

The 40 Year Streeterville War



Cap'n George Wellington Streeter of the "Deestrick of Lake Michigan."

An Old Squatter's Futile Fight for Property

(Continued from page one.)
pending in the United States District court in Chicago. They are trying to collect damages from present owners of property in Streeterville, an area the value of which eight years ago was estimated as high as 800 million dollars.

Streeter was a picturesque old fellow. He served in the Civil war, became a showman, a steamboat operator, and a country fair faker. In the spring of 1886 he built and launched in Chicago a small boat which he called the Reutan. He had planned to employ this vessel in river passenger service somewhere in the west with the idea of obtaining as a reward land grants from the government. As his plans were taking form, however, he put the craft into service on Lake Michigan, making trips to Milwaukee and other nearby ports. On July 10, 1886, according to his own story, he took a private party to Milwaukee on the Reutan. A storm blew up and his passengers decided against making the return trip to Chicago. Streeter, his wife, Maria, and his crew started back without the passengers. Years later Streeter's experience on that eventful day was described in the following words:

"By the time we reached Racine we encountered a terrific storm which did not abate its fury for many hours, and by that time the Reutan was a badly damaged wreck lying on a sandbar off Chicago harbor, behind the government breakwater on the north shore.

"It was about 10 o'clock at night when we drifted near the breakwater. . . . We were then at the mercy of the wind and waves, helplessly drifting about. Fortunately or unfortunately, just as you may choose to judge by subsequent events, the wind drove us behind the breakwater, narrowly missing a collision with the pier. Just as soon as we were clear of this danger I cast anchor overboard, hoping to prevent the vessel from running aground on the beach. But the sea was so strong that it not only broke over the boat in tremendous waves, but it also dragged the anchor across the bottom of the lake, which at that point was not very deep.

"The boat finally stranded in a shallow body of water when 451 feet from the shore."

Although reports have varied as to the exact spot where Streeter's boat went aground, some placing it as far north as the foot of Oak street and others near the pier just north of the mouth of the Chicago

river, it is generally believed that the actual spot of the grounding was off the foot of Superior street, just east of St. Clair street.

It always was Streeter's contention that his vessel sank in very shallow water and that the action of the waves built an island around the craft, but another story is to the effect that he had his boat dragged into shore upon property owned by N. K. Fairbank, who, according to testimony at subsequent hearings in the controversy over the ownership of Streeterville land, ordered the Cap'n off time and time again.

At any rate, here was Streeter and his wife, living on a stranded boat in the fall of 1886, near the foot of Superior street, the waves piling up sand around his curious dwelling. Land grew so



"Ma" Streeter as late as 1923, standing before her houseboat, the Vamoose, ready to defend it against invaders.

the Maria, and used her in carrying passengers from the downtown district to the fair grounds on the south side. By that time he had converted an abandoned scow into a house, and in that he and Maria lived.

As this was transpiring a great building boom struck Chicago. There was much excavating necessary and contractors were anxious to find dumping grounds close at hand. The waste of sand around Streeter's scow was inviting, and literally millions of tons of refuse, earth, and gravel were hauled to the spot. In fact, the Cap'n himself later said that a number of contractors paid him for the privilege of using the section as a dumping ground. Streeter combed the refuse for old iron, copper, and other junk. While the waste material piled up, the waves of the lake, trapped by the pier at the north of the river, brought in more land to add to Streeterville.

Property owners along the original lake shore saw Streeterville taking large proportions. On the basis of the fact that their deeds entitled them to their land to the very water's edge, they held that this newly added land rightfully was theirs. Among these property owners were wealthy men, such as the previously mentioned Mr. Fairbank, Potter Palmer, and Gen. Charles Fitz-Simons. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Potter Palmer mansion in Lake Shore drive, to the north, was not involved.

The controversy between

Streeter and the property owners took on the form of prolonged warfare. To the banners of the Cap'n flocked an assortment of folk who wanted to see his wealthy opponents beaten. Streeter even organized an association and sold and leased lots. One William N. Niles was given by Streeter, or assumed on his own initiative, the title of "military governor of the District of Lake Michigan." The belligerency of the Cap'n and his battling wife, Maria, began to share space in the newspapers with the legal aspects of the case. The property owners engaged batteries of lawyers, and Streeter marshaled his own legal corps. As attorneys wrangled over points of law, Streeter and his wife held forth with lethal weapons, ready upon a moment's notice to pounce upon any one found "trespassing" upon Streeterville. It was in 1899 that five policemen captured the Cap'n in an unguarded moment. As the bluecoats began to gloat over their feat a shower of boiling water descended upon them. Maria had seized a kettle and dashed to the rescue. In the confusion Streeter freed himself and grabbed his rifle.

During the following year several shots were fired within the dangerous precincts of the District. Once Samuel Avery tried to build a fence across the Cap'n's deadline, and was peppered with bird shot. A month later the military governor ob-

jected to the presence of Police Captain Barney Baer and two bullets were sent through the top of the policeman's buggy. The next day 500 policemen surrounded the District. There was much maneuvering and skirmishing, and finally one lone Lincoln park policeman captured Streeter's entire army. All were acquitted.

The killing in Streeterville in 1902 of a man by the name of John Kirk brought Streeter and others before the courts to answer for the man's death. Streeter finally was found guilty of manslaughter in connection with the case and, starting in February 1903, actually served several months in Joliet penitentiary before he was freed on habeas corpus proceedings. In the meanwhile, his wife, Maria, had died.

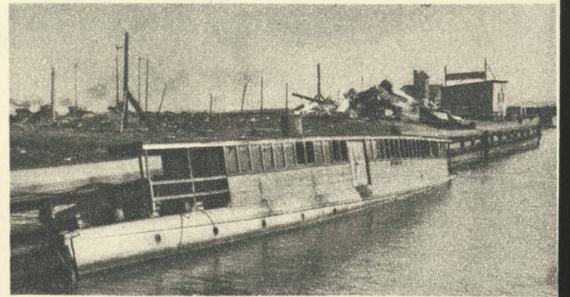
In April, 1906, according to the Cap'n's statement, he married Elma Lockwood, who ever after was known as "Ma" Streeter. He took her to live in a brick house that he had erected not a great distance from the site of the old scow.

Three years later the old fellow once more broke into print. Marching down to the foot of Chicago avenue and discovering a gang of workmen engaged in civic improvements, he doffed his aged plug hat and said:

"I warn you that you are trespassing upon my property and that I will have you all arrested and punished."

For his efforts, the Cap'n found himself once more briefly behind the bars.

Streeter saw a chance to make money selling beer on Sundays to thirsty pilgrims from across the border in Illinois. Business started off briskly, but it was not long before the authorities heard about it. So one Sunday, some time in 1915, the invaders



The houseboat of "Ma" Streeter, rotting away at its mooring near the mouth of the river.



The end of the houseboat Vamoose. It was burned by orders of the city in 1928. (Tribune photos.)

descended in force, raided the Cap'n's place, his castle near the foot of Chestnut street, seized hundreds of bottles of beer, and carried Streeter and "Ma" off in a police ambulance.

This marked the beginning of the end of the old man, although he still was full of fight. In 1918 he and "Ma" returned one day to their home to find it in ruins. He took to life afloat again. His houseboat went up the north branch of the Chicago river, then out and down the lake to a beach near East Chicago, so that he might establish an Indiana residence and get proper jurisdiction for renewed legal action. While living on the north branch of the river, he stepped from his houseboat one evening to address the Dill Pickle club. He said:

"The courts tried to get me on everything but adultery, and I beat them every time."

This statement, of course, was a gross exaggeration. Although he had appeared innumerable times in state and federal courts, he never had been able to obtain a title to the land lying within the District. His claim was based upon squatter's rights, upon his allegation that he had built up the land comprising Streeterville, and upon old documents bearing the signature of President Cleveland. These last, in the form of grants from the government, were discussed as follows in a master of chancery's report as far back as 1918:

"Streeter claims title since 1886 by virtue of two alleged

when the old fellow gave up the ghost on Jan. 24, 1921, at the ripe age of 84. Death came to him on his houseboat as it lay moored off East Chicago.

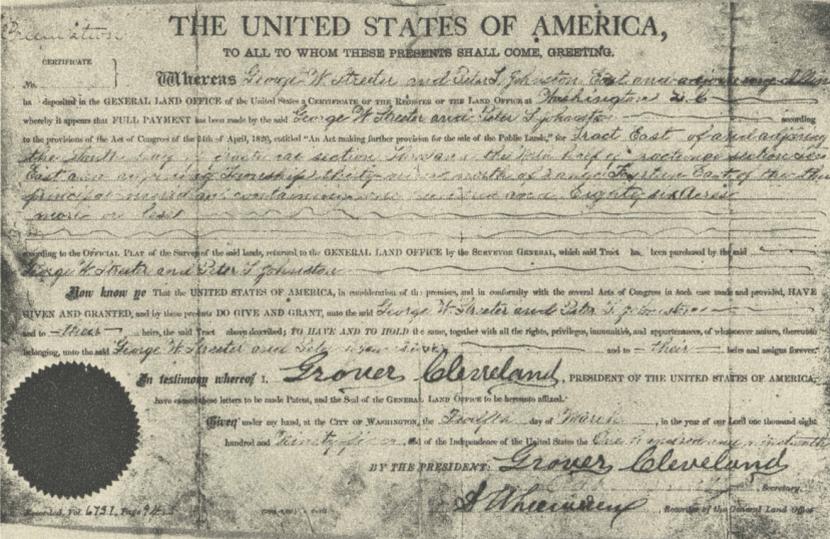
Upon the passing of the aged battler an effort was made to substitute "Ma" Streeter as the plaintiff in the case, but it was shown that she had not been legally married to the Cap'n and therefore could not be considered as his widow. When the heirs of Streeter discovered that there was a judgment standing against him for which they would be liable if they entered the case as plaintiffs, they elected to keep clear of that particular bit of litigation, preferring to file their own suit later.

The battle, so far as the old man was concerned, therefore came to an end shortly after his death, leaving the property owners of Streeterville still in possession of their various parcels of land. Their titles were based upon old deeds, accretion (land formed in the lake at the water's edge of their properties) and old contracts with the Lincoln park commission.

"Ma" Streeter lived on until the autumn of 1936, when at the age of 65 she breathed her last in the County hospital. After the Cap'n's death she had made good her promise to carry on his fight for ownership of the land in Streeterville. Despite court efforts to remove her, she continued to live aboard her houseboat, the Vamoose, until it finally rotted to the water line. It was burned by the city in 1928. In 1924 "Ma" filed suit for a billion dollars against the Chicago Title and Trust company and some 1,500 lake shore property owners. She ceased to be active as a court principal, however, when Federal Judge James H. Wilkerson ruled that her marriage to Cap'n Streeter was illegal. It was proved at that time that the Cap'n had married one Mary Collins in South Bend, Ind., in 1905 and had never taken the trouble to obtain a divorce.

In 1929 twenty-three heirs of Streeter filed a declaration in federal court asking \$5,000,000 damages of 3,500 individuals and corporations. The tract involved in the suit was the famous Streeterville district. Among the defendants were Stanley Field Potter Palmer Jr., Kellogg Fairbank, the Drake hotel owners the Furniture Mart, the Palmolive building, the Ogden T. McClurg estate, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, the city of Chicago, the state of Illinois, George W. Dixon, Frank J. Loesch, Honor Palmer, the Chicago Title and Trust company, the Illinois Merchants Trust company, the Northern Trust company, Charles H. Swift, Joseph Leiter, Silas H. Strawn, George A. McKinlock, and Augustus S. Peabody.

This is the suit that was remanded to the federal District court after an appeal by the Streeter heirs in 1932 to the federal Circuit Court of Appeals. It still is pending in the District court.



Facsimile of document which, with other claims, was the basis of Cap'n Streeter's contention that he was the owner of the property comprising Streeterville.



A scene at the Cap'n's funeral. Note the flag and the plug hat atop the casket.



Debris left in the wake of a raid on Streeter's headquarters in Streeterville.

rapidly that it was not long until a hundred acres of white sand had sprung up around the stranded boat. Streeter called this stretch of beach "District of Lake Michigan." He pronounced it "Deestrick." It was no part of Illinois, he said. "No, sir! It was a separate commonwealth under the direct jurisdiction of the federal government." It was not until 1889 that physical efforts were made to evict the Cap'n. In July of that year Streeter and his valiant Maria, with loaded rifles, drove five constables out of the District of Lake Michigan.

According to the Cap'n's story, he repaired the Reutan, refloated her in 1893, rechristened her

land warrants, recorded and purported to be signed by former President Grover Cleveland, by Hoke Smith, secretary, and S. W. Lamereaux, recorder in the land office. Hoke Smith never was secretary to the President, but at the time was secretary of the interior, and Lamereaux never was recorder."

The name of Hoke Smith was written in as "Oak Smith."

Most of Streeter's battling was done with him in the rôle of a defendant, but on Sept. 5, 1920, he took the offensive, when he filed his famous suit against the Chicago Title and Trust company and a number of other defendants. The case had scarcely gotten under way, however,