

The Lansing Explosion

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This is Roald Tweet on Rock Island.

I've been talking about steamboat explosions, which were common on the Upper Mississippi throughout the 19th century, but there is nothing to show you, no photograph of a single one: only the occasional shot of what had been a boat.

Hollywood and its slow motion got there too late.

Let me try to remedy that by taking you back to about 9:30 on the morning of May 13th, 1867, somewhere upstream from Davenport, Iowa. The steamboat Lansing, Capt. H. M. Hughes in the pilot house, had left Davenport headed for Port Byron. She was the first boat built by the famous Diamond Jo Reynolds Line. Near Hampton, the boat hit a sudden squall. The broad expanse of boat was no match for the wind. Near Hampton, Illinois, the Lansing was pushed against the shore, and would not budge.

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Capt. Hughes realized that the boat needed all the power it could send to the two paddles. He ordered rosin added to the boiler fires to make them hotter. The paddlewheels thrown in reverse still did not move the boat; finally, the engineer hung a three-pound wrench on the safety valve to increase the pressure beyond the safe level.

A sudden, thumping sound followed by a hiss of steam informed everyone on board that the boilers had blown. Twisted pieces of metal mixed with sand, sticks and rubbish flew everywhere. Live steam engulfed the screaming passengers in the main cabins. In one of these cabins just over the boiler was the Honorable Sidney A. Hubbell, a judge from Davenport. The blast blew him through the window which caught a foot, leaving him hanging upside down. John Kreedler, also above the boilers, was blown four hundred feet. He landed unhurt on shore. George White the pilot was killed when three spokes of the wheel went through him. The body of H. Curtis of Davenport, who was writing a letter at the time, was blown to pieces and never found. An additional five passengers later died from burns and injuries.

Captain Hughes could, of course, have requested help from other boats to pull the Lansing back into deep water, but that would have meant an embarrassing loss of face on the river. Much better, as we all know, to sacrifice a pilot and a few passengers.

Rock Island Lines with Roald Tweet is underwritten by Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.