

Remembering a little-known disaster

100 years ago today, Grand Island's Eagle Park dock collapsed, leaving more than 30 dead

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Carol Schlee sits in her Williamsville home, flipping through a binder of newspaper clippings and photographs collected by her family over the years. She slowly runs her fingers over her Aunt Clara's portrait.

"I always think how horrible drowning must be," she says softly.

Today marks the 100th anniversary of what's known as the Eagle Park tragedy, when a section of Grand Island's Eagle Park dock collapsed, throwing 250 people into the Niagara River. Thirty-nine people drowned, among them Schlee's aunt.

Some historians say a boat collided with the dock, causing the passengers to tumble into the water. Others believe the dock was overcrowded and collapsed from the weight of the people.

But whatever the cause, it only took a split second for drunken singing and laughter to turn into frantic struggling and screaming. For the boathouse to turn into a makeshift morgue.

With a cracking roar, about 50 feet of the planking went down near the south end of the dock, violently ejecting passengers into the water. Some were carried away from the dock by the river's current, which rushed at about 10 miles per hour.

Others clutched the floating splinters of the dock and grabbed onto each other.

"All I remember was a sea of heads and arms and legs, and a terrible screaming," Cora Went told Buffalo Evening News reporters the day of the incident.

The victims were mainly women and children, and were members of Amherst Court Outing Club, Foresters of America, a social organization in Black Rock. About 900 members and their guests had gone to Eagle Park in the morning on the steamers Henry

Koerber Jr. and the Lottie Koerber. Some of the excursionists had returned to Amherst Street late in the afternoon, and the Henry Koerber had returned for the rest of the party.

The tragedy took place June 23, 1912, at a time when the larger world was still focused on one of the greatest drowning tragedies of all time -- the April 15 sinking of the Titanic, which struck an iceberg in the Atlantic Ocean and sent 1,200 people to their deaths. The disasters were only two months apart.

Carol Schlee's mother, the late Helen Schulz, spent her life fearing the water.

Schlee remembers jumping off a dock at age four, and her splashes were met by her mother's screams.

"Though my siblings and I were all great swimmers," she said, chuckling softly.

Schlee's mother, Helen, was seven years old when her sister Clara left for Eagle Park for the day. Helen had been preparing to speak at their brother's graduation and everyone, especially Clara, was excited for her.

"Oh, honey, try on your dress," said Clara, 22 at the time. Helen stubbornly refused.

"But Helen," Clara jokingly told her, "what if you never see me again? Come back."

Soon after, Clara left for her excursion. Helen left for her performance.

The two sisters would never see each other again.

One of Clara's older brothers identified Clara's body, which was laid out, fully dressed and covered in burlap, in the park's fish shanty.

Most of the people who fell into the river were saved. Life preservers were thrown from the two boats, allowing people to keep themselves afloat until rescued. Small boats were sent from shore and picked up those floating on the water, many of whom couldn't swim.

Several women were weighed down by their petticoats.

Some men dived into the water to rescue people. Others tossed ropes overboard, and hauled many victims from the water.

Clara's sister Bernadine, who was also on the dock that day, was saved by the man she was dating at the time, Leo Tepas. The two later married, Schlee said.

Bernadine's son, Milton Tepas, is now 85 and resides in Florida. He remembers his mother describing the disaster to him, telling him how his father had rescued her and how she lost her sister.

"I imagine what she felt at the time was quite severe," he said.

Walter Manthei, one of the last known survivors of the tragedy, wrote in a letter he sent to former Grand Island Town Historian Marion Klingel in 1966 that a section of the dock, 54 feet long, split in the center, leaving half of each side hung along the piling. The victims were trapped in the space, struggling in a mess of beer kegs and empty soft drink cases.

Manthei had managed to save his wife, who was pregnant with his son, born four months later, and a Mrs. Kelly, whose baby was believed to have drifted over Niagara Falls, he wrote.

But Manthei wrote that many were saved as a result of the efforts of a man known as Doctor Sperry, who attended the injured and instructed those working on the nearly drowned people. Flesh that had been torn by the timbers was mended by Sperry. He called for a bottle of 100 proof whiskey for sterilization, but a Mr. Miller, owner of a nearby tavern, refused to provide it without pay, he wrote. Walter Lynch, who also was involved in the rescues, jumped over the bar and rushed two bottles to the doctor.

The aftermath of the disaster was disorganized due to intoxicated men and valuables were stolen from corpses.

Some drunken male passengers, who were mildly interested in getting the morgue ship under way, returned to the bar. When reporters from The News arrived at the scene, they wrote in a June 28, 1912 article that some of the men had returned to the bar, and others were sprawled on the grass.

A reporter asked a man why no effort was being made to get the bodies out. The man pointed to the barroom.

"What's the use of trying to do anything with a gang like that?" he had said.

Reporters George Hauck and Edwin Halley then had to retrieve bodies themselves, recovering 12 bodies with sturgeon hooks fastened to a long fish line, according to a June 24 Evening News article. A total of 39 bodies were recovered.

Sharon Nichols, a member of the Grand Island Historical Society, said many of the corpses were robbed. It's what her father, Karl Long, remembers most vividly as a young child who lived next door to the accident.

Jewelry, trinkets and valuables were taken from the bodies and clothing of those drowned, with no one to stop the robbers, she said.

On June 27, 1912, a coroner ordered 16 witnesses to appear in court in an effort to place criminal responsibility, if any, for the cause of the accident.

Captain Frank F. Fix, the owner of the boats, swore the boat did not touch the dock, and that he was four to six feet from the dock when it collapsed. He also told The Evening News that the dock was known as "the rottenest on Grand Island." An inspection of the dock showed that the collapsed portion was older than the rest.

No one was held criminally responsible for the accident.

The Grand Island Historical Society will hold a special commemoration to mark the 100th anniversary at 1 p.m. July 1 at the Whitehaven Road Overlook, 2715 W. River Road.

A group of singers will gather to sing "Everybody's Doing It," the song that was sung by picnickers the day of the accident, said Curtis Nestark, president of the society.

Carol Schlee looks forward to attending the commemoration.

"It's so important, as so few people know about it," she said. "I'm glad they're commemorating."