



## DON'T GO OUT WHEN YOU SHOULDN'T GO OUT

### The Disappearance of the Car Ferry Milwaukee – October 22, 1929

Captain Robert McKay was a “Type A” personality. He was known to be “rough, tough and gruff.” He lost his temper easily. Although a number of the officers on his ship held master’s licenses and were qualified to command a ship themselves, Captain McKay never asked for their opinions or advice, and they understood that any counsel they could offer would be highly unwelcome. When it was announced that Captain McKay was being promoted and given command of the mighty Milwaukee, his ship’s officers all chipped in to buy McKay a gold watch to be presented to him at a surprise party in his honor. When the surprise was sprung, McKay became furious and stormed out of the cabin. A female reporter from the local newspaper had been invited to the occasion, and McKay rudely shoved her aside as he left.

Another way that Captain McKay’s personality manifested itself resulted in the nickname – “Heavy Weather McKay”. He always kept the schedule. He sailed on time, very time, even if Lake Michigan was in the midst of a roaring gale.

Of course, captain would have confidence in the Milwaukee. She was a “car ferry” owned by the Grand Trunk and Western Railroad. Car ferries were huge ships designed to carry loads of railroad freight cars across Lake Michigan. The Milwaukee was 338 feet long – longer than a football field – and displaced 2,933 tons – more than a navy destroyer. She was broad-beamed, with powerful engines and twin screws. Unlike other vessels on the Great Lakes, car ferries were designed to operate year-round, and had strong hulls to deal with ice fields. She also had staterooms and accommodations for passengers on her upper decks.

However, along with their immense strength, car ferries had two unique vulnerabilities. Strings of railroad cars were moved from railroad sidings, across railroad tracks on the dock, and then onto rows of tracks on the ship. If the loaded railroad cars broke loose during a storm, the result would be a disaster. The Milwaukee had a system of blocks, chains and clamps to prevent this. The second vulnerable aspect of the car ferries was the huge “sea gate” at the stern, which opened to allow railroad cars to be loaded and unloaded. If the sea gate were

smashed in, waves would rush aboard and flood the lower decks, which contained the engine and boiler rooms and the crew's quarters (known as the "flicker".)

On the late evening of October 21<sup>st</sup> a gale struck Lake Michigan with winds and waves building all night. The Milwaukee was scheduled to depart from Grand Haven early that morning for her usual passage to the Grand Trunk and Western Railroad dock in Milwaukee. Predictably, with "Heavy Weather McKay" in command, the ship departed on time in spite of the certain prospect of a very rough passage. And a rough passage it was! Huge seas built and the winds increased as the powerful Milwaukee bashed her way across the lake. On shore, docks and piers were swept away. Beach cottages were destroyed. In Chicago, waves flooded Lake Shore Drive. On the Milwaukee, passengers and even some of the crew muttered silent prayers for their survival.

We can well imagine their relief when the ship arrived in her namesake city, and Captain McKay skillfully maneuvered the ship against the dock. The gale was growing worse, the wind screaming, but this did not prevent switch engines from pulling the railroad cars off the Milwaukee and pushing twenty-five loaded east-bound freight cars onto the ship. A handful of passengers, with nowhere else to go to wait out the storm, also went aboard. Since it was obvious that the ship would not be going anywhere until the storm was over, three crewmen caught a streetcar downtown to go see a movie and visit a few taverns.

Meanwhile, out on the lake ships and their crews were fighting for their lives. The freighter Delos W. Cook had been unlucky enough to sail from Chicago before the storm warnings were posted. The storm caught her half way up the lake. Her crew did battle with the gale for twenty-seven hours before ending up back at her port of departure in Chicago. The Robert Hobson, a 600- foot long freighter – just two years old- was flung around violently by gigantic waves and began to take in large amounts of water. Her captain was finally able to turn her around off Ludington, to put her stern to the seas, and "ran before the wind" for two hundred miles until she reached safe harbor in South Chicago. She was later discovered to have broken more than 25,500 rivets.

Meanwhile although windswept rain rattled the windows of the Grand Trunk and Western Railroad offices, the employees carried on with their routine work. Suddenly, an impossible sound was heard over the roar of the storm. The Milwaukee's steam whistle was giving the departure signal! Her crew cast off lines and the ship backed away from the dock. It was three o'clock, the exact time the ship was scheduled to depart. Office workers rushed to the windows in disbelief to watch the car ferry depart down the river toward the lake. Old lake sailors on ships moored along the river, who had just finished telling shipmates that they had only seen one or two storms this bad *in their entire lives*, dropped their jaws in amazement as they watched the Milwaukee steam across the harbor. A dock worker gave the sign of the cross.

The storm was nearing its height, and the car ferry was already rolling in the heavy swells running in the harbor. Half an hour later, the captain of the U.S. Lightship 95, moored three miles due east of the Milwaukee harbor entrance, sighted the car ferry and noted in the log said she was "pitching and rolling heavily". Her heading was due east, instead of holding a little to the north, where the ship would have met the waves at a more favorable angle – a typical uncompromising "heavy Weather McKay" course.

It would be forty years before anyone would see the Milwaukee again. The ship was not equipped with a radio. The law did not require one. None of the forty-six souls on board would ever be seen alive again. Bodies, furniture and other flotsam from the ship were found on the surface of the lake off Racine after the storm.

If this was the end of the tale, then the disappearance of the Milwaukee would have been a mystery. However, many Great Lakes ships used to carry a waterproof, floating canister called a "message case." It served the same purpose as the "black box" on a modern jet airliner. If a ship were about to sink, a designated-officers would place a message describing the vessel's circumstances in the message case and throw it into the lake. On October 27, 1929, the Milwaukee's message case was found on the beach at South Haven. Inside was a message written on the stationary of the Grand Trunk car ferries:

S.S Milwaukee October 22, '29 8:30 P.M. The Ship is making water fast. We have turned around and headed for Milwaukee. Pumps are working but sea gate is bent in and can't keep the water out. Flicker is flooded. Seas are tremendous Things look bad. Crew roll is about the same as on the last payday.  
[signed] A.R. Sadon, Purser.

One of the bodies found floating in the lake with a life preserver marked "S.S. Milwaukee" wore a watch, which was stopped at 9:45.

SCUBA divers discovered the wreck of the Milwaukee in the late 1960's. Her bow points toward Milwaukee. Her sea gate is smashed in. She is in 125 feet of water on the bottom of Whitefish Bay, just north of the city she was named for. Scores of divers visit this silent dark tomb every year.

So- the regatta has been planned and scheduled for months. Or, it is the start of your vacation, and you plan to sail across the lake to South Haven. Or, it is the end of the season, and you and two friends have all taken off work to move the boat to winter storage. You get down to the harbor, and the lake is rough and getting rougher. Winds are increasing. The weather report is not good. But you have a fine, stout, seaworthy boat.

Think of Captain Robert McKay, and his mighty ship. Leave your boat where she is. Walk your crew to the club ship. Have a beer or glass of wine.... and tell them the story of Heavy Weather McKay, who never allowed Lake Michigan to change his schedule.



Source: Ghost Ships of the Great Lakes, by Dwight Boyer

