

alongshore



By John Bell

As one of the minority who favored building the new Coast Guard station at Long Point, I felt that Capt. Norman Scherer's arguments against it lacked weight. Further study has tipped the scale against me, but the added ounces have little to do with Long Point being "out in the boondocks" where Coast Guard wives would need jeeps to pick up their men after work.

I changed my view while reading about the work of the Wood End Life Saving crew during a storm that hit 73 years ago this weekend, 17 years before the birth of the Coast Guard. Four of the crew had wives who lived by the rule, "Expect me when you see me." On Saturday and Sunday, November 26 and 27, these ancestors of today's motorized Coast Guardsmen worked around the clock in a freezing hurricane without even one horsepower to aid them. Said Capt. Ike Fisher, their boss, "If we had had a couple of horses, I believe we could have saved every man on the *Lewis* and the *Mott*."

The Portland Gale

That weekend storm has since been named the Portland Gale from the tragic sinking of the steamer *Portland* with some 60 lives lost. Because wreckage and bodies came ashore between Race Point and Nauset when the wind shifted to the north, the steamer is thought to have broken up and sunk some miles offshore. Her hulk has never been positively identified among the wrecks out there.

Warned of the approaching gale, fishermen crowded into Provincetown Harbor on Saturday and anchored. Local crews went home. The five-man crews of the three-masted schooner *Lester A. Lewis* of Bangor, Maine, and the two-masted coaster *Jordan L. Mott* of Rockland, Maine, stayed aboard. By Sunday evening, six of the ten were frozen to death.

The gale started from due east with spits of snow, light enough to allow Capt. Fisher and his Wood End crew to work all Saturday evening helping dory fishermen land boats and gear. After 11 p.m. the wind backed to the northeast and increased "by leaps and bounds" to hurricane force. At dawn Sunday, much of the fleet was sunk at anchor or drifting helplessly

The Storm That Drove The 'Portland' Down

and colliding with anchored vessels, or piled on the west end flats in a heaving tangle of wreckage. (Remember, there was no west end breakwater until 13 years later; at high tide, the surf reached almost to the back door of the Wood End station.)

Up all night, Capt. Fisher was in the watchtower at dawn Sunday. He saw Surfman No. 3 Frank Wager "coming on the dead run" to report that a coaster had sunk in the harbor. Fisher and his seven men rolled out the surfboat on its wagon, but the minute they turned the corner of the boathouse, the wind blew the boat off its carriage. They laid their oars on the sand and dragged the boat over them to the water's edge.

The west end of the harbor was packed with lumber, wharf pilings and planks from the wharves wrecked by the storm, "the whole mass writhing like snakes as the surf tossed them. Good sized boards were being blown like feathers out of the mass..." The crew dragged their boat eastward over this wreckage, finally reaching the mouth of Lobster Plain, a tidal inlet.

Fighting Wind and Snow

Against that wind, they could not row the boat across the 50-foot channel. Finally one man waded across in icy water up to his neck to bury their anchor in the opposite bank. They hauled the boat across by its painter.

A dozen times they tried to launch; each time the wind and surf threw them back on the beach. They dragged the boat eastward to Capt. T. Julian Lewis' fish weir, hoping it would break the wind slightly and give them ropes to cling to. Here they finally got through the surf—but the rope they depended on broke. The boat swung broadside, and they were back on shore again. By now the crew was near exhaustion.

Seeing some fishermen on the beach, Capt. Fisher called on them to help. Three of the crew of the *Mary Cabral* got into the boat. With double-manned oars, they managed to get clear of the surf. It was now 4 p.m., nine and a half hours into the rescue attempt.

They had to row almost into the teeth of the gale to reach the *Mott*, drifting to leeward faster than they went ahead. "If we had had to go one boat-length farther, we would have missed her and been swept away."

The *Jordan L. Mott* was sunk to her upperworks. The five men on her clung to the

rigging. Captain Charles Dyer and the ship's boy were nearly dead; their companions had been beating them to keep them from freezing. Capt. Dyer's father, the steward, was already dead, his rigid body encrusted with snow. The Life Savers took the four survivors off.

The *Lester A. Lewis* lay upwind of the *Mott*, only her deckhouse and masts above water. The four men in the rigging showed no signs of life. Another lay frozen in the roofless cabin. Said Capt. Fisher later, "We wanted to get to her, but it was impossible." Capt. Dyer told him the crew of the *Lewis* seemed to have given up early; he thought they had died before the Life Savers arrived. He and his men were themselves nearly dead; when the surfboat reached the station, two of them had to be carried ashore.

Capt. Dyer told a reporter later that he had not expected any help from Wood End Station because he could not believe "that mortal man could get a boat up from that direction across such a sea in such a hurricane. Fisher and his crew did all they could, more than I thought humanly possible."

No Jeeps in the Boondocks

I could go on, listing some of the 260 ships lost with all hands between Hatteras and Cape Ann. Forty of the boats in Provincetown Harbor alone met disaster. (One, the steamer *Vigilant*,



Boston papers still hoped the *Portland* was safe three days after Provincetowners found her wreckage on the back shore. The storm had knocked down telegraph lines and washed out railroad service to the Cape.

was hauled out for repairs, then blew off the cradle Sunday night and was hopelessly