the *Meteor* without signaling.

The trial lasted only two days. Addressing the jurors, Judge Ross Wilkins told them that the "experienced and expert navigators . . . proved that Cleveland's seamanship was good and that anyone could hardly dare to disagree with them, after considering the evidence." He closed by adding, "I would not pronounce that young man guilty." Following Wilkins's lead, the jury took only a few minutes to find Cleveland innocent. George Cleveland went on to become captain of another vessel.

The *Pewabic* continued to claim lives long after her sinking. Some thirty years later, as the threat of the Spanish-American War renewed interest in the boat's copper, salvagers came to the waters off Alpena. The *H. A. Root*, out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, located the *Pewabic* in June 1897. The following year two divers died in the recovery efforts. Over the years, several more divers lost their lives trying to find and retrieve the vessel's increasingly valuable cargo. In 1974 the Busch Oceanographic Equipment Company recovered a large amount of copper and artifacts from the wreckage, but they left the victims of one of the worst Great Lakes shipwrecks undisturbed in Lake Huron's cold deep water. ■



Dinnerware recovered in 1974 from the *Pewabic* is on display at the Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing.

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A resident of Mackinac County, Richard D. Shaul would like to thank Cris Roll, librarian at Lake Superior State University; Marlo Broad, librarian at the Jesse Besser Museum in Alpena, and Cheryl Shaul for their assistance in locating materials for this article.

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