

THE PEARL DISASTER

[By L. E. SLAUGHTER.]

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The Captain Took a Risk

The worst disaster, with much loss of life, ever to happen in Brisbane until that time was the wreck of the small steamboat "Pearl," in the Brisbane River on Thursday, February 13, 1896, sixty years ago.

The big flood of 1893 had carried great logs and trees and deposited them on the flats up the river. Another flood was in the river in February 1896. This brought down those logs, which buffeted the piles of the bridge. At 1 p.m. on February 13 these logs and other debris had caused three piles to collapse, the result being that the bridge sagged for three feet. The Victoria Bridge Board then ordered that the bridge be closed to all traffic. To hold the bridge in position, a steel hawser was fastened to it and to a telegraph pole on North Quay. In the meantime Mr. W. Stevens, M.L.A., had chartered four small steamboats to ferry people over the river. One of these was the "Pearl." At the same time, the Police Commissioner had ordered the bridge to be opened for pedestrian traffic only. Representatives of the Victoria Bridge Board then saw the Police Commissioner and he agreed to the bridge being closed again. At 5.30 p.m. that day it was reopened for pedestrian traffic.

The "Pearl" was a small wooden screw steamboat. Her skipper was Captain James Chard. She was 41 tons deadweight, of 10 horsepower, 58 feet long, 15 feet beam and 5 feet draught. She had been employed plying between Brisbane and Cleveland and Brisbane and Redcliffe. At 5.5 p.m. on Thursday, February 13, 1896, she had left Queen's Wharf for Musgrave Wharf with a number of passengers, estimated to have been between 90 and 100 persons. The flood was running

strongly; but not enough to retard the progress of the steamer.

The "Pearl" Crashes Into The "Lucinda"

The steamship "Normanby" and the government yacht "Lucinda" were anchored in the stream. This was the practice in those days of few wharves. There was less than 100 feet space between the stern of the "Normanby" and the bow of the "Lucinda." The "Pearl," when endeavouring to avoid crashing into the "Normanby," was carried by an eddy and the strong current on to the anchor chains of the "Lucinda." The "Pearl" was almost cut in two; it quickly capsized and sank. Almost simultaneously, all the passengers were thrown into the water. Some scrambled up the Lucinda's anchor chains, others were rescued by ropes thrown to them from the "Lucinda" and by small rowing boats. Thirty-four people were rescued at that time. As the number aboard the "Pearl" was only an estimate, it was not known then how many were lost. A large crowd of people rushed to William Street, near Victoria Bridge, and several hundreds rushed across the bridge. The crew of the "Beaver" and other vessels nearby threw overboard seats and other life-saving equipment, as well as anything which would float. The "Lucinda's" boat rescued several people.

Harrowing Scenes

People rushed to the river ends of South Brisbane streets. In those days these streets continued right down to the water's edge. There were no wharves at the ends of the streets then. The end of Sidon Street at the water's edge had the largest crowd. These people looked and waited anxiously, in case relatives were in the wreck. Most of these onlookers were moaning, sobbing and crying with grief. Soon after the wreck the river swarmed with small steam and other kinds of boats. These were endeavouring to effect rescues. The next day it was possible to obtain a better estimate of the number of passengers on board the "Pearl." This was when relatives were able to report missing persons. The estimate of passengers was then between sixty

and seventy persons. Search parties examined the river to its mouth and even the nearer shores of the bay. No traces of the "Pearl" or any bodies were found. The steamboat "Pippo" continued the search on the Saturday and found a number of bodies.

On February 20 some men with depth poles felt something solid in the river. The next day a diver descended and found the "Pearl" right side up. At low tide there were only 4 feet 6 inches of water above the deck. The boilers, having fallen through the large hole in the "Pearl," could not be found. The position of the wreck was fifty yards downstream from the Ernest Street ferry shed. It was raised after the floodwaters subsided.

The "Pearl" on other journeys had passed between the two vessels. On one occasion she had bumped the "Normanby" and on another had a narrow escape when she touched the "Lucinda's" chains. This caused the "Pearl" to slew around. This route was taken to save time and to forestall the passengers' complaints against going the longest way. When interviewed after the crash, the captain of the "Pearl" admitted that he had taken a risk and that it would have been safer to go around the stern of the "Lucinda."

Survivors' Accounts

Leslie Water Groom, a young man (son of William Henry Groom, M.L.A.), who was one of the survivors and was able to climb on board the "Lucinda," said the "Pearl" almost touched the "Normanby." The captain gave the order "stop." The engines stopped and started again. The engineer called to the captain, "Look out, Jim, you'll be on the 'Lucinda'!" The captain gave the order "astern" and immediately the "Pearl" crashed into the "Lucinda." The "Pearl" seemed to be lifted up by the "Lucinda's" anchor chains. Groom then climbed on to the "Lucinda" from the upturned bottom of the "Pearl." At the same time thirty people clamoured aboard the "Lucinda." Twelve of these were women. Mrs. Jewell, wife of V. Jewell, a cabinet-maker, was sitting on the verandah of her home in Stanley Street, facing the river. She was very interested in the small steamboats ferrying people over

the river. She saw the "Pearl" dash broadside on to the "Lucinda's" bow. The awful shrieks of the "Pearl's" passengers made her feel "sick and giddy." Dozens of people slipped off the "Pearl" as she turned over. Men, women and children were fighting against debris and rushing water. James Wilson and his wife met on Queen's Wharf after she had done some shopping. When the "Pearl" struck, Mr. Wilson caught hold of his wife. When they were in the water, he held her up. Another woman clung to him. He tried to save his wife; but she sank within his sight. Mr. Wilson was saved and was being cared for in a nearby Southside boarding house. Four children, ages one to eight years, living nearby were brought to the house. When he heard that their mother, Mrs. Harper, was drowned, he consented to care for them. Miss Isabella Braidwood, who was an employee of Grimes and Petty, drapers, who had their business in the building now known as the Strand Building, was another survivor. She was carried by the current to the railway wharves. There she saw a man and a woman holding on to a lifebuoy. She called to the man to save her. He succeeded in catching hold of her and she gripped the lifebuoy, until a rowing boat picked them up. Malcolm Finlayson was thrown into the water, but was able with two others to cling to a floating seat. His brother William, who had climbed on to the "Lucinda," threw a rope, but he was unable to catch it. He with the other two were carried downstream and finally rescued by a steam launch. Charles Herbert Briggs was carried downstream holding his bag and umbrella in one hand while he was swimming with the other. He was rescued near the dry dock by a small ferry rowing boat.

Archibald McCorkingdale Drowns

Archibald McCorkingdale, who had been a councillor of the Coorparoo Shire Council and president in 1894, was on the "Pearl" with Frederick Ballinger. He said to Mr. Ballinger, "Good-bye, I cannot swim. Remember me to my wife." Mr. McCorkingdale then disappeared and his body was never recovered. Mr. Ballinger was rescued.

The Captain Rescued

When the "Pearl" struck, Captain James Chard, the master, called to everybody to grip something. Someone near him said, "Why don't you grip something?" The captain replied, "I don't want anything. I am going down with her." The captain sank with the "Pearl." When she turned over he was thrown against "Lucinda's" anchor chains. He sank. When he came up, he was astern of the "Lucinda." He saw a lifebuoy, seized it and enabled two women to hold on to it. The three were carried down to the dry dock. The lifebuoy was inadequate to support three persons, so the captain indicated that he would let go. By that time one of the women became unconscious and the captain supported her. His senses were leaving him by the time they were rescued. His clothing was much torn, so he went to his nearby home, in Vulture Street, and obtained other clothing. He then returned to the wharf.

Survivors

The survivors of the wreck were: Misses Geraldine and Maud McGroarty, daughters of inspector of schools; Miss Mary Lehane, daughter of the licensee of the Boundary Hotel; Miss Mary Cain, Jane Street, West End; Miss Isabella Braidwood of the same street; Frederick Ballinger, traffic inspector; Mrs. Preece, wife of Mr. Preece, of John Preece and Kennedy, Coorparoo; Mr. W. O. Lamond, of Morehead and Co.; Mr. Bell-Booth, of Queensland Trustees; Charles Herbert Briggs, Brisbane Newspaper Co.; H. W. Huckins, of G. T. Bell and Co.; William Wilson, Yeronga, of Apollo Co.; Malcolm and William Finlayson; Mr. Geddes, Too-woomba, father of postmaster, Melbourne Street; James Chard, master of the "Pearl"; —. Tate and —. Mutch, fireman and engineer, respectively, of the "Pearl"; Arthur Loseby, Spring Hill; P. L. Williams; J. Fitzmaurice; Peter Dowd, Government Printing Office; J. Wassell, son of Inspector Wassell; E. Owen Rees, manager, Equitable Insurance Co.; Mrs. B. Brookes; Alex R. Henry, Ernest Street; Leslie Walter Groom, Franklin Street, son of William Henry Groom, M.L.A.; David Kerr, Jane Street, West End; Gurney

Henzell, Coorparoo; T. Sythers, geological museum; Mrs. Jarman; deck hand of the "Pearl"; R. Pickering; A. J. Crowther; B. P. Brown, railway department; Thomas Brock, of Wynnum; Frank Guzomai; G. Yanger, Fairfield deviation; Mr. Hilton; Mr. Ovenden; L. P. Petersen, Ferndale Estate, Ipswich Road; Miss Nellie Norton, Granville Street, West End; W. H. Arnold, District Engineer's Office; and a girl, Martha Morren.

The Lost

Those who were missing were: a boy nine years of age named O'Sullivan; Mesdames Messenger, Gould and Wilson; Miss Ida Newman, dancing teacher of Coorparoo; S. Chorlton, Stanley Street; Mrs. A. B. Renton, Cordelia Street; H. Williams, of Pastoral Butchering Co.; H. C. Morren, Manly; Miss Grace Yorston; Mrs. Worthington; H. A. Jarman; A. G. Williams; William Percy Hall, Merton Road; Mr. Lavers, fruiterer, Merton Street; W. Ellis, Queensland Trustees; Joseph Rose, brushmaker, Hutton Lane; Miss Marshall, Merton Road; Mrs. Guzomai (a South Sea Islander) and her two children; Miss Louise Barnes, Boggo Road; Mrs. Harper, corner Grey and Russell Streets; Alexander McCorkingdale, former President of the Coorparoo Shire Council; F. W. D. Martin (accountant Bank of New South Wales), Brighton Road, West End; Edward Trueman, Ipswich Road; G. M. Bullock, Ipswich Road; and a schoolgirl, Annie Donelan, Thompson Estate. Fourteen bodies were not recovered.

Harry A. Jarman was twenty-one years of age and was interested in the cadets in the defence force. He was in charge of the saddlery business of his father (R. E. Jarman) on the corner of Adelaide and Edward Streets. He had a lifebuoy which he gave to his aunt. She was saved. He was lost. Mr. H. C. Morren, who was lost, lived at Manly and was returning from his wife's funeral with two of his children.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the "Pearl" wreck the present Victoria Bridge was in the course of erection, to replace the old worn-out one.

Now, this bridge is old and worn out and preparatory work on the foundations of a new and fourth bridge is being done.

Archibald McCorkingdale

Mr. McCorkingdale was instrumental in the establishing the Coorparoo Masonic Lodge. The preliminary meetings were held in his home in Cleveland Street, Stone's Corner, in 1894. The name was Lodge St. Mungo, No. 802, Scottish Constitution. In 1896 he was installed as Worshipful Master. The ceremony took place in the Centennial Hall, Adelaide Street. He was for a number of years a councillor of the Coorparoo Shire Council and president in 1894. His rescue work during the 1893 flood at Stone's Corner was outstanding and tireless.



Archibald McCorkingdale