



Historical Fiction

Legend of North Bay

In January the winter winds blow cold across Kelley's Island. Visitors are scarce except for a breed of individuals known as "Ice Fishermen." In the early 60's, I was one of those risk takers. I can't remember the exact date, but the ice and the fishing were exceptionally good. The winter blast of cold weather had come earlier than usual that year. The ice had been building for weeks. The out-of-town newspapers were keeping up with the island fishing reports, and interest was high. Each weekend, the island air services were strained with fishermen. It was a lure most could not resist.

On a weekday, my flight left Carl Keller Field at first light. Off in the distance was a brilliant sunrise. Upon landing, I gathered my gear and headed for the North Bay. The best fish I had ever tasted were caught in North Bay. By the time the sun had reached its peak, I was a mile offshore fishing in thirty feet of water. I was pulling in fish and off in the distance I could see others doing the same. As the afternoon wore on, the weather started to deteriorate quickly. What started out as light snow had turned heavy. It soon became a "white out" condition with the wind gusting in all directions. With the wind and snow howling around me, I was hoping that this was just a passing squall, and I made up my mind to wait it out.

By the time I had gathered my gear and set out for shore, the storm had intensified. The temperature felt sub zero. I tried to pick up my pace. Glancing at my watch, I found that I had been walking for almost an hour and still had not reached land. Pressure cracks were starting to open up with water being forced up on the ice. Darkness was settling in rapidly and my mind was playing games with me. I realized I was lost.

Then it happened! I stepped into an open pressure crack and was in icy water up to my chest. Kicking desperately, I struggled to pull myself up on the ice. I lay there, both mentally and physically drained. It was also almost completely dark now, and the winds were blowing at gale force. While trying to gather my strength, I felt something touch my leg. I opened my eyes to find a large black Lab next to me. I didn't quite understand, but I knew the Lab was there to help me. Grasping the Lab's collar, I was able to pull myself up. Walking was difficult. My clothes were frozen, and pain from the cold was shooting up my arms and legs. As I held tightly to the Lab's collar for support, I couldn't help wondering if he might be leading me further out onto the lake. But it seemed he instinctively knew the difference between good and bad ice. His main purpose was to watch over me.

I had no idea how long we traveled together. Finally I felt land under my feet. As I whispered, "We're OK now," I started up the embankment toward the road. In the distance I saw headlights approaching. It was the Village Police Chief searching for lost fishermen. As I got in the car, I turned to look for the Lab. He vanished as fast as he had appeared. I imagined that he headed for home and a warm bed. I told the Chief that tomorrow I must locate the Lab and thank his owners.

After a quick ride up Division Street, we arrived at the Lodge. The Chief helped me inside. Joe, the owner, offered me some hot soup and a badly needed brandy. I was able to tell the others of my frigid ordeal after heat from the old stove had penetrated my frozen body. When I finished my story, Joe said he knew for a fact that no one on the island had a black Lab. I said it couldn't be true; one saved my life today.

Joe was very thoughtful for a moment before stepping into his back room and returning with a tattered scrapbook. I could see in his eyes the tenderness he felt for this old scrapbook. Joe said he had a story to share with me. Turning the old pages, he pulled out a newspaper clipping from 1924. It told of an island resident who perished along with his black Lab when their auto plunged through the ice on North Bay. As the story stated, both were able to get out of the auto before it went down, but the man could not climb out of the icy water. Each time he pushed the dog onto the ice, the Lab would jump back into the water to try to save his master. After a few minutes, neither could struggle any longer. Both of their lives' voyages had come to an end. Neither had ever been found.

As Joe talked, I let my mind drift back to the Lab, truly convinced that the experience was real. The depth of serenity I had felt could not have come from a myth. Was it possible, while I lay there on the ice, I had indeed passed through that doorway of lost souls? Could that black Lab still prowl the North Bay, always willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for any unfortunate soul lost on his journey?

To you, My Loyal Companion, I vow to keep your spirit alive.

-Phillip Edwards

Sandusky County ABLE

The Moonlight Runner and Lost Ballast Island

The year was 1928 and out on the lake was a time of high drama. The 18th Amendment had transformed ordinary people into "Rum Runners." Nearly 9,000,000 cases of liquor were shipped to lakefront towns from over a hundred Canadian breweries and distilleries in the first seven months of Prohibition. Boatloads of smugglers were gliding across the lake. Bootlegging had become a glittering world of fast riches for those who dared to defy the law. There was never a shortage of buyers on the American side, and this new industry created many new jobs on both borders. Most local police were sympathetic toward the "Rum Runners," but the federal government saw things much differently. They were determined to drive them from the lakes, and they did not hesitate to use armed force.

It was during this time that there was a beautiful young lady named Magi. She was employed as a maid at a hotel on South Bass Island. She had fallen in love with a former bootlegger. He was known only as "Max" to the Island people. Friends of Magi had warned her of the risks involved, as well as the reputation of a gangster heart, but she loved Max and he loved her. They had met about 3 months earlier when Max was making deliveries to several "speakeasies" on the island.

Max had been making runs for quite a while to islands, as well as to the mainland and had become well known. His 30-foot Belle Isle Bearcat, "Midnight Fox," was becoming a legend on the lake. He knew it was a matter of time before the Coast Guard would catch up with him. Max and Magi had plans for him to make just one more run before the busy July 4th weekend. Magi would then return with Max to Canada, to marry and continue their lives in a much slower style with the wealth he had made on the lake. By this time though, the Revenuers and the Coast Guard were on full alert knowing there would be a lot of activity before the holiday. Max suspected this and had a plan. He would slip into the harbor between Peach Point and Gibraltar. In a smaller rowboat guided by a lantern, Magi would lead the way through the submerged rocks.

The stage was set. It was July 2nd and there was a half moon low on the horizon. It took Max only minutes to cross the lake and deliver his illicit cargo to Oak Point. With Magi's help all went as planned. In a while they had the cases of Scotch whiskey unloaded. They both knew that in a matter of minutes, they would be off on their new life together.

As they slid past Lost Ballast, little did they know what fate awaited them. In an instant, a white blast of light splintered into the boat. Max instantly pushed down hard on the throttle. At that exact moment, the 40-foot Coast Guard boat that had lain in ambush position opened up with a hail of deadly machine gun fire. By the time the Liberty engine on the Coast Guard boat got up to speed, they could not locate the "Midnight Fox." Not until dawn did they find the many bits and pieces floating near the ambush site. This led them to believe there were no survivors, and all had slipped to the bottom. Max, Magi,

and the "Midnight Fox" were never seen again.

For over a decade, through the passing of time, Islanders often thought of them and their destiny. Then in 1942, when WWII news filled everyone's thoughts, this personal notice appeared in the Wheatley Ontario Daily News....

"To my beloved Captain Max Fox of the Canadian Royal Navy, whose life was taken by a German torpedo in the North Atlantic, please rest now my warrior. May all your 'Midnights' be filled with my love." Magi

-Phillip Edwards
Sandusky County ABLE

The Night a P.T. Boat Prowled Lake Erie

There are many stories that are adrift and unsolved on Lake Erie. A few of them are tall tales, and I'm afraid I would be laughed off the lake even to mention them. Those can be ignored, but some can't.

Not long ago, I slipped down to the library on a mission to the past. As I sifted through the archives of old newspaper clippings from the Cleveland Plain Dealer dated October 3, 1945 the headline-grabbing story was "War boat sunk off Whiskey Island". As I read the first accounts, it pushed my pulse rate into the red zone and cast a spell on my adrenaline. Most lake stories are worn with time, but what unfolded was one of the lake's more unusual untold episodes. This story has been hibernating somewhere between V.J. Day and Monica. Trying to recall the details through the doorway of my memory is somewhat like looking in the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. With the help of the local library, I will now embark on a voyage back to the fall of 1945.

The sunken man-of-war was an icon of WWII in the Pacific. An eighty-foot "Patrol Torpedo Boat," a.k.a. P.T. Boat, lay on the bottom of the lake about one-quarter mile north of Whiskey Island. Although not visible by land, its dark shadow had been spotted by a pilot departing on a morning flight from Burke Lakefront Airport. The only information available at press time was that the Cleveland Coast Guard was investigating.

October 4, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition.... "When the U.S. Navy was contacted, they gave no explanation as to the odd occurrence." Or, was it an effort to conceal information? It wasn't long before they had placed the area under tight security.

October 5, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition.... "Salvage operations are now under way by the U.S. Navy." The Plain Dealer ran daily articles describing the progress and trying to unravel the incident. The news swept across the city as fast as a spring storm crossing the lake.

October 6, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition.... "Each day bewildered curiosity seekers gathered at the shoreline." It was as if someone had found the master key to unlock each spectator's imagination. A flood of "ifs" came up with the sun each morning, as excitement ran high on pure speculation. The best theories were hotter than "Betty Grable." The Plain Dealer followed up on every clue that seemed logical, and even the illogical ones that seemed interesting, but their efforts to learn the truth were inconclusive.

October 7, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition.... "The Navy salvage crew brought a magnificent war machine to the surface." Now wider implications took shape. It was no accident that the P.T. was on the bottom. It had been scuttled. This solved the questions of the crew's whereabouts.

Although unverified, the belief was that the boat had been used to run some illegal

cargo. Perhaps an attempt had been made to dispose of the evidence by sending the P.T. Boat to the deep solace of the lake bottom, but the P.T. took a dive sooner than anticipated before reaching deep water.

October 8, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition... "The P.T. Boat was far from being a decrepit old war relic." Powered by three 1350 h.p. Packard gas engines, it was over the edge in the speeds it could obtain at maximum power. Many of the Navy's captains returning from the war stated riding on a P.T. at full force was like holding onto a drunk on ice.

No police or coast guard boats on the lake could even come close to the mystic speeds of the P.T. This warrior was in pristine condition, although all of its lights had been removed, and the entire boat had been painted with flat black paint. This gave further credence to the notion that the boat had become a pawn in a high stakes crime.

October 10, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition... "Lieutenant Commander Bruce Campbell, a spokesperson for the Navy's recorded copy of the P.T.'s mission log shed light on its military career. The Electric Boat Co. of Bayonne, N.J., built Hull Number 621 which had been commissioned June, 1943. Hull 621 had achieved distinction in war patrols with the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron of the Pacific Fleet." Later, it was returned to the U.S. to be retained for instructional purpose at the Great Lakes Training Center near Chicago. When the Navy checked with the G.L.T.C., they listed the P.T. as "Whereabouts unknown." Could the P.T. have fallen victim to a world of stolen possessions and human ambitions? Found in the boat was an oilskin chart case containing several water soaked charts of the Detroit River. Both the Cleveland Coast Guard and the Cleveland Police could only conclude that whatever the high stakes crime had been, it had been carried out by a select group of non-amateurs, that left no margin for errors.

October 25, 1945, Plain Dealer Morning Edition... "The Cleveland Police believe their investigation has unlocked the puzzle of the PT 621." Prior to the early morning discovery, as the rest of the lake slumbered, a major art theft had taken place in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. It occurred at the Art Institute of Windsor located on Victoria Street less than a block from the Detroit River. The Curator of the Institute said several pieces of Renaissance Art had been taken during the night with the help of some sophisticated equipment. The art objects were listed as priceless. The Curator indicated clever art pirates looted the paintings from a heavily secured vault. The rare paintings had been sent to Canada for safe keeping to avoid possible damage during the air raid blitz on London by the German Luftwaffe. Now owned by a socially prominent London family, the art at one time had been owned by the Duke of Kensington.

There was no doubt that the heist had been carried out by master thieves with an ingenious plan for using the fastest means of maritime travel. Even in the 40's the art world had unscrupulous buyers willing to pay staggering sums of money to secure priceless treasures for their private sanctuaries. The last mention of the story appeared in the

Plain Dealer that December. There were no leads on any of the art thieves or any trace of the art cache.

P.T. 621 was returned to the Great Lakes Training Center. With the war finally over and Christmas just days away, the P.T. saga was quickly forgotten. The story had long ago slipped from the headlines. By far it was not the biggest event of 1945, but the mixture of fact and tale fueled people's imaginations. Long locked in time, the old clippings had claimed a lair deep in the chambers of the Port Clinton Library. Their silence is still elusive, but possibly the incident may be remembered by a few people in Cleveland.

I had gone in search of a story and accidentally stumbled into a passageway that led to a refuge of another unsolved lake mystery that had vanished with time. I now ask myself, are the winds of the past still searching for the truth of the occurrence or have I only disturbed the silence of mere shadows?

-Phillip Edwards

Sandusky County ABLE