

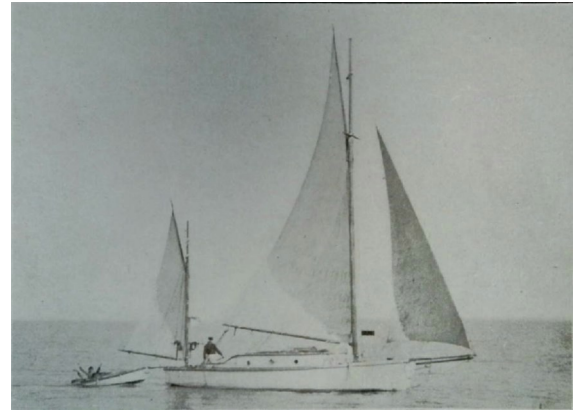
# BAY VIEW YACHT CLUB IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR



Interest in particular historical subject matter often follows great trends the same way as does popular culture. These trends can be based on new discoveries, anniversaries, or even works of art and fiction. From the year 2014-2018, the world commemorated the centennial of the First World War and as such it created much interest in re-examining what we know and how we interpret this massive conflict that helped give birth to and define the machine age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As members of Bay View Yacht Club, it may be interesting to note that we share a powerful link to The Great War in a fascinating and twisted tale from the end of the boating season, 1914. This article will relate the tale.

World War I began in late July 1914. Anti-German sentiment and hatred for the wretched “Hun” was rife throughout North America and many parts of Western Europe. The United States quietly watched and naïve suspicions grew...

Unrelated to events in the rest of the world, in November 1914, four Toledo friends - Otto Peters, William Bleschke, Dwight Gould, and Frank Hoyt, had decided on a guys’ weekend of fishing and camping in and about Lake Erie and accordingly loaded several days’ worth of provisions and equipment aboard Peters’ vessel *Luella*, moored here at Bay View Park. Though a yawl rigged sailing craft, Peters and *Luella* were members of the Toledo Power Boat Club, Bay View Yacht Club under an earlier name. Why these gentlemen chose such a late month of the year for their excursion is not known but the vessel departed our lagoon on a fateful Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. By nightfall the boat began being rolled by increasing seas and growing winds as the lead elements of a forceful storm tore into the lake from the Northwest. Through the darkness of the night the storm raged and gained fury, a long and desperate Saturday all at the storm’s mercy followed. Sometime within the ordeal the pretty yawl was dismasted and all the provisions and food washed overboard, the men clinging to the toppled craft. The small lifeboat they had been towing snapped free and was lost. Now helpless and without a power source, the storm pushed the *Luella* further out to the depths of the grey lake.

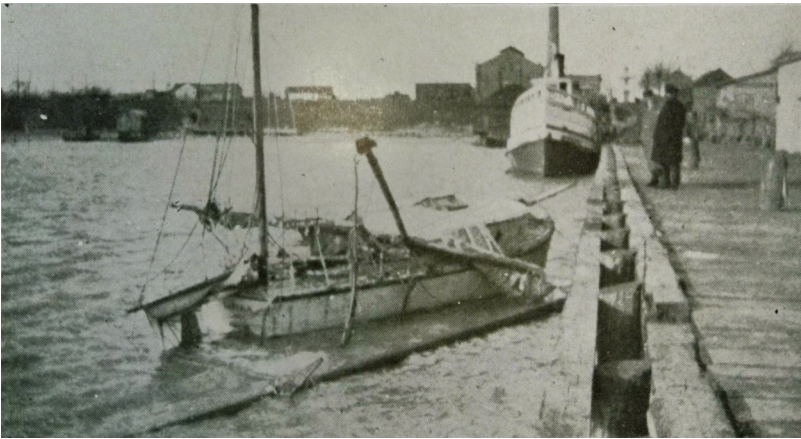


“*Luella*” in early 1914—note the small lifeboat

The storm at last blew itself out sometime Saturday night. She had been the unstable leading edge of a massive cold front pushing down from Canada. On Sunday morning it began to snow. The struggling sailors managed to rig up a makeshift sail from an old blanket lashed to a broken spar and began making headway for the Detroit River. But frozen and brittle lines snapped, and the blanket was also lost to the lake. Once again, the vessel was adrift and being pushed back out to the empty

center of the lake. They dropped anchor to claw some security from the bottom; and later reported that several hours before sunrise Monday the anchor was lost. *Luella* simply twisted in the frosty currents. The last of any food aboard was consumed that morning. The heavy snow continued.

Tuesday was cold and foggy. Late in the afternoon the Canadian tug *Alva W* came lumbering out of the gloom and slowly towards the desperate men. Captain McAuley of the tug described what he saw by saying “all were exhausted and more dead than alive” adding “the boat was covered in an inch of ice.” The survivors were hastily nourished and steamed towards shore, making landfall in Kingsville, Ontario. A concerned local citizen, Earnest Flemming, offered them refuge at the nearby hotel he owned. Their clothes were thawed and dried, and the owner arranged for money to be wired to them from Toledo. William Bleschke, a crewman aboard the *Luella*, would say “If we had been in that boat an hour longer we would all have died from exposure or starvation.” Indeed, they had had almost no food for three days and deadly frostbite had begun inching through the exposed skin.



“*Luella*” - after the disaster. Note the shredded mizzen sail.

But not all in Kingsville were so accommodating or concerned for the sailor’s well-being. Shortly after landfall, alarm was rapidly spread that German Spies had landed in Ontario! Immigration officials and an armed guard of four soldiers were dispatched to Kingsville to detain them! Instead of a tow home, the men were held on suspicion of espionage and arrested. A provocative and perhaps hyperbolized editorial in Detroit described their confinement as “a stone wall on one side and a firing squad on the other.” Bleschke quickly

telephoned his wife in Toledo and stated that if he were not home Wednesday night, she was to alert the United States Government to their peril and sinking fortunes. Apparently one of the four American sailors wore a prominent “Kaiser Wilhelm Moustache” and in the hysteria of the war time age, it was all that some Canadians with nervous imaginations would need to raise a call to arms.

The entire debacle created something of a minor international incident with American editors railing against the officials in Windsor:

“It never seems to have occurred to the good folk of Kingsville that their prisoners had chosen an unnecessarily spectacular and uncomfortable way to break into the Dominion and that if they had harbored evil designs, it would have been much easier to come to Detroit and cross the river on a ferry boat. But obtuse reasonings of this sort could scarcely be expected of persons who judge of a man’s purpose by the length and shape of his hirsute adornment.” (Detroit Free Press 11/21/14)

## NEAR DEATH ON LAKE; HELD AS GERMAN SPIES

Four Toledo men, who were rescued by a Canadian fish tug from death by starvation and exposure late on Tuesday afternoon and who were later held by the Kingsville, Ont. officials as German spies, were expected to return to Toledo on Wednesday afternoon. It was believed they would have little difficulty in satisfying officials as to their identity.

The men, William M. Bleschke, 1323 Navarre-ave., Dwight T. Gould, 1421 Navarre-ave; O. A. Peters, 210 Hawley-st., and Frank Hoidt, were in a serious condition when they were rescued from a small boat in which they had been buffeted about Lake Erie for three days.

Toledo News Bee 11/18/1914

The Canadian Press would spin things differently, making safe claims that “Their rescue had an incidental connection with the Immigration Department.” And later “The energetic staff of officials is endeavoring to carry out the regulations with minimum embarrassment to the traveling public.”

Upon a deep investigation of the crewmen aboard the *Luella*, the Canadian people may not have been entirely overboard with such superficial and outlandish suspicions, basing their perceived threat on a moustache alone. The skipper of the harried vessel was Otto Albert Peters, aged 22. Otto was the youngest son of the Peters family (his eldest brother Robert was the actual owner of the *Luella*) and Otto was the *only* son of the family not born in Germany. At the time of his 1914 arrest, Otto was still living at home with his parents who spoke no English at all. While Otto was a fluent English speaker, it is interesting to wonder what his accent may have sounded like growing up in a German speaking household in the largely German ONYX neighborhood of Toledo.

Ultimately it was not overly difficult for the men to prove they were Americans and that their shipwreck story was legitimate, (the smashed *Luella* was tied up in the harbor). The men were released. Under the mothering groans of the same tug, *Alva W*, the distressed yawl was towed back to Toledo on Wednesday afternoon. And thus ends Bay Views’ brief and stressed involvement in World War I.

BVYC HISTORIAN, JOHN HC THOMPSON



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“Near Death on Lake”. Toledo News-Bee, 11/18/1914

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