

Former Inmate, Local Transplant Turns Hero in Alaska

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By CORY MATTESON / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Monday, September 21, 2009 1:00 am

It was to be a typical gillnetting trip. James Seymour and Richard Earnhart, both Lincoln transplants, wanted to get north of Juneau on Alaska's Favorite Channel by noon.

There, 20-plus boats would line up to get 20 minutes of fishing time apiece, protocol the displaced Nebraskans are familiar with after nearly two years on the seas.

But Seymour, 34, said his boat, the Loyal Lady, was about an hour behind schedule when they set off.

Their tardiness turned out to be a godsend for six of seven people aboard a small craft that overturned at about 11:54 a.m. Aug. 17.

Seymour, a former inmate at the Nebraska State Penitentiary, steered the Loyal Lady, the first responding Good Samaritan vessel, toward the accident.

He declined interviews in Alaska immediately after the rescue, but said he'd talk to the Journal Star so people back home would know he was doing something with his life since his release nearly two years ago, on Oct. 5, 2007.

"I didn't do anything special," he said. "I just did my job."

Usually, Seymour said, he pays little attention to his boat's radio.

But that Monday he happened to be sitting at the table near it when a voice came on: "Mayday! We're going down!"

Seymour said he thought it was a joke. Then the Coast Guard came onto the line, asking urgent questions. Amid the chatter, he heard someone say the sinking boat was near Aaron Island.

The Loyal Lady was near Aaron Island.

Ahead, people were waving him down as the capsizing boat took on water.

"This is Loyal Lady," Seymour radioed. "We'll be on the scene in a couple minutes."

If they'd arrived even 30 seconds later, Seymour said, there may have been more casualties.

Strong southerly winds and 5-foot seas led to waves that "came over the bow of the boat and spun it around so it was taking broadsides, which led to the capsizing," the Juneau Empire reported.

"Pretty soon waves were coming down on that open bow," Rod McLeod, one of the passengers, told the Crescent City (Calif.) Daily Triplicate. "It was getting filled with water by each wave."

Robert Earl Lehnhart, 76, the father of the boat's captain, was trapped in the capsized boat's cabin. He died in the 42-degree seas.

Seymour and Earnhart helped save the other six people who had gone overboard.

Marge Shriver, Seymour's mother, said her son didn't divulge many details, but did quote him as saying, "We couldn't have rescued these people without Rich."

"I suppose it was kind of a life-changing event," Shriver said.

The Loyal Lady took five of the six survivors back to shore, Seymour said. The trip back was completely silent.

"It was shocking," Seymour said.

"This was one of those cases that happened suddenly and was over almost as quickly as it began," Lt. Byron Hayes, a Coast Guard search and rescue controller, said in a press release. "We were fortunate that there were a number of vessels in the area able to assist after the vessel capsized. We were able to avert an even greater tragedy."

For Seymour, the open seas and a home a near the beach and in view of the mountains has been a welcome change from the cell he stared at for about six years while incarcerated in Nebraska.

Stints for unauthorized use of a transaction device, a failure to appear and growing and selling marijuana are in his recent past. While in prison, Seymour said, he thought about summers he'd spent in Alaska, and how he longed to return there and get his own boat.

"It was always on my mind," he said.

"It was his dream to do it," Shriver said. "He needed a dream fulfillment, goodness knows. So I said, 'OK, we'll go into this. We'll go into it together.'"

So the two bought a boat together.

"I think maybe we were third or fourth owners," Shriver said of the 42-foot Loyal Lady. "It's just a nice little boat. You don't call it a boat, though. You call it a vessel."

He's pretty much broken even since he started. ("The boat just loves money," he said.) But he's getting by, and living a life he'd dreamed about for much of this decade.

"I don't own any dress clothes or dress shoes," he said proudly. "I wear rubber boots everyday. Nobody cares. My girlfriend wears rubber boots."

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