

Lost on the Lady Elgin

As sung by
Hamilton Lobdell
06-24-1941 Mukwonago, WI

Lost on the "Lady Elgin" words and music by Henry C. Work

Up from the poor man's cot-tage Forth from the man-sion door; Sweep-ing a-cross the wa-ters, And echo-ing 'long the shore; Caught by the morn-ing bree-zes Borne on the eve-ning gale; Com-eth a voice of mourn-ing, A sad and solemn wail

Chorus

Lost on the La-dy El-gin! Sleep-ing to wake no more

Num-ber'd in that three hun-dred, who fail'd to reach the shore!

Verse 1.

Up from the poor man's cottage,
Forth from the mansion door,
Sweeping across the water,
And echoing 'long the shore,
Caught by the morning breezes,
Borne on the evening gale,
Cometh the voice of mourning,
A sad and solemn wail.

Chorus

Lost on the Lady Elgin,
Sleeping, to wake no more,
Numbered in that three hundred
Who failed to reach the shore.

Verse 2.

Staunch was the noble steamer,
Precious the freight she bore,
Gaily she loosed her cables,
A few short hours before.
Grandly she swept our harbor,
Joyfully rang her bell;
Little thought she, ere morning,
T'would toll so sad a knell.

Verse 3.

Oh, 'tis the cry of children,
Weeping for parents gone,
Children who slept at evening,
But orphans woke at dawn.
Sisters for brothers weeping,
Husbands for missing wives,
Such were the ties dis severed
In those three hundred lives.

Critical Commentary

Transcriptions by Peters, p. 239, and HST

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

The title page of the song bears the following information:

LOST ON THE LADY ELGIN

Song and chorus

Commemorating the Terrible Lake Disaster

Of Friday Night, September 7th, 1860

Words and Music By

Henry C. Work,

Author of "Brave Boys are They"

Published by J.L. Peters, New York 1861

In Summer of 1941 we visited Hamilton Lobdell of Mukwanago who sang for us a number of old songs and ballads. One song led to another and in a [illegible] the song which he had kept alive for 80 years, one of the great Lake Michigan tragedies – Lost on the Lady Elgin.

Not only does the song recount the tragedy but also a crucial moment in Wisconsin History – Charles M. Scanlan in his little book The Lady Elgin Disaster (Milwaukee 1928) shows how, indirectly, the slavery issue was the cause of the disaster. For it is true that the excursion which left Milwaukee on Sept. 7, 1860 for Chicago was organized for the purpose of raising money to pay for arms for Barry's Guards.

Who were Barry's Guards? They were a company of Milwaukee Guards ... No Irishman attained high standing in [law?] or politics until he enrolled in Barry's guards. ... mostly Irishmen who under Capt. Barry's instruction had become of the best trained groups of the Wisconsin [militia?]. Whenever Barry's Guards put on a drill all Milwaukee turned out to see them.

Why the occasion for raising funds for arms for Barry's Guards? Arms for use of Wisconsin militia had been sent by the U.S. to the state and were subject to be called in at any time by the Government. States gave out guns to military org. – this way Union [?] Guards received their arms.

Why then were Barry's Guards deprived of arms? This is [tied?] directly to the Slavery Issue. Governor Randall and some members of legislature were radical abolitionists and threats were openly made that Wisconsin would secede unless slavery were abolished. For on Mar. 3 1860 Assemblyman Ben Hunkins of Waukesha Co. introduced into Wisconsin legislature the following resolution: Res. by the assembly, the senate concurring that the Governor [he is?] hereby directed to declare war against the U.S. States. [Illegible] is hereby appointed Com. in Chief of all the armies of his state.

Secret service men [illegible] officers of various companies of militia to determine whether they would be [soldiers?] of the state or [soldiers?] of the U.S. Government in case of clash of arms.

*Barry was reported that he would stand by the U.S. Government.
The sinking of the Lady Elgin took place between Milwaukee and Chicago.*

Sources:

“Lost on the Lady Elgin.” From Digital Tradition Mirror. <<http://sniff.numachi.com/~rickheit/dtrad/pages/tiLDYELGN;ttLDYELGN;ttLDYELGN2.html>> [accessed 27/05/05] Tune and text nearly identical, with alternate tune that is nothing alike

Peters, Harry B., ed. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin: An Illustrated Compendium of Words and Music*. Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977.

Randolph, Vance, collector and editor. *Ozark Folksongs*. Vol. IV. Columbia, Mo.: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1946-50. tune rather different

Scanlan, Charles Martin. *The Lady Elgin Disaster, September 8, 1860*. Milwaukee: Cannon Printing Co. [?]: 1928.

K.G.