



OPINION

Offbeat Oregon History

For captain and crew, catastrophic shipwreck was luckiest break of their lives

BY FINN J.D. JOHN
For the Sentinel

When their ship suddenly started sinking beneath their feet, just after nightfall on a winter day while crossing the notorious Columbia River Bar, chances are that Captain Canute Rommerdahl and his crew thought their luck had run out.

They'd figure out later that the sinking of their ship, the S.S. Drexel Victory, was probably the luckiest break they'd ever caught in their lives.

No one actually knows what happened to the Drexel Victory that night, as she steamed across the bar en route to Yokohama, Japan. The ship was practically brand-new, having been built less than two years before at the Permanente/Kaiser shipyard in Richmond, Calif. But she was a Victory ship — and that gives our best clue as to what might have suddenly happened to her at 5 p.m. on the fateful evening of Jan. 19, 1947.

Victory ships were, essentially, souped-up Liberty ships. And Liberty ships were one of the most important reasons the Nazis lost the Second World War.

The basic Liberty Ship was patterned after a First World War-era British cargo steamer, with the blueprints modified to make mass production possible. To keep costs down and make huge production numbers possible, it was obsolete by design, using an antiquated but reliable 2,500-horsepower steam engine to shove a squat, blocky 441-foot-long hull through the water at a barely-adequate 11 knots. But it was capacious, and it was cheap, and when production really got rolling the Portland shipyard alone was cranking them out at a rate of one ship every three days. The Nazi submarines, trying to choke off the torrent of supplies crossing the Atlantic to keep the war going, soon found themselves inundated with thousands of these ugly things, and no matter how many they sank, the numbers never stopped increasing.

But an awful lot of them were getting sunk. Slow and underpowered, they were sitting ducks when a submarine got them in its sights, and no amount of guns and depth charges added to the upper decks could change this.

Also, when a submarine put a hit on a Liberty ship, the results could be quite dramatic. Part of the modification of the original British design involved having the Liberty ships' plates welded rather than riveted. This resulted in a stronger, tighter connection between the plates, and a much faster one to boot — but it meant something else, too: When a crack got started, it could literally circumnavigate the ship. A Liberty ship could crack in half. And plenty of them did exactly that.

Of course, when a German torpedo hits an unarmored cargo ship, she's going to sink one way or another, cracks in the hull or no cracks in the hull. What was more alarming were the three known cases of Liberty ships just breaking in half and sinking while

mind their own business, nowhere near a German raider. One of these, the S.S. John P. Gaines, broke in half and sank off the Aleutian Islands, drowning 10 mariners. And, of course, plenty more were lost in storms and heavy weather at sea; it's a good bet that under the strain of hurricane winds and mountainous seas a few other Liberty ships went down with all hands and no one the wiser as to why.

So it was with all these factors in mind that the U.S. War Shipping Administration commissioned a replacement for the Liberty, just a few months after Pearl Harbor. That replacement would become the Victory class. The Victory was an improvement in every possible way. Thanks to a massive power upgrade, it was over 50 percent faster — 17 knots, which is roughly the same speed as a surfaced German submarine — so it was far harder to put a torpedo into. It was bigger — 455 feet long and displacing 15,200 tons, versus 441 feet and 14,245, respectively. Then, too, it was far easier on the eyes than a Liberty ship, with a raked bow and an elegant cruiser stern. And to help address the cracking problem, the internal bracing was changed to make the hull less stiff.

The very first Victory ship, the S.S. United Victory, slid into the water at Henry Kaiser's Oregon Shipbuilding Company yard in Portland, in January 1944. From then until the end of the war, a total of 531 of them were launched from six shipyards — the largest number of them built in Portland — to join the 2,750 or so Liberty ships in Uncle Sam's wartime production records.

The Drexel Victory was one of the last Victory ships built, in the waning months of the war. Now, two years later, she was making her way across the bar with a modest load of cargo bound for Yokohama, Japan, when suddenly something big and loud happened to the hull amidships — between holds 4 and 5.

It was nothing as dramatic as what had happened to the doomed Liberty ships, but it was enough. Water poured into the ship; plates bulged under the sudden pressure. The crew got to the pumps and tried to keep up, but the ship was clearly sinking.

By now the darkness was complete, but fortunately the weather wasn't too heavy, so the Coast Guard motor lifeboat Triumph and cutter Onondonga managed to get the crew evacuated without any major trouble.

Then the Onondonga tried to get a line on the drifting, unmanned freighter, hoping to beach her or at least make sure she didn't sink in the middle of the channel. All efforts failed, though, and the sinking Drexel Victory drifted out to sea, wallowing lower and lower and finally sinking in deep water just offshore.

So, what happened? No one really knows for sure. The captain was exonerated at the subsequent hearing; he'd had his ship in the channel, doing everything he was supposed

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A new peace movement

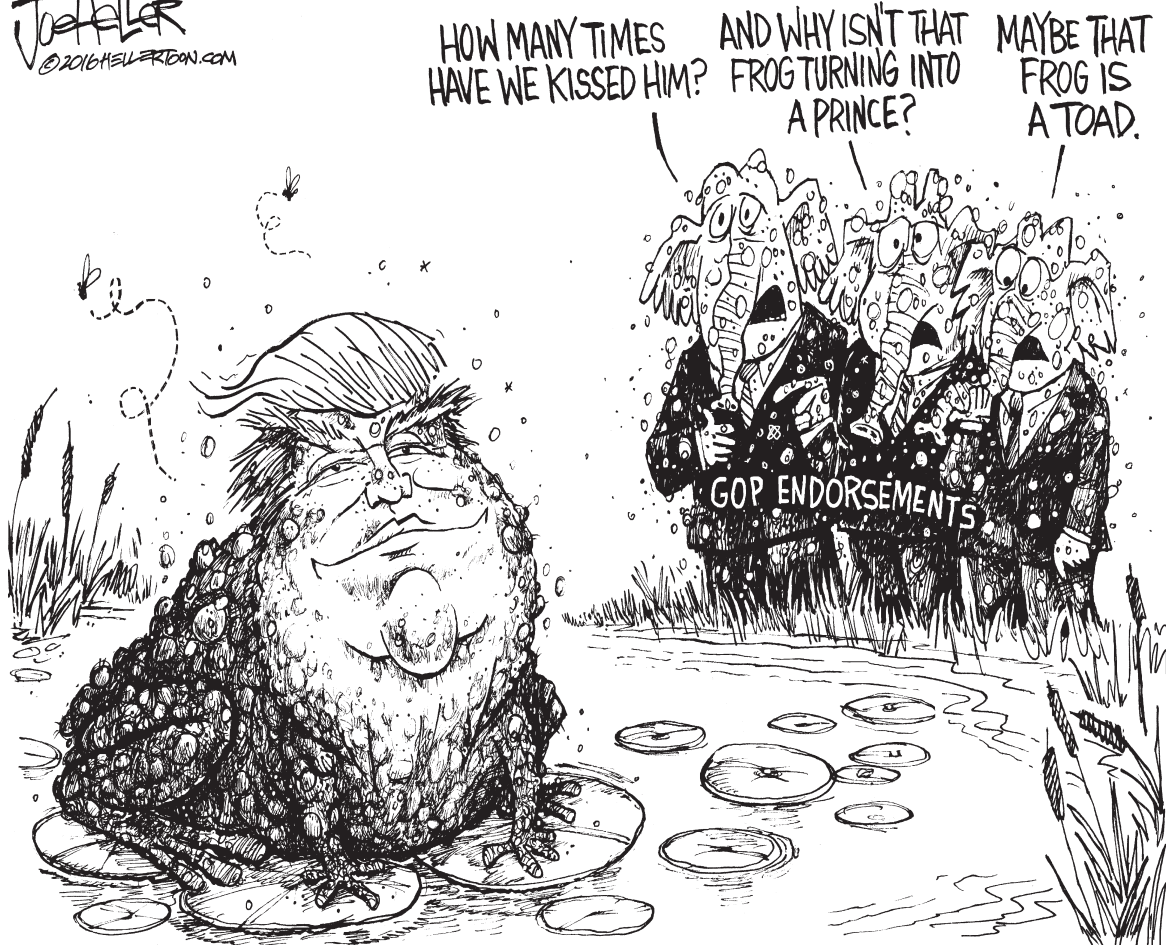
We need a new peace movement, a movement to bring both peace and peace of mind. A movement that turns away from greed and force, because greed and force are ugly in the eyes of childhood and our better nature.

The world needs a peace movement to becalm its waters and rinse its skies with cool, clean rain. We

need a world that acquires learning (for its own sake) and makes peace (for its own sake), removes rocks from its fields and sows for a tomorrow that we can give our children as a gift. Our world needs a peace movement because tigers love not the lamb, and bloodshed lays salt upon the land.

Leo Rivers
Cottage Grove

Jo Jelller
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The health risks of natural sweeteners

BY JOEL FUHRMAN, MD
For the Sentinel

Added sugars come in several forms other than table sugar, such as evaporated cane juice and high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS). Calorie-containing sweeteners like maple syrup, honey, agave and coconut sugar are marketed as "natural"

and often touted as healthier alternatives to these types of added sugars. Is there any truth to these claims? Similar to sugar, these



alternatives are still low-nutrient concentrated sweeteners; they add substantial calories to the diet while contributing very little nutritional value. Maple syrup and honey elevate blood glucose similarly to sugar (sucrose), leading to disease-causing effects in the body. Agave and coconut sugar rank lower on the glycemic index but are still empty calories and have other negative effects.

Repeated exposure to these excessively sweet tastes dulls the taste buds to the naturally sweet tastes of berries and other fresh fruits, which perpetuates cravings for sweets and can undermine weight loss. Since some natural sweeteners undergo fewer processing steps than sugar, they may retain some phytochemicals from the plants they originate from, but their nutrient-to-calorie ratio is still very low, and they contain minimal or no fiber to slow the absorption of their sugars. The negative health effects of added sugar and HFCS (high-fructose

corn syrup) are well documented, including increased risk of weight gain, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Agave nectar is marketed as a low-glycemic sweetener, due to its high fructose content (agave is approximately 90 percent fructose). Sucrose is half fructose and half glucose, made up of one fructose molecule linked to one glucose molecule. HFCS contains 55 percent fructose and 42 percent glucose. All sweeteners (and fruits) contain some combination of glucose, fructose, and the two bound together as sucrose. Maple syrup contains about 90 percent sucrose, so it is very similar to regular white sugar. Coconut sugar contains 70-80 percent sucrose, and honey contains 49 percent fructose and 43 percent glucose.

Fructose and glucose are broken down differently by the body. When fructose is absorbed, it is transported directly to the liver, where it is broken down to produce energy. Fructose itself does not stimulate in-

sulin secretion by the pancreas. However, much of the fructose is actually metabolized and converted into glucose in the liver, so it does raise blood glucose somewhat (although not as much as sucrose or glucose). Despite its lower glycemic index, added fructose in the form of sweeteners still poses health risks. Fructose stimulates fat production by the liver, which causes elevated blood triglycerides, a predictor of heart disease. Elevated triglycerides have been reported in human studies after consuming fructose-sweetened drinks and this effect was heightened in the participants who were insulin-resistant. Fructose, when used as a sweetener, also seems to have effects on hunger and satiety hormones that may lead to increased calorie intake in subsequent meals.

When you ingest any caloric sweetener, you get a mix of disease-promoting effects: the glucose-elevating effects of added glucose and the triglyceride-raising effects of added

fructose. Sweeteners, unlike whole fruits, are concentrated sugars without the necessary fiber to regulate the entry of glucose into the bloodstream and fructose to the liver. All caloric sweeteners have effects that promote weight gain, diabetes, and heart disease, regardless of their ratio of glucose to fructose, or what type of plant they originate from.

Dr. Fuhrman is a #1 New York Times best-selling author and a board certified family physician specializing in lifestyle and nutritional medicine. His newest book, The End of Heart Disease, offers a detailed plan to prevent and reverse heart disease using a nutrient-dense, plant-rich eating style. Visit his informative website at DrFuhrman.com. Submit your questions and comments about this column directly to newsquestions@drfuhrman.com.

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