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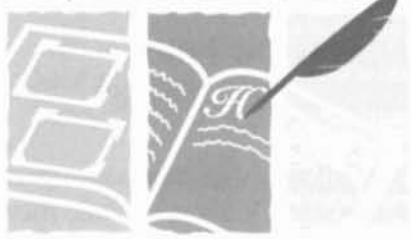
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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Fatal Wave: The "Seiche"

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

While seiches may be foreign to you, their presence in the history of the Holland area is not. These natural occurrences are common to beaches along the Great Lakes, as well as the drowned victims they leave in their wake—like the ten souls drowned at Grand Haven on July 4, 1929. The earliest one recorded at Holland was in August 1917. But the most tragic occurred on July 13, 1938.



Lois Jesiek Kayes collection

That Wednesday began quietly as reports showed that Lake Michigan at Holland State Park was absolutely calm at 5:00 a.m. While farther west, a huge amount of water, which had been "piled" against the Wisconsin shoreline two days earlier by an easterly storm, was now returning to the east with great power. Ten minutes later the first of many ten-foot waves raced ashore at seventy-five to one hundred feet above normal. Two hours later the stillness had returned to Ottawa Beach and the sky had become overcast as hundreds of beach-goers thronged to the shore all along the eastern coast of Lake Michigan. As bathers played in the water, a second seiche, accentuated by a strong westerly squall line, had already started its journey from the Wisconsin shore. As it traveled east toward Holland, it continued to build in height until approximately 3:45 p.m. when its power crashed against the breakwater and nearby shore. Surprised by the large

waves, twenty people standing on the breakwater were forced to hold onto the beacon or scramble back onto the wall after being swept off. Bathers like the Fabiano sisters, Josephine and Esther, were pulled down as they swam in shallow water. From Esther's recollection:

"My sister Josephine and I decided to walk really quite close to shore then decided to swim to the breakwater. Louise [their sister] did not want to go with us, so she stayed on the shore. We weren't very far before the undertow felt just like somebody had taken our legs. We started yelling for help until I remember being hit right in the face with a large wave and being knocked out. Josephine remained conscious but thought for sure we were going to drown. Josephine later told me that when Harold Jennings came for us, she couldn't believe it was true, but thought it only a hallucination."

As the eight to ten-foot waves battered 16-year-old Esther and 20-year-old Josephine, they were left helpless to the undertow that pulled them beneath the surface. As they struggled, lifeguards heard their cries, but their small rescue boat foundered in the heavy surf. Luckily, 22-year-old Grand Rapids resident Harold Jennings spotted them as he struggled to control his small boat in the wake of the large surge. After jumping from his boat, he swam about two hundred feet to where he located both girls under the surface of the lake.

"He pulled us in by the hair. He said I fought all the way, because when the wave hit me it made me very angry like someone had slapped me in the face. He told us that Josephine had tried to help me but passed out. Then the Coast Guard came, and they helped us as soon as we reached the shore since Harold was utterly exhausted. I didn't wake up until we got home,

(Continued on page 3)

From the Director

Welcome to summer and what has to be one of the most infrequent weather patterns Holland has experienced in some time. In addition to my love for the work here at the archives, I have also enjoyed the low humidity and cool "indoor climate" we offer to the collections, researchers, and staff. Please visit soon and spend the morning, afternoon, or all day with us.

In this issue I have penned a story concerning the freakish waves that periodically visit our shoreline—sometimes with tragic consequences. This story began two years ago after I noticed a *Holland Daily Sentinel* headline and inquired about it with a longtime volunteer. Once she relayed her memories of the tragic incident at the State Park, I was hooked and began the search for more information and survivors. I hope you enjoy the piece and view the waters of Lake Michigan with a little more respect in the future.

Visiting Archivist David Andrews and our staff have also been very busy processing the collections you entrust to us. We now have the records of the Christian Endeavor Society of Grand Rapids and the papers of past Western Theological Seminary president Marvin Hoff ready for your use. In addition, we are promising the opening of the much-anticipated collection of former mayor and longtime Holland Chamber of Commerce leader Louis Hallacy, Jr. "Mr. Holland" collected a lot of historical material, as well as making some history. You can look forward to having full access to his historically rich papers this fall.

Lastly, I feel I must address the news stories concerning the Holland Historical Trust Board of Trustees' recent decision to "move in the direction of removing its collection" to the basement of the Holland Museum and the creation of its own archival space. While the movement of the archival collection is at least 18-24 months off, and only after monies have been approved to equip and staff such a facility, we here at the archives will continue to offer 45 hours a week of full service to our researchers and donors until such a permanent move is effected. Our relationship with our researchers and donors has always been paramount and will not change, regardless of the final outcome. Please feel free to contact me with any concerns you might have concerning these latest developments.

Geoffrey Reynolds

The Joint Archives On Line— Your Own "Wayback Machine"

Remember Mr. Peabody and Sherman, cartoon characters from the old *Rocky and Bullwinkle* TV show? While they weren't as glamorous as villains Boris and Natasha, Mr. Peabody *was* the world's smartest talking dog, and young Sherman his apt, and rapt, pupil.

When Sherman needed a history lesson, Mr. Peabody turned on a gizmo he called the "Wayback Machine" - a TV monitor able to transmit scenes from the past. Ever wish you could have one? At the Joint Archives website, you can. It will let you, in your own home, office or public library, examine the history of Holland and Western Michigan, the Reformed Church in America and its congregations, Hope College, Tulip Time, and Netherlands Culture. Want information on our school holdings for your upcoming reunion? Do as Holland Christian Schools did for their centennial, and look it up on line.

Just go to www.jointarchives.org. There you'll find our home page, with facts and news about the Joint Archives. On the menu bar at the top of the page, click on "collections search." (You can also click on the brown box that reads "Search Our Collections.") This click will take you to the Joint Archives Collections page, where you can choose to look up topics, personalities, photographs and audiovisual media across our entire holdings. Just click "Guide to the Collections" under the "Main Collection" heading. You can also search under specialized areas, such as our photographic files or biographical files, by clicking on the appropriate heading under "Secondary Files." Finally, you can choose to examine our periodical indices, which not only access story topics in Hope College publications, but - by clicking on the "Van Reken Newspaper Index" - gives access to lists of stories in Holland-area newspapers of the 19th through mid-20th centuries.

Once you've clicked on your search choice, a "Joint Archives Search" page will open. Read the search instructions listed under "Helpful Hint" and enter a search term in the Query box. Click "Submit Query" and the page will show the results of your search. If you want to search for your topic under a different heading, there's no need to go back to your previous page - just click on the arrow beside the Collection window to choose between the Main Collection, Secondary Files, or Periodical Indices again.

Your search will produce a list of abstracts (or, "descriptions") of individual collections that contain the search term you used.

(Continued on page 5)

Fatal Wave (continued from page 1)

even while they were working on saving me. Josephine said she came to on the beach with my sister Louise between us."

"I remember the day quite clearly," said Louise:

"Me and my two sisters went to Ottawa Beach and the water was rough, even though there were no signs warning us. I decided to stay on the beach and get some sun, whereas my sisters decided they would walk along the beach. A few minutes later I heard this commotion and realized that someone was drowning. But then I realized it was my two sisters out there, and



Hope College/Joint Archives

Louise, Esther, and Josephine Fabiano, c. 1940

before I knew it, they were out of the water and people were working on giving them artificial respiration. I sat between them while people around us were saying, "Oh, she's a goner, this one is a goner." I always thought that it was the undertow that day even though they were only wading in one or two feet of water because it was so rough, but they ended up out near the end of the pier. I prayed I wouldn't have to go home and tell my parents that they were gone."

In reality, Esther and Josephine Fabiano had been overcome by a freshwater seiche. A seiche, like the ones documented along the Great Lakes in 1917, 1921, 1952, 1971, 1992, and 1998, is described as "a rare type of storm surge which is part of a series of long waves that travel away from a squall line and sometimes catch a person by surprise on harbor breakwaters and beaches far from the squall," according to storm surge aficionado Phil Keillor of the University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute.



Above photo taken at Grand Island, Munising, Michigan on August 19, 1921, illustrates normal water levels; below shows same scene moments after seiche appears. [[A Pictorial History of the Great Lakes, 1963.](#)]

Holland's 1938 encounter was not its first. In 1917 a much larger seiche occurred several days after an August storm in which it rose on the beach until reaching the Ottawa Beach Resort bathhouse and wetting the feet of its employees.

"I always wondered what happened to our hero after that. He came and visited us a couple of days later to see how we were, but we never heard from him again," said Esther.

In fact, Harold Jennings had been nominated, and eventually received, the Carnegie Gold Medal in October, 1939, for voluntarily risking his own life, knowingly, to an extraordinary degree, while saving or attempting to save the Fabiano sisters. His citation read:

Harold L. Jennings, 24, meter reader, saved Josephine R. and Esther C. Fabiano, 20 and 16, respectively, from drowning, Ottawa Beach, Michigan, July 13, 1938. While wading in Lake Michigan, Josephine and her sister Esther were swept from their footing and drifted in a strong undertow to water seven-feet deep, three hundred feet from shore. Waves were five-feet high and heavy because of unusual conditions existing. Jennings dived from a boat and then swam about two hundred feet to the girls and got hold of their hair. The girls were unconscious. With great difficulty Jennings then swam toward shore, the

undertow hindering his progress. He called for help, and he was gasping. After having swum two hundred feet with the girls, he reached shallower water and was given assistance. The girls were revived. Jennings was fatigued and nauseated.

He passed away in Grand Rapids in 1990.

While the drama at Ottawa Beach was unfolding, the seiche had already taken the lives of three others a little farther north. The first two victims were 18-year-old Catherine Schutt and 19-year-old Ruth Riksen, wading in waist-high water at Tennessee Beach. Employed as domestics with nearby cottagers, the two discarded warnings by onlookers to leave the water after an hour in the heavy surf, even though Schutt could not swim. Soon after, at approximately 3:45 p.m., the large waves and the subsequent undertow pulled the local girls out into the lake where they eventually succumbed to the invisible force, almost taking a half dozen would-be rescuers with them. As stunned bystanders watched, Schutt and Riksen were swept away from shore and beneath the churning waves.



Hope College/Joint Archives

Catherine Schutt, c. 1938

Soon the news from the beach spread into town and the girls' families were notified. A sister of Schutt's, working nearby, was alerted to the tragedy and relayed the news to her widowed mother. Two days later, after the raging waves had subsided, the *Holland Evening Sentinel* carried the story and photographs of the saved and victims on the front page. A day later, Schutt's body was recovered and a funeral was held in Zeeland. Sister Alice (Schutt) Kamphuis remembered the family's belief that it was God's will and there was nothing that could have been done in the end. Riksen's body was recovered Saturday by vacationers, after her father, Bert Riksen, and her three brothers conducted a dawn-to-night vigil along the beach gazing out at the waves for her body. The third victim, 34-year-old Herbert J. Brouwer of Grand Rapids, was pulled to his death at Tunnel Park.

As authorities and family members from Holland continued to search for victims, the death toll from the surge grew farther up the coast. There, 34-year-old Oscar Thorsen of Muskegon and canoeist John D. Lent, Jr. of Peru, Indiana, also lost their lives to "high freak waves" at Bronson City Park near Muskegon and the public beach at Pentwater.

In the wake of the July 13th death toll, Holland State Park officials and lifeguards were forced to remind swimmers to

heed their warnings when given and to swim within patrolled areas. While witnesses said that warnings had not been posted, guards insisted that verbal orders had been issued. Days later the headline of the *Holland Evening Sentinel* read, "Seek Added Devices for Holland Beach," as the common council of the city of Holland discussed the issue at its regular meeting. Council members decided to appoint a committee which would include members from the U.S. Coast Guard, Holland State Park authorities, Ottawa County Board of Supervisors, and city officials to study the event and propose precautions to prevent future drownings. Ideas included posting poles along the beach at set intervals with a line and life preserver attached that could be thrown to bathers in distress. Ironically enough, these same safety devices had been instituted at Grand Haven in 1929, after its most tragic day at the beach.

Today the beach is not patrolled by lifeguards, but simply marked with buoys, water condition flags, and a small boat near the boardwalk. While the years have passed, the dangers of these freshwater phenomena have not.



Reception Honoring Larry Wagenaar

A reception was held on June 18, 2001, for past director Larry Wagenaar as he prepared to leave and become the new Executive Director of the Historical Society of Michigan. Approximately one hundred well wishers attended the two-hour reception in the reading room of the archives.

"I thought it was a fitting farewell to Larry for his many years of dedication to the archives and its mission, and I think is evident in the number of friends and colleagues here today," said incoming director Geoffrey Reynolds. "He will be missed, but he has also prepared me and the archives staff very well for the transition."

The Joint Archives On Line (continued from page 2)

Scroll through the abstracts to see if the materials you want are in our holdings. If you have trouble finding your search term in the abstracts, or need to locate another word quickly, click on the Edit menu at the top of your net provider's window (the bar near the top of the screen). Then click "Find in Page" to enter the term you need to find. The cursor will move to it and it will appear highlighted on your screen.

Some abstracts will have a link to a "Detailed Collection Register" in blue text below them. This means that an itemized inventory of the collection is available on line if you click the link. Nearly all our collections have registers in print, available when you visit the Joint Archives.

The Joint Archives of Holland collects documents and objects for three local institutions: the Holland Museum, Hope College, and the Western Theological Seminary. Collections listed on line are identified by storage numbers particular to each institution. So, materials belonging to the Holland Museum have storage numbers beginning with T; Hope College numbers begin with H; and Western Seminary numbers begin with W. Materials in our Secondary Files are identified by these initials in parentheses. Noting these storage numbers will help you reduce your research time when you visit the Joint Archives of Holland to study the materials you find on line. If you don't have access to the internet, or need special help, or just have a research question that comes to you in the middle of a busy day, we will be glad to personally introduce you to the research materials you need from our collections. We very much appreciate your visits, phone calls, letters and e-mail at the Joint Archives of Holland.

David Andrews

Recent Collections of Note at the Joint Archives

For the Western Theological Seminary (WTS) collections, we have processed and arranged for study the records of Christian Endeavor (**W99-1250**), the society devoted to involving youth in Christ since 1881. Founded in Maine by Francis E. Clark, Christian Endeavor was designed to enable young people to express their faith through useful works. Its message of devotion and evangelism helped it grow from a single-church society into a world movement. The WTS Christian Endeavor collection consists of advertisements, books, booklets, brochures, bulletins, correspondence, instructional materials, manuals and handbooks, newspaper clippings, oversized graphics, pledge cards, programs, and scrapbooks. It includes also the personal materials of prominent members of Michigan Christian Endeavor including LaVerne Boss (who donated the collection), Dorothy Kling,

Sarah McCullagh, and Alice Spykerman. There are, too, items related to International Christian Endeavor figures such as Francis Clark and Daniel Poling. The collection also contains a history of the Christian Endeavor movement, and 65 photographs. An exhibit of Christian Endeavor materials is planned for the sixth floor display cases at Beardslee Library.

The WTS collections have also benefited from the processing of an addition to the papers of Marvin D. Hoff, president of Western Theological Seminary from 1985 through 1989. The addition brings the size of the Hoff collection (**W88-1237.8**) up to 10.5 feet. Hoff earned several degrees: a B.A. from Central College, 1958; an M. Div. from WTS, 1961, a Master of Theology degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, 1965; and the Doctorandus from the Theological University at Kampen, the Netherlands, 1977. He served pastorates in New Jersey and Illinois, and was Secretary of Operations and Finance for the RCA from 1971 through 1981). In 1995 Hoff became the executive director of the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia. Materials in the collection include correspondence associated with Hoff's WTS presidency, documents related to WTS committee work, strategic planning, personal works, clippings, faculty, fundraising, and Missions to Asia.

In Holland Museum collections news, the Joint Archives is close to finishing the processing of the papers of Louis Hallacy II (**T00-1572**), a man often called "Mr. Holland." In this case, Mr. Holland's opus was a working lifetime of service to our community, in the form of five years as city councilman (1968-1973), six years as a three-term mayor (1963-1979), and a 20-year stint as president of the Chamber of Commerce (1980-2000). While the papers are not yet available to the public for study, they will be by this fall. To coincide with their opening, an exhibit case of Hallacy photographs, documents, and memorabilia is being prepared for the Joint Archives Reading Room - including items documenting Holland's award-winning float in the 1976 Tournament of Roses Parade. For me, one of the most moving moments of working on the Hallacy papers was seeing a photograph, published in the *Sentinel* in 1979, of Lou's face on the day he resigned as mayor; the expression says it all about Lou's devotion to the city.

While the Hallacy exhibit is under construction, the Joint Archives Reading Room currently features two cases of photos and memorabilia documenting Holland's summer resort era at Ottawa Beach, Macatawa Park, and adjoining areas offering fun on Lake Macatawa and the Lake Michigan shore. Come in and see the sights of the Ottawa Beach Hotel, Hotel Macatawa, Angels' Flight incline railway, and Waukazoo Inn, in materials from the Holland Museum collections.

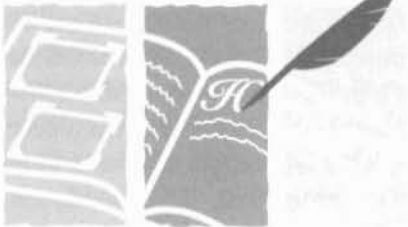


Lois Jesiek Kayes Collection

Holland State Park, c. 1940s

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The Joint Archives of Holland



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