

November 27, 1944

N. E. Marine Mystery Has Chance of Solution

BOSTON, Nov. 27 (UP)—Relatives of the 176 persons who died in the sinking of the steamer Portland off Cape Cod in 1898 were hopeful today that a survey of the recently-discovered hull of the old side-wheeler would solve the ancient New England marine mystery.

At ceremonies on the wharf from which the Portland departed only to founder in a great Atlantic blizzard, plans for investigating the hull were officially announced last night to the group—the Portland Associates.

John A. Thornquist, chairman of the Associates, told them divers would go down to the hulk, near Highland Light, in the Spring and attempt to uncover the ship's log as well as search for \$18,000 in uncut diamonds rumored to be in the ship's safe.

Mrs. Mildred Blanchard Poole of Bloomfield, N. J., scattered flowers over the sea from India wharf in the annual memorial service. Her grandfather, the late Capt. Horace H. Blanchard, was in command of the ship when it put out for Portland, Me., 46 years ago last night.

From The Provincetown Advocate

DECEMBER 28, 1944

Old Story In New Headline

It was odd to read in recent newspapers that the hull of the steamer Portland had been located. It was stranger still to find the United Press attributing to Edward Rowe Snow, as something new, assertion the lost steamer lies a few miles off the backside of Cape Cod.

The evidence which United Press now presents in support of Mr. Snow's announcement is the identical incident which Mr. Snow himself offered in a signed article in the Boston Herald six years ago. A year ago on the anniversary of the Portland's loss, Mr. Snow published a book in which he detailed his research into the Portland mystery. The headline writers of this week could have found all they presented as news in Mr. Snow's year old book. In the Herald, on November 27, 1938, Mr. Snow wrote:

"Four summers ago a scallop trawler from Rockland, Maine, recovered some dishes from the hulk of the Portland, about seven miles

from Highland Light. If the place had been marked with a buoy at the time, divers might have been able to visit the wreck with the possible solving of the mystery."

If there is anything new in recent stories of the Portland disaster it is Mr. Snow's suggestion a diver ought to be sent down to recover \$18,000 in uncut jewels from the steamer safe and the captain's log, which Mr. Snow is credited with believing may still be readable forty-six years after the great gale of November 26, 1898, tore the wooden side-wheeler to pieces. Seawise folk will conclude Mr. Snow has a deal of work to do before he finds the spot from which Captain Carver's Maine scalloper dredged up the Portland's dishes in 1935. Mr. Snow himself notes Captain Carver neglected to buoy the spot. Mr. Snow's hearers at the anniversary meeting took no action to hire a diver. Perhaps they recalled Mr. Snow writing in 1938, "The keel . . . has undoubtedly been covered by shifting currents with sand and debris."

There hasn't been any major mystery about the Portland since the bodies began to wash ashore on Cape Cod on Sunday, November 27, 1898. Within 48 hours 33 bodies were recovered. There was enough wreckage alongshore to identify the Portland. All on board were lost with the steamer—108 passengers and 68 crew members.

The minor mysteries, and they are interesting ones, are why Captain Blanchard sailed from Boston that Saturday night in the face of northeast storm warnings, and the exact hour at which the steamer sank off the Cape's outer shore. Was it for some 12 or 24 hours that the storm confronted the Portland's personnel with imminence of overwhelming death?

The Portland's companion ship on the Boston and Portland run did not venture out of its Maine harbor that stormy night. The Portland sailed from Boston's India wharf at 7 P. M. Snow has suggested that Captain Blanchard was piqued by the appointment of a young man to command the sister ship and proposed to show up the cautious master who held the steamer Bay State in Portland harbor. A fisherman passed the Portland, rolling heavily, at 11:15 P. M. off Thatcher's island to the north of Boston. Next morning at 7:45 A. M., men far southward at Race Point Lifesaving station on Cape Cod heard four sharp blasts of a steamer's whistle. An hour later a fisherman, making heavy weather off Peaked Hill bars, thought he saw the storm-shrouded bulk of the Portland, still afloat and gale-racked.

Watches on bodies the surf tossed up had stopped at 10. That could have stood for 10 on Sunday morning. Some students of the disaster believe the Portland was overwhelmed at 10 on Sunday night—after more than 24 hours of struggle with the gale. They choose the later hour because no wreckage came ashore until nearly midnight Sunday, but there were bodies in the North Truro surf at dusk that afternoon.

For years relatives of the Portland victims have kept memory of the tragedy green by meeting on the anniversary to strew flowers on Boston harbor. Mr. Snow, Winthrop teacher and historian of Boston harbor, has diligently collected details of the story.

The Portland's 176 lives lost were but a fraction of the toll of the November gale of 1898 which took probably 500 lives along the New England coast. Five men perished when Schooner Lunet sank in Tarpaulin cove. Three of five men were lost when Schooner Addie Sawyer was torn from anchorage off Falmouth and driven, bottom up, across the Sound. Homes in Falmouth "rocked on their foundations," according to The Enterprise. Isaac M. Small, a Cape marine historian, estimated the Portland Gale blew 100 miles an hour. That was such a wind as Falmouth experienced at the height of its 1944 hurricane.

It was symbolic that the Portland wreck scattered a consignment of coffins on the Cape beach. A court said that last official word, on the fate of the steamer. When relatives of the dead sued Portland Packet Company, the court rejected their claims. An "Act of God" took the steamer, the court decided.

—Falmouth Enterprise

DIVER RECOVERS KEG LABELED PORTLAND

1945

ORLEANS, June 7 (AP)—A diver has brought up from the ocean depths off Cape Cod a key bearing the label of the Portland Steam Packet Co., operators of the ill-fated steamer Portland, which sank in 1898 with a loss of 176 lives, Edward Rowe Snow, New England coastal historian, said tonight.

Snow said the key, recovered a week ago Sunday from a sunken vessel, probably the Portland, had been turned over to an expert for identification.

Reports Seeing Bodies

The diver also reported, Snow added, that he saw bodies and what he thought was the Portland bell on the sunken craft. He also brought up a piece of timber.

"Being naturally suspicious as a coastal explorer," Snow said, "I want to be sure of my ground before making any announce-

ment that we have recovered the long lost Portland."

The sunken craft, he added, was found in the vicinity of a spot where Capt. John B. Carver, a Rockland, Me., scallop fisherman, reported a year ago he hauled up a door knob which also bore a Portland Steam Packet Co. inscription.

Will Take Pictures

Snow said he planned to have divers go down again a week from Sunday to take underwater pictures which may establish definitely whether the vessel is the Portland.

The diving operations, financed by the Portland Associates, headed by John A. Thornquist, Boston stationer, are being directed by Snow, a Winthrop Junior High School teacher, who has authored several books on New England coastal history.

June 1945



RELICS OF SHIP DISASTER

JAMES I. WILSON (left) of New Haven, Conn., holds a section of the paneling from Stateroom 110, occupied by his father who perished when Steamer Portland sank off Cape Cod 47 years ago with a loss of 176 lives. EDWARD ROWE SNOW, director of diving operations for Portland Associates, a group comprising relatives and friends of passengers aboard the ill-fated side-wheeler, made presentation to Wilson and holds a stateroom key recently brought up by a diver.