Mooncusser Story Persists

"Mooncussing" has come to mean beachcombing for whatever the tide brings in. However, the origin and its ancient meaning are well-known on the lower Cape, and if you have an "ear" for old-time talk the "wreckers" did a thriving business.

On a dark night a skipper unfamiliar with her back-side shoals and driven by wind and tide might easily have been lured by a lamp swung slowly through a wide arc, in the belief that he was following some skipper better in formed than himself and would be enticed in to waters from which there was no escape.

There is the story of the ancient crone who lit her lantern, tied it to the end of a long lily-iron, and then holding the light aloft with one hand, leaped nimbly aboard a lean white horse, and down the beach she went waving the lantern in wide arcs from side to side, hoping to snare some bewildered skipper and his coveted cargo into the shoals. This could not be accomplished in the light of the moon—hence, "mooncussing".

There are those who declare there never was such a crime on Cape Cod, and there never was a record of mooncussing because no mooncussier was ever caught.

An Honorable Calling

Beachcombing still has a lure for Provincetowners though their harvest now is not as rich or as plentiful as in the days when the outer shore was often a source of constant revenue and sometimes, they whisper, of real wealth. Even yet one hears of "so-and-so" having gone out to the Back Side after a wreck and from that day on he never "did a lick of work", yet always had ample funds.

But the excitement of the search is as keen as ever among those who follow the pastime and the news of an unusual find still travels through the town on the wings of words which add size, value and importance to even minor finds.

Time was, when beachcombing was a lucrative and often piratical business with every man for himself and heaven help the ship and cargo owner, that everything found had to be reported to the town clerk and the owners advised by a legal notice. Then if no claim were made it was "finders keepers."

Truro, of course, would have none of this and in its history there is no mention of any wreck-master. Some effort was made by property owners of that town to claim anything that came to their shores but what Mr. Small told the lighthouse keeper who claimed the hawser that landed in front of Government property can't be repeated here.

Always there is in the mind of the beachcomber the dream of a rich haul as he picks up cork and glass net floats, choice pieces of wood, lobster floats, odd oars, or once in a while a ship's knee wrenched from a wreck by the storm. He can recall those days within his own memory when the Cape-end was doing its best to cheer the nation through the legally arid years of the "noble experiment" when a drum of Belgian "alky" might be found on the beach or a case of the real McCoy. And he knows of the days when loads of lumber and lathes and cotton and wollen goods came ashore sufficient for the needs of the finders for many a lean year.

How much jetsam and flotsam of the sea, harvested by generations of beachcombers may be found in Provincetown, Truro and Wellfleet homes, its value and the dramatic history which may cling about the finds is and must always be a matter of conjecture. Certainly as recently as last summer there was a sudden and frenzied canning of blueberries not only in Orleans where the blueberry laden Nova Scotia freighter went aground but in Provincetown as well and in many of the homes in the intervening territory. And they were blueberries of excellent quality.

A trip out along the far reaches of the great beach which surrounds the end of Cape Cod may yield almost anything. Sometimes a bale of crude rubber which brings a good price, or a drum of oil. Odd and curious buoys have been known to float ashore here after drifting thousands of miles and now and then a bottle with a message comes up on the sandy beach.

But if you don't find a thing save a load of first class fireplace drift wood you are certain to come back with a sense of reverence which springs from the soul being alone out where a mighty sky meets an equally mighty sea and the two come together with the shore in what seems to be a God-like, eternal understanding.

July 12, 1836

When shipwrecks occurred frequently along Cape Cod shores the rule of "findings are keepings" was often applied to pickings along the beaches. But often, too, honest salvagers advertised their finds with the request that owners come forward, prove their property, and pay the charges. Everything from bales of cotton, bags of coffee and lumps of tallow, to whole hulls of vessels, were advertised. But here, advertised on this day, 1836, was a find which suggests the old saw that truth is stranger than fiction, and which defies one to think up a plausible explanation: "NOTICE. Picked up between the bars at low water, on the backside of Truro on the 10th ult. an ELEPHANT'S TOOTH; the owner can have the same by proving property and paying charges. Apply to EBENEZER DYER. Truro, July 12, 1836."

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First Shipwreck

The first recorded shipwreck on Cape Cod was that of the Sparrowhawk, wrecked on Nauset beach in 1626. It took two wrecks to finish off the Sparrowhawk, and she lay buried in the sand of Cape Cod for two centuries. She went ashore first in December, 1625, and after repairs were made and her passengers had received aid from the Pilgrims at Plymouth, she set out again, only to go fast on the shoals again, The passengers and crew of the ship spent the winter at Plymouth and left for Virginia the next summer. The wreckage of the ship, on the lonely unpopulated Cape shore, was forgotten. Wind and tide washed sand over it. Marsh grasses grew over it. Cape residents brought it to light in 1863 when whims of tide and wind uncovered a few ancient timbers. The entire ship was exhumed, put together and put on display in Boston. Historians assisted in reconstructing the skeleton of the ship, which is now on view in the historical museum at Plymouth.

"The Peaked Hill station did an immense work during the storm and cold of January 1886, saving thirty-one lives from two crews stranded upon the beach. . . The achievement was performed at great sacrifice to the station men, whose hands and ears, in a number of cases, were frozen in the attempt at rescue, while they were encased in armor of thick ice that rendered action almost impossible."—Joseph W. Smith: Gleanings from the sea. Andover 1887.