

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Calumet
The Sage of a Sad
and Stubborn Lady

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"CALUMET"- The Saga of a Sad and Stubborn Lady

The "Calumet" was built in Madison during the summer and fall of 1876. On the 28th of November she slid into the river at Madison and twelve hours and 5 minutes later she was at the docks in Cincinnati, not a bad time for a new boat. Captain Phil Anschutz was mightily pleased with his new boat and pronounced her maiden voyage a success. She was loaded with cargo bound for New Orleans and everything seemed to be going smoothly-everything with the exception of the weather. It was an early and unusually cold fall in 1876. The river had begun to freeze and the "Calumet" had encountered floating ice on her first time out. The temperature had been dropping down fast as had the depth of the water-a sure-fire combination for trouble. The "Calumet" was now, however, safely docked and made snug willing to wait for, what was assumed would be a break in the weather. However, as the boat hugged the shore, it was noted that the river was "blocking up" and without immediate warmer weather it was feared she would freeze over. Only a few short hours later, that's exactly what she did. "The ice in the river blocked and stopped floating at 4:10 o'clock this afternoon. All the ice has been formed in the last 24 hours." said the local paper. The ice was ushered in by a "Northwester" that battered the countryside all night during which the temperature dropped to ten degrees below zero.

Boats lay up next to wharves, hugged the shore, or hid in the tributaries-any place that afforded safety and they waited. On December 11th, 1877 the ice in the Ohio broke with a terrific crashing and grinding noise, piling the broken pieces in heaps along the shoreline. Much damage was done to barges and property and at the Madison Marine Ways 118 logs were swept away adding to the already dangerous situation. It was noted the "Sherley", the "Vint Shinkle" and Abbott's ferry were safely harbored in the Kentucky River. By all reports the boys were having a good time and the boats were in a good fix.

On the 15th of December any hope for an early resolution was squelched as the weather again took a turn for the worst. Ice reformed and the river was again blocked.

A frozen river was nothing new and life progressed towards the inevitable thaw. People skated on, walked on and sledged on the Ohio. To break the tedium a shooting match was held on the river. Even in an inanimate state, life seemed to evolve around the river. December turned into January and on the 8th it was noted that the mercury was at 8 degrees below zero and three inches of new snow had fallen. On the tenth the New Albany Ledger remarked this was only the second time in fifty years the river had frozen over, solid at that city. January dragged on and the cold weather held. Reports from up-river began to filter in. The river was rising and the ice was running. Then from Cincinnati on the 12th, "In the breaking of the ice gorge here this morning the new steamer Calumet, valued at \$24,000, sank and will probably prove a total loss; she was insured for \$17,000; she had a cargo for New Orleans, some 3,000 tons". On December 14th Cincinnati glumly reported, "The ice which has remained stationary above Newport bridge gave way at noon today, and striking the sunken steamer Calumet, turned the wreck around and swept it down with the current, making the boat a total loss. When the wreck of the steamer was swept away Captain Dugan and the mates were on board but made their escape by jumping on the Golden Eagle when the wreck reached that steamer." That same day the Madison Courier stated, "The rise from above, together with the heavy discharge of water and ice from the Kentucky River, caused a grand move of the ice fields at this

point. In advance of the general crushing and crumbling, zig zag seams shot across the ice fields in every direction, producing deep rumbling tones like distant thunder. In some places great fields of 20 acres of smooth surface moved along without a break, and alternating with them came the rugged, tossed and tumbled masses, crushing everything before them. A part of the wreck of the steamer Calumet passed this city about 2 o'clock this afternoon." The next day it was reported the sunken steamer Calumet had returned home and was lodged near the Marine Way, her birthplace.

By the 17th of January the river was free of ice but flooding now became a problem. Wreckage that had been protruding from the water now was submerged. Salvage operations would be put on hold for more favorable conditions. At least navigation was back to near normal. The river had closed on December 9, 1876 and re-opened for navigation January 17-one agonizing month and 8 days.

On February 1, 1877 Captain Anschutz arrived in Madison from Cincinnati in search of his lost steamer. He soon divined it to be about 200 yards beyond the Marine Ways and about 100 yards from the shore. He contacted the then famous sub-marine diver, John Guire, who arrived in Madison on the 7th. On the 8th of February a large flatboat was connected to the wreckage and Guire donned his costume consisting of a flannel suit worn over his ordinary clothing then a gum suit pulled over all. The gum suit was seamless and covered the diver to his shoulders where the base of the copper helmet was attached by bands and screws. A ladder was attached to the flatboat and before descending down the ladder, Guire donned a girdle of lead bars weighing 100 pounds and shoes with lead soles each weighing 20 pounds. With a line about his body and being attached to an air hose connected to an air pump he climbed down and disappeared beneath the cold, murky water. Guire better secured the wreck to the flatboat but, other than that, little progress was made. The hull was filled with mud and debris and would not be coaxed or coerced to move. In the days that followed all sorts of remedies were applied including punching a hole in the hull and filling it with drums pumped full of air. On the 13th a big boat tugged at the wreck then sullenly left the scene. On the 19th the steamer "Samuel Clark" pulled and struggled with the "Calumet" but gave up. In exasperation Captain Anschutz abandoned the heap to wait for low water. The once proud "Calumet" had become little more than a spectator sport and she petulantly lay on the bottom refusing to be lifted.

Over the next few months, time after time, attempts were made to loosen the "Calumet" but time and again the old girl refused, seemingly comfortable in the nest she had made on the floor of the river. In August the huge towboat, "Jacob Heatherington" and diver, Guire again make a try for her with no success. At this point Guire can see no use for further attempts, and to preserve his reputation as a salvage man, he permanently leaves the scene. In September another diver is brought in but has no more luck than Guire. By November, nearly a full year after her maiden voyage, and after being pumped and drained, turned over, cleaned out, filled up, drug to shallow water then to deeper water, the "Calumet" still lay on the bottom. In a heroic effort, and probably as a last ditch stand, the towboats "J. Sharpe McDonald", the "Josh Cook", "Nellie Speers" and the "Heatherington" all use their tremendous power in unison in a failed effort to raise the stubborn old girl. The newspaper reported, "Alas, poor Calumet, her life has been short and full of trouble". Duuuuh. In December three towboats again make a try and again they fail. The newspaper states she will now most certainly be abandoned.

There is no further mention of the Calumet until years later when the newspaper makes a slight reference to her demise, leading one to believe she is still lying there, still and silent. Perhaps it is best to understand that when a lady decides to settle down it's best not to try and dissuade her.