

The Sea Wing Disaster

By Marilyn Erickson

On July 13, 1890, 15-year-old Phoebe A. Bearson (1875 - 1890) joined her friends and neighbors on a paddle boat cruise down the Mississippi River from Red Wing to Lake City, Minnesota. It was an oppressively hot and humid day, so the passengers hoped that the cool breezes from the river would provide relief, but the main attraction was visiting the summer encampment of the Minnesota's National Guard's First Regiment at Camp Lakeview. After a long day of refreshments, tours of the tent city, listening to band music and flirting with the



boys, it was time to return home to Red Wing. As they started to board the *Sea Wing*, people noticed that the sky was darkening and beginning to look very ominous. Although the passengers were nervous, they were anxious to return home and they felt that the boat with a barge attached to the side would be able to handle the storm. At 8 PM, the *Sea Wing* entered Lake Pepin, the widening of the Mississippi River, and headed up river. As the storm intensified, the women and children were encouraged to go into the enclosed cabin for protection. It is uncertain whether the boat was hit by a tornado or straight line winds, but the violent storm caused the shallow-bottomed *Sea Wing* to flip over. Some passengers were thrown overboard, but most of the women and children were trapped in the cabin of the *Sea Wing* and drowned.

Upon receiving the news of the overturned boat, the communities quickly started a rescue operation, but it soon focused on retrieval of the bodies. Many of the barge passengers had survived, but 98 bodies were recovered over the next several days. Most of the bodies were transported to Red Wing, where they were laid out on the street for relatives to identify. My

mother remembers being told that Phoebe and her best friend were so tightly entwined that it was difficult to separate them.

All the communities along the river were devastated and many of the citizens had participated in the recovery efforts. After the funerals were over, preparations were made for an area-wide memorial event on July 25 in City Park, Red Wing. J. D. Kellogg, an owner of a Red Wing photography studio, decided to create a photographic memorial of the victims. He requested a photographic negative from each of the families and he eventually received photos of 93 of the 98 victims. It turned out that Phoebe had never been photographed in life, so she was the only one whose photo was taken at her funeral in her casket. Her photo was included in the composite poster and was given the number 57. This one photograph became the only visual memory of a beloved daughter and sister.

Phoebe was buried in the Calvary Cemetery in Red Wing. She was the youngest child in the family and her father, John Bearson (1829 - 1907), seemed to be especially devastated. My mother said that he asked to be buried next to Phoebe when he died in order to stay close to her forever. His wife, Anna Carlsdotter (1832 - 1914), is also buried in Calvary Cemetery.

Phoebe's oldest sister was my great grandmother, Amanda Bearson (1855 - 1932). She was born in Melrose, Jackson County, Wisconsin and the family later moved to Belle Creek, Goodhue County, Minnesota. Although Phoebe was only 2 years old when her sister Amanda was married in 1877, the family stayed close. Most likely Amanda's young son, Charles Herman Pierson (1881 - 1945), was aware of the story of Phoebe's death. Since tragic events often have a lasting impact on children, I am sure that knowing there was only a single funeral photograph of his 15-year-old aunt made Charles realize how important it was to have portraits taken while family members are still alive.

In 1913, Charles H. Pierson married my grandmother, Ida M. Nesseth (1885 - 1967). They moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where they soon increased the size of their young family. Their daughter, Rochelle Aurelia Pierson, was born in 1914. A little over two years later, in 1916, they added Gordon Wesley Pierson.

Life was going well for the small family when the Great Influenza Epidemic broke out in 1918. The global outbreak was exceptionally deadly and millions of people died. Remembering his Aunt Phoebe's death, Charles made a promise to himself that he would have a formal portrait taken of his family in case they didn't survive the illness. The professional portrait was probably expensive, but Charles felt it was worth every penny. Fortunately, everyone in the family survived the 1918 pandemic – which is fortunate for me because the little girl in the photo is my mother.

The photographic process creates long-lasting images by recording light, but the end result is so much more than the mere recording. Photos help to reinforce and enhance our memories of relatives, friends and special events. I have also noticed that photos can humanize my ancestors by making them more than just names and dates on a family tree.



For more information about the *Sea Wing* Disaster:

- “The *Sea Wing* Disaster”, Frederick L. Johnson, Goodhue County Historical Society, Red Wing, MN, 1986
- “Unlocking the Mysteries of the *Sea Wing*”, Frederick L. Johnson, Minnesota History, Summer 1990