

Offbeat Oregon: Youngsters' summer shipwreck couldn't happen today

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

The first day of summer vacation in 1930 was a real red-letter day for Washington High School students Stan Allyn and Wally Stenlake.

Of course, every high-school kid looks forward to that first day of freedom. But Stan and Wally had a special reason: They had a little excursion planned.

They were going to take their

bicycles and ride from their homes in the Mount Tabor neighborhood of Portland out to Astoria, cross the river to the Washington side, go out on Peacock Spit at low tide, and spend the night on a shipwrecked passenger steamer, with breakers crashing around them when the tide came in.

The S.S. Admiral Benson was, in 1930, a fairly new and modern passenger steamer, built during the First World War at Bethlehem Steel back east. Since 1927

she had been on the San Francisco-Portland run.

On Feb. 15, 1930, the big steamer was on her way to Portland with a cargo of citrus fruit and other general cargo, along with 39 passengers; the crew (including stateroom stewards, dining-room staff, and an orchestra) numbered 65.

For a February day, the seas were fairly calm, and it was a routine run. The only problem was, it was extremely foggy. This was, of course, before GPS made it possible to really navigate blind. So Captain Charles Graham and his officers were peering into the cottony darkness, looking for the telltale flares of light from the Tillamook Rock Lighthouse and Columbia River Lightship that would tell them where to steer.

Soon, the big steamer was rounding the turn into the Columbia River, and lookouts were peering into the darkness looking for the channel buoys.

Shortly after, one loomed up in the distance, visible through a break in the fog — black with a stripe across the middle. They were off course, it appeared; the buoy was farther to the north than they'd expected. The ship changed course, steering toward it.

Then the lookout saw something else:

Breakers. The engineer slammed the drive screws into reverse. But by the time you can see breakers from the bridge of a 3,000-ton steamship that's heading straight for them at 10 knots, there's not much you can do other than brace for impact. So, a few seconds later, still lumbering along at a good clip, the Admiral Benson fetched up on the sands of Peacock Spit.

The "buoy" they'd been steering for now revealed itself. It was not, in fact, a buoy; it was the smokestack of the steamship Laurel, which had wrecked there the previous June.

Unlike what had happened to the Laurel, though, the Admiral Benson's was a relatively gentle grounding, and there was no reason to think they wouldn't be off the beach and back under way in a few days. Capt. Graham ordered the ballast tanks pumped full of seawater, trying to pin the big ship to the seafloor so that the waves wouldn't be easily able to pick her up and slam her against the bottom.

Then the ship's radio operator got on the air to request a little help from the Coast Guard, to get the passengers on their way to Portland and then try to re-float the ship.

The passengers and nonessential crew were soon off the ship; the Coast Guard's new motor lifeboats made such rescues almost routine. Many of the passengers had to slide down wet ropes to get to the rescue boats, to the dismay of the women, who of course were all wearing dresses and skirts. A line was also made fast to land, so that the remaining crew members could be easily evacuated via breeches buoy (basically a zipline) if necessary.

Unfortunately, the February weather declined to cooperate with the plans to salvage the ship, and soon a mammoth gale blew up out of the southwest. Huge breakers hammered the Admiral Benson, wedging her farther up onto the sand and flexing her hull enough to pop rivets. Finally the captain admitted defeat, and he and the remaining crew rode the breeches buoy to shore.

The breeches buoy was strengthened and turned into a sort of platform tram, and over the next month or two it was used to take all the cargo off along with the more manageable bits of personal property. By late spring, the wreck was wholly abandoned, and it sat there on the spit, slowly being worked into the sand — which would eventually envelop it.

This, then, was Stan and Wally's destination. They had lashed bedrolls and some food — cans of beans and loaves of bread — to their bicycles. They'd checked the tide tables and confirmed that a minus tide was scheduled — a clamping tide. And so off they went.

The two boys made it to Astoria in one day of pedaling along Highway 30 — just over 100 miles. When they arrived, they were naturally exhausted;

they found an abandoned streetcar to roll out their bedrolls in, and the next day boarded the ferry to cross the Columbia River to Ilwaco. The crossing was long enough for them to enjoy a hot breakfast of ham and eggs, with hot coffee, in the ferry's café.

Once on the Washington side, they worked their way down to Peacock Spit. There was the Admiral Benson, looking as if she were sinking by the stern into a sea of sand. The boys stashed their bikes, collected their bedrolls and food, and hustled down onto the beach. They intended to spend the night on the wreck.

When they got there, they found it wasn't entirely high and dry. The ship sat in the middle of a great pool of tidewater, several hundred yards across. So the two of them hastily lashed together a makeshift raft made of driftwood, and made their way across to the hulk.

The breakers had torn a hole in the stern of the ship, and they were able to paddle right into this, as if driving a car into a garage. They carefully worked their way around a huge sheet of steel that hung from the overhead by a dangerously frail-looking sort of hinge made of thin metal — it had been an engine-room bulkhead — and tied their raft off to a metal grate. Then they climbed into the engine room and pulled their raft up high, out of reach of the incoming tide.

Then they set about exploring the derelict.

They poked around the passenger rooms a bit, climbed to the bridge, stood on the peak of the bow nearly 100 feet above the sand. They found payroll records in the captain's desk, and learned that he was paid \$300 a month for his services. Stan found a dollar pocket watch in working order. And of course they nicked a few souvenirs — bits of easily removable ship trim and so forth.

They weren't nearly done exploring, though, when the entire ship trembled and a deafening crash was heard. The first breaker of the incoming high tide had slammed into that loose bulkhead, pounding it forward like a pendulum to smash into the next bulkhead.

Then it happened again, and the boys realized that that piece of steel was going to repeat the performance every time a wave hit the ship ... all the rest of the day, and all night. Although it

was early summer, the seas were running high.

The boys were, of course, now stuck on the wreck until the minus tide returned the following day. They would be on board the ship, listening to that constant racket, for a full 24 hours.

They wouldn't get much sleep that night, up there on the tilted floor of the bridge. And after night fell they wouldn't be able to see the great combers pounding down on the wrecked hulk. But between the impacts of the great walls of water, and the hammer blows of that huge sheet of steel below, the two of them were more than a little afraid the ship would break up under their feet that very night and they'd drown on Peacock Spit.

It didn't, of course, and they didn't, and the next day, their raft was still there and ready to take them back to shore. They stashed all the souvenirs they'd taken, planning to come back for them sometime when they had use of a car; climbed on their wheels; and pedaled on back home.

It was the kind of summer adventure that kids used to be able to have in Oregon, 75 years ago. Such a lark would be unthinkable today. Shipwrecks on the Oregon Coast are almost unheard-of; when they do happen, as with the New Carissa incident in 1999, state bureaucrats get very excited and start filing lawsuits, demanding instant removal. And any parent who allowed their teenage kids to pedal 100 miles to strand themselves on a wrecked ship like this would be in danger of losing custody.

Modern teenagers can only wish they could undertake an adventure like this. In almost every way, the world is a far better place today than it was in 1930. In this one way, though ... arguably, it's not.

(Sources: The Day the Sun Didn't Rise!, a book by Stan Allyn published in 1991 by Binford & Mort of Portland; Pacific Graveyard, a book published in 1950, also by Binford & Mort; "SS Admiral Benson grounds on Peacock Spit..." an article by Daryl C. McClary in HistoryLink.org Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History at historylink.org.)

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