

OFFBEAT OREGON HISTORY

Shipwreck became a massive, drunken looting party

BY FINN J.D. JOHN

Offbeat Oregon

On the morning of Nov. 5, 1915, at the back of the entrance to Coos Bay, a big steamship could be seen towering improbably over the beach, stuck fast in the sand close to shore.

This was the Santa Clara, a 233-foot steamer on the Portland-San Francisco run.

The Santa Clara didn't much look like the scene of a humanitarian disaster, jutting out of the sand nearly plumb and level and nearly high and dry — but appearances were deceiving. Sixteen people died trying to get ashore when she first struck, three days before.

Nor did the wreck scene look like a very likely place for a massive, boozy free-for-all mob rampage ... but a little later on that day, after a small army of looters swarmed aboard and found she was carrying a cargo of whiskey, things would be different.

Here's how the wreck of the Santa Clara — arguably the most tragicomic maritime disaster in Oregon history — went down:

In the afternoon of Nov. 2, 1915, the Santa Clara was on her regular run from Portland to San Francisco. She was making her scheduled stop at Coos Bay, where a large cargo of shipments consigned to Marshfield and North Bend merchants would be offloaded along with several dozen of her complement of about 60 passengers.

But as she made the turn into the mouth of the bay, something happened to the steering gear. Captain August Lofstedt had called for a 55 degree turn, but the best the ship could do was 15. The ship was now headed straight for South Spit.

Lofstedt called for full power astern, hoping to pull the ship back in time.

He was too late. The ship left the channel and struck something hard, evidently an underwater basalt reef — then the heavy seas lifted her over the obstacle and she was wallowing in deeper waters for the moment, just inside the mouth of the bay but still in unprotected waters.

Lofstedt called for the power to be reversed: All ahead full. Whatever they'd hit was letting a lot of water into the hull, and it was crystal clear to him that the ship was doomed. He wanted her as close to the beach as he could get her, so the passengers could be saved.

The big steamer churned up to the beach and shuddered to a stop, still outside the line of breakers. The seas were high and rough — the waves started pounding her into the sand. Things started cracking and



The steamship Santa Clara stands almost high and dry on the beach at the mouth of Coos Bay early in the day on Nov. 5, 1915, surrounded by onlookers and would-be looters.

breaking below.

Lofstedt then, in the pressure of the moment, made what was almost certainly the worst mistake of his life — he gave an order to abandon ship.

What followed was a nearly unmitigated disaster. The first lifeboat pulled straight for the beach, hit a rock, and was somersaulted over by the next breaker. Men, women and children struggled for life's breath in the cold, roiling water. Some of them made it to shore. Some of them didn't.

The other lifeboats made it through the surf and onto shore, all except for the last one — the one into which Lofstedt had stepped after seeing everyone off the ship. This lifeboat flipped over almost immediately after launch. Lofstedt and the others struggled around to the lee side of the wreck and managed to climb back aboard the hulk.

And there they spent a more comfortable night than the survivors on shore did. The spot where the boats landed was not far from Marshfield (as the town of Coos Bay was then named), but it was very remote, and the road to town was long, muddy, and awful. Rain poured down all night long, and the only shelter available was a fishing-club cabin with a tiny, inadequate woodstove and a single kerosene lantern for light. Some 45 survivors packed into it. They brought the bodies of the dead and the unconscious and tried to revive them, mostly unsuccessfully. Those close to the outer walls shivered in the damp cold.

The next day was almost as bad. The cabin in which the survivors had taken shelter was

only accessible by a long, slippery walking trail that led to a long, slippery, winding dirt road — 18 miles long — to Marshfield. And after a night of heavy November rains, the road was a bog. At least 20 automobiles got stuck on it trying to reach the scene.

Meanwhile, the pounding breakers were driving the stranded ship higher and higher on the shore. By the time they'd finished their work, the wreck was so high up on the beach that it was possible to wade ashore at low tide. Ironically, if the passengers and crew had stayed aboard to ride it out, it's almost certain that they would have all been fine. They might not even have had to get their feet wet walking ashore.

A day went by. Then word started getting around that the Marshfield merchants, who had initially thought their shipments were covered by the steamship's insurance policy, were probably completely out of luck. Naturally, their thoughts quickly turned to wondering if they would be able to salvage any of it from the stranded ship.

On the beach, the ship was still being pounded hard by breakers at high tide. Sooner or later it would probably break up — its hull was, after all, made of wood — and everything would be gone. But maybe, they thought, maybe there was still time to salvage some of it.

They reached out to the president of the shipping line with a telegram. He didn't reply. Meanwhile, Lofstedt and

his officers had moved back onto the ship. There was about \$50,000 worth of cargo on board, and if it were fully abandoned, it would be vulnerable to a salvage claim if someone else managed to take possession

And their fears weren't unjustified. Word had gotten around that the shipwreck was loaded with valuable cargo, and there was a large encampment of local residents nearby waiting for a chance to get at it — either by waiting for the ship to break up and scavenging goods up off the beach, or — for the more assertive — by simply boarding the wreck and looting it.

Another day went by without word from the shipping company, and the business owners started talking about actually forcing their way aboard ship to salvage their cargo.

Finally, on the third day, just as the business owners had decided to do just that, the owners replied to the telegram:

"Consignees may go aboard Santa Clara and remove any cargo that may be saved," they wrote. "It will be necessary to thoroughly guard and prevent any pilferage by unauthorized parties. Keep an accurate account of everything removed for future adjustment between the underwriters and the owners. Captain Lofstedt will assist and represent us."

Trouble was, it was all well and good to urge a "thorough guard" and request an "accurate account." Making those things happen was going to turn out to be something of a "you and whose army" kind of propo-

sition.

The businessmen and their hired helpers chartered a boat to take them to the scene. They presented their permission credentials to the captain, who stepped aside and let them come aboard.

When the encamped looters saw the businessmen and helpers being allowed aboard the ship, they thought this signaled that the shipping company had finally given up and was abandoning the wreck to its fate. So, naturally enough, they surged forward en masse to grab their share of the loot.

There was probably a moment at which the captain and crew could have discouraged them with a couple of careful rifle shots, but the attack seems to have caught them entirely flat-footed.

Soon the ship was full of men, all strangers to the ship's officers, grabbing boxes and hustling them to the rails and flinging them into the sea. Other men and boys were fishing the boxes out and hustling them up on the beach, making little piles of booty watched over by women and children.

And then ... someone found the whiskey. Lots of whiskey. Cases and cases of bonded liquor, no doubt consigned for some unfortunate local merchant. And after that, there was no shutting

the party down.

"The merchants saved little of their goods and were soon forced out of the running by the pirates," the Coos Bay Times reported in the next day's edition. "All last night the looting went on in one mad orgy. Case after case of whiskey was broached and the beach was covered with swaying men."

"At one o'clock it is reported there was a regular riot on the sands," the article continues (under an eye-catching sub-headline reading "HAVE DRUNKEN RIOT"); "and a hurry call was sent for the Coast Guard in the hope that they might be able to still things."

One might think this was a situation that would call for a response from law enforcement. The problem was, there was no law enforcement agency willing to get involved. The hoped-for Coast Guard intervention didn't happen. The sheriff claimed his jurisdiction ended at the high-tide line. Someone sent a plea for help to the U.S. Marshals Service in Portland, and the marshals claimed they didn't have jurisdiction either, and referred the increasingly frantic merchants to the state government. The Oregon State Police did not yet exist, so there was no help coming from that quarter either.

Finish this story online at redmondspokesman.com

■ Sources: Archives of the Coos Bay Times and Portland Daily Journal, 03 Nov.—03 Dec. 1915; historicebeaverton.org, Law and Order at the End of the Oregon Trail, a book by Ken and Kris Bilderback published in 2015; FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Nov. 1947 and Jul. 1949; archives of Portland Morning Oregonian and Portland Journal, 1948-50 Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, *Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon*, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

SOLUTION

Sudoku on Page 2

6	5	3	2	8	7	9	4	1
8	2	9	4	5	1	3	7	6
1	4	7	3	6	9	2	8	5
4	7	1	9	2	3	5	6	8
5	8	2	7	1	6	4	3	9
9	3	6	5	4	8	7	1	2
2	9	8	1	7	4	6	5	3
7	1	5	6	3	2	8	9	4
3	6	4	8	9	5	1	2	7

SOLUTION

Crossword on Page 2

A	F	R	O	M	A	I	N	E	S	L	V	E		
B	L	O	C	A	N	N	E	X	C	O	S	A		
B	A	T	T	I	N	G	A	V	E	R	A	G	E	S
E	N	L	A	R	G	E	S	C	E	L	E	R	Y	
	G	O	E	R	A	R	A	P						
R	A	Y	O	N	U	L	A	R	J	A	M			
A	L	I	N	E	A	L	O	T	C	A	R	E		
C	L	E	A	R	E	D	T	H	E	B	A	S	E	S
K	I	L	L	L	I	R	A	I	L	O	N	A		
S	E	D	L	E	M	A	G	E	N	T	S			
	R	I	P	E	S	E	W	N						
A	M	B	U	S	H	S	O	L	I	T	U	D	E	
B	A	L	L	P	A	R	K	F	I	G	U	R	E	S
C	L	U	E	N	A	I	A	D	R	A	N	T		
S	T	E	R	T	E	N	S	E	E	L	S	E		

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Celebration Place the Landing

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Wednesday 6:00 pm

Saturday Vigil 5:00 pm
First Saturday 8:00 am (English)

Sunday 8:00 am, 10:00 am (English)
12:00 noon (Spanish)

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Terry W. Holmes

of Redmond, OR
March 27, 1966 - Feb 5,
2021

Arrangements:
Arrangements Entrusted
To: Redmond Memorial
Chapel; 541.548.3219.
Please visit www.redmond-memorial.com to view full
Obituary when available &/
or leave a thought, mem-
ory, or condolence for the
family
Services:
A Celebration of Life is
planned to be held for
Terry at Highland Baptist
Church, Sat., Feb. 20th,
2021, 1:00PM
**Contributions may be
made to:**
A local Veteran's Charity of
your choice

Richard Dale Johnson

of Sunriver, OR
March 29, 1939 -
February 17, 2021

Arrangements:
Baird Funeral Home of
Bend is honored to serve
the Johnson family. Please
visit our website,
www.bairdfh.com, to share
condolences and sign our
online guest book.
Services:
A Celebration of Life will
take place at a later date.
**Contributions may be
made to:**
Bend Humane Society
(hsc.org) or
Deschutes Land Trust
(deschuteslandtrust.org)

Arthur Norman Gwin
of Redmond, OR
Feb 21, 1944 - Feb 15,
2021

Arrangements:
Autumn Funerals, Red-
mond 541-504-9485 www.autumnfunerals.net
Services:
Services will be held at a
later date.

Melody June Harvey

of Redmond, OR
May 9, 1949 - Feb 11, 2021

Arrangements:
Autumn Funerals of Red-
mond is honored to serve
the family. 541-504-9485
Memories and condolences
may be expressed to
the family on our website
at www.autumnfunerals.net
Services:
A celebration of life will
take place at a later date.
**Contributions may be
made to:**
Partners in Care Hospice
2075 NE Wyatt Ct., Bend,
OR 97701

Beatrice "Bea" Mae King

of Bend, OR
April 14, 1932 -
February 13, 2021

Arrangements:
Baird Funeral Home of
Bend is honored to serve
the King family.
Please visit our website,
www.bairdfh.com, to share
condolences and sign our
online guest book.

Carol Jean Moore

of Bend, OR
August 15, 1949 -
February 19, 2021

Arrangements:
Baird Funeral Home of
Bend is honored to serve
the Moore family. Please
visit our website,
www.bairdfh.com, to share
condolences and sign our
online guest book.

Cameron Michael Petz
of Redmond, OR
Feb 14, 1976 - Feb 09,
2021

Arrangements:
Autumn Funerals, Red-
mond 541-504-9485 www.autumnfunerals.net
Services:
A Celebration of life will
be held at a later date.

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