The Emma Storm: A tale of the July Storm 1916

The recent near miss of Tropical Storm Alberto on July 3, 1994 reminded me of an incident that happened on the Mississippi Coast 79 years ago almost to the day. It is a true story well documented in the jornalists and lives of the people of that time.

On the humid morning of July 6, 1916, railroad agent John Dyasdale (1869-1934), walked slowly across the L&N Railroad bridge from Ocean Springs towards Biloxi. Soon he would announce to the world the fate of his little town on the eastern shore of the Bay of Biloxi. During the early morning hours a hurricane struck the Mississippi Coast roaring through Ocean Springs with wind gusts up to 125 mph.

 Destruction wrought by the tempest was manifested in roof, fence, chimney, tree and shed damage. No one was seriously injured, but lumber yards were blown down. The colored Baptist Church was heavily hit by the strong wind force and had to be torn down in the days following the storm.

In the city of the Rose Farm north of Fort Bayou reported severe damage. At the C.E. Pattn (1851-1920) pecan orchards some of the older trees were damaged. More fortunate was Theo Bechel (1853-1931) reporting only slight rain in his potential crop.

At Biloxi, L&N agent Dyasdale found the city in great suffering. The hurricane had struck there also with devastating fury. The Back Bay and Point Cadet areas were especially hit. It would be days and even weeks before all the news of the great natural disaster would be known.

The Emma Storm was converted to a charter boat and trawler. She was last seen about 179 in a canal at Cold Point, Ala., north of Dauphin Island. Every ship has a tale to tell. The Emma Harvey has a long and illustrious career as will be demonstrated.

On Tuesday morning, July 4, 1916, the Emma Harvey, owned by Ulysses (Les) Desporte, a Biloxi oyster dealer, departed from Bayou to Chandeliers Island. Unknown to Capt. George Duggan and his crew, who consisted of Arthur Duggan, Lawrence Bennett, John Helms, John McDuff and Jack Atkinson, an Englishman, a category three hurricane was poised to strike the Mississippi Gulf Coast the following afternoon (July 5).

The July Storm, as is known in the annals of Gulf Coast meteorology, came ashore between Ocean Springs and Passacagoula. During this cyclone, several ships and barges in Biloxi registered 28.08 inches of mercury. Although this was the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded to this date, it was relatively high when compared to the mighty Camille of August 1969 which had a record low pressure of any storm to that time of 26.06 inches of mercury.

The wind direction in the early hours of the storm was northeast, but shifted to the west where it remained until it abated in the early hours of the morning of July 6. A wind velocity of 90 miles per hour was recorded at Biloxi.

The Emma Harvey reached Chandeliers Island and was anchored in Schooner Harbor on the west side of the island.

The Fairy Queen

The Fairy Queen was built in 1845 by Casimir Jacob Harvey (1845-1904) at his Back Bay (D’Iberville shipyard) probably in the 1890s or early 1900s. The Fairy Queen was owned by W.W. Branigan and others in the late 1920s. She was used to entertain guests at their Gulf Hills Resort. The Emma Storm, which was lost in the July Storm of 1916, was a sister ship to the Fairy Queen.
By late July, the hunt for the missing schooner continued aboard the Uralia C, now captained by Flock Lamiat, Henry and Fred Duggan, son of Capt. George Duggan, were also aboard. The search party now concentrated its relentless efforts to the east combining Hotel Petit Bois, Dauphin and lesser islands in that area. They also went to Pascagoula, Mobile and the west Florida coast seeking information and leads.

There were sightings in the eastern Gulf which gave hope for locating the missing crew and boat. The Coast Guard cutter Tullfroooa, reported on July 11 that it had passed a schooner's mast 12 feet out of the water at Latitude 29,18 N and Longitude. 86,55 W (approximately 100 miles southeast of Pensacola). About the same time, the private yacht, St. Marin, of New Orleans passed a vessel within six miles of Grant's Pass (near Dauphin Island) with its right side up.

An unusual event occurred on Aug. 2 when Marin Lomax, a young lad from Biloxi, found a balsa in a hole in the south side of Deer Island. The note read: "Help, Help. On an unknown island." Signed George Duggan and crew. Some thought the note a hoax while others believed John Helm had written it since he always carried an empty flask in his pocket likely to be prepared for the"riddle de the shipwreck.

The destiny of the vanished Emma Harvey was discovered on Aug. 12, when the lost schooner was located by two fishing boats from Pensacola. She was found 45 miles east of Cedar Key, near Pensacola (other reports put her position at 75 miles). She was found at 30 miles from Pensacola (other reports put her at 75 miles). No sight of Capt. Duggan or any members of his crew was ever found.

The derelict was towed to a mooring point just north of Pensacola, by the tug, William Flanders. On Aug. 19, 1916, the crew salvaged the schooner and the debris. The crew evidently cut away the rigging on the starboard side, but failed to cut it on the lee side, and apparently, the rigging went over the port side, bunging up the vessel. The anchors appear to have been lost, but only a short length of chain, but, son, Fred had disappeared to parts unknown. When the anchor was weighed, Frank Duggan was replaced by his brother, Arthur, a newbrown, Arthur was eager to earn good wages for his new family situation.

Fred Duggan, who had sailed on the Emma Harvey many times with his father, never liked the vessel, and thought it unsafe in rough weather. He referred to it as a "deathtrap," and admonished his brother Duggan to never sail on her. Fred preferred the larger schooner, Cassvailer, which he would never understand his dad's love for the smaller boat.

The tragedy of the July Storm of 1916 has remained with the Duggan Family through the years as one would expect from such a sudden loss of loved ones.

After the Emma Harvey was towed into Pensacola and salvaged, each Miami, man bought it for a salver. He had it towed to southern Florida, and refurbished it with a new cabin, engine and travel. The U.S. Coast Guard became suspicious of the vessel since it seemed to utilize its fishing gear. When they boarded the craft, a large bag of fish was discovered in the hold, much to the surprise of the fishermen. The schooner was examined and determined to be part of the Prohibition enforcement efforts of the time (1919-1933). The schooner, an Emma Harvey, was sold to the Gulf Coast, probably to Ben Womper, a fisherman.
The Emma Harvey: A tale of the July Storm 1916
(Part III)

A trip to Cedar Point and Dauphin Island, Ala., on Dec. 31, 1956, resulted in an adventure that would change the Collier family. Sadie Mae Collier Serna and John Henry Laney, Sadie Serna’s daughter, were among the passengers on the DC-6 airliner that crashed into the Gulf about 12 miles south of Pensacola, Fla. The accident occurred in February 1953. The commercial aircraft was en route to Mobile, Alabama, from Tampa when it went down as a result of turbulent weather.

After the Dauphin Island causeway was completed in the 1950s, the Emma Harvey plied the bay and Gulf waters as a shrimp trawler. According to the indigenous people of coastal Alabama, the high tides and strong winds of Hurricane Frederic on Sept. 12, 1979, blew the Casimir Harvey built schooner into the wide expanses of the Mobile Island marsh or Portiservills Bay to the west of Cedar Point. The fate or position of the Emma Harvey is presently unknown, but it is generally held that the Biloxi built schooner was destroyed by Frederic.

Epilogue
Ocean Springs, July 7, 1994 —

Today I received a telephone call from Bobbie Bond Helms who resides at 309 Live Oak. She tells me that her husband, Joseph O. Helms Jr., is the nephew of John Henry Helms (1893-1916) who was a crew member of the Emma Harvey.

Mrs. Helms further details the Helms family relating that there were at least five Helms brothers and a sister: Conad (1890-1914), Martin (1891-1914), John Henry (1893-1916), Joseph O. (1896-1966), and Rita (1898). Their father, John G. Helms (1867-1949), of German ancestry was born at New Orleans while their mother was Josephine Molteno (1859-1941) of St. Bernard Parish.

The Moltenos were from the Casimir Harvey line. All the Helms men were born in New Orleans and died in Biloxi, except John who was lost at sea east of the Chandeleurs on July 5, 1916.

Frank Duggan (b. 1912), the son of Capt. George Duggan, the skipper of the ill-fated Emma Harvey, who resided at Biloxi is married to Carrie Mac Voevitch (b. 1913). She spent her formative years in Ocean Springs. Mrs. Duggan’s father, Nicholas Voevitch, owned a store on Washington Avenue about where Miner’s Toys is now located. The Voevitch Brothers store closed in the mid-1920s.

To my present knowledge, other Ocean Springs residents with familial connections to the Emma Harvey through its builder, Casimir J. Harvey (1845-1904), are: former Ward IV alderman Phillip Harvey, Carroll Clifford, Jackson County Supervisor from Gautier, and myself. I am a descendant of Pierre Harvey Jr. (1841-1878) and Victoria Koohl (1850-1904). Clifford descends from the builder, Casimir Harvey and Rosina Hudy (1852-1937), and I am a descendant of Marie Helms (1840-1904) and Antoine Vincent Guiloudeau (1829-1918). Marie was the oldest child of French immigrant, Pierre Harvey (probably Hervin or Harve) (1810-1880), and Celestine Morain (1811-1883). Casimir, Pierre, Jr., and Marie Helms, who were born at Back Bay (present day D’Iberville), were siblings.

For all you loyal readers of "Sous Les Chenes" who have asked about a book concerning the history of Ocean Springs, wait no more. In its limited edition printing, which should be off the press by Aug. 1, 1994, I will have for sale, Hotels and Tourist Homes of Ocean Springs. This book is a treasure on our early tourist industry and gives an insight into the architecture, people and history of 13 structures at Ocean Springs, some of which survive today.

The art work by Ken Matthew is superb and worth the price of the book. If you desire a copy, please call me at 872-3830 or write PO BOX 617, Ocean Springs, Mississippi 39564-0617.

The cost is $30. All profits will be given to the Depot Restoration Fund raising efforts now in progress.