

Charity Island Excursions

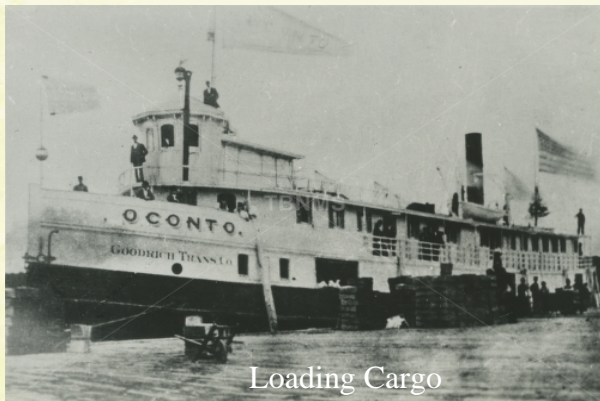
Dinner Cruise Gift Certificates

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Loading Cargo

A NY Times story December 13, 1885

The Oconto Aground off Charity Island December 1885

Greetings Everyone and Happy Holidays!

In my last email I began a multi part history of Charity Island lighthouse that brought us to 1917 when the Lighthouse was automated using acetylene gas and a valve invented by the Swedish inventor Nils Gustav Dalen. As this is December it's the perfect time to relate the story of the Oconto, a Great Lakes steamer that wrecked in Saginaw Bay in 1885 three weeks before Christmas.

The Oconto left Oscoda about 4 pm on December 4th with 22 passengers and 25 crewmembers on what was supposed to be a short trip to Alpena. About an hour after they got underway a winter storm descended on Lake Huron and engulfed the Oconto and its crew in a blinding

gale snowstorm. One of the crew members later related to a reporter that "when the storm hit all the lights went out and we were in total darkness. The gale grew in strength so fast and the snow was falling so heavily that Capt. McGregor decided to turn around and run with the wind south to find shelter at Tawas Bay. First Mate Reardon of Port Huron told how he was called to the main deck after the horses and cows broke loose from their stalls and were running at large. Before he got there, however, Reardon said he passed the galley and saw trouble there. "The Kitchen stove was red hot and I thought the boat would catch fire so I went to put this out first", Rearden said. That was when he found the ships cook, Charles brown, lying on his bed and crying for help. By the time Reardon put the fire out Brown was dead, apparently died from fright. Reardon found total chaos on the main deck with one of the gangways forced open by the storm which he managed to get closed. Horses and cows were tumbling and sliding around with the roll of the ship. Many animals had their legs broken. Everything on the upper deck, including several cutters, one hundred chickens and turkeys were washed away. All four cranes were broke and the cabin badly damaged. A worker in the engine room later told the Huron Times at Huron Beach; "our starboard bulwarks were stove in and all the upper railings and two of our lifeboats and all the light freight on the hurricane deck were washed away."

Give the Gift of Summer this Holiday Season with Charity Island Dinner Cruise Gift Certificates.

○ Tawas Pt. Light is Sighted ○

“ The colored Cook, Charlie Brown died of fright and we buried him on Charity Island”

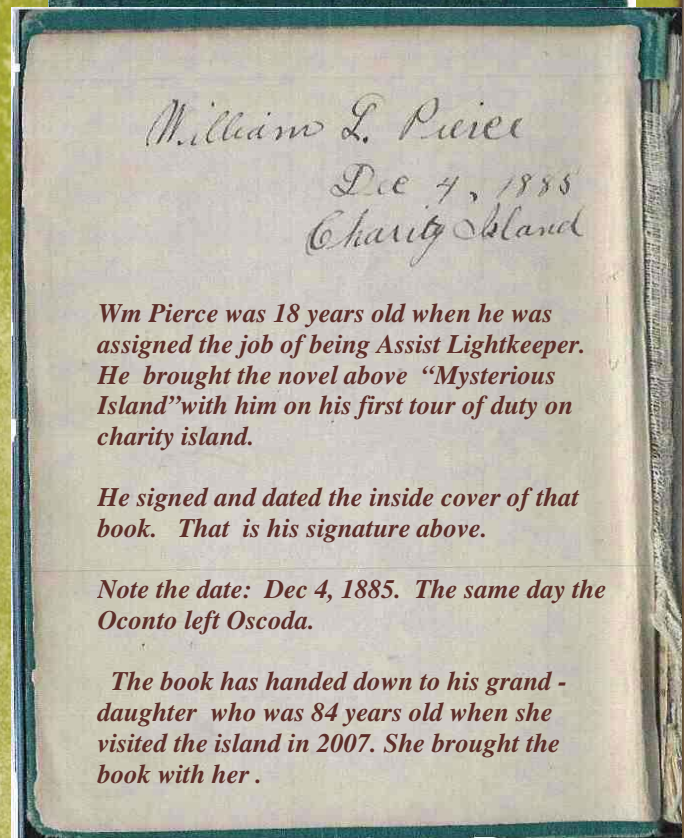
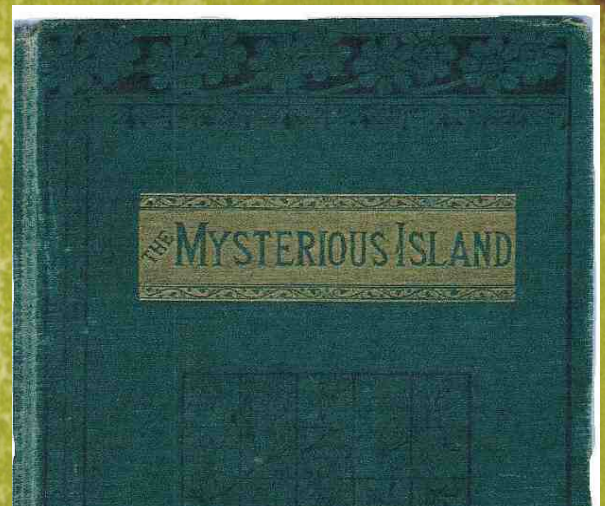
Crew member Oconto

The waves were so high the ships propellers were being lifted out to of the water causing them to race erractically. The captain had to turn back into the wind to stop the rolling so the crew could get control of the livestock. The storm intensified and he turned around again and made another attempt to reach Tawas.

Reardon said they saw a light off the Starboard bow and headed for it thinking it was Tawas Point. Later, as they got closer and McGregor determined the boat was approaching Charity Island and the Oconto struck moments later and stranded about a mile from shore.

One crewmember related “as soon as the boat struck the crew began dealing out life jackets and preparing for the ice bath none of us would have survived for more than 15 minutes when we determined we weren’t leaking anywhere and even with our engines off we were holding our position. The Oconto was made of good timber and held together even while taking a terrible hammering over the next two days.

At daylight distress signals were hoisted and five crew members went to shore in a metal lifeboat. The Lightkeeper and his assistant had launched a yawl and before the day was out had all the passengers and crew members safely ashore. The two women and a child were taken to the Lightkeepers and the male passengers set up house keeping in the fishing huts that were located on the south side of the Island.





Women & Children From the Oconto Spend the next few days at the Lighthouse

Two days later the worst of the storm was over and seven crew, including the story teller, took the yawl back to the Oconto, recovered the compass and some provisions and then made for Caseville 10 miles to the south. McGregor tried to persuade them to give up the trip. They started in the midst of cake ice and had to work every minute to keep from freezing. The spray froze on the men as it struck. Four miles offshore from Caseville the men encountered solid ice and had to cut their way with axes. For Six hours they pushed and cut like mad and reached shore exhausted after dark.

Within a day or so another group of men took a yawl and set out for Pt. Lookout which they made without much incident. The only source of help in those days was in Tawas so they followed the shoreline and walked the whole way there and arrived there just before dark. It was such a strenuous journey that they all collapsed from exhaustion and had to be carried to by the local townspeople to warm lodging where they were given rest and hot food.



Charity Island Gift Certificates The Gift Of Summer A Great Holiday Gift

Over the next couple of weeks the remaining crew and passengers were taken off the Island and were presumably home by Christmas. What stories they must have had to share with their families.

The Oconto was raised in the spring and made ready for another trip. The Oconto left Port Huron in the spring of 1886 with a cargo of dress goods and silks, bound for Alexandria Bay, Lake Ontario where it collided with a dock on the St. Claire River, then collided with a Tug at Toledo. The Steamer struck a rock on the St. Lawrence River and Sank in 200 feet of Water.

With that I will end this issue. Karen

and I Wish everyone a Very **Merry**
Christmas and a **Happy New Year.**