

Steamer's Loss Linked To Captain's Ambition

BOSTON (UPI)—The mysterious sinking of the sidewheel steamer Portland in the great storm of 1898 may have been a tragic monument to the driving ambition of the ship's captain.

That was the theory put forth at the annual meeting of descendants of the 176 persons who

perished in the sinking of the Portland Nov. 27, 1898.

According to Roger O. Snowman of Weymouth, the Portland sailed from Boston for Portland, Maine, despite severe gale warnings because Capt. Hollis H. Blanchard was anxious to get to Maine to take command of the Bay State, a larger ship, and also become

commodore of the Boston - Portland steamship fleet.

Snowman's great grand-uncle, William Snowman, was captain of the Bay State until his death two weeks before the sinking.

Captain Was Anxious

Blanchard was due to succeed William Snowman as captain of the Bay State and commodore of

the line but had been delayed by circumstances and was becoming anxious. The two ships had to be in the same port at the same time for the promotion to become effective.

When William Dennison, acting captain of the Bay State, wired Boston that he was keeping his ship in Portland because of bad

weather, Blanchard seized upon it as a good opportunity to take over his new command.

The Portland sailed from Boston into a mounting gale the night of Nov. 26, 1898, and none of the persons aboard was ever again seen alive. The actual fate of the ship never was determined, but its hulk was discovered in 1945, seven and a half miles off Race Point, off Cape Cod.

Theories are that the sidewheel-

er may have collided with one of five other vessels lost in the area that night or that it might simply have been pounded to pieces by mountainous seas and screaming winds.

Students of the Portland sinking say a very heavy post-Thanksgiving passenger list, coupled with pressure from the ship's owners not to cancel a lucrative run, may have influenced Blanchard's decision to pull away from India Wharf

and sail into the gale. There also is evidence of conflicting weather reports at Boston that night.

New England maritime historian Edward Rowe Snow, who took part in the pilgrimage over the route of the Portland out of Boston Harbor, said reports of other Boston skippers at the time indicated several of them thought

the storm would not be so bad as most expected.

Whatever the cause for the sailing and sinking, the loss of the Portland remains one of the greatest mysteries of the New England seacoast and new theories about the Portland gale will continue to arise.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 1962

New England Author Recalls Disaster Claiming 190 Lives In Portland Gale

Tuesday evening, on the 64th anniversary of the Portland's sinking in a violet storm off Highland, a memorial service was held at the Light in North Truro by friends and relatives of the 190 persons who drowned in the disaster.

Brief services conducted by Miss Marie Hansen, president of Portland Associates, an association of relatives and friends of the ill-fated passengers and crew, included dropping of flowers upon the sea. Lighthouse keeper Joseph Martinez also participated in the memorial rites.

Author Edward Rowe Snow, at the Cape End with Portland Associates for the observance, narrated the events of the Portland's last voyage at the office of the Advocate Tuesday afternoon.

Mr. Snow said, "The steamer Portland sailed from Boston at 7 p.m. on the night of November 26, 1898 and was pushed back by the great storm, which still bears her name, until 5:30 the next morning.

"Keeper Fisher of the Race Point Coast Guard Station heard her whistles. Then at 10 o'clock the center of the storm passed over Provincetown and during the lull those at Highland Light, including Benjamin Sparrow, who was then superintendent of the Life Saving Service, saw three craft—the Portland and two others, wallowing in the great seas five miles off shore from Highland Light."

Edward Rowe Snow continued, "Then the storm returned with all its diabolical fury and the three craft faded from view.

"At twenty minutes past 7 that Sunday night, Surfman John Johnson of the Peaked Hill Bars Station noticed something coming ashore and watching his chance he ran down on the beach and re-

rieved it. It was a life preserver and on it was the name 'Steamer Portland'.

"By eleven o'clock that night masses of wreckage ten and twelve feet high were being battered ashore all along the Highland Light area. In the next four days, 36 bodies came ashore, but for the others whose only grave will forever be the sea, we will have a short memorial service tonight at 5 o'clock at Highland Light," concluded Mr. Snow.

The sixty-year-old author, whose latest book is "Women of the Sea," is famous for his books about the Coast. He is also well-known for his annual pilgrimage by plane, over a period of 28 years, to drop packages to lighthouse keepers along the New England and Canadian Coast.

Mr. Snow will fly over the Cape End on December 10 or 11 this year, he said.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1962

November's End Recalls Portland Gale With All The Terror Of Its Tragedy

It was a cold sundown, but clear, the bay crimson with sunset. On the ocean shore the headlands were November-brown, and darkening as the sunset colors massed to the West. We were tramping the top of the cliffs around Cape Cod Light, in search of that faithful band which at intervals journeys here to commemorate the loss off Cape Cod of the S. S. Portland. The Portland, bound from Boston to Portland, Me., went to her dreadful death, with all her passengers and crew, in the hurricane-force gale of November 26 and 27, 1898.

But the Sons and Daughters of Portland Associates, descendants of those lost in the historic tragedy, had already made their pilgrimage here. They had dropped their flowers down the side of the steep cliffs into the sea below and then framed a mental prayer for those remembered folk who perished on the Portland. Not knowing this, however, we were searching for the group come to strew their flowers here at dusk.

Majestic Scene

It would have been easy to forget what you came for—frozen there in your shoes, though you had seen it a hundred times, by the sheer majesty before you. Sea, sky, sunset and cliffs—only a few bold colors and half-tones produced this contrast of light and shadow, but with such intensity you were brought up short before it. Not for nothing is this seascape ranked with the Grand Canyon and the Yosemite, among the scenic spectacles of a continent!

Not a single human figure dotted the sweep of cliffs from North to South. Nothing human moved on the shore, most of it under water in a high tide that licked at the base of the cliffs. It was as if all creation were putting on a show for the personal and particular benefit of any watcher willing to come and see it.

You had to jerk yourself loose from this spell to remember you were here on business—and not to lose yourself in the splendor from this final flare-up of day.

At the edge of the cliffs there would be a good view of the shoreline. If the faithful band remembering the Portland were anywhere around, one should be able to see them from here. Then, at the edge of the cliff you looked down, straight down its steep sides to its base. And down there was death—a cold death, and frightening!—in those powerful surges of water borne in from far reaches of the ocean. Beauty and wonder, a harvest of food—and hardship, terror and death! All these this sea dealt out to those who trafficked with it! And it was death the sea had in store for those hapless souls, 190 of them, on the Portland . . .

Death In Terror

Death for them could only have been attended by terror of unimaginable dimensions. The sidewheeler, blown off course, had gone down in mountainous seas, in a swirling blizzard. Her passengers, many of them Maine folk, were returning to Portland after a Thanksgiving holiday with friends and relatives in Boston. It was only an overnight trip, choppy at worst, but nothing to make the average passenger apprehensive.

To be sure, there were ships that remained at their Boston berths that early evening, as the weather signals indicated rising winds along the coast. But the captain, an able man, was under pressures from his company, the stories go, to keep to his schedule. Ship-owners lose money when a ship doesn't sail or when it doesn't

arrive on time. One account of the tragedy has it that the captain already had been admonished for sacrificing his schedule to what he believed was safety.

If, over against his principles he did only what multitudes have done before him and since. He took his ship, with its post-holiday passenger list, down Boston Harbor, and gambling on the weather, headed North. But the winds kept increasing, mounting in hours to hurricane velocity.

The Portland was blown back and to the eastward, off the tip of Cape Cod. Several estimates put her graveyard off High Head in Truro. Frantic blasts, believed to have come from her whistle, were heard at Race Point during the peak intensity of the storm. But nothing, they say, could have saved the Portland on that wild night!

In the fury of the storm, seamen will tell you, everything on the vessel must have broken loose before the Portland plunged to the bottom. What passengers and crew experienced in suffering and terror will never be known—or the thoughts of the captain, on his pitching bridge, when he knew he had lost his gamble. If conscience plagued the ship-owners that furious night, we've never happened to read about it in numerous accounts of the Portland story.

Bodies Ashore

Bodies and wreckage came ashore along the outer Beach and coffins were packed on a Boston-bound funeral train. Because the railroad trestle in Truro had been weakened by the storm, the coffins had to be conveyed by hand car over the trestle—so the story goes—to another train waiting at Grove's Crossing.

Old Advocate clippings have the story of the Portland. Aspects of the tragedy have caused the "Wreck of The Portland" to be written and re-written by a score of writers. The story still moves Lower Cape folks on a gale-ridden night . . . the image of an

old sidewheeler with terrified passengers, plunging in seas that finally smashed her to kindling . . .

Knocking at the door of Cape Cod Lighthouse, we found two courteous, young Coast Guardsmen, one of whom remembered seeing, an hour or so earlier, the band we had been searching. Descendants of the Portland victims had carried their flowers to the edge of the cliff and dropped them down on the treacherous sea—so disarmingly beautiful in that clean expanse of sky and water!

If the unheeding sea swallowed up the flowers, somewhere in the universe, nevertheless, a bell must have rung. A handful of people were confronting the indifference of the sea and the callousness of men, with their flowers and their remembrance.

In one way or another, from time immemorial, you reflected, men and women had been doing this . . . saying that pity and kindness and remembrance also belonged to that universe of beauty and might—and mystery—to be glimpsed there in the deserted November twilight. In setting and theme, the TV script was thin and counterfeit after this Shakespearean tragedy.