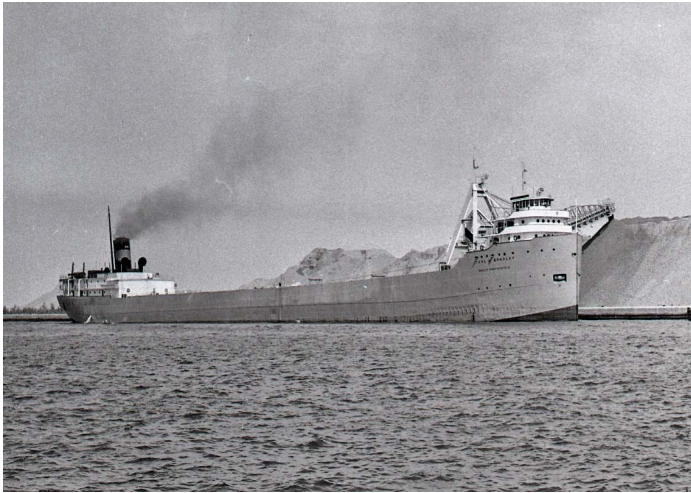


# The Wreck of the Carl D. Bradley

## November 18, 1958

By David L. Miles, Curator, Charlevoix Historical Society



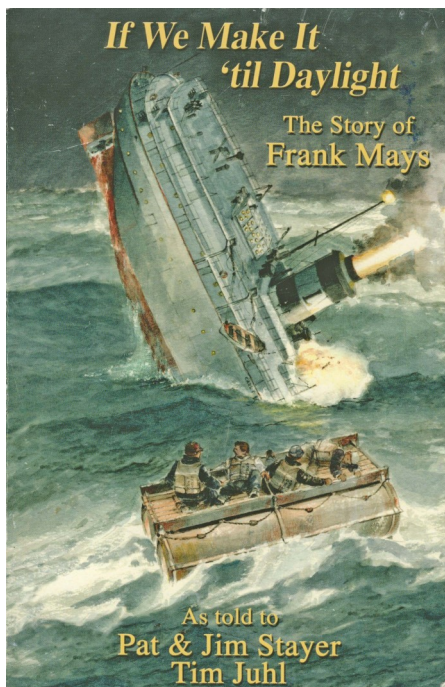
The *Carl D. Bradley* unloading stone in Gary, Indiana

Photograph compliments of  
Presque Isle County Historical Museum

Sixty-six years ago, when the 639-foot lake freighter *Carl D. Bradley* sank forty-seven miles west of Charlevoix in the late afternoon of a violently stormy November 18, 1958, it was the worst freighter disaster in Great Lakes history. The *Bradley* split in two and sank south of Gull Island on the far side of Beaver Island.

Out of a crew of thirty-five, two survived. Sixteen years later, also in November, the 729-foot *Edmund Fitzgerald* went down in Lake Superior, with a loss of its entire twenty-nine man crew. Both tragedies were reported worldwide. For the *Bradley*, Charlevoix became ground zero for the immediate search and rescue efforts, and news reportage that was sent out around the globe.

At the time of the *Bradley*'s launch in 1927, it was the longest and largest boat on the inland seas, a statistic that held for twenty-two years. When the *Fitzgerald* appeared in June of 1958, five months before the *Bradley* vanished, it took over the largest crown, and became the largest ever to be lost on the lakes.



The story of the *Bradley* is one of the most dramatic and inspiring in Great Lakes history. It is grounded in the incredible rescue of Frank Mays and Elmer Fleming. Mays described their all-night ordeal in his book *If We Make It 'til Daylight*. They held on in hellish conditions long enough to be miraculously plucked from mountainous seas, only an estimated hour from certain death. Prior to rescue, they had to witness two of their shipmates, Gary Strzelecki and Dennis Meredith who had been on the life raft with them, succumb and drift off into the roiling waters.

Immediately upon receiving word of the disaster, the crew of the Charlevoix Coast Guard cutter *Sundew*, the first of its type to serve from Charlevoix and having arrived only a few months prior, headed out into the increasing darkness and high winds and waves. Their all-night search and rescue mission yielded no survivors.

But soon after daybreak, *Sundew* cook Dick Selissen, assigned watch duty in the bridge house, spotted an object atop a distant wave through his binoculars before it dropped from view. He instantly reported his sighting to the captain. It turned out to be one of the freighter's life rafts, holding the almost frozen Mays and Fleming.

The two survivors and the bodies of eight others were brought to Charlevoix, Mays and Fleming to the hospital, the deceased to City Hall where the Council Chambers on the ground floor were turned into a temporary morgue. The number of retrieved bodies, several yet to be unidentified, would soon grow to eighteen. All the room's lower window panes were covered from inside.



The *Sundew* shown departing from Charlevoix's lower channel, 1960s



Charlevoix City Hall. Council Chambers at left behind the car served as a temporary morgue.

Charlevoix's municipal Lake Michigan Beach was the scene of one of the most poignant episodes of the *Bradley* story. After dark on the 18th, cars carrying the wives, families, and friends of crew members from the towns of Cheboygan, Posen, St. Ignace, Onaway, and Rogers City, the *Bradley*'s home port, started to arrive from across the northeast section of the Lower Peninsula. They headed for the beach and its circular drive, along the lakeside of which they parked in a row facing outward to shine their headlights into the black howling night in the bitter hope that any survivors would be able to head toward them to safety.

One shameful episode concerned newspeople mainly out of New York, some of whom worked for Time-Life. City Hall was kept locked at all times while the bodies were inside. The media people banged on the doors and windows, demanding entry so they could photograph, claiming it was their right as news representatives to do so. So obnoxious and belligerent did they become that Charlevoix County sheriff Glenn Rose finally had enough. He ordered them to gather all their possessions, then escorted them to the city limits where he ordered them to get out of town and never come back. And with that, Charlevoix's role in the *Bradley* operation came to an end. Mays and Fleming were literally thawed out in the Charlevoix hospital, and went on to live their lives.



A body from the *Bradley* being carried from the *Sundew*, at left, across the city dock to a waiting hearse, November 19, 1958

The paths of Dick Selissen and Frank Mays didn't cross again until many years later, and purely by fate. Frank actually lived in Charlevoix for a time and worked at the Medusa cement plant that went into operation here in 1967. Dick served his stint in the Coast Guard, elected to remain in town, and married a local girl. He and wife Noreen Cross Selissen owned and operated a popular bar on US31 south called the Flight Deck, located across the highway from the airport. Later they moved several miles south to open a bar called the Nordic, after their two first names, near Boyne City. But Dick and Frank never ran into each other after 1958.



One day, many years later when they both men were retired, the Selissens were loading their vehicle in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Zephyrhills, Florida where they spent their winters. In the space next to them was a woman also loading hers. They fell into conversation. "Where do you come from?" they asked each other. The word "Charlevoix" caught the woman's attention. Stories began to be told. "Don't you move," she said. "Frank is still in the store. He's always wanted to find you to thank you." A highly emotional reunion followed. Dick said that after a stunned Frank threw his arms around him he didn't think Frank would ever let go.

They were reunited again in 2017 when Frank lectured about the sinking at the Charlevoix Public Library Community Room to an overflow audience. It was a surprise reunion that left many in the audience in tears. Frank Mays passed away on January 7, 2021.

Left: Frank Mays, left, and Dick Selissen at the Charlevoix Public Library, reunited once again

As part of its current exhibit titled "A Maritime History of Charlevoix—The City on Three Lakes" at the Museum at Harsha House, 103 State Street, the Charlevoix Historical Society compiled a loose-leaf binder of the entire *Bradley* story, available for public viewing. The exhibit is open Tuesday through Saturday 12-4 to the end of the year, then Thursday-Saturday 12-4 January through April, and will continue through 2025. Call (231)-547-0373 for more information.