While the orchestra played a gay tune for the nearly 500 passengers, the steamboat Columbia glided along the fog enshrouded west bank of the Illinois River shortly before midnight.

Suddenly, the boat shuddered. The music stopped and there was a moment of alarm. One of the boat's officers ordered the orchestra to resume playing. What no one yet knew was the Columbia had struck a submerged tree stump, tearing an 11-foot long and two-foot wide hole in the doomed sternwheeler's wooden hull. \_\_PUBLIC\_\_

Captain Herman Mehl ordered pilot Tom Williams to make for the eastern bank near Wesley City (now Creve Couer). Mehl reportedly shouted: "Run her ashore, damn her, run her ashore!" He also ordered passengers to quickly move to the top deck. However, the Columbia was rapidly taking on water and soon the bow disappeared beneath the river's surface. Suddenly, the Columbia began to list to the starboard (right) side. In the ballroom, dancers and musicians fell to the floor. The boat went dark and panic ensued.

As the sternwheeler began to settle in the shallow water, the ballroom ceiling collapsed. Many were trapped beneath the large steel I-beams that fell across the floor. Water poured in, quickly claiming the lives of the helpless victims.

Hours after the disaster, the Peoria Star reported: "Screams of women, shouts of men, cries of children, together with loud commands of officers mingled in wild confusion. Some prayed and others swore. Women were pulled out of the water from the cabin decks by strong armed men and placed safely in the hurricane deck. The crew was trying to launch the life boats and getting life preservers to passengers. Within a few minutes the first boat got away and other craft from the shore came out and took off as many as they could carry. Work of landing the survivors continued for nearly two hours."

The final toll was 87 dead and one deck hand missing and presumed drowned. It could have been much worse had it not been for L.W. Logan, the chief engineer. He opened the safety valves on the boilers, thus averting an explosion that most certainly would have resulted in an even greater loss of life. Nonetheless, the Columbia sinking would be remembered as the worst disaster on the Illinois.

It was determined the boat sank at 12:05 a.m. on July 6. This was ascertained by the recovery of victim's watches that had stopped at that moment.

By late afternoon on the day of the tragedy, Gov. Frank Lowden called for a complete investigation of the Columbia disaster. William Sackett, state waterways superintendent, put the machinery into motion for a sweeping inquiry.

Not to be outdone, federal investigators laun-ched their own investigation the morning of July 7. Tazewell County Coroner Law-rence Clary was making headlines with his own probe.

It soon became clear that investigators were more interested in finding a scapegoat than the truth.

Next: Blame game.