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WEEKEND BREAK



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THE SHIPWRECKS OF WEATHER BEACH

By NANCY LLOYD

In the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s, the wheat harvest and timber crops of the region drew sailing ships, like big moths, to the mouth of the Columbia River. Some of those ships piled up on the sandy peninsula to the north. For a time there was an intriguing assembly of battered husks on what used to be called “Weather Beach.”

In those years, sailing ships were the ideal conveyances for bulk cargo to be moved long distances without the urgency of time. The winds were free fuel and there were plenty of deep-water sailors skilled in the art of sailing by wind.

Lumber shippers built multi-masted tall schooners precisely for the lumber trade. Not a few of the wheat fleet were new — the Potrimpos, for instance, was only 10 years old when she grounded here, and the Alice but eight.

Dark and stormy nights

Between 1881 and 1909 at least 17 named vessels wrecked between North Head and Leadbetter Point on the sandy Weather Beach. They were Great Broughton, 1881; Lammerlaw, 1881; Harvest Home, 1882; Whistler, 1883; Abbey Cowper, 1885; Dewa Gungadur, 1885; Carrie B. Lake, 1886; Jessie Nickerson, 1886; Grace Roberts, 1887; Strathblane, 1891; Point Loma, 1896; Potrimpos, 1896; Glenmorag, 1896; Frank W. Howe, 1904; Zampa, 1904; Solano, 1907; and Alice, 1909.

They were all wind-driven vessels, except for the steamship Point Loma.

At least 14 of these ships wrecked in the months of predictable bad weather: five in January, three in February, one in March, one in July, two in October, two in November and three in December.

In those years before electric lights, 13 vessels came ashore at night. Only four came ashore during daylight — “8 a.m.,” “before 9 a.m.,” “4 p.m.,” and “11 a.m.”

Bad weather at the time was a given: “thick gale;” “fog;” “heavy sea, frequent squalls;” “gale;” “fog;” “dense fog;” “gale, rain, thick fog;” “southwest gale, rough water;” “southwest gale, rough seas;” “stormy, wind c. 60 m.p.h.;” “heavy seas;” “foggy, south strong wind, weather thick;” “thick foggy weather;” “terrific southwest gale, huge sea;” “strong southwest headwinds and current;” “during a southeast gale;” and a “... gale that raged.”

Eight of the vessels were inbound in ballast, lightly loaded and riding higher in the water, presenting a larger profile to the force of a hostile wind.

Operator error

Not all vessels were well-designed or in good repair. Not all captains and crews were competent. Not all cargo or ballast was stably stowed.

Other reasons given for these wrecks included:

“...the error in calculating his latitude and longitude was ascribed by Captain Mattson to a fault in Tennet’s Nautical Almanac. Tennant acknowledged the mistake ... owing to the curvature of the coast line north of the cape (Disappointment) the wreck could not be seen from the life-saving station (at Cape Disappointment) ...” (Harvest Home);

“... She had mistaken in the fog the entrance to Shoalwater Bay for the entrance to Columbia River, the shape of the land not being discernible ...” (Great Broughton);



Parts of the Potrimpos were made into a desk for an early editor of the Chinook Observer, himself a shipwreck survivor who settled here. A significant part of this wreck may still lie under the sand.

“...The sea was very rough, and had washed away her (on-deck) houses and swept her decks of everything ... heavy gales had blown away her sails and the helpless vessel was driven ashore, although all (her) anchors were thrown out.” (Grace Roberts);

“... the Captain’s chronometer was wrong ...” (Strathblane);

“The heavy sea put out the fires in the boiler room and the vessel drifted onto the beach ...” (Point Loma);

“At daybreak ... (the captain) sighted land and was on the lookout for a pilot or tug, but the vessel soon became perfectly helpless and drifted towards shore. The captain ordered both anchors out. ... The current, which sets in very strong all along the beach at certain stages of the tide, was too strong, and the ship drifted through the breakers and on to the beach ...” (Potrimpos);

“The placing of one or more whistling buoys in the ocean abreast of North Beach might be of some assistance in preventing future disasters. There is a whistling buoy off the mouth of the Columbia, and a whistle on the Columbia River Lightship. The next whistling buoy is at the entrance of Willapa harbor. Some 26 miles of coast are thus unprovided with this means of warning ships in thick weather...” (Glenmorag).

The search for fixes

Endless waves battered those wrecks to pieces; iron rusted, wood rotted, shipworms chewed; sand floated aside, embracing heavy wreckage. Salvors and “seagulls” (locals who got to the wreck before the insurance man did) removed anything worth removing. Over the years, Weather Beach’s sands accreted many yards to the westward, covering, for example, the Frank W. Howe, whose timbers now anchor a shore pine forest in Seaview.

Maritime authorities became increasingly aware of the genuine danger presented by the north Pacific Ocean and

its Columbia River Bar. Officials took ever more expensive and time-consuming steps throughout these years to mitigate the trouble:

- Purchasing Coston flares — brilliant pyrotechnic devices similar to highway safety flares — for use at night by patrolling surfmen to warn away vessels too close to shore;
- Development of an accurate, affordable marine chronometer so sea captains could determine their longitude;
- Increasing the accuracy of the “Coast Pilot” and similar almanacs about this region;
- Clarifying the offshore and inshore currents on marine charts;
- Starting to build the monumental Columbia River South Jetty;
- Building and anchoring offshore the Columbia River Lightship;
- Building the North Head Light-house, visible from the north;
- Manning the life saving stations year-around;
- Building the Ilwaco Beach Life Saving Station at Klipsan Beach;
- Dredging the Columbia River shipping channel;
- Buoying that channel.

Tourist attractions

In those years, wreck remains contributed to summertime’s tourist life at the beach. In August 1885 the Morning Oregonian reported,

“Life at the seaside is now at its best... Many were compelled to sleep in Stout’s (Seaview) barn last night, owing to lack of accommodations. Over 300 people came down on the Lurline alone ... fishing continues good. The other day a gentleman got over 80 crabs at the wreck of the Harvest Home ... the weather continues warm, though not unpleasant. The nights are cool. Camp

fires are all the rage in the evenings, and the passerby is greeted with selections from ‘Il Travatore,’ ‘Billee Taylor,’ gospel songs, negro melodies, etc., which combine to make an evening pass away very pleasantly.”

About 10 years later, the South Bend Journal commented,

“With the Potrimpos, Glenmorag, Point Loma and Harvest Home all on exhibition, North Beach has a superior lot of attractions to offer summer visitors during the coming season.”

News from the Oregon Daily Journal of Aug. 3, 1907, read:

“With reports of 100 degrees in the shade and papers filled with accounts of the uncomfortable atmosphere of inland places, people at North Beach are congratulating themselves on being away from the interior and meet every train, confidently expectant of finding many friends, refugees from the stifling heat of cities ... the beach this year offers a new attraction in the line of wrecks, the old Harvest Home and Patrimpus, which have lain on the ocean bed for so long, being now nearly covered up by the sand into which they are gradually sinking out of sight, being completely forgotten in the interesting sight of the Solano, a four-masted sailing vessel of San Francisco, which came ashore last winter and which is

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Harvest Home, Wrecked Jan. 18, 1882

The picturesque wreck of the Harvest Home was blown up in 1923 in the service of a short-lived scheme to conduct car races on the beach.