

Joseph Sellbbie, Sr. Investigator

June 13, 1868

Dearest Sir,

Please rest assured that I am writing this to the best of my ability, although I am self-taught due so very much to the war years. You have asked me kindly about a report on the tragic misfortune that happened this previous Sunday aboard the fine Riverboat Calliope. A most horrendous experience I, I assure you sir.

The Lord Above has blessed me with a Profound Memory in these matters. I do recall that we'd left Jackson upriver, moving past all the refined, delicate shops I'd dreamed of visiting in St. Louis, as well as others, but once again ma and Mrs. Hollered had said no, and I could not find away around them on this matter.

Ma's brother was struggling at his new farm somewhere in Tennessee and we were invited to see if it was to our liking. Good news, Ma said, but I'd surely miss my Iowa town where I could be alone to think and scheme some.

Dad had died in the war and the farm was gone, so this was an adventure and I am to be an adventuresome girl, but I didn't like going down into rebel country where I'd heard they were heathens and scream out the Rebel Yell! Yet, the Prophets would protect me!

On that fateful night, God help me, we had just left the municipality of St. Louis. Twenty minutes passed. I do remember the majesty of the stars in the sky. Mrs. Hollered took me to look at the giant, churning paddlewheel and then there was an explosion! Turning a bend in the river, the boat had stuck a tree jutting out into the river, like cutting your bare toe on a sharp fork carelessly left on the floor.

Close to the shore, the gangplank was hurriedly put down, and most of the first-class passengers were allowed to disembark, then us and animals, but oh, it disheartens me to mention that many cases and trunks were left behind. We thought we would have time for our valuables since Captain M. Had assured us. lord, there'd wasn't any time! It is reported that the main boiler blew and sent wood, glass, and iron raining down upon us, as if the lord himself had rained wrath upon our immutable, heathen souls!

As my mother is still under the care of a fine doctor due to a head injury, we can only pray. Until her head swelling goes down, it is up to the Good Lord's design. Thirteen people and one horse died in the flaming calamity, as you are well aware, Sir.

To speak of such material things at this time seems callous in the extreme, and while many have lost precious items, I should be remiss if I did not mention that a family heirloom my grandfather had given my father was on board with us. It is a souvenir Grecian Urn that old Granddad bought during one of his unfortunate forays into the west. It is said he bought it in the Denver area and it is assuredly not of any value.

However, Sir, to us it has romantic memories of a time before the war removed so much from us. When this mighty boat sank in the fast current, the urn was lost. Although the possibility is doubtful, if it should be retrieved, our family would be grateful and give a grand reward.

I do hope that I have been of service in documenting for you the crisis that occurred when the Riverboat Calliope sank.

With honor, Your Most Humble Servant,

Tess Ellen Grable