

Offbeat Oregon

Rumrunners rescued shipwreck victims, went to prison anyway

By FINN J.D. JOHN
FOR THE SENTINEL

Captain Robert Pamphlet and his crew were sailing south in a heavy sea when they heard the distress calls. The 579-ton steam schooner Caoba, slugging it out with the gale off the mouth of the Columbia, had suffered a knockout blow: A wave had burst through and flooded the engine room, putting out the boiler fire. The ship was adrift, rolling in the trough of a very heavy sea, and filling with seawater. The crew had taken to the lifeboats.

Pamphlet was in perfect position to help. But there was just one problem: The hold of Pamphlet's 90-foot, 100-ton gasoline-powered schooner, the Pescawah, was crammed with Scotch whisky — a total of 12,876 bottles of it. And the date was Feb. 1, 1925 — Prohibition wouldn't end for another eight years.

Pamphlet and his crew were Canadian rumrunners. At the time, this was a going business, with big rewards and bigger risks. They would leave British Columbia with a hold full of liquor and head south, being careful to stay as much as possible in the international waters 12 miles off the U.S. shore. When they reached the prearranged spot, they would offload their cargo and head back

north again.

Pamphlet and his crew were almost certainly part of the Sauvie Island rum-running line, a fairly open and notorious operation that kept the higher-end speak-easies of Portland supplied with high-quality bonded liquor throughout the 1920s and beyond. Police knew about it, but were virtually helpless to shut it down.

Here's how it worked: Canadian cargo ships like the Pescawah would come down and lurk off the mouth of the Columbia River, in international waters. In the dead of night, a fleet of high-powered motor launches would come out and rendezvous with the ship. The launches would be loaded with cases of liquor. Then they would, under cover of darkness, slip across the bar and race upriver to secret landing points on Sauvie Island.

These launches were the cigarette boats of the day — faster than anything the Coast Guard could send after them. Once or twice a launch was captured, but usually that only happened when it was wrecked or accidentally beached.

Of course, the plan was for the cargo ships themselves never to touch American territorial waters. Most of the time, the cargo ships would carry destination paperwork to "prove" that they were on

their way to Mexico, just in case a storm blew up and they had to take refuge in a port. But on this run, Pamphlet didn't have those papers to cover himself. If he got caught within U.S. territorial waters, without those papers, he could expect scant mercy.

So he was listening carefully to the radio to see if the crew of the Caoba was getting rescued — hoping he wouldn't have to get involved.

What he was hearing was at first reassuring. The tugboat John Cudahy had found and picked up a lifeboat with nine men in it. But Pamphlet knew a steamer the size of the Caoba would have more than nine men on her crew. There had to be another lifeboat out there.

Nobody else seemed to think so, though. Responding to the distress call, two other freighters had come to the Caoba's aid. One after the other, they tried diligently to get towing hawsers on the wallowing ship, ignoring the need to rescue its crew. Apparently by this time it had become obvious that because of the flotation of the lumber in its hold, the Caoba was not going to sink after all. Now, crewless and adrift, ship and cargo belonged to whoever could get a line on her, under the law of salvage rights. So first the Forest King and then the Thomas P. Beal came alongside and tried to take the stricken ship in tow. Then, having failed, they just went on their way.

From Pamphlet's wheelhouse, it sounded like the scramble for those salvage rights was at the top of every-

one's list, and the sailors on the second lifeboat — somewhere out there being tossed around in a gale, if they hadn't already overturned and drowned — could just look out for themselves.

He gave the order to fall off the wind and sail due east. Eyes wide open, the Pescawah plunged into the 12-mile danger zone.

After a search, the Canadians found the lifeboat right where Pamphlet had figured it would be, and rescued its occupants (sources differ on how many — seven or nine).

But there was no time for celebration; they were still at least 10 miles inside the 12-mile danger zone. Leaving the empty lifeboat tossing upon the waves, the Pescawah turned west and, under full canvas hauled close to the southwest wind and probably with the gas engine running wide open as well, started for the open sea as fast as she could go.

It wasn't fast enough. The 1,181-ton, 16-knot Coast Guard cutter Algonquin, which had also plotted the winds and currents to search for survivors, got to the scene a short time later and saw a sinister-looking black schooner, canvas virtually bursting as she raced westward ... and it was all over for the Pescawah.

Pamphlet, of course, told the Algonquin's officers that he was taking the liquor to Mexico; but he didn't have the all-important paperwork to back that claim up, so he was promptly arrested, along with the other crew members.

When they arrived at Astoria, they were greeted by

a cheering crowd, including the rest of the Caoba's crew. After all, it was only with a bit of luck that the Pescawah had found the tiny lifeboat bobbing in the sea; if Pamphlet and his men had stayed in safe waters, the Coast Guard cutter might not have spotted them in time, and half of them might very well be dead.

The popular show of support might have been gratifying, but it did not help the Canadians' cause. The cheering infuriated the district immigration officer, who responded by jailing the Pescawah's crew and throwing everything he had at the men — including a charge of entering port without inspection and failure to carry the proper entry visa.

In response, calls for clemency came from all over the U.S. and Canada. The Canadians had put themselves in jeopardy to save these sailors after two freighters turned their backs on them in an unlovely scramble for booty; it didn't seem right to most folks that the only people on the water that day who did the right thing should pay for their heroism with prison sentences.

It wasn't enough. Off to prison they went — with no regrets.

"If I was off the coast with a cargo of liquor, and the whole Yankee fleet was in your waters, and I saw that I could save the life of one poor fisherman, I'd sail in and do it again," Pamphlet said. "That's the training of the sea, my boy."

As for the Caoba — the lumber schooner for whose crew members the Pescawah's crew risked and gave all — all the salvage attempts failed. The strong southwest wind blew her up onto the coast of Washington, and she fetched up near Ocean

Park. Today, you can still find the ship's rusty boiler if you know where along the shore to look for it.

Pamphlet died at age 59 in 1932, a few years after his release from prison.

The Pescawah came to a bad end as well. After about a decade of weathering at a dock in Portland, she was sold to an Oregon City man named Victor Riley. Riley planned to use the Pescawah to sail to the Arctic and hunt whales — an activity that in the mid-1930s, was not frowned upon as it is today.

Riley recruited a crew of college students to help him in this adventure. Finding the Pescawah's sturdy 100-horsepower Union marine power plant to be non-operational (probably seized), he disconnected it and replaced it with a four-cylinder automobile engine scavenged from an old Maxwell. The Maxwell engine was stationed up on the ship's deck, driving the prop shaft with a long belt.

It was a remarkably janky and unseaworthy DIY setup.

It was made to push a 1,500-pound car around at speeds of 30 to 40 miles per hour; but it was simply not up to the job of muscling 100 tons of schooner around — even when it was running.

Which, before too long, it was not. On the Pescawah's way across the bar, at the moment it was most needed, the old flivver motor quit and the storied old sailing ship was washed into the North Jetty. Captain Riley was killed in the crash, crushed against the rocks while trying to launch the lifeboat; the other crew members managed to swim to shore.

(Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd Oregon history. His book, Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon is available from Ouragan House Publishers.)



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