



McPhee, Alexander Edgar and Gordon

At 11.30pm on Saturday night 18 April 1908 the lives of four people were taken on the Otago Harbour.

It was the Easter holidays. Traffic had increased on the Otago Harbour because the Defence Department was busy at Taiaroa Head training young men of the Volunteer Navals, and many townspeople were descending on their cribs at Otakou and other places along the harbour's edge.

It was a bright moonlit night when the *Matakana* left Port Chalmers with eight Volunteers, one civilian and three boys Alfred, Gordon and Alexander Edgar McPhee on board. The vessel was under the command of Joseph Cordella, a resident of Deborah Bay who used the vessel for fishing.

Around the same time as the *Matakana* was leaving port, the Defence Department's steamer *Lady Roberts* was leaving the Heads, commanded by master mariner Henry Cashman, with James Daley at the wheel. Cashman saw the *Matakana* some 65 metres off and judged she would pass his steamer some 55 metres away. But the *Matakana* unexpectedly altered course about 30 metres off and headed to cross the bow of the *Lady Roberts*. Captain Cashman saw the danger but it was too late, and the *Matakana* was cut in two, her occupants being flung into the sea.

The rear half of the *Matakana* sank immediately, while the forward section stayed afloat. The *Lady Roberts* suffered no serious damage.

Cashman acted quickly, throwing life belts and buoys over the side and a boat was lowered to pick up survivors. Extensive efforts failed to save four of the *Matakana*'s passengers from drowning. Corporal Robert Slater (24), William Methers (21), Gordon (12) and Alexander Edgar (10) McPhee. The other McPhee brother, Alfred (14), had managed to cling to a piece of wreckage and was rescued.

Mr and Mrs McPhee waited at the Kaik jetty until long after 11pm, waiting for the boys return. News that two of their sons had drowned was conveyed to them on Sunday morning.

The inquiry at Port Chalmers on 30 April found that the collision was due solely to an error of judgement on the part of Joseph Cordella, master of the *Matakana* who had run his vessel across the bows of the *Lady Roberts*. He was charged with manslaughter but the jury in the Supreme Court found him not guilty.

In a simple grave in Andersons Bay cemetery, Dunedin, the word MCPHEE ,in marble, records the last resting place of Gordon and Edgar McPhee.

Research taken from *Rocks, Reefs and Sandbars* by Bruce E. Collins.