

The Wolfe Islander is Missing

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...after four hours of continuous searching bleak coves and small inlets, both groups were almost ready to announce that the vessel had gone down. The Canadian side revealed nothing more than empty shoreline.

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The faith a captain puts into his ship must be absolute. It doesn't matter if the voyage is a Trans Atlantic crossing lasting several weeks or a Great Lakes trip taking several days. Even a ferry trip from Wolfe Island to Kingston, a shipmaster never takes the weather or sea condition for granted. Captain Sebastian 'Joe' Sisty, master of the ferry Wolfe Islander, was well aware of that risk.

"I had no choice but to put to open water," said Captain Joseph Sisty, skipper of the ferry boat. "It was either take a chance or see the Islander batter herself to death against the concrete dock in port."

Friday night, January 13, 1950, tied to the pier on Wolfe Island, the ferry *Wolfe Islander* tugged uneasily on her lines. Inside the wheelhouse, Captain Joe Sisty stretched to the top of his toes and tapped the glass of the barometer which was mounted above the left window. What he saw worried him and he tapped the glass again. It had never been this low. Sliding the window down he called to the mate, "Double the lines, Harold. We're in for a blow." Pulling the window back up, he walked over to the polished brass telegraph and rang 'Finished with Engines' to Elmer Kane, waiting for the signal below. Satisfied, Joe locked the door to the wheelhouse remembering the rhyme from navigation school: *"When the wind shifts against the sun, trust it not for back it will run. First rise after very low, indicates a stronger blow."*

Saturday morning dawned a bright red with all the tell-tale signs of an impending gale. As he made his way down the dock, holding his cap to his head, Captain Sisty realized the ramp cables had slackened in the night as



EMPLOYED ON AUTOMOBILE AND PASSENGER FERRY SERVICE
BETWEEN WOLFE ISLAND AND KINGSTON, ONTARIO

THE PREVIOUS FERRY:
M.S. WOLFE ISLANDER
PHOTO TAKEN ABOUT 1950

in vessel was originally a Type "C" Coaster and in the year 1946 was converted into a ferry by Milne, Gilmore & German to an automobile and passenger ferry for use of the Department of Highways, Ontario, which department felt that the of maintaining a regular service between Wolfe Island and the mainland & for immediate action. It was therefore decided to proceed with the conversion

of a vessel already built, rather than wait for the building of a new vessel to replace the original "WOLFE ISLANDER" which had been retired from service. From the above photograph of the vessel it will be seen that, while of pleasing appearance, she is admirably suited for the nature of the service in which she is employed.

"Employed on automobile and passenger ferry service between Wolfe Island and Kingston, Ontario". *M.S. Wolfe Islander*, built in Collingwood, Ontario, 1946. Photo: Brian Johnson Collection

"Yeah," the captain replied, "but she's beating herself hard against the dock, George. I'd feel better if she were layin' to, in Kingston." Shortly after, the rest of the crew made their way aboard and went to their stations. Deckhands Tom Doyle and Jim Duncan were told by mate Harold Cosgrove to tie everything down. Walking back to the galley, which was back aft in the fantail, Captain Sisty told Mrs. Bullis who was ship's cook, to lock everything in the cupboards or put it on the deck. It was going to be a very rough trip for crew and passengers alike.

Under Ragged, low flying clouds, today's vicious gale churned waters of Kingston harbour into creatures of froth and fury. Along the waterfront deep, heavy rollers hurled themselves against docks and other installations

like tireless battering rams. "I've never seen her blow up like this before," declared Lyall Dougan from the pilot dock at the foot of West Street. "The waves out front here are plenty big. Must be 15 or 20 feet high anyway. I've been on this job for 12 years and never saw her like this before!"

Grasping the telegraph handle, Captain Joe Sisty rang for 'Full Astern' to spring the *Wolfe Islander* off the pier. Churning water, the big ferry was reluctant to move for almost two full minutes as the wind held her fast to the dock. Finally, her huge, flared bow started to swing clear as Joe quickly applied the wheel to port as he swung the telegraph handle to 'Full Ahead'. As she left the pier Joe gave her a couple more spokes to port to compensate the ever growing leeway as she moved ahead. Gently at first, the *Islander* began to rock in a steady rhythm.

The tops of whitecaps on the harbour were picked off by the high wind and sent scudding over the water and at Whiskey Island off Fort Henry the waves were going completely over and swamping the island from sight. Breakers striking the end of Cedar Island were driving 75 and 100 feet inland when the wind picked them off. City fire trucks were standing at the alert outside fire stations in case of emergency...

As she approached the foot of Garden Island, the *Wolfe Islander* was already carrying ten degrees of port wheel on her rudder. The wind by now was deafening, even in the enclosed wheelhouse. The captain and mate said nothing to each other as they looked out beyond the sanctuary of the bay, at the huge rollers waiting for them. Inside the passenger saloon on the second deck seventeen year old Jean Niles leaned up on one knee and peered outside. "Oh, we're in for it now," she said, to no one in particular. Her father Howard was down below playing euchre with the crew. Just behind Jean sat Maggie Gillow who was nervously talking with Mrs. Sisty, the captain's wife. Both women were going to town for a leisurely afternoon of shopping, one already regretting her decision. Back up in the wheelhouse, Captain Joe Sisty looked out at the huge seas waiting to test him and his ship. Gripping the spokes of the wheel, mate Harold Cosgrove placed his feet apart preparing himself for the rolling they were about to take.

At eleven o'clock the Kingston Yacht Club was taking a terrific pounding from 25 to 30 foot waves which swept completely over the dock.



HEROES OF THE STORM. The crew of the Wolfe Islander posing on the afterdeck of their ship after the danger had passed. From left to right, George A. Woodman, engineer; Capt. Joseph Sisty, Harold Congrove, mate, and Elmer Kane, second engineer. In front, holding one of the lifebells which were never needed during the gale which blew the Wolfe

Islander off her berth from the St. Lawrence. James Dunbar, Kingston, and Thomas Doyle, Wolfe Island, deckhands. Two other members of the crew are Richard Spivey, purser, and Mr. Robert Dullis, both islanders, who were not on hand when the photograph was taken on the 13th day across the harbor following the blow.

Captain Sebastian 'Joe' Sisty and crew of the Wolfe Islander. Photo: Brian Johnson Collection

The flared bow of the ferry *Wolfe Islander* had cleared the foot of Garden Island by now and was meeting the gale fine on her port side. Joe Sisty had been her master now for two years and knew his ship well. He knew her abilities in drifting ice, heavy ice and just about anything the lake could do to date. Gauging the waves from trough to crest, they had to be as big as any he had ever encountered off the Atlantic coast or the Gulf of Mexico. Even as captain of the Keystone freighter *Trenora* trading on the upper Great Lakes he had certainly experienced wind, even gusting as high as this, which he estimated must be somewhere near 90 miles per hour, but these seas were tremendous. Slowly, the bow began to climb, swinging slightly to the right. Then, just as quick, she rolled steeply to the left, shipping tons of water over her port rail.

“Hold her up, Harold. Two more points into the wind.”

“That’s all she’s got, Joe. She’s hard over!”

Grabbing the telegraph handle, Joe Sisty swung it back to ‘Stop’ then again to ‘Full Ahead’. Down below George Woodman and Elmer Kane, hearing the bells, knew exactly what the captain wanted and began

nursing more power from the ship's 400 hp Enterprise engine. Gripping the telegraph, George also swung the handle through a 90 degree arc and back again, indicating he got the message. One deck above, in the passenger saloon, the women hung onto the seats, hearing the bells when there shouldn't be any, preparing themselves for the wild ride.

"She's falling off, Joe," the mate yelled, holding the wheel hard to port while holding the door handle with his left hand to steady himself.

Sisty had to make a decision. "Ease her. Let her come around." Both men wrestled with the wheel as the ferry wallowed between the waves. "Hard to starboard," the captain said. Slowly, and rolling hard, the Wolfe Islander swung her bow to the right, her foremast drawing crazy arcs in the sky against the far shoreline as she headed downriver. The ferry was now at the mercy of the screaming wind and wild, turbulent waves.

Gales of near cyclonic force which blew in from the southwest over the lake caused an estimated \$250,000 damage to city property and industrial plants, blew the Wolfe Islander off her course and down the St. Lawrence. At press time today there was no information as to the number of passengers aboard the ferry boat. When last seen, the Wolfe Islander was reported speeding past Howe Island, approximately 15 miles from Kingston...

And then she was gone. All throughout the city and area, telephone and telegraph lines were down. Roofs of buildings were gone as shingles flew everywhere in the wind. The Drive-In screen blew over on Bath Road and, on Wolfe Island, Alan MacAdoo's barn blew down as well as the end of George Pyke's new barn.

...reporters and photographers scoured the mainland shore for some sight of the ship...

Radio station CKLC, while reporting on the heavily damaged areas of the city, reported the missing ferry and those aboard *had all been lost, or believed lost.*

Aboard the 'doomed' ferry, Captain Sisty and Mate Cosgrove were relieved at the wheel by passengers Louis Kane and Leon Halliday. Seeking shelter behind Brophy's Point, Sisty quickly changed his mind as he saw the breakers in the shallow water. He had one chance for the ship's safety and headed for Quebec Head, the foot of Wolfe Island. She must be doing twenty knots, the captain thought, watching the shore of Wolfe Island speed by. Reaching the end of the island and shelter, Howard Abbott and Pat Doyle joined the mate and deckhands high on the bow as both anchors splashed into the muddy bottom. After five tries, both anchors finally took hold. Aboard, in the galley, Eva Abbott and Mrs. Marlowe joined the women in preparing meals for everyone while bread man Louis Kane donated the cakes and pies from his truck.

...at four o'clock, Whig-Standard reporters 2 ½ miles west of Clayton N.Y. picked her up by powerful binoculars... all that was left to do was tell the outside world that the Wolfe Islander and her passengers and crew were safe.

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