

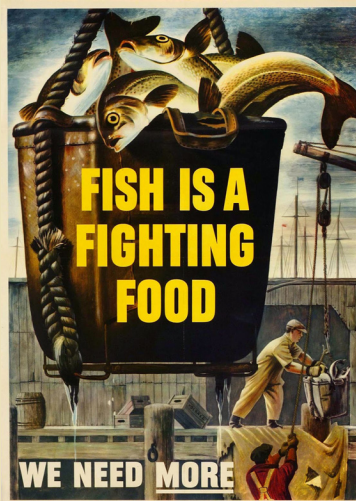
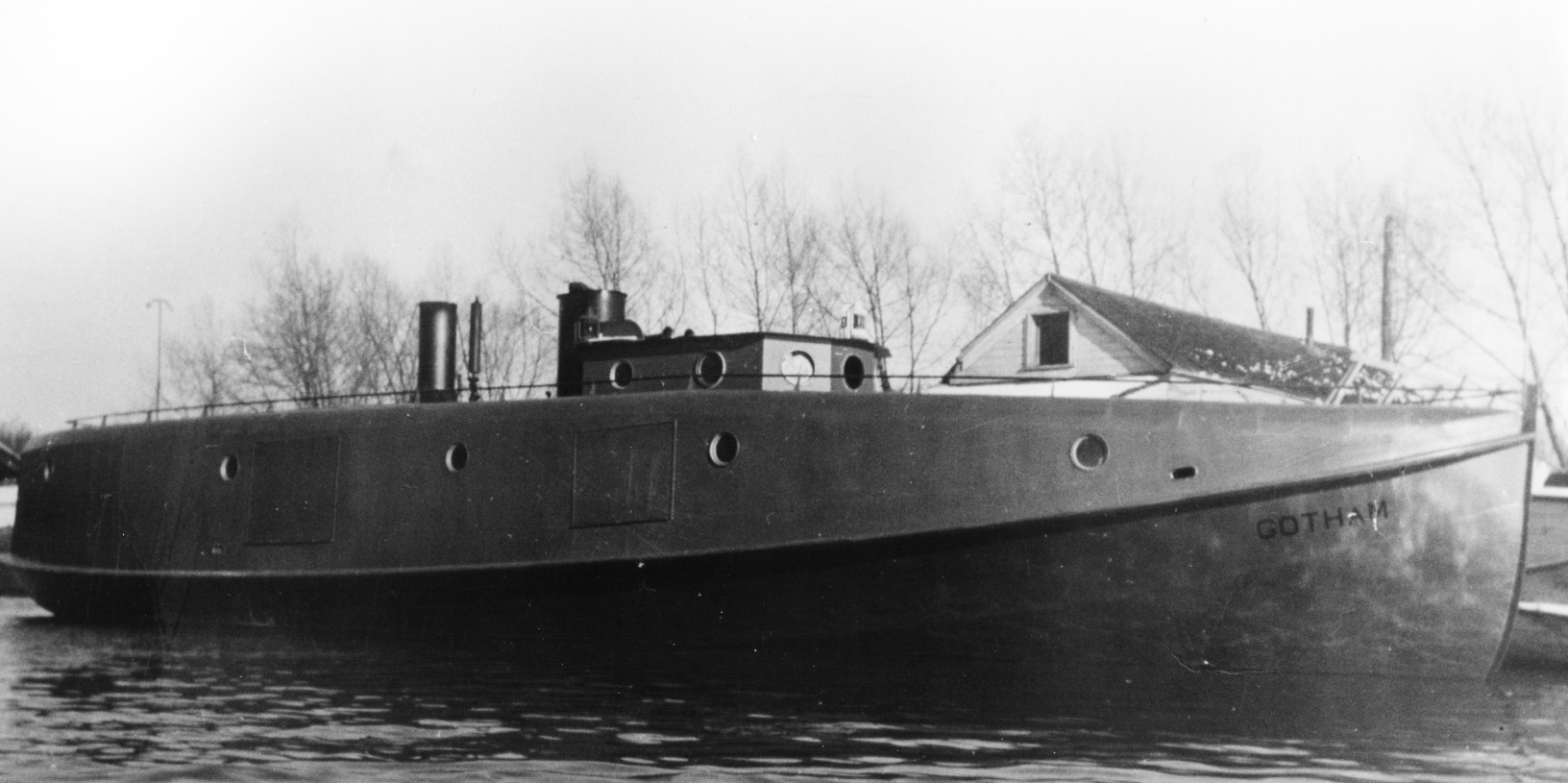
# "THE GREATEST TRAGEDY IN SAUGATUCK'S MARITIME HISTORY"

— December 17, 1943 *Commercial Record*

The *Gotham* illustrates the dangers faced by Lake Michigan fishermen. In 1939, the Gothams, a local fishing family, decided to build a steel fishing tug. Lewis Gotham designed the hull. His sons Fred and Sam cut and welded the steel. By spring 1941, the *Gotham*, the first all-steel vessel built on the Kalamazoo, with sleek lines reminiscent of a submarine, knifed through the waves rather than riding over them. It looked invincible. Justifiably proud of their accomplishment, Lewis reportedly said of the *Gotham*, "You can never sink her."



The Gothams proudly display their model hull. Gotham is pronounced "GO-tham" rather than "goth-ham."



World War II food shortages compelled fishermen to go out in all conditions.

On December 11, 1943, while out retrieving hook lines set three days previous, the *Gotham* was caught by a sudden turn in the weather.

Lewis Gotham was a cautious and experienced captain so initially he chose to ride the storm out in the middle of the ice-free lake. His crew would be in for a wild ride, but the *Gotham* was solidly built and there was no danger they would strike anything. When waves are high, entering the narrow river mouth required calculating the exact angle of approach to avoid slamming into the cement channel walls or grounding on a sand bar.

*From top* | The *Gotham* was completely welded. No bolts were used.

The *Gotham* under construction

World War II Office of War Information posters





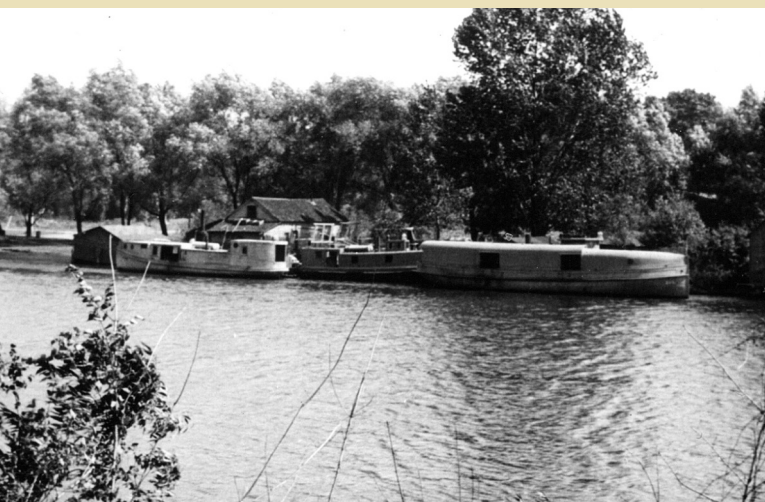
Jack Sheridan

Artist's interpretation of the *Gotham's* run toward the channel.



But that night — for reasons unknown — the *Gotham* tried to make it to shore in 50-mile-per-hour northwest winds.

Before dawn the next day, local fisherman Jim Sewers smelled fuel oil and found fish boxes marked "Gotham" on the beach north of the channel. The morning light revealed terrible evidence: pieces of the *Gotham* deck, Fred's dinner bucket with a sandwich and banana still inside, four life preservers tied in a bunch and captain Lewis Gotham's pipe.



Two views of the *Gotham* docked at Water Street

Three days later the *Gotham* was located in 20 feet of water, 100 yards north of the channel. The bodies of Lewis Gotham, Sam Gotham and crewman F. Harley Jones washed ashore in the spring of 1944. The vessel was dragged inside the channel in May and the bodies of Fred Gotham and 15-year-old Billy Jones were found buried in sand inside. The wooden rear doors of the *Gotham* had been pushed in by a crushing force but there was little other damage to the hull.





Townpeople gather for the sobering sight of the *Gotham* raised from Saugatuck channel, May 1944.

Today, the descendants of Lewis Gotham take the bell recovered from the wreck down to the water every year on the evening of December 11 and ring it five times — once for each life lost.

