

We Escaped from a "White Dungeon"



As waves splashed over our sides, we tied onto a buoy—but rescue was still no closer.

A carefree boat trip turned into terror for the author and his wife as banks of impenetrable fog imprisoned them for 24 hours far out on wind-churned Lake Michigan

By RICHARD HOFFMAN as told to Hal Higdon

I HAVEN'T LOST my love of the water as a result of being nearly killed last summer; I've just learned to respect it.

For 24 hours my wife and I were adrift on Lake Michigan in fog as thick as milk. Waves splashed over the sides of our 16-foot inboard, threatening to swamp or, almost worse, push us far from shore and rescue. I swore that, if we got out alive, I'd never try to cross the lake in an open boat again.

It all began one sunny Tuesday in June when we impulsively decided to visit friends on the other side of the lake. I had made the trip from Wilmette, Ill., to Michigan City, Ind., many times. On a clear day it is an easy, unexciting cruise of 38 miles; you lose sight of shore only half the distance. But to be safe, I radioed the Coast Guard: "Any small-craft warnings?"

"Fair weather predicted all day," crackled back the voice.

"I'm leaving Wilmette bound for Michigan City. I should get there around noon."

I had allowed myself considerable leeway. It was then 10 o'clock, and the trip ordinarily takes only an hour and a half. But by 11:15, we still had not sighted the Michigan City shore. Visibility had worsened.

Then, almost like stepping through a door, we found ourselves immersed in fog so thick we could see nothing but the bow of the boat! "I've never seen fog like this," said Mickey, my wife. I hated to admit it, but neither had I.

I was afraid of going aground, so I cut speed and steered by compass. Later, I would have happily ripped the bottom of my boat out on some beach for the privilege of touching land. After 10 minutes I radioed the Coast Guard and told them our predicament. Yes, they had fog, but visibility was still almost a mile.

We must have stumbled across an isolated bank. "Well, if we can't get through the fog," I said to my wife, "maybe we can go around." With the Coast Guard's permission, I made a 180-degree turn and tried to go out the way we came in. But

after 15 minutes, I had to give up; the fog had completely swallowed our boat.

"We failed to penetrate the fog," I radioed the Coast Guard. "Assistance requested."

"Stand by and drop anchor," came their reply.

We dropped 100 feet of line overboard—but failed to touch bottom. Waves, building from the northeast, began to splash over our sides. Then a lucky thing happened. I heard a thump; looking overboard I saw we had drifted against a fisherman's buoy. It must have been a million-to-one shot. After tying onto it, I relayed the news to shore.

"We'll find you in a minute," they replied confidently. But five hours later they were still looking. Unfortunately we were too small to appear on the radarscope, and our radio signal had grown too weak for the directional finder.

As we listened to the Coast Guard boats conversing back and forth by radio, we heard them reporting visibility of half a mile. Yet our visibility was only 50 feet. "Why, they're nowhere near us," said my wife—and I had to admit she was right.

It was like being adrift in outer space. With the fog completely surrounding us, we were separated from the world. We felt we had to do something, so I got permission to make another compass run toward shore. But 20 minutes later, with fuel dangerously low, I finally gave up and cut engine. I had to hold some gas in reserve to avoid being washed against a breakwater.

NOW OUR PROBLEMS multiplied: we were adrift, our radio batteries were shot, we had no warm clothing, the waves roared at us broadside, and there were eight inches of water at our feet.

I dug out a canvas bag to use as a sea anchor, but it pulled us only part way out of the trough. Then I remembered the picnic basket that had contained our lunch. Filling it with tools, a fire extinguisher, and every other heavy object I could find, I tied it to a nylon line and dumped it overboard. It yanked the boat's head into the waves; in this position, we at least could ride out the

night without having to bail constantly.

The night was cold. We huddled beneath a terry-cloth beach towel and cushions we had pulled off the seats. The canvas boat cover would have helped, but it had been stolen only a few days before. We did not sleep.

"Do you think they'll ever find us?" Mickey asked with great concern.

"The fog will lift by morning," I said. But by morning it had not lifted; we still were imprisoned in a white dungeon.

During the night, however, we had received a clue to our whereabouts. It was the sound of a foghorn, and it seemed to come from all directions at once. Its mournful cry grew and grew until about two in the morning—then it faded slowly in the night.

"THAT'S THE Michigan City foghorn," I told my wife. "We must be drifting by offshore."

By seven o'clock my radio battery had recharged enough to report this to the Coast Guard. An hour later we heard a boat's engine upwind. I whistled as loudly as I could, but they must not have heard us. Soon the noise of their engine faded away.

Then we heard another boat downwind, tooting its horn three blasts at a time. They had heard us trying to attract the first boat. We had finally been found!

Forty-five minutes later the radar boat *Arundel* loomed up like a giant whale feeling its way through the mists, and we were taken aboard. As we sipped hot coffee with the *Arundel's* captain, he told us: "If you had one 35-cent grocery item on board, we would have found you at once."

"What's that?" I asked.

"A roll of aluminum foil. Spread out on your deck it would have served as a reflector for our radar signal."

I won't make the same mistake twice. The next time I cross a large lake in a small boat I'll be hugging the shore line. And in addition to carrying the extra clothing and provisions we forgot, I'll have a roll of aluminum foil along!