

## The Mooncussers of Cape Cod

There is a tradition that a band of robbers anciently infested the shores of Cape Cod. These robbers, on horses, are said to have decoyed vessels on the rocks in the darkest of nights by means of large lanterns and, plundering them of everything, put the sailors to death, leaving the ships stripped and gutted. They are now generally known as the mooncussers of Cape Cod, a name which became a legend.

These men for whom the beach on a winter's night held so strong an appeal seem to have had a peculiar talent, for just as the experienced duck hunter knows what weather will bring the birds to certain corners of the marshes, so were these mooncussers gifted with a sort of sixth sense that enabled them to smell a wreck as they lay in bed, listening to the winds howl down the Wellfleet valleys or across the plains of Nauset.

What a strange company they must have made as they met on the beaches. A group of them would divide, two of them tramping the beach in one direction, two in the other, a shingle held

up to protect their eyes from the flying sand, and their eyes straining to pierce the darkness for a light from a ship in distress or for a glimpse of a hut on the bars off shore. Perhaps the first sign of trouble would be a spar flung up by the surf, bringing the tattered remnants of a sail or the numbered and battered form of a sailor. The wild beach and the turbulent sea, with the foam flying, the howling wind, the pounding waves, made a wild setting for a wild play. The introduction of lighthouses, put up after much opposition from Eastham men, put the curb on the profits of these men whose business was wrecking, or mooncussing. There was also a reputable and honest side to this business of wrecking and so-called "salvaging." These reputable salvagers were ready, at a price, to float a grounded vessel if she were intact, or to salvage her cargo and trans-ship it if the ship were past saving.

And so these romantic, swash-buckling, domestic pirates, halted only by the lighthouses, remain in tradition as some of the most colorful figures in the unending novel of the Cape.

March 12, 1955

Beachcombing and the possibility of finding valuable or unusual things, or even excellent timbers, has never lost its hold on many Cape Codders. Today, equipped as they are with tough sand buggies they can go anywhere and do their job quickly and efficiently. They are liable to find anything from a crate of oranges or, as during the last war, a bale of crude rubber. Lately, several have come upon drums of highest gasoline high up on the back shore. In addition, cans of a liquid used in decorating Christmas decorations, trees and wreaths have been found.

Frank Henderson of Provincetown found a drum of the gasoline on the shore below Highland Light.

Franklin M. Young of Truro, who has a beach buggy and frequently cruises the beaches for driftwood, said he picked up two drums of gasoline, one of oil, and a short while later some 18 cans of the liquid preparation.

Mr. Young also said a new object has been uncovered near Peaked Hill Bars, apparently a 75-foot barge, which was not visible in the area before. He thought it might have been tossed up by this Winter's storms, or been uncovered by accident of wind and rain.

## They Used Big Anchors

THE pictures one sees which shows the bow of some old sailing ship with her anchor catted ("hung up" on the outside of her bow) invariably fail to give a true impression of the tremendous size and weight of both anchor and anchor chain. An incident of two summers ago off Provincetown will, however, help to correct any impression that a ship's anchor was a small thing. One day that summer the dragger "Jimmy Boy" had its gear foul in a huge anchor deep in the water off the Back Shore. When the skipper tried to tow the anchor and its great length of chain, he found that he would have to have the aid of two other draggers, the "Plymouth Belle" and the "Joan and Thomas." All three combining their strength, they managed to bring the mass of iron round to the wharf at Lands End. One fisherman estimated that the total weight of chain and anchor would be about three tons!



STAFF PHOTO BY PAUL KOCH

This huge anchor, newly placed in the courtyard of the Provincetown Aquarium, was picked up off Peaked Hill Bar by the Johnny-O, Louis Rivers, captain. Donald T. Gleason of the Aquarium says he found two old coins embedded in the rust covering the anchor. He has asked Edward Rowe Snow, New England historian, to inspect the anchor and help determine its age. It must have come from a wrecked ship, says Mr. Gleason, because the hawse-pipe (lower center) is still on the chain.