

George E. Condon

Heroism Has Its Complexities

Once, it seems, every red-blooded American boy knew about John Maynard, the heroic wheelsman who steered a burning steamboat safely onto a Lake Erie beach at the cost of his own life. Poets immortalized him in verse. Ministers held him up as an example to selfish humanity. Elocutionists bubbled at the mouth as they declaimed his epic story.



CONDON

But John Maynard was forgotten as time passed, as most heroes are — forgotten by the people of his native America; that is. His name and his feat of heroism, as incorporated in a poem by Theodor Fontane, are still kept alive in German and Austrian primary schools. The children learn the poem by rote and consider John Maynard to be in the same superman league of Americans as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy.

It is sort of embarrassing to lose a bona fide hero, especially one whose achievement took place near home, and, driven by remorse and curiosity, Dick Burke of the Buffalo Evening News took the time for some scholarly research into the Maynard story. He discovered that many scholars had been there before him; most recently, Dr. Marvin A. Rapp, Niagara country historian, who wrote about the legendary hero for Inland Seas Magazine in a piece entitled, "John Maynard — Lake Erie Hero."

RAPP'S STUDY reveals one of the reasons for all the confusion and uncertainty about this American hero is that the poets and essayists kept changing the poor fellow's name. Wer ist John Maynard? Well, John Maynard's right name was Luther Fuller. Some authorities think he was christened by Charles Dickens in a story called, "Helmsman of Lake Erie," published in 1845 both by the Buffalo Commer-

cial Advertiser and the Western Literary Messenger. Some believe his name was changed again, in later years, to Jim Bludso by John Hay of Cleveland.

The fact would seem to be, though, that John Maynard really was Luther Fuller, a wheelsman on the steamer Erie, which pulled out of Buffalo harbor on the evening of August 9, 1841, bound for Dunkirk and points west with a passenger list of some 300 persons.

Four hours out of Buffalo and eight miles off shore, at a point about opposite Silver Creek, N.Y., the steamer suddenly erupted in flames. Capt. T. J. Titus ordered Fuller to head for the dark shoreline, hoping to beach the boat and save as many lives as he could.

BUT THE ERIE burned faster than it could travel, and by the time a rescue boat arrived on the scene, it was able to pick up only 50 survivors. Some 250 persons perished in the disaster — among them Luther Fuller, or John Maynard, who stayed at the wheel and guided the boat toward shore even when he was enveloped in flames. Under one name or the other he became an international hero.

Under still another name, that of James Rafferty, he later became more a man of mystery than ever. A man named James Rafferty, "a common drunkard, a convicted counterfeiter and a pauper," died in the Erie County Hospital in Erie, Pa., on Nov. 22, 1900. Twelve years later, the secretary of the Erie Historical Society revealed that Rafferty's real name was Luther Fuller — the same heroic wheelsman who supposedly had died in the steamboat fire so many years before. The official, one Andrew Blila, had been a ship's boy on the Erie the night it burned and knew Fuller well. He said that Fuller had been badly burned, but had floated ashore on a piece of debris.

The moral is clear. When you ask, "Wer ist John Maynard?," you had better brace yourself.