



Nelson J. Martin (photo courtesy Velma Adams Hoover/Beverly Stigge)

The “Unfortunate” Mister Martin: And Coeur d’Alene’s Worst Steamboat Accident

By John V. Wood

Today, the era of the steamboats on Lake Coeur d’Alene is so far removed from us that it is slipping into the realm of legend. So, when I talk of the worst accident that ever befell the steamboats on the lake it would be easy for readers to imagine that the worst steamboat accident must have killed a very large number of people—given the many years that the boats ran (1880-1950s). But you would be “dead” wrong (pun intended).

Actually, the worst accident took the lives of only 5 people that we know of, and not only that, it occurred in the first decade of steamboating. For some reason, and it had to be either dumb luck or the pure Grace of God, the catastrophes that plagued steamboats elsewhere were remarkably absent from Lake Coeur d’Alene. And this good fortune cannot be passed off

as the result of a strict following of safety laws, as such laws were nearly non-existent in the State during most of the years steamboats operated.

But I’m getting ahead of myself as I want this story to be as much about the owner of the boat involved as the event itself. So, here is the story of the “unfortunate” Mr. Nelson Martin and what befell him on his first venture with a steamboat.

Nelson J. Martin was born in Illinois on November 22, 1847, to Andrew and Angeline (LeClair) Martin. While the exact location of his birth is not known, he was living in Bourbonnais, Illinois, at the time of both the 1850 U.S. Census (his age 3 years) and the one following in 1860; so he may have either been born there, or nearby. He was one of at least 5 children the couple had. While living at Bourbonnais in 1862, he

enlisted in Company E of the 12th Cavalry Regiment, Illinois (he was only 14 years old at the time). He was mustered out at the end of the war on June 8, 1865 with the rank of "commissary sergeant," and still had about 6 months to go before turning 18.

At the time of the 1870 U.S. Census he was living at Ottumwa, Iowa, and had married Mattie Berhalter. Nelson Martin falsely gave his age as 24 (perhaps because he had lied about his age to enlist or because his wife was 23). His occupation was given as "clerk in store" which seems a reasonable following for a person trained as a commissary sergeant. Nelson and Mattie had only one child, a son Fred Nelson Martin born in January of 1870.

Some time prior to August 30, 1878 (when Nelson registered to vote there), the family moved to Truckee, California. At the time of the 1880 census for Truckee, Nelson was listed as a "merchant." But in less than five years the family would be on the move again, and here is where the story ties into north Idaho.

Clearly, Nelson must have heard the news of the boom in Spokane Falls, which was due in no little part to the Gold Rush on the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River. So he decided to move. In the early days of the year 1885, the *Spokane Falls Review* reported on a letter just received from, "...Nelson Martin, Truckee, Cal. He is closing out his stock of general



Mattie Berhalter Martin
(photo courtesy Velma Adams Hoover/Beverly Stigge)

merchandise, and will come to Spokane Falls with his family to reside about the first of March. He will bring his family and will locate them permanently. He is a good businessman and will be an acquisition to Spokane Falls. He has not yet decided what branch of business he will embark in." But the question of business "type" must have been quickly answered, for on February 12, 1885 the *Review* carried an ad for a "New Stage Line" to be operated by "Hall & Martin, Proprietors." Just who the partner "Hall" was, has not been found, but the stages for the new company, Spokane Falls & Ft. Coeur d'Alene Stage Line, were to run tri-weekly. The *Review* gave another report on February 14th that the first run would be after the 18th of the month.

By the end of that month the stage was, "carrying the usual big load of passengers and baggage. The travel from this point [Spokane Falls] to the mine is growing larger all the time." (*The Evening Review* February 31, 1885). And within a couple of months the line was up to running daily stages. (*Review* May 1). And right on the heels of this new schedule came the news that the firm was dissolved and Martin was buying out his partner. (May 9).

One might wonder just how personally Martin was involved with actual operations, but reports show he did not just sit behind a desk. On May 12th he "...sailed out this morning, driving his own stage to Coeur d'Alene. That is, he drives half way, returning in the evening. He proposes to make the route pay if strict attention to business will do it." (*Evening Review* May 12, 1885). But Martin was not only willing to get his hands dirty, he was constantly thinking of ways to build the business. He decided to expand the operation to the other end of the line as well—from the Old Mission Landing to the mines. This necessitated building a road for this latter section and he joined with others to do so. The first through run occurred on July 24, 1885, and the story published first in the *Murray Sun* was repeated in the *Evening Review* August 3, 1885.

First Through Stage.

The Coeur d'Alene mines are at last connected by stage with the railroad, and from this on it need not be said that the camp cannot be reached in ease and comfort. The first thro' passengers by the new line left Spokane Falls on Monday morning and arrived in Murray on Tuesday evening. A reporter of the "Sun" had gone to Delta to meet the incoming coach, which dashed into that town at 4:30 p.m., with four fine-looking horses and carrying four passengers, the owner of the line, Nelson Martin, and the driver. A change was here made to Scofield's light spring wagon, built for mountain travel, and in two hours three of the passengers were landed at the Palace Hotel, Murray. The stages will now run regularly and through tickets will be sold from Murray to Spokane Falls.

SPOKANE FALLS AND COEUR D'ALENE
DAILY
STAGE LINE.



HALL & MARTIN, PROP'R'S.

STAGES LEAVE SPOKANE FALLS
EVERY DAY AT 6 O'CLOCK A. M.
FOR FT. COEUR D' ALENE,
 Connecting with Steamer for
**Kingston, Big Jam, Beaver,
 Eagle and Murray,**

Fine Line of Stages, and the Best, Cheapest
 and Quickest Route into the Coeur
 d' Alene Mines.

STAGE OFFICE--Hall's Second Hand Store,
 MAIN STREET, SPOKANE FALLS.

Spokane Falls Evening Review May 1, 1885

And when winter threatened to end stage runs in November of 1885 the Review (Nov. 9) carried the story that Martin would put "passenger cutters [sleighs]" on the section from the Old Mission to Murray, and even went so far as to say when the lake froze over he would run these over the entire route, but apparently he couldn't keep his word as the Review of February 16, 1886, announced that Martin would be "reviving" his run to Murray the next day, and that to begin they would only be Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Then in March (reported the 14th Review) this schedule was changed and the stage would, "... leave Spokane Falls on Sun. at 1 p.m. and Tues. & Thurs. 3 p.m. connecting with steamer Coeur d'Alene which leaves the next morning for Kingston."

While the transportation system certainly began with service to the North Fork gold mines as the objective, it was only natural to include service to the South Fork silver mines as they grew. The Review ran an article on September 29, 1886 that Martin shipped over 60,000 pounds of freight for Wardner and intermediate points on one day alone.

During the winter of 1886-1887 he made the decision

to purchase a small steamboat and put it on the run between Coeur d'Alene City and the Old Mission Landing. The Review article describing this (April 7, 1887) also referred to Martin as, "...formerly proprietor of the Spokane Falls and Coeur d'Alene stage line..." but no confirmation of the sale of the stage line was found. In his testimony after the accident, Nelson Martin gave the following story about the boat's origin (Review April 9, 1887).

As to the Boat.

I believe it to be the best boat of the kind in the north-west. It was built in 1882 down on Snake river for a Mr. Ringer. Mr. Butler, who is now stopping at Coeur d'Alene, and is a mechanic, was called before the coroner's inquest as an expert, and swore that he built the boat now called the Spokane, that it was a 30-foot keel by 8 1/2 beam; that its capacity was seven tons, and its speed eighteen miles an hour; that he had run the boat in very swift water, and in fact was a swift water boat, and that he did not consider her overloaded at the time of the accident - that he had more than that number in the boat many times. I had seats arranged in her so we could seat twenty-four passengers comfortably. [At the time of the accident there were said to be 21 people on board and no freight.]

After the boat's initial operation on the Snake River she was transferred several times. She was said to have been on Flathead Lake in Montana at one time, then she was moved to Pend d'Oreille Lake. She was operated on Pend d'Oreille Lake as an excursion boat for two or three years before Nelson Martin purchased her and had her transferred to Lake Coeur d'Alene. Martin said his engineer, George Ellis, "...has [had?] been a half owner in the boat for more than a year and had exclusive charge of her."

Nelson Martin was a well-known stagecoach owner with a line operating from Spokane Falls to Coeur d'Alene

NELSON MARTIN'S

STAGE LINE
 COEUR D'ALENE GOLD MINES.

STAGES LEAVE SPOKANE FALLS AT 6 O'CLOCK A. M. EVERY DAY.
 PASSENGERS LEAVING FROM SPOKANE FALLS MUST ARRIVE AT SPOKANE FALLS AT 5 O'CLOCK A. M. GOING THROUGH BY WINGATE ARRIVE AT SPOKANE FALLS AT 11 O'CLOCK A. M.

STAGES LEAVE SPOKANE FALLS FOR
 COEUR D'ALENE, KINGSTON, BEAVER, MURRAY & EAGLE
 ON THE COEUR D'ALENE STEAMER, LEAVING AT THE
 COEUR D'ALENE GOLD MINES, MONDAY AT 11 O'CLOCK
 A. M.

MARTIN'S STAGE LINE
 HALL'S SECOND HAND STORE
 MAIN STREET, SPOKANE FALLS.

NELSON MARTIN

*Spokane Falls Review
 Aug. 3, 1885*

*For Wardner and all Points in the Coeur d'Alene
Gold and Silver Mines*

THE NEW STEAMER

The 'IDAHO'

CAPT MOODY in Charge,

Leaves Coeur d'Alene City every morning at 6 o'clock, a. m., for Old Mission, returning at 6 p. m. Fare from Spokane Falls to Mission, \$3.65. For full information call on CHAS. DYER, at S. Heath's Book Store.

—TICKETS FOR SALE AT THE OFFICE—

MARTIN & AINSLEY, - - PROP.

Spokane Morning Review June 9, 1887

City. He also started lines from the Old Mission to Wardner and from the Mission to Murray. It was only natural that he wanted to connect the section between Coeur d'Alene and the Mission with a boat under his ownership, rather than rely on the sternwheeler *Coeur d'Alene*, owned by others.

The *Spokane* had only recently been moved to Lake Coeur d'Alene and Martin started on a trial trip April 3, 1887, to see what the running time would be between Coeur d'Alene City and the Old Mission so he could publish a schedule for her service. There had been no advertising for the trial and while a few passengers rode up the lake and river to the Mission on the boat, Martin said he took no money from them and only did it as a favor.

Having reached the Old Mission about "supper time," Martin found a number of people who urged him to go on to Kingston as the high water had washed out the railroad bridge (narrow gauge CRY&NCo) at Cataldo, and the ferry that would take people across the river to the road for Kingston, couldn't operate. Martin said he was, "...not prepared to go there, and would not go, but they kept after me until I consented to take them up..." for which he again accepted no money.

When he reached Kingston he was met by a crowd, "...and as soon as I got out I found myself shaking hands with friends and acquaintances, congratulating me on the arrival of the new boat." A number of men then asked how soon the return would be, and Martin said possibly after they got some dinner.

On the return trip the pilot and engineer, Ellis, asked Martin to help by stoking the boiler while he steered. When Martin looked up, "...he saw we were near a

small island, where a large amount of drift [wood] had caught on the lower end." When Ellis asked which side to take Martin didn't reply as he didn't know, but passengers yelled giving conflicting advice—the result of which was that Ellis didn't turn in time to avoid the drift and the boat capsized.

Martin said that after the boat hit a log extending out into the water, it "...dipped to the right and took in some water, but righted itself, when at this moment, four or five men ...jumped on the logs, thereby throwing all the

weight on the right hand side of the boat, and as it then stood quartering with the strong current the moment the weight threw her back and the current caught the edge it turned over...." Thus Martin contended that the passengers were really to blame for the boat capsizing.

In any case, the result was that five people were known to have drowned, although there were some that said the number was six, although that was never confirmed. Who was to blame? The early reports overwhelmingly condemned Martin, and both he and the engineer/pilot Ellis were arrested, although later released. The (Portland) *Oregonian* of April 7, 1887 laid charges of the "...grossest ignorance and criminal recklessness on the part of the owner. Indeed it is hard to believe that any man, not insane, should have attempted to carry passengers under the circumstances...." Of course the first hand report the *Oregonian* received was from a lawyer who had a stake in the outcome.

Were Martin and his engineer Ellis to blame? There is no doubt that they were unprepared for the conditions of high, swift water, and yet they were only taking the men as passengers without charge—as a favor. Should the passengers also have known the conditions were dangerous? It would seem since the bridge had washed out and the ferry was unable to operate (which brought on their entreaty to ride) they must have known there was some danger.

It seems to me that the whole thing came about from Martin's attempt to do a good deed when he was asked to go beyond the Old Mission and take passengers. However, if he had refused, how would he have looked then? It became a lose, lose situation.

On April 9 the *Review* carried these words of Martin, "I



This view of Kingston from 1893 looks down-stream, the same direction the little steamer Spokane took on her fatal trip. However, the water is low in this photo and gives no indication of its swiftness at the time of the accident. University of Idaho Library, Barnard-Stockbridge Collection, 8-X119

did not solicit a single passenger that got on my boat, nor did I receive one cent from any of them. I had not advertised nor did I expect a single passenger from Kingston or Wardner. As to myself, I claim no ability to man a boat, nor did I intend to do it."

Not all feeling was against Martin, as his past work had made him many friends. An expression of this was made in the paper on April 7th. "The many friends of Mr. Martin deeply regret that this misfortune has come upon him. Those who know the longest and best will understand his feelings under the circumstances. No one will more deeply regret and mourn over the disaster than he will himself, and his version of the affair should be heard before judgment is passed in the case. Mr. Martin has always been a careful man and in this case he may be less to blame than many are at present willing to think."

Following the accident, the *Spokane* was, "...raised and found not injured, except the boiler was out of it." However, Martin realized that the public would forever associate the boat with the disaster and her chances as a passenger craft were hopeless. Because of this, he went into partnership with a Mr. Aimsley [sic-Ainsley] and acquired another boat, the *Idaho* that would serve as the company's passenger boat. Martin's plan was announced in the *Spokane Falls Review* April 21, 1887. "The *Spokane* will be put on the line as a freighter, and will tow a barge. It will be a couple of weeks before the line will be in operation, but when it starts up the owners propose to make close connection with the trains and run on schedule time."

But this operation did not pay and it was moved to the

St. Joe River. While there seemed some success on the *St. Joe*, little was heard about it, and in 1889 the *Spokane* was sold to Col. Wallace (namesake of the town Wallace) and the boat was renamed the *Irene*. The *Idaho* too was apparently sold about this time, for by 1895 it is believed she was operating on Kootenai Lake in Canada.

As to the lasting effects of this disaster on Nelson Martin, very little has come

to light. Martin and his family continued to live in Spokane where he was apparently still a merchant. In 1896 the paper in Olympia, Washington (*The Olympian*, August 28) carried a story about Martin being appointed receiver of the Grand Hotel in Spokane. So he must have still been of some standing in the community. Then in the U.S. Census of 1900, he appears in Spokane with his wife Mattie, but there is no occupation listed, but the couple's only son, Fred is shown managing an express company, probably a job he started when his father was in the stage business.

The 1910 Census gives Martin's occupation as "merchant-wood & coal," and he was still living in Spokane. However, by 1920 Nelson & Mattie had moved to San Diego where Nelson gave "none" as his occupation. It was in San Diego that he died on February 3, 1930, at the age of 85. With all of Nelson Martin's exciting past—fighting in the Civil War at a very young age, working as an early-day merchant in the California Sierra Mountains, then moving to Spokane Falls to start a stage business hauling gold-seekers to the Coeur d'Alenes—it seems sad that his life became marred by a disaster that this author believes was not his fault and occurred only because he was trying to help others. He should be remembered for so much more.

NOTE: The two steamboats in this story, the Spokane and the Idaho, were the first boats using these names on Lake Coeur d'Alene. They are NOT the larger boats by these names that were built later.

From the Board President

The ongoing focus on our plan to raise funds and construct a new museum involves working with the city planners and the community to best locate the facility, while also meeting the museum's basic needs for now and into the future. This year, the city unfurled an initiative to involve public stakeholders in creating a long-range community development plan. In response, the Board is engaged in several important activities surrounding the 4-Corners site and coordinated planning with the Carousel Group to develop plans to co-locate a facility and represent our conjoined needs and desires to the city planners. This Fall, and into early next Spring, an ad Hoc committee made up of board members Fred Ostermeyer, Frank Darlington, Don Pischner and Larry Strobel and Director Dorothy Dahlgren are working with a group from the Carousel Board to move this joint planning effort forward. We are also looking for ways to engage other similar interests who might benefit from the concept of a co-located, multi-use facility without compromising our mission. The basic idea is to share common space requirements such as commercial (shop) areas, catering and other common space needs required by such institutions, while allowing for specific program, exhibit and preservation activities to occur free of conflict and maintaining focus on our respective missions. At present, we do not have an official term for what this facility will be, but it is likely to be a "Heritage Center" of some sort and we hope to make it a destination point for both local residents and out-of-state visitors. I am very happy with the cooperation and good will being demonstrated by all parties and

I believe this vision is a practical way to meet the Museum's needs and yet include the needs of others without a compromise that would inhibit our mission. Please let us know what your thoughts and feelings are on this approach. We value our members' input and we need your help in articulating our vision throughout the community.

Mike Dolan, President Museum of North Idaho Board of Trustees

Welcome New Board Members

The Board of Trustees appointed Dave Eubanks and Kim Brown to serve on the Museum Board until the election by the membership in April.

Cash Donations

Doug & Deidre Chadderdon - bus funding for 4th grade field trips
Jerry & Tina Gospodnetich
Frank Darlington - Endowment

We thank Jane Robertson for donating a 57" TV for the theatre room.

Building Fund Donations

Frank Darlington
Fred & Mary Ostermeyer
Jack & Helen Yuditsky
Harlan & Barb Renner
Bill & Valerie Wolfe
Bonnie Fossum

Fulfilling Our Mission ... Collect

Jesse Agee: Books for the library - *The Bunker Hill Enterprise, Railroad to the Pacific* and *The History of the Northern Pacific*.

Kootenai Health: Medical instruments from doctors Fox, Wood, Henson, Kutteruf and others.

Robert Singletary: 1969 Boy Scout Jamboree pennant.

George LePard: DVD of home movies.

Betty Berting: Mattie Humphrey and Clayton Eaton's school diplomas.

Kit Craine: Poem found in a Del Cardo Bay cabin.

Ken Hummel: 3 buttons from Ft. Sherman found in the City Beach area.

Steve Shepperd: Timber scribe, 1930s-1940s and a 2013 Diamond Cup Program.

Nadine Brooten LaVonne: 1946 Kewpie doll, 1947 Saucy Scootles doll with handmade clothes.

Gary Judd: Souvenir plate from Idaho, 1990 bluebird pin and photo of Cd'A City Beach 1930s.

Dallas Wilmarth: Sourdough Supper Club mugs, matches, photos, menu. He bought the club in 1973.

Jim Pieratt: Training rifle used at Farragut Naval Training Station.

... Preserve

Volunteers Linda Shinn and Jay Broderick have been sorting the Chuck Sowder and Connie Trembly negative collections. The images are from the 1950s, 60, 70s and we need people to help identify the people and places.

... Foster Appreciation

For the second year, Robert Singletary set up the Museum booth at the Kootenai County Fair. Several volunteers including Don Pischner, Linda Shinn, Fred Ostermeyer and Vikki Nelson handed out information to increase public awareness about the Museum.

... Interpret

Coeur d'Alene in the 20th Century

Robert Singletary, the Museum's Program and Marketing Director, is working with David Townsend from the Coeur d'Alene Public Library on a year-long lecture series about the history of Coeur d'Alene during the 20th Century. Monthly programs will start in January. Each program will feature a decade of Coeur d'Alene's history and development beginning with 1900 to 1910. Robert plans to get other organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Association, Kootenai County, North Idaho College and the Coeur d'Alene School District involved in the program.

Need a Program?

Robert Singletary offers a variety of historical programs. Call 755-1308

Coeur d'Alene's Baseball History

Shem Hanks is interning from Eastern Washington University researching Coeur d'Alene's baseball history for a future exhibit. If you have photos, artifacts or stories call the Museum at 208-64-3448 or email dd@museumni.org.

From the origins of Old Fort Sherman, the great American pastime known as baseball was a mainstay for the young men and women in the Coeur d'Alene area. Baseball was an integral part of Coeur



Coeur d'Alene baseball team, 1913. Rec-4-12

d'Alene culture from the inception of the fort, to the time of the two World Wars. These wars robbed the area of much of its youth and vitality, but upon the young men returning home from battle, Coeur d'Alene saw a renewed boom of excitement towards the sport. Both slow-pitch and fast-pitch became a necessity in the Coeur d'Alene sports world from that point on. Names like "Blackie" Fortin, Red Halpren and Hugh Neuman became synonymous with baseball's success in Coeur d'Alene. These were men who were responsible for keeping the sport alive in the area as well as furthering interest in additional players and tournaments. They would also be responsible for constructing "new" fields and grandstands such as the one in Memorial Field. Teams rose to fame and prominence during the time, such as The Coeur d'Alene Lakesiders. This team, and its players, would represent the area for years and bring home local and state championships and would test their metal and compete in national competitions. Softball would see various peaks in interest through its history, especially in the 70s and

80s. During this time, people reinforced their love of the game. This love would then be projected onto their children leading to the current competition level today. Jack Hatch, Idaho's semi-pro baseball commissioner in 1947, was asked about baseball and softball in the area by outsiders, to which he replied, "I'm sure, people as far east as New York now know how to spell the name

of Coeur d'Alene." Coeur d'Alene has a rich and abundant history of athletics. The history of baseball is one of the many facets of this history, but its influence on the area cannot be underestimated, but must be celebrated. This exhibit will look to do just that.

Rural Electrification

Do you have stories about when Kootenai Electric hooked up power to your house? We are gathering photographs, objects and stories about rural electrification in our region for the 2014 exhibit.

Memorials

- For Leeman "Jack" Spurgeon from Gail & Jerry Vanderhoof, Jean Gilmore, David & Skeeter Locken, Bill & Barbara White, Lynn Locken, Bonnie Fossum & Family, Larry Belmont, Rick & Karen Bonk, Randy & Janet Miller, Sara Rohel, Regina Galleher and Darrell Hoffman
- For Gene Hyde from Melissa Guy
- For Bob Ross from Helen Yuditsky and Mr. & Mrs. Otto Brenneke
- For Mikki McGoldrick from Milaine J. McGoldrick
- For Otto, Ella & Jayne Schmidt from Stan Schmidt
- For John Huber from Karen Huber

All memorial donations go into the Endowment Fund. The endowment is important to the financial health of the Museum and your help in building the endowment will ensure the Museum's future.

To make a memorial donation use the form on the back of the newsletter.

**Museum Library & Office open by appointment Tuesday-Saturday
664-3448 or dd@museumni.org. Exhibit Hall reopens April 1**

Hydromania *A History of the Diamond Cup*

Limited printing - order your copies today. 400 pages, over 100 photos, 8.5" x 11" hardcover \$39.95 plus \$5 shipping. Send a check to MNI or order at www.museumni.org

Because of printer delays the books will arrive in mid-November



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Museum of North Idaho Mission Statement

The Museum of North Idaho collects, preserves and interprets the history of the Coeur d'Alene Region to foster appreciation of the area's heritage.

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Editor Dorothy Dahlgren dd@museumni.org
PO Box 812, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816-0812
208-664-3448 www.museumni.org