

# Albemarle Boat Sinking Recalled

WINDSOR, Feb. 16.—Forty-nine years ago this month, on February 16, what is said to have been the greatest maritime catastrophe in the history of Albemarle Sound and its tributary waters, occurred when the steamer "Olive" sank in the Chowan River after having been struck by a storm of tornado strength.

The storm not only crippled the vessel but flooded it so completely that most of those on board were drowned.

Still living in Windsor is "Chief" J. T. Murphy who was assistant engineer on the vessel when it was sunk and who continued service with the company for some 20 years more. At his home here, Chief Murphy told the details of the sinking and the strenuous efforts made by the officers and crew to save those aboard, some 32 persons in all. It was reported at the time that 17 persons died in the storm but because of the lack of records, the exact number is not known.

The "Olive" was a stern-wheel river boat that plied between Franklin, Va., and Edenton, making the trip down one day and returning the next. It served the farmers and merchants on both sides of the Chowan River, even then a highly-developed and prosperous farming section. She was of 987 tons burden and had seen many years of service in shipping along the eastern coast.

Having left Franklin at about 11 o'clock on this Monday morning, the "Olive" had proceeded down stream during the day, serving the various wharfs and landings, picking up passengers and freight for points down-river and discharging them at the various ports of call. The vessel had been bucking a headwind from the southwest for several hours which increased in intensity as time wore on and because of this fact, Captain George H. Withy, a veteran river man, had told his crew that they would turn around and proceed back to the Harrellsville landing where they would anchor for the night,

instead of trying to buck the winds in Albemarle Sound.

After the vessel had turned around and was under way, Chief Murphy went off duty and went to his stateroom to get some rest. He had started to get ready for bed when the storm, out of the north this time, struck the vessel with such force that it was capsized and the door of his room forced open.

Making his way to the pilot house, where Captain Withy was wrestling with the wheel, having seen on his way that the pilot house itself had been torn loose and was about to part company with the vessel itself, he literally forced the captain to leave the wheel and to seek safety outside. This act of his undoubtedly saved the captain's life.

There are many details of the fight put up by the officers and men of the crew, as well as by the passengers themselves, to save the lives of those aboard, but most of the passengers and some of the crew were trapped below decks and were unable to get on deck and so drowned in their rooms.

The story of the drowning of a Negro preacher, the Rev. George White, a very well-known evangelist of his race, was one of the most heart-rending tales of the wreck. He was trapped below decks and made desperate efforts to get out, but when he realized that his fate was sealed and that the rapidly rising water would surely drown him, he began praying for salvation and those on the deck could hear his prayer until the rising water shut it off.

Another fatality was that of the young girl, some 12 years old, named Bennett, who was with her grandmother on way to Edenton. At supper that night she had asked Chief Murphy if "he thought it would rain" and predicted that they would all drown if it did. The engineer assured her that even if it rained they would be all right. When she was trapped with her grandmother, who was also a resident of Franklin, the captain said that her cries were something he

would remember "if he lived to be a thousand years old."

By a quirk of fate, the life of Mrs. Murphy, the wife of Chief Murphy, was saved. She had come aboard at Franklin, where they lived, when the voyage started and was planning to go to Edenton and from there to the home of her parents in Windsor. However, she thinks she was forewarned, as she left the vessel at Tunis, a landing in Hertford County and one of the last ports of call made before the "Olive" turned around and took the train from there to Ahoskie and Windsor. It is said that the first news of the catastrophe came to Windsor when a telegram was received from her husband after his rescue, from Suffolk, Va., the next day. The later reports that came out that day listed Chief Murphy among those lost, but she remained because of already having had the telegram from her husband.

Another person listed as missing was Jake Lassiter, a native of Rich Square. Chief Murphy, however, states that Lassiter was among those who put off from the sinking vessel in the only lifeboat that was not destroyed or blown away when the tornado struck and that he and Lassiter, with six others, spent the balance of the night in the lifeboat and on a barge that was anchored offshore on the eastern bank of the river, opposite Bandon Plantation, now the home of Inglis Fletcher, the well-known teller-of-tales of the early history of "the Albemarle."

Lassiter later moved to Rocky Mount and was owner of a prosperous hardware business there for many years, dying only a few years ago. It is evident that Captain Withy did not know that Lassiter had entered the only lifeboat that got away from the wreck.

Those in the lifeboat, who spent part of the night on the anchored barge, were rescued the next morning by a tug, the Gazette, owned by the Roper Lumber Company, which landed them at Tunis, where they took the train to Suffolk. Those who remained through the night on the sunken vessel's deck, which remained out of water, were also rescued the next morning, by the crew of the "Marie Roberts" of the Norfolk and Southern Line, which also plied the river. They were taken to Edenton, where they also entrained for Suffolk. Thus all the survivors were brought together.

The sinking of the "Olive" will remain as a story of one of the main rivers of eastern Carolina, the Chowan.