

B W Arnold. *Sinking of the barge Sumatra.*

A peculiarly lamentable disaster was the foundering of the barge *Sumatra*, September 30, 1896, off Milwaukee Harbor, Wisconsin, when within a mile of a safe refuge, with help close at hand, and with scarcely any warning to the ill-fated crew. Although sufficiently disabled to cause grave apprehension on board, she sank so unexpectedly as to preclude any concerted effort of her crew to escape, and carried three of them down with her, helplessly pinioned, no doubt, by the heavy deck load of steel rails sliding upon them as she plunged head foremost to the bottom. She was a schooner-rigged barge, built in 1874 at Black River, Ohio, and was in good condition and considered perfectly seaworthy, having a rating of A 2. in Inland Lloyd's. Her gross burden was 845.34 tons, and she was valued at \$18,000 by her owners, the Mills Transportation Company, of Port Huron, Michigan, her hailing port.

The *Sumatra* left South Chicago about 6 o'clock on the morning of September 29 with a crew of seven men including the captain, Charles Johnson, and in tow of the screw steamer *B. W. Arnold*, 944 tons, of Port Huron, bound for Fort William, Canada (on Lake Superior), with a cargo of steel rails for the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company, 250 tons of the rails being carried on deck. The cargo was valued at \$35,000 and was fully insured. The *Arnold* had a similar cargo and was bound for the same port.

The weather was fine when they left South Chicago, and it was expected that by evening they would reach Milwaukee, where the captain of the steamer had been instructed to call and pick up another vessel. About 3 o'clock p. m., however, the wind began to freshen, and by 10 o'clock, when the two vessels were off South Point, eight miles from the Milwaukee piers, it was blowing a gale from north to north-northwest, though the sea came very heavy from the northeast. The *Arnold*, therefore, with her cumbersome tow had to steam right into the teeth of the wind, while the sea was well on the starboard bow, so that both vessels labored heavily.

About 12 o'clock Captain Neal of the *Arnold* discovered a torch signal on the *Sumatra*, which indicated that she was in trouble. Just what the difficulty was could not be determined, the night was so dark and rainy, and with 900 feet of towline out it was impossible to hear a shout from her against the powerful wind. The captain responded with four whistles, and made all possible speed for the harbor. About 2 a. m. he was within a mile of the piers, and the torch was again seen to flash from the *Sumatra*. He thereupon immediately began blowing for a tug. Fortunately the signal was heard by the watch on the tug " *Simpson*, under command of Captain Eickmeyer, which was lying just inside the piers, with steam up, in readiness to answer calls for assistance (it being a part of her duty to aid incoming tugs to get their tows into the harbor), and she immediately cast off her lines and steamed out, not suspecting a vessel was in distress, four whistles being simply a well-known signal for a tug.

The lookout at the life-saving station on the pier also heard the whistle, and looking to seaward saw the lights and the torch on the tow, but well understanding what the signal meant, and not thinking the torch indicated anything to the contrary, he concluded that

everything was right when the *Simpson* left the pier. He kept his eye on her, however, as long as he could see her through the glass. By this time the barge had ceased torching. When the *Simpson* reached the *Arnold*, in about ten minutes, she was requested to take a line from the tow and help her get into the harbor, but before that could be done the *Sumatra* sank.

From the testimony of those on board the *Sumatra* it appears that at 8 p. m. she was rolling deeply and making such bad weather of it that the heavy cargo below decks strained the planking, and soon she began to leak, so that the pumps had to be started. The leak gained steadily upon them, and at 10 p. m., when off South Point, the steam pump, hand pump, and siphon failed to keep the water down. It was at that time that the captain showed his first torch, which was seen by the *Arnold*. The crew continued pumping, however, for they knew the *Arnold* was making every effort to reach port, and realized that their only hope was to keep their vessel afloat. But the water continued to increase in the hold, and the barge settled deeper and deeper, until 2 a. m., when within a mile of the piers, the sea was making a clean breach over her. The captain ordered his men to set the foresail and to signal again with the torch, intending to cut the towing line and run for the beach. Scarcely had the crew started to obey his order when the water-logged hulk made a sudden dive and slid swiftly beneath the waves, head first, bursting out the stern with a loud report, and disappearing from sight in less than a minute. USLSS Annual Report 1897