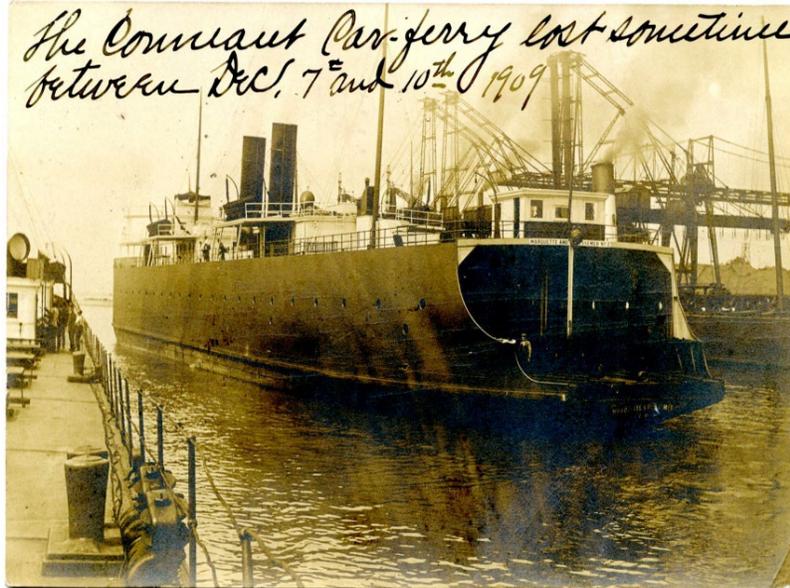


# The Continuing Tragedy of the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2

By Kathy Warnes



Marquette & Bessemer  
No. 2

Call it coincidence, the roll of the dice, or divine intervention, whatever the reason, two Conneaut men, John Cook and John Olson, both firemen on the Marquette Bessemer No. 2, thanked their good fortune and their lucky stars that they had

quit the ship in the winter of 1909.

John Cook had sailed with the ship for two seasons and “Old John” Olson had performed his firemen’s duties on the Bessemer No. 2 for almost six years. Both men felt under the weather and declined to reboard the Bessemer for the last trip of the season.

Diminutive Scotchman John Cook told a newspaper reporter that he was “mighty glad” he got off the Bessemer when he did. “Never had a narrower escape in my life,” he said. “When I went down to the boat Tuesday to get my pay, Chief Engineer Wood asked me if I wouldn’t make one more trip, saying that they were short of men. I came mighty near doing it but decided that I wasn’t feeling well enough.

“I’ve sailed on that boat now ever since coming here from Scotland and it seems pretty tough to have nearly all the friends I’ve got wiped out like this.

“I wasn’t the only one who was lucky. “Old John” had been on the boat longer than I had and he got off in time, too.”

“There’s Tom Steele. We were raised together and came to America together.

“No, this won’t make me give up sailing and I’ll probably go back on the lakes again next spring. Don’t believe I’m one of the fellows who get scared very easily. When we were having an awful time coming over a short time ago, they woke me up and told me they were pumping water from the boat, but I was tired and turned over and went to sleep again.



### The Captain and His Crew

Captain Robert Rowan McLeod, who died in the MARQUETTE & BESSEMER No. 2 sinking in 1909, with his daughter, Charlotte Roberta McLeod  
Captain Robert McLeod, originally from Kincardine, Ontario, was one of the six McLeod brothers who sailed the Great Lakes. His brother, John, was Robert's first mate, and for a while lived in Conneaut, as well. Other crew members from Conneaut included Frank Stone, R.C. Smith, Chief Engineer Eugene Wood, E. Buckler;

T., Kennedy, W. Wigglesworth, W. Wilson, F. Annis, P. Keith, and P. Hughes. Charles Allen, who for a while had a barbershop in Conneaut Harbor, also sailed on the M&B No. 2 as a coal passer. Assisting was William Ray, who was making his first trip on a boat. Tom Steele, fireman, had immigrated to the United States from Scotland three years earlier. He planned to make the Dec. 7 trip his last because he'd found work on shore. John "Paddy" Hart, a stereotypical sailor from Ireland, was an oiler whose tales of serving in the Second Boer War fascinated his shipmates.

Because they were under the weather, John Cook and "Old John" Olson had escaped the weather-related sinking of the Marquette Bessemer No. 2 in December 1909. On the morning of December 7, 1909, the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 departed Conneaut on its daily five-hour run to Port Stanley, Ontario. The Bessemer departed late at 10:43 a.m. because it had taken the harbor tugs three hours to push an ore carrier back against the dock when strong winds had parted its lines. When the Bessemer finally left the dock, she carried a cargo of thirty loaded railway cars carrying coal, steel beams, and iron castings. The wind blew out of the southwest at fifty miles an hour and snow curtains surrounded the ship.

Another newspaper account of the Bessemer's departure has Edward Pfister, the Conneaut lighthouse keeper, repairing a fog signal bell on the lighthouse tower when the Bessemer No. 2 steamed out of the harbor late on that morning of December 7, 1909. Edward Pfister grabbed his hammer and banged on the bell as a farewell to the Bessemer. Captain Robert McLeod heard the bell and waved to Lightkeeper Pfister. "Get that thing fixed! I may need it on my trip back!" the Captain shouted to the lightkeeper. The Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 slowly chugged past the lighthouse and melted into the first major winter storm of the region, destination Port Stanley, Ontario.

The storm progressed with the day. The temperature dropped from 40 degrees F. to 10 degrees F. and by the evening December 7, 1909, the wind velocity had increased to a sustained 75 miles an hour. One version of the fate of the Bessemer No. 2 estimated the wind speed as 70 knots, which translates into about eighty miles an hour. Whatever the variation, the wind speed combined with the drop in temperature and the snow created a regional blizzard that made the record books and proved fatal to the Marquette &

## Bessemer No. 2.



The original Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 being helped from the ice near Erie, Pennsylvania.

Over a century of controversy about what happened to the Besser swirls like the snow in the 1909 blizzard. People in Port Stanley testified that they saw the Bessemer off- shore about six o'clock in the evening, but it could not enter the harbor because of the storm. Captain McLeod turned the ship west, possibly attempting to shelter at Rondeau, Ontario. Canadian Customs Officer Wheeler and other residents of Port Stanley said that they heard the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2's whistle around three o'clock in the morning near the Port Stanley harbor. Around five a.m., a citizen of Port Bruce, Ontario claimed that he had heard a steamer whistle so close to shore that he thought it had gone aground. The sound of the steamer whistle soon faded away.

On the opposite side of Lake Erie, Conneaut residents east of the city reported that they too had seen and heard the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 on the late evening of December 7, 1909. One person reported that the Bessemer was headed directly for shore and the turned sharply to port before it faded back into the storm.

On December 8, 1909, shortly after midnight the captain and chief engineer of the steamer Black anchored outside Conneaut claimed that they saw the profile of the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 heading east. Several Conneaut residents said that they heard the ship's whistle sounding distress signals around 1:30 in the morning.

Two days later, on December 10, 1909, the William B. Davock, who would later founder in Lake Michigan during the Armistice Day storm of November 1940, passed through but did not stop

through a wreckage field west of the tip of Long Point, Ontario. The green woodwork in the wreckage was the same color as the Bessemer's superstructure.

Two days later on December 12, the Commodore Perry, the tug of the Pennsylvania State Fish Commission, discovered lifeboat number four of the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2, fifteen miles off Erie, Pennsylvania. The lifeboat held nine bodies with evidence that a tenth person had sheltered in it, but he had jumped overboard for reasons lost to history. None of the men were dressed warmly, indicating that they had to evacuate the Bessemer in a hurry. Steward George H. Smith had carried two large knives and a meat cleaver from the ship's galley aboard the lifeboat, an action which caused speculation into the twenty-first century.

Searchers found a large amount of wreckage washed ashore near Port Burwell, Ontario, which included one intact unused lifeboat, and the buoyancy tanks from the second lifeboat. In the spring of 1910, the last lifeboat broken in two was found on the rocks of the Buffalo Harbor breakwater. Besides the nine bodies in the lifeboat number four, only five other bodies were found from the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2. Captain Robert McLeod's body contained severe slash wounds which supposedly matched Steward Smith's knives. This discovery caused maritime historian Dwight Boyer to believe that the Bessemer No. 2 suffered a severe list as she sank, making it impossible to use two of the lifeboat. Dwight Boyer believed that Steward Smith blamed the ship's officers for their dire straits and brought toe knives to attack the ship's officers. The steward's knives and the captain's wounds have continued to be discussed and speculated about since the foundering of the Bessemer No. 2.

#### The Marquette & Bessemer Dock and Navigation Company Acts

Even before some of the bodies from the Bessemer No. 2 had been recovered, The Marquette & Bessemer Dock and Navigation Company replaced the car ferry, using the same plans. They slightly modified the plans by including a stern gate and an enclosed upper bridge but gave their new ship the same name as the foundered Marquette & Bessemer No. 2.

The second Bessemer car ferry entered service on October 6, 1910, ironically the same day that Captain Robert McLeod's body was discovered. The second Bessemer No.2 followed the same route as her predecessor, serving until 1946 when she was sold and converted into a barge and renamed Lillian. She was scrapped in 1997.

#### The Why and Where of the Foundering of the Marquette Bessemer No. 2

The lack of witnesses to the sinking, survivors, or a wreck for evidence, the cause of the foundering and precise location of the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 have been mysteries since its sinking. Sightings of the Bessemer and soundings of its whistle were seen and heard on the Canadian and American sides of Lake Erie. Some of the theories about why it sank include the lack of a stern gate on the Bessemer which allowed monster waves to breach the ship from the rear. When that happened the ship would sink either because the battering wave action would eventually cause water to flood the engine compartments extinguishing the boiler fires, thus robbing the ship of all power.

Another scenario involved a single large wave coming aboard the ship containing enough water causing it to capsize and there without a stern gate to stop it. This event had nearly happened to the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 the month before she finally sank, during a bad November storm.

After this near catastrophe, Captain McLeod demanded that a stern gate be installed and the company promised to install it during the winter layup. Other possibilities include the theory that the heavily loaded cards pitched and rolled so violently with the action of the wind and waves that they broke loose from their fastenings and caused the ship to sink below the waves.

Added to the mystery of the why of the foundering of the Bessemer No. 2, is where it rests under the Lake Erie waves. Many different theories about her location have been debated through the years since she sank.

One theory based on the final sightings and the location of the wreckage say that the Besser headed east, trying to reach shelter behind Long Point. They say that the wreck should be either southwest or west of Long Point.

The rumor that the Bessemer has been discovered, but its location is being kept secret for security or other reasons has been circulated in diving communities through the years.

Another theory has it that after crossing and recrossing the lake unable to find a safe, accessible harbor, Captain McLeod turned the Marquette & Bessemer away from Port Stanley to the West, headed toward Rondeau Point and Erieau, Ontario. When he reached the lee of Rondeau Point, Captain McCleod turned the ship southward, intending to aim for Cleveland.

Some advocates say that the Bessemer capsized off Rondeau while others counter with the idea that the Captain hugged the lee of Rondeau Point as long as he could, but once beyond the end of the point he headed south where the mounting seas continued to breach the ship. The seas added additional coating and weight of ice, causing the ship to roll, becoming more and more unwieldy, and allowing water to invade the open car deck. Somewhere between Rondeau Point and Cleveland, the seas flooded the engine room and put out the fires. The ship lay dead in the water and in the trough of the waves and finally sank.

Other people speculate that the wreck of the Marquette Bessemer No. 2 sank into the muck at the bottom of Lake Erie, the fate of the wreck of the C.B. Lockwood. In the second printing of her book, *The Story of Captain Hugh Donald McLeod and His Family*, his daughter Donna McLeod Rodebaugh and the niece of Captain Robert McLeod writes about the fate of the Bessemer. She pictures a scenario of the car ferry crossing the lake in good order against the seventy-mile and hour winds, but when he neared Port Stanley, the weather conditions prevented the captain from steering his ship into the narrow harbor mouth. Some sources say he made the run back across the lake and encountered the same conditions at Conneaut Harbor.

Conneaut dock workers reported they heard repeated distress signals they thought were the car ferry at 1:30 a.m. the following morning and the master of the steamer Black, lying outside the Conneaut Harbor was quoted as saying he saw the ship pass by in the darkness bound east. If these sources are correct, Captain McLeod did bring his ship back to homeport and even there the fury of the storm prohibited him from gaining entrance.

“Presumably, he had tried to anchor and the severity of the storm pressing hard against the high wall-like sides of the car ferry snapped the anchor chains and it was then that the master of the Black saw the No. 2 driving east before the wind- the captain either setting course for Long Point

or Erie, Pennsylvania to save his four-year-old ship.

“It was probably at this point that following waves poured over the stern and broke loose the loaded coal cars. If so, each surge of the vessel would roll the heavy cars forward, then back on their tracks and press the stern lower in the water. The boilers would be flooded and the ship lose headway and the huge ferry would be at the mercy of the waves. Water would sweep into the stern with every wave finally causing the awkward ferry to founder.”

In a 1989 Conneaut News Herald story, Managing Editor Robert Lebzelter quotes Donna Rodebaugh sharing her own theory about what happened to her uncle’s car ferry. Based on her years of research, she said “My theory is that there is a fault in Springfield Township or at the state line east of Conneaut, not far out. I got a letter last month from a lady who says she listened to that whistle of the car Gerry until it went under water. Her father worked at the docks. He knew the whistle and he knew it was in trouble. The lady said she still hears that whistle.”

Donna Rodebaugh further supports her theory that the ship is in a fault by pointing out that after 80 years somebody would have otherwise discovered it. She was upset by a recent story in an Ohio newspaper that suggested that the steward had murdered Captain McLeod with knives and a meat cleaver. “I found out from the wife of a chef that a chef or a steward never leaves without his own knives and nobody better touch those knives. When they came home in the winter they would take their knives with them. Their wives wouldn’t touch them”

On April 26, 2023, Thomas Adams, doctor from Cleveland, presented the story of the Marquette & Bessemer No.2, and his theory about the fate of the ship at his book signing at the Conneaut Public Library. In his book titled *Where is the No. 2? The Mystery of the Marquette & Bessemer No. 2*, Dr. Adams used a detailed power point consisting of maps, charts, and graphs as well as citing expert opinions to advance his theory about what happened to the Bessemer No. 2.

Based on his extensive research, Dr. Adams believes that on Captain McLeod’s final effort to find a safe harbor for the Bessemer No. 2, he may have been close enough to Port Bruce and Port Stanley for the ship’s whistle to be heard. The Bessemer may have been trying to find her way in the blinding snowstorm. Captain McLeod did not leave the bridge of his vessel and he did not get into an argument with crew members involving knives. Dr. Adams believes part of the crew had just enough time to launch lifeboat No. 4, with half capacity, no officers, and no warm clothing or supplies.

Dr. Adams writes, “We will never know for sure what transpired those last hours on the lake, but the Marquette & Bessemer sank sometime after 5 a.m. Wednesday. She may have sunk as late as Thursday after being trapped in pack ice or disabled, but she went down Wednesday. I also think the wreck will be found south of Port Stanley coming up from the southeast somewhere in the arc 10 or 15 miles so south of the harbor.”

Dr. Adams went on to explain his reasoning, supported by maps, charts, weather reports, and relief maps of the currents and weather of 1909 and 2023. His interesting presentation sparked

many questions and interactions with the audience of about fifty people who attended the book signing.

The Second Marquette & Bessemer Two.

In 1910, shortly after the first Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 disappeared in Lake Erie, the American Shipbuilding Company begin building the second Marquette & Bessemer No. The second Marquette & Bessemer No. 2 operated as a car ferry from 1910-1940 between Conneaut, Ohio and Ports Dover and Stanley, Ontario. In 1936, during the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland, Ohio, Herman Pirchner chartered her to use as a showboat at the East Ninth Street pier and she was unofficially renamed Moses Cleaveland.. She was scrapped in Menomonee, Michigan in 1997.

### “All Conneaut Will Have a Sad Christmas”

Lake Erie wind and waves, relatives of the same ones that had stalked and ambushed the Bessemer No. 2 raced each other to shore and collided with the wooden planks of the Conneaut wharf. On December 7, 1909, and days and months afterwards, people anxiously scanned the Lake Erie horizon for the Marquette Bessemer 2 and its crew. Wives and children, family members, friends and neighbors of the crew shivered and pulled their winter clothes more tightly around them. Searching the eternities of lake and sky and life, they waited.

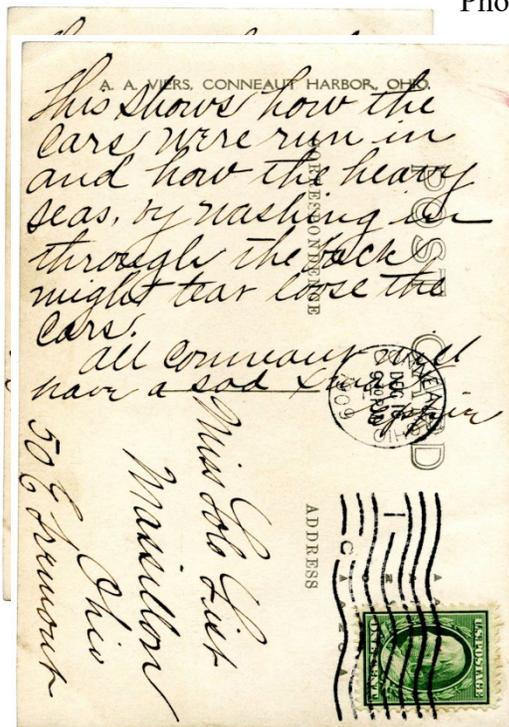


Photo postcard of the Bessemer dated December 16, 1909.

At the top of the card is written "The Conneaut car ferry lost sometime between Dec 7th and 10th 1909."

On the reverse side of the card it's also written "This shows how the cars were run in and how the heavy seas, by washing in through the back might tear loose the cars."

"All Conneaut will have a sad Xmas." (From the Facebook Marquette Bessemer No. 2 site Ryan Bekanger.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/185359218371/>)

On December 12, 1909, the Duluth News-Tribune reported that hoping against hope, the people at the Conneaut wharf were waiting for the tug that left Port Dover for Long Point that Friday afternoon to see if the Bessmer 2 was sheltering at Long Point would find the car ferry. If the car ferry were not sheltering at Long Point, that would destroy their hopes of its safety like storm tossed waves. The

ominous news that the steamer W.B. Davock had reported finding scattered wreckage with the green markings of the Bessemer collapsed like a sand castle buffeted by waves.. The Duluth News-Tribune speculated that if the wreckage that the Davock had found was from the Marquette Bessemer No. 2, the way the car ferry had been loaded caused her demise. The load

featured a heavy weight of bridge iron piled on top of the freight cars and the 75 mile an hour winds and fierce waves caused the load to shift, snatching control of the Bessemer from Captain Robert McLeod's capable hands.

The weekend after the Marquette Bessemer No. 2 failed to return from its regular run to Port Stanley, Ontario, the people on both sides of Lake Erie waited anxiously for its captain and crew.

Conneaut people faced the reality of taking the sad next step of planning funerals for their family members on the crew of the Bessemer which the Duluth news described as believed to have "turned turtle in Lake Erie."

Laurel V. and Addie O. Stone, the parents of twenty-five-year-old Frank Edward Stone, the youngest second mate on the Great Lakes, arranged to bury him in City Cemetery in Conneaut. Chief Engineer Eugene Wood's parents Stephen Wood and Matilda Tinline Wood and his wife Gertrude Ringsell Wood and their two children were left to mourn him. He and Gertrude and his brother are buried in St. John's Anglican Cemetery in St. Catharine's, Ontario.



George R.A. Smith's wife Anna buried him in City Cemetery in Conneaut and Edward Butler's wife and R.C. Smith's wife arranged their burials. Coal passer William Ray's first trip on the Bessemer was his last.

Just a little over a week after the Marquette Bessemer No. 2 disappeared, The Conneaut News Herald edition of December 14, 1909, reported that this day resembled the day that the Bessemer crew last saw their home. That day Conneaut lighthouse keeper Edward Pfister had waved to Captain McLeod as the Bessemer headed into the stormy lake. This day, a little over a week later, the News Herald headline announced that funeral services were held for two crew members of the Marquette Bessemer No. 2 that had been found in Lifeboat No. 4 off Erie, Pennsylvania. They funerals took place at St. Mary's Catholic Church and the Methodist Church in Conneaut. In the morning last rites were performed over the body of John W, Soares (Not Emmanuel, his brother), at St. Mary's Church and in the afternoon services were held for Thomas Steele at the Methodist Church. John W. Soares was the son of Joseph Soares Sr. who worked at the Pittsburgh & Conneaut Docks and he is buried in St. Joseph Cemetery in Conneaut. Thomas Steel is buried in Center Cemetery in Conneaut. Plans for the burial of George Smith of Harbor Street, the third Conneaut crewman found in the life boat were still pending. His family was waiting for the arrival of a brother from Westminster, Canada.

The Duluth News-Tribune printed what it considered the "corrected" list of the crew of the Marquette Bessemer No. 2.

R. R. McLeod, captain, Conneaut; J. C. McLeod, first mate, Courtwright, Ont.; Frank Stone, second mate, Conneaut; Eugene Wood, chief engineer, Conneaut; E. Buckler, first assistant, Conneaut; T. Kennedy, second engineer, Conneaut; W. Wigglesworth, fireman, Conneaut; W. Wilson, Wheelsman, Conneaut; Fred Walker, unknown; Watchman F. Annis, Conneaut; J. Clancy, Cleveland; J. Wirtz, oiler, Detroit; G. Lawrence, cook, Port Stanley; coal passers P. Keith, Conneaut; J. King, Port Stanley; J. Bailey, Canada; F. Barrett, seaman, Wisconsin; E. Harvey, seaman, unknown; P. Hughes, seaman, Conneaut; D. Ball, seaman, unknown; Charles Kreitts, seaman, unknown; Albert J. Weis, passenger, Erie; Christ Johnson, passenger, Erie.

## Crew List of Marquette Bessemer No. 2 (Wikipedia)

### Wikipedia List

Robert McLeod, Captain. Body found October 6, 1910, on Long Point. Conneaut. Buried in City Cemetery, Conneaut.

John McLeod, First Mate. Body found April 6, 1910, in Niagara River at Niagara Falls, Ontario. Lived in Courtwright, Ontario.

Frank Stone, Second Mate. Conneaut. City Cemetery, Conneaut.

R.C. Smith, Purser

William Wilson, Wheelman. Body found on Long Point, October 1910. Conneaut.

John Clancy, Wheelman. Cleveland.

F. Annis, Watchman . Conneaut.

Fred Walker, Watchman

Eugene Wood, Chief Engineer Body found May 2, 1910, near Port Colborne, Ontario, Lived in Conneaut. Buried in St. John's Anglican Cemetery, St. Catharine's, Ontario

Edward Buckler, First Assistant Engineer. Conneaut.

Thomas Kennedy, Second Assistant Engineer. Conneaut.

F. Barrett, Seaman

Fred Harvey, Seaman

P. Hughes, Seaman

D. Ball, Seaman

Max Sparuh. Fireman/seaman. Badly injured on previous trip. In hospital.

Tom Steele. Fireman. Last trip on ship. Found dead in lifeboat No. 4.

Joe Shank, Shenk. Found dead in Lifeboat No.4.

J. Olson, Fireman.

W. Wigglesworth, Fireman. Conneaut.

J. Cook, Fireman

John Paddy Hart, Oiler. Found dead in Lifeboat No. 4.

Patrick Keith, Oiler. Body recovered. Conneaut.

A, Snyder, Oiler.

Charles Allen, Oiler/Coal Passer. Found dead in Lifeboat No. 4.

John Wirtz, Oiler/Seaman. Making last trip on ship. Detroit.

William Ray, coal passer. Found dead in Lifeboat No. 4.

Roy Hines. O'Hagen. Coal passer. Found dead in Lifeboat No. 4

J. Hing, King. Coal passer. Port Stanley, Canada

C, Coupt, Coal passer.

George R. Smith, Steward. Found dead in Life Boat No. 4 armed with kitchen knives.

Harry Thomas, Second Cook. Found dead in Life Boat No. 4. Buried in Union United Church Cemetery, Union, Ontario

J. Schwartz, Waiter.

Emanuel Soars, Porter. Found dead in Life Boat No. 4. Not Emanuel, but his brother J.W. Soares.

George L. Lawrence, Porter. Missed boat on previous trip. Port Stanley.

J. Bailey, Canada

F. Barrett, seaman, Wisconsin

E. Harvey, seaman, unknown;

P. Hughes, seaman, Conneaut;

D. Ball, seaman, unknown;

Charles Kreitts, seaman, unknown;

The Marquette Bessemer No. 2 and part of her crew still are waiting for safe harbors. Remember them and pray that someday they will finally come home.

