

### 3) Mr. Tann's account:

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#### THE STEAMBOAT ERIE

*The Detroit Advertiser* contains the following thrilling narrative of the experience of one of the survivors of the ill-fated *Erie*. It is a sad picture indeed of the most dread and mournful doings of an inscrutable Providence; how the heart bleeds at the recital of such an agonizing tale:

As everything relating to this terrible calamity, is looked for with painful interest, we subjoin a few additional particulars, gleaned from a friend (Mr Tann, of Pittsford, Monroe County, N. Y.) who was on board the *Erie*, but who was Providentially among the few who were saved.

He states that he was walking on the promenade deck at the time, in company with a young lady (Miss Shearman) and had just reached the point above the boiler deck, where the demijohns of turpentine were, when the explosion took place. The explosion—which sounded like the puff of a high pressure boat, but not so loud—was followed by the ascension of a volume of dense black smoke, which our informant likened to a cloud of coal dust. Without feeling much alarmed, he stopped for an instant, when the smoke was directly succeeded by a column of red, lurid flame—communicating, in an instant, to every thing combustible—cracking the sky lights by its intense heat—and filling up the space, between decks, with what appeared to be a dense red flame.

After a moment's reflection our informant ran to the stern of the boat, and soon perceived the awful character of the catastrophe. When looking around for some mode of escape, the young lady rushed from him and disappeared. She, however, almost instantly returned, calling upon her father, who, being, like herself a few minutes before, sea sick, had retired to his berth. —

Frantic with the scene, and the awful fate which seemed inevitable before her, she was about to rush below, when Mr T. induced her to remain with him, until he should procure some means for her escape. This appeared at hand. He observed a gentleman near by, forcing one of the seats which surrounded the promenade deck. He succeeded, and throwing it overboard leaped after it. Whether he was saved or not, is not known. Our informant, improving by this example, also forced up one of the seats, and placing it across the railing of the promenade deck, and over the stern, sat Miss Shearman upon the outer end of it, and

called upon those below (who were clustered at the rudder post) to assist the young lady in her descent into the water. But no attention was paid to their solicitations, and the young lady, becoming dizzy from her fearful position, fell from the board, among the rudder chains, and sunk to rise no more.

Having failed in his noble attempt to save this young lady, Mr T. looked around him before he made an effort to save himself. He saw Capt. Titus make his effort to reach the lady's [sic] cabin, and heard him give the order to stop the engine. It was a moment of awful terror. From bulkhead to rudder, the flames were raging, with an impetuosity which mocked every attempt to escape. *The shrieks of the [youn? or dyin?]g* and terrified, borne upon the fiery blast, sounded fearfully. —The engine seemed to play with a double power, as if itself maddened by the appalling character of the scene. The flames as they rushed aft, sounded like the roaring of a hurricane, and seemed to threaten the instant engulfment [sic] of the vessel and every affrighted soul on board of her. Forward of the wheel-house, there were several persons struggling to wrench loose timber from the vessel. Below, and in the rear of the ladies' cabin, some twenty or thirty persons were clustered, each struggling to descend by the rudder chains for safety. Some had succeeded, but were forced off by others struggling to reach the same point. Others were hanging from the sides of the boats —husbands vainly endeavoring to support their wives, mothers their children and all themselves. In this group were a number of unfortunate Swiss—so many of whom perished; but it appears that not one of all the females whom Mr T. saw there, not one of the children, not one of the wives, not one of the mothers were saved. All sank into the deep tomb of waters.

After making the survey, and seeing no hope of other escape, our informant, who had clung, with a death grasp, to the plank from which the unfortunate young lady, whom he had attempted to save, had taken her fearful death-plunge stripped himself of his superfluous clothing, cast the plank overboard, and instantly leaped after it.—It was a fearful, an awful leap—a leap akin to the eternal plunge of the grave: but, thanks to a kind Providence, it was a leap of safety and of life. He arose on the surface directly by the side of the plank, to which he clung during the entire of his awful voyage.

He had companions in his terrible struggle for life; but they were few. Here was one buffeting, unsustained by any thing but his own strength, the tossing waves, which the next moment, formed his winding sheet. Near by was another, shrieking for aid, first in a voice of strength, but soon with a gurgling faintness, which indicated a speedy termination of the struggle. In another direction, the voice of supplication was heard—the last faint prayer of the dying, to the God of Tempest and Fire, for that succor and mercy which man's arm could not give. Still elsewhere, the shriek of the wife or mother came up, (like the howl of despair) for her lost ones, whom she in vain strove to keep out of the distended jaws of the devourer. With his eye still upon the tossing wreck, he saw, one after another, dark masses passing from the boat to the water; saw them strike upon the tumbling surges, marked their few feeble efforts to keep away from the dark, cold deeps which bore them, and then lost them forever!

For about five minutes after Mr Tann leaped from the boat, she continued in a straight direction, and seemed to fly through the glaring waters. At the expiration of what appeared to be that length of time, she suddenly veered around, still progressing rapidly, when, as suddenly, she appeared to stop, and rose and fell in the trough of the sea as if at the mercy of the waves. At this time, she appeared to be about two miles from our informant; but she very soon floated very near to him—so near as to threaten his engulfment [sic]. But he had the presence of mind to swim, with his plank, from under her course, and around to her bow.

And here was another scene of horror. He saw five or six persons hanging to the anchor, and as many holding on to the liberty cap, which is attached to the pole at the bow, the guides of which had given way, and dropped into the water. As it was held fast by its iron hinge, it afforded safety to several. These latter persons, however, suffered a great deal from the heat, but more from the dashing of the waves.—Directly above them, and by the bulk head, a person stood, surrounded almost by the fire. He held in his hand a piece of white cloth, with which he appeared to bathe his face to keep off heat. when he saw Mr T. he called upon him for God's sake to allow him to get upon his plank, as he could not swim, and therefore dare not leap into the water which he would soon be obliged to do, or perish by fire. But Mr T. saw no other hope for himself, and so informed the half-frantic suppliant. His reply was, "you can swim, and can get to the paddle wheels and be safe." Mr. T. was about doing so, when a heavy swell bore the blazing wreck beyond his reach. Whether the unfortunate man was saved or not, he could not learn.

As the wreck was floating off, he saw a man standing upon the wheel house, shrieking like a maniac, for assistance, and looking like the picture of despair, lit up as his countenance was, by the red light which cast its glare upon every object within the circle of miles. But there was no aid near—no arm to save, and scarcely an eye to pity! The cracking of the flames, mingled with the shrieks of the dying was the only requiem chanted over the deep grave of these two hundred souls!

How sad were the reflections of our friend, as he rested his breast upon his faithful plank, from which he had launched into eternity, the young and beautiful girl whom he had vainly attempted to save! What a moment for thought! How emphatically illustrative of the frailty of man, and of the power of that Being whose will the elements obey! Above him was the star-lit heavens, made red the lurid [sic] by the cloud-reaching flames, which ascended from the crumbling hull of the ill-fated *Erie*. Around him were his companions, struggling, like himself for that life, which seemed the more precious as it appeared receding from them. And beneath him the dark green deep, where slept so many who scarce an hour before, were counting the progress of the sunny hours, and looking forward to the bright prospects which seemed to dawn upon their pathway in the future. It was an hour for thought! An hour big with admonitions from eternity!

Buoyed up with hope—though suffering greatly from the chilly coldness which seized upon him, from being so long immersed—Mr T. struggled with the waves in the hope that relief was at hand. Distracted by his constant tossings, he soon forgot the direction in which the land lay, and, consequently made no effort to progress towards any point. After he had been in the water two hours or more, he saw lights, like lights from a window, but soon deemed them from their apparently fixed position, stars, and not lights from a vessel. A little before 11 o'clock, however, he observed the *Clinton*, and, when almost exhausted, and when death seemed at his elbow, the yawl of the *Clinton* picked him up and placed him on board! He soon recovered and informing those around him, that there were several still clinging to the wreck, boats were dispatched, and as many as could be found, picked up.

In relation to the materials from which the fire took, Mr Tann says that he does not think that the statement that they were once removed, correct. He saw them on the boiler deck several times; but he saw them nowhere else. —Not knowing their contents, he felt no uneasiness about them.

