

**Lewiston  
History  
Mysteries**

# Thousands Witness Dramatic Rescue of Two Men at Falls in 1918

## Scuttled barge is still stuck in Upper Rapids

Maybe you've seen it — the old barge (also called a “scow”) that is sitting in the Niagara River, just above the falls. The two men on board — Gustave Lofberg, age 51, and James Harris, age 40, both from Buffalo —

thought their lives were doomed when it started drifting down the river toward the falls.

It was August 6, 1918. The steel towline that held the barge to a tugboat snapped “like a thin string” and the 80-foot barge was set adrift.

The two men frantically worked to save themselves and opened the “dumping” doors at the bottom of the barge to scuttle it. The strategy paid off and the barge finally got caught on the rocks in a shallow part of the river 2500 feet from the brink of the falls. They dropped the anchor and hoped the barge would stay put. Rescue efforts began immediately. The U.S. Coast Guard from Youngstown was called to the scene. The Coast Guard mounted a gun on top of the Canadian Power

Station and shot a rope to the stranded men. By the time the rope was secured it was dark out and a breeches buoy (a chair like attachment) had become tangled in the rope.

Morning came and thousands of people lined the shoreline to see what would happen next. No one knew if or when the barge would break loose and go over the falls.

Riverman Red Hill, Sr., volunteered to go out on the rope to fix the buoy. Hand over hand he went, just feet above the raging rapids. He worked for hours to get everything untangled. Meanwhile, Lofberg and Harris were becoming weak from hunger and exposure.

At 9am, Harris was the first to be pulled in and a little later Lofberg joined his partner on shore to the jubilant cheers of the crowd.

Contrary to myth, their hair did not turn white overnight and they were uninjured. They were driven to the Prospect Hotel in Niagara Falls, NY, for a hot meal and shower, and believe it or not, reported to work the next day. Harris died in Buffalo in 1939.



### Barge Still Stuck in Niagara River After 100 Years

Here is a recent photo of the grounded barge in the rapids above the falls that has been stuck in place for the past 100 years. The photo was taken on the Canadian side and you can see the Seneca Casino on the American side in the background. The rusted hull has become part of the landscape and a haven for seagulls. Millions of tourists see it, but only a few know the amazing story of the daring rescue which saved the lives of two men. No attempt has ever been made to remove the scow from the river because of the expense and hazards involved. We know that James Harris was the father of five children. However, we don't know if any of his descendants are aware of the barge or his amazing death-defying rescue.



After 19 anxious hours of being marooned in the rapids above the Horseshoe Falls, James Harris is reeled onto the roof of the Toronto Power Station, August 7, 1918.

### Hero of the Day: Red Hill

William “Red” Hill, Sr., was a Canadian who was honored with the Carnegie Life Saving Medal for his bravery in helping to rescue the two men. No one knew the Niagara River as well as he did and his exploits were legendary. He is credited with saving the lives of 28 people. He was born in 1888 and died in 1942.



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