

The Loss of the N.J. Nessen

- As told by Paul Schmidt - *Inland Seas, Quarterly Journal* - Great Lakes Historical Society

"The report of my death has been greatly exaggerated..." is the line Oswald Emig should have used to break up the long stares when he walked back to his home town to St. Clair, Michigan. On the best authority, he was deader than Mark Twain in his prime.

But it was the case of the truth being stranger than media fiction.

This is the story of the last hours of the steamer N.J. NESSEN, as told to me by her first mate, Mr. Oswald Emig, 50 years after the strangely durable rumour of the entire crew's demise. Yet Mr. Emig only recently passed away at the age of 83.

By 1929, the N.J. NESSEN was already an old ship. The 150-foot wooden vessel had been built for the lumber trade in 1880, and later hauled general freight. But now, 50 years old, she was in the scrap iron trade between Detroit and Cleveland. Here is Mate Emig's account:

"We were basically a river district crew with Captain Bernard Benson, Chief Engineer Moses Lavelly and two others residing in Marine City, while myself and two others hailed from St. Clair, Michigan.

"October 22, 1929 was a rather cool day with light northeast winds and a slight overcast as we left Detroit with a load of scrap. All was well as we entered Lake Erie and set course for Pelee Passage.

"About 3:30 p.m., while abreast of the Colchester Light, Captain Benson came up from his cabin and pointed to the northeast where dark clouds were forming. With wind still out of the north and the ominous look in the skies, we both agreed that we were likely in store for a strong northeast gale. Since the NESSEN had a heavy deckload and nothing in the hold, Captain Benson decided to run for the lee shore of Leamington, where we dropped the hook and planned to wait out the storm in the protection of Pigeon Bay.

"For a time our decision seemed well advised as the wind blew hard from the northeast and the NESSEN rode well in the lee of the Canadian shore. At about 6 p.m., I went down to supper and, as I did, noted that we were riding with our bow to the land.

"During the meal, I felt the boat shake a little now and then, but thought nothing of it. However, as I left the galley I looked out the door and saw land to our stern. The wind had shifted 180 degrees and was now blowing with gale force from the southwest.

"We were trapped within an hour, taking water over the bow while straining at the anchor. Our heavy deckload caused the vessel to roll violently as the seas swept us and required the crew to walk the rail to go fore or aft.

"The skipper asked me to go back and talk to the engineer about our situation. I made my way along the port rail and, as I was about to step down to the aft cabin deck, I felt movement under my foot. Looking down I saw the rail opening and closing. I quickly crossed to the starboard side and found another large crack in the rail. The ship was breaking her back just forward of the boiler!

"I raced forward along the starboard rail in effort to notify the captain at once. As I approached the forecabin, a tremendous sea swept the vessel, causing her to shudder and roll and knocking me off the rail into the scrap iron piled on deck. As I sat up, attempting to recover from the fall, I noticed the hull also splitting just aft of the forward cabin. The ship was clearly breaking up and time was short!

"I sprang to my feet and made my way to the pilot house where I told Captain Benson the bad news.

"With the battering of the NESSEN, it was clear she could never last. We discussed the possibilities available: the nearest shelter was Pelee Island, but that was 20 miles away, directly into the teeth of the gale. With the hull breaking up, she clearly would not take the punishment. We could sheer off to starboard and attempt to run for the Detroit River. But that would put us into the trough of the waves and with our heavy deckload we would surely roll over.

"That left as the only alternative, a run for the beach in the hope we could get close enough to be rescued before the vessel broke up. But would she make the turn, or with her heavy deckload would she roll over? The skipper and I agreed; this was our only chance. The maneuver had to be sharp under full power, for if we fell off into the trough of the seas, we might never recover.

"Chief Lavelly got the steam up and when all was ready Captain Benson sounded the ship's whistle. I slipped the anchor chain, the engineer gave her everything she had, and with the wheel hard to port the NESSEN rode on a big swell, then came completely around without so much a serious roll. After we were headed for the shore all the crew was ordered to don life jackets and come forward the moment we hit, as we knew the bow would strike first and would thus be less likely to break up once we went on.

"At about the 10 p.m. when we were within a half-to-a-quarter of a mile from shore, we hit. But instead of holding, the boat began to swing around till we were nearly broadside, with the shoe to our starboard. The NESSEN continued to take a pounding as the seas crashed against and over her port side! Periodically a large wave would lift us up toward shore then slam us down again on the reef.

"All of the crew were now forward as we helplessly watched the fury of the Lake batter the NESSEN. On the shore we could see people with lanterns walking back and

forth along the beach. Cars were also being positioned to shine their headlights on us. I was kind of fixated with this strange view when I felt the vessel shudder and heard a series of thuds. I looked toward the stern and saw that the aft end had now broken away! This really scared us and some of the crew began to pray, for the seas were now entering the hull where the stern opened up and surging the full length of the vessel. Each surge would then cause the bow to rock forward then back.

"We quickly abandoned the forecastle by climbing onto the deckload. Our thinking was that the boat had a reinforced sort of sand box in its cargo hold and we felt it would be safer there if the bow were also to break off.

"It was really black by then with the lights on the beach our only clue as to direction. Even this comfort was sometimes obscured by periodic rain and snow squalls. Our misery was increasing as we became colder and wetter, but the noise was the worst. Every time I heard a thud or groans from the hull timbers, every muscle in my body tensed up as I feared the NESSEN was breaking up completely.

"The night seemed never ending as we just huddled there in fear with the storm seeming to build in intensity. Once in a while one of the crew would swear he saw a surfboat heading our way, but most of us knew that no rescue could be attempted till daylight.

"At last dawn began to break. Not with a sudden, optimistic glow, but with a sickeningly slow, steel gray light. It seemed to take forever to make out the people on the beach, but ever so slowly the dots of light on the beach became possessed of people and automobiles.

"I thought I could speed our rescue if I could float a light heaving line to the beach. I climbed back to the bow and up the stairs to the upper deck where I had some line stowed. I threw it in as far as I could and at first it seemed to be working, as the wind and waves pushed the line towards the shore, but then it would be caught by the undertow and circle right back to us. I tried this over and over for about two hours, but to no avail.

"By this time it was quite light and we could clearly see the damage that had been done to the NESSEN. Her stern house was all stove in and there was a lot of wreckage in the water all around us. We could also see a large boat being hauled over the beach. Capt. James Grubb of the Point Pelee Life Saving Station and a volunteer crew of local fishermen had come to the rescue.

"The surfboat looked to be about 25 feet long, and when we saw the lifesavers launch into the breakers, a loud cheer went up from all of us. The stout dory at first seemed to plow through the waves with ease, but after about 60 seconds she rode up on a large sea, was turned broadside and driven back to the beach.

"Our hearts fell; would they try again? Could we be rescued before the NESSEN completely broke up? Suddenly I could feel how really cold and wet I was as a snow squall temporarily obstructed our view.

"When the visibility improved, our hopes once more soared as the lifesavers again launched their boat into the teeth of the gale. But as before, they were beaten back. Finally on the third attempt they succeeded in clearing the breakers and began to pull toward us.

"All was excitement aboard the NESSEN now as our rescue was at hand. We rushed about, gathering what belongings we had saved and prepared to leave the vessel. The lifesavers were within a hundred yards of us when a large sea broke over us causing the NESSEN to shudder, and bringing the stack down with a loud crash! For a moment I froze with terror. Could this be the end of us, with rescue so near? But the old girl held and within moments the surfboat was in our lee.

"Mrs. Humphreys, the cook, was put into the boat first, then seven more of the crew followed as the boat could carry no more. The lifesavers feathered their oars as the wind and sea carried them back to shore. Lew Gotch, Sam Mokriski, Jim Flanagan and I, along with Captain Benson, were left to wait.

"Time seemed to drag as the dory slowly made its way to shore and discharged our shipmates. It dragged further as the boat slowly made its way back for us. When the lifesavers arrived, we eagerly entered the surfboat and again let the wind and seas take us to shore.

"No sooner was I ashore, thanking the lifesavers and talking to some of the crowd, than I turned and looked toward the NESSEN and discovered the bow was gone. It had finally yielded to the hours of pounding and disintegrating. By the next morning, the entire vessel had broken up, leaving nothing but a pile of scrap iron on the reef. That evening we all wired home and spent the night in a Leamington, Ontario hotel.

"Back home in St. Clair, Michigan, preliminary radio news broadcasts had indicated that the NESSEN had broken up and the "entire crew" had been lost! Thus, while my wife had received my telegram, many of my friends and relatives thought me dead. You can imagine the long stares I got when I finally returned home. You would think they had seen a ghost!"