



BICENTENNIAL BULLETIN No. 53 **—Sheffield Celebrates 200th Birthday**

The Sheffield Bicentennial Commission will issue a *Bicentennial Bulletin* each Monday throughout 2015 that illustrates the rich heritage of our communities. **View them at — www.sheffieldbicentennial.org or sheffieldvillage.com**

THE TRAGEDY OF YOUNG STERLING WOOD (1921-1940)

Sterling Wood was only nineteen years old when a gale roared across Lake Michigan reaching its full force on November 11, 1940—*Armistice Day*—the day World War I had come to an end 22 years earlier. Sterling had graduated from Brookside High School in May, one of four students in his 1940 senior class that had attended Brookside since their first day of school. He had been accepted to Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea and had even been awarded a \$200 scholarship. To augment this award, he had taken a job with the Cleveland-based Interlake Steamship Company; all his earnings budgeted toward a college education. On that fateful day in November he was serving as a deckhand onboard the freighter *William B. Davock*.

The *William B. Davock* was built in 1907 at the Great Lakes Engineering Works in St. Clair, Michigan. She was a 420-foot-long steam-powered, propeller-driven bulk freighter with a wood hull. Over the winter of 1922-1923 she was reconstructed with a steel hull at Fairport, Ohio, reducing her gross tonnage from 4,468 to 4,220, but increasing her seaworthiness. On November 9, 1940 she left Erie, Pennsylvania with a full cargo of coal bound for Chicago, Illinois.

Sterling Wood was born on September 1, 1921 and grew up on Sunset Avenue in Sheffield Lake, Ohio. His father, Bertrand E. Wood, worked as a motorman on the Lake Shore Electric Railway. Sterling excelled at school, serving as President and Business Manager of his class, Editor of the *Brookside Gazette* and *The Leader*, and member of the basketball team all four years of high school. He also participated in the Dramatic, Glee, and Latin Clubs. His classmates predicting he would “carry on work that the average person would find seemingly deep.” Sterling looked forward to a career in journalism.

Senior classmate Harry Lloyd of Avon remembered Sterling as being “very smart.” He recalls Sterling working on the lakes in the summer after graduation, but Harry was already in the Army Air Corps when the tragedy occurred. Knowing that he would likely soon be drafted, Harry volunteered for the Air Corps where he flew a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter/bomber on 60 missions supporting the British 8th Army in the battle to liberate Italy.

What has come to be known as the *Armistice Day Storm*, started on November 8, 1940 as a tremendous low-pressure system off the Pacific coast of Washington. Fierce cyclonic winds from this disturbance collapsed the Tacoma Narrows Bridge—frequently shown on TV as an example of a dramatic bridge failure. U.S. Weather Bureau synoptic maps of the low predicted the menacing forces of the storm. In Chicago, Armistice Day ceremonies were scuttled at the Loop as power lines



and trees fell, chimneys collapsed, and signs were twisted in the wind. The level of Lake Michigan fell five feet as the water was pushed eastward, causing the Calumet River to reverse its flow back into the lake. In Wisconsin, duck hunters were caught unaware along the Fox River—50 of them froze to death in their blinds and boats.

On Sunday November 10, 1940 the *Davock* steamed up Lake Huron. By noon on Monday November 11 she had passed through the Straits of Mackinaw and was heading down Lake Michigan with the Canadian freighter *Anna C. Minch* only four hours behind. The early morning was bright and sunny, but the deep cyclonic storm was brewing to the west. The full force of the storm, the most violent in decades, hit the east side of Lake Michigan with winds up to 125 miles per hour. The last reported position for the two steamers was at the Straits of Mackinaw. Neither ship was heard from again—both lost with all on board, 56 men, including young Sterling Wood.

The struggle of these ships in the center of the storm can only be surmised, but the ordeal must have been terrifying. They would have been tossed about violently, vision obscured by falling snow, and decks washed by freezing waves. The pilothouses and cabins were likely demolished and swept away in the maelstrom, leaving the vessels unmanageable. Ultimately the ships may have been broken as seams split open and the vessels foundered in the mountainous waves.

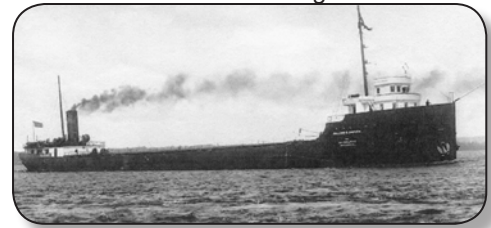
As the storm abated, the owners of the 40 freighters, ferries, and fishing tugs that were known to be plying Lake Michigan during the storm, awaited word from their ships. A few had washed ashore, but one by one they were accounted for, all but the *William B. Davock* and the *Anna C. Minch*. Three days after the storm, near Pentwater, Michigan a spar protruding out of the water was sighted and divers confirmed that it was the bow section of the *Anna C. Minch* in 35 feet of water, only 400 feet from the shore. The divers reported a gaping hole, 20 feet in length on her port side near the bow, with plates curved inward.

For years the theory was largely accepted that the *Davock* had collided with the *Minch*, which sank the same day in the same area. It was not until 1972 that the wreck of the *William B. Davock* was found some seven miles off Little Sable, Michigan. The wreck, lying upside down was located by sonar in 205 feet of water. Divers exploring the wreck could find no evidence of a collision.

The lifeless men of the *Davock* and the *Minch* were not long in finding their way ashore after the storm. Among the eleven bodies of *Davock* crewmen found on the beach near Pentwater, Michigan, was Sterling Wood and his friend James Saunders. Another crewman, wheelsman Andy Stiffler, had apparently given his jacket to Sterling, which he was still wearing when discovered on the shore. Sterling's body was brought back to Ohio and he was buried in Sheffield's Garfield Cemetery on November 16, 1940. Brookside's 1941 senior class dedicated *The Leader* to the memory of Sterling Wood:

Our cherished and lasting possession is the memory of days spent with Sterling here at Brookside. His eager face and sunny smile will always be an inspiration to us. Our walls will never lose the echo of his voice, nor our hearts the beauty of his noble, willing spirit. He was our friend and classmate and we loved him. He is a portion of the loveliness, which he once made lovely, and our lives are fuller and richer for having known him.

William B. Davock, 420-foot-long
Great Lakes freighter



Sterling Wood's grave marker
in Garfield Cemetery

