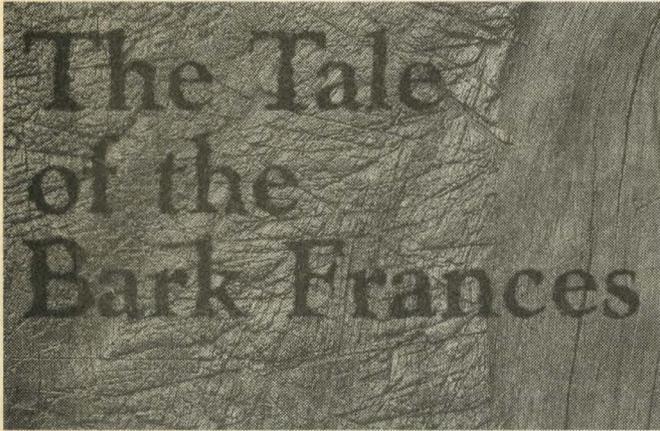




KELLY'S CORNER

by Jan Kelly



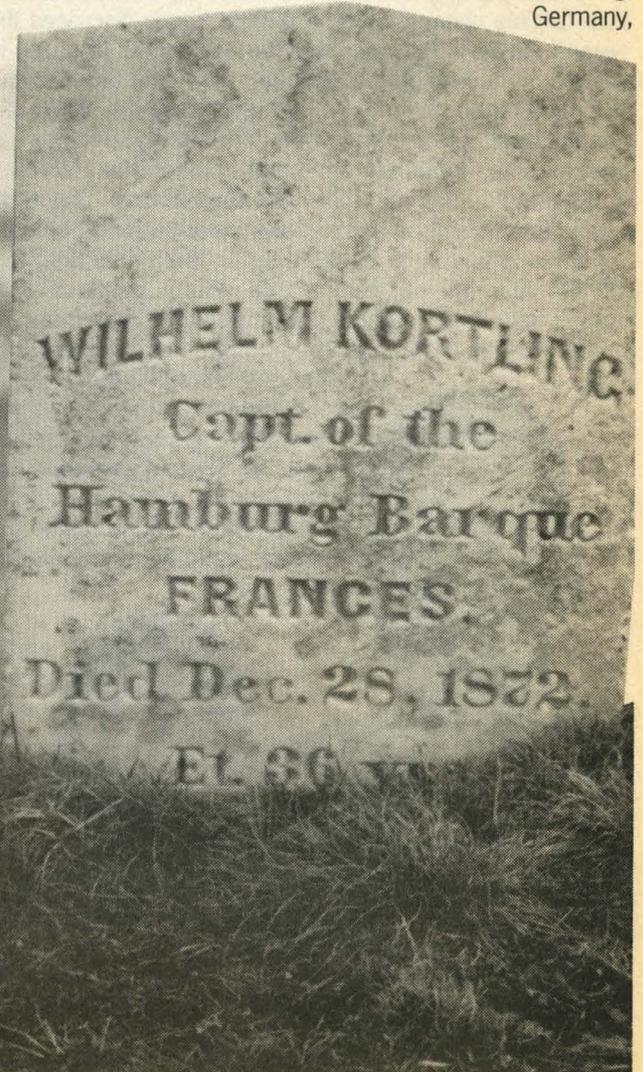
To sit out at Race Point, Head of the Meadow, Newcomb Hollow or any of the beautiful back shore beaches on a fine day, your mind would wander to many subjects... but perhaps not to shipwrecks. But try a day when a nor'easter commands the sea and shore and your imagination will naturally wander and try to reconstruct the images of shipwrecks. And not too easily at that, standing there and looking seaward in your comfortable Gore-tex, fleece, and insulated boots topped off by hat and gloves that make all but the tip of your nose impermeable to the weather.

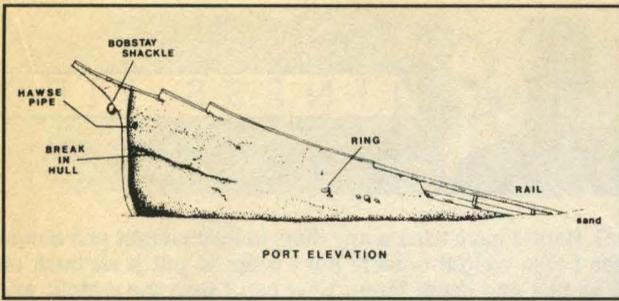
Perhaps with difficulty, imagine yourself part of a crew on a vessel without radar, sonar, or ship to shore radio, and relying on whale oil for light. Your clothes, made of wool, hang wet and heavy. Your leather boots, also wet and heavy provide no comfort, perhaps they scrape the tender skin of your feet. With the roaring of the waves you have difficulty hearing any command or warning. With the pounding of the waves you steady yourself with difficulty and the craft seems to flounder, saturated with sea water to its last absorbable speck. You wish you were somewhere else perhaps like Shakespeare's foot soldier, "Oh for a pint of ale in an English pub, or rhyming once again on dry land, "one hour in port, the sailor freed from fears, forgets the tempest of a hundred years."

Some 3,300 wrecks from Provincetown to Chatham, from the Sparrow Hawk of Pilgrim times to those of the second quarter of the 20th century, have made a history unique to our tiny patch

on the globe. The vicious and uncaring storms of the Atlantic have kept sailors wary and brave and kept landlubbers busy saving crews and Mooncussers busy stripping the mute remains of noble craft for selfish gain. Most of these seafaring tragedies have stories, engravings or artistic renderings of their final voyage. One, the bark *Frances*, has two tangible and visible remains: her hull exposed to drying air each low tide and a gravestone.

On Christmas Eve, 1872 about 6:30 in the evening as a blizzard was harassing the Christmas peace, a Truro man spied a light lurching out in the sand bars of Head of the Meadow beach—shipwreck! This brave soul trudged back to the village, pulled friends and neighbors from their preparations for holiday activities and turned them to the rescue of the bark *Frances*—a boat from Hamburg, Germany,





that sailed from Calcutta with a crew of 20, Captain Wilhelm Kortling at the helm. The cargo was tin and sugar.

Three miles away at Peaked Hill Bars in Provincetown a second boat, the *Peruvian*, was suffering a similar fate. The two craft were within sight of each other during most of the long journey from Calcutta. The *Peruvian's* fate was sealed by a wooden hull and the lack of an observer, the entire crew perished in the shallow foaming water.

The bark *Frances* sat in deeper water and had an iron hull which the sea thrust upon an inner bar where it lodged and remained so, giving the rescuers and crew precious time. The rescuers were on the job the moment the alert sounded. An 18' long whale boat with sharp double ends was shoveled out, pushed and hauled from the bayside to the backside. Twenty men shoveled this boat to the pond in North Truro, pushed it over the frozen surface where two horses continued to tow it from the area of the Post Office. Hoisted onto a set of wheels, the boat was dragged through the raging storm with the brave volunteers shoveling furiously where the drifts were too high and deep for easy passage. After a night of horrendous and herculean efforts the whale boat, horses and men were perched at the edge of the shore, exhausted but ready for their next great effort and challenge: to save the crew and the captain from a ship fastened in sand, suffering the constant slashing of waves.

Without taking any extra recuperating breaths, the volunteers jumped into the whale boat, dipping oars into the rising and falling foam. A boat that had seemed so heavy and difficult to move, must have seemed precarious and fragile once under way. Great heroism and that small boat landed the twenty crew onshore, shaken but jubilant. Now, Christmas could happen.

The 21st person to rescue was a different story. Captain Wilhelm Kortling had been ill for days and stayed in his cabin. He had to be lifted and lowered into the whale boat by the rescuers. This task was dangerous with the waves relentlessly pounding, threatening to splinter the 18' wooden boat against the iron hull of the bark *Frances*. Crushing, hypothermia, drowning—any of these could claim a man so none would have survived.

Ultimately the captain too was saved and brought to Highland House for nursing and recuperation; but three days later, worn out from illness, stress and exposure, Captain Kortling died. He is buried in the North Truro Cemetery across from the police and fire station, third row, second grave in from the southwest entrance.

Whenever I visit him, I find remnants of flowers in a mason jar or similar humble vessel. Captain Wilhelm Kortling is not forgotten though he has marked that spot since December 28, 1872. He was thirty-six years old.

The owner of the bark *Frances* and the insurance company hired the same brave rescuers to unload the cargo of tin and sugar from the stilled ship. (Sugar was shipped in straw mats in those days.) Several mats had been loosened and torn during the storm. The men worked all day to retrieve the cargo and so would carry their noonday meals with them in lunch pails. They were told they could fill these lunch pails at the end of the day with the spilled sugar. As each day passed, the lunch pails of these crafty Cape Codders grew in size and got so heavy to row in at the end of the day that capsizing and more tragedy seemed a real possibility. That ended the kind gesture, but Truro did not worry about the price of sugar for a long while.

Once the cargo was unloaded, the insurance company deemed the boat beyond salvage and gave it to the crew, rescuers and wreckers. They organized and thought it would be a great business opportunity. With wooden barrels pontooning, steam pumps on board, lightening the hull, weeks of hopeful labor went by. On the chosen day, a tugboat was engaged to lift the bark *Frances* from the bar and set her afloat.

The bark *Frances* did indeed rise, like a cork, sea water and debris falling from her iron sides. A great roar of success went up. Water was spied pouring out of two holes where the masts were stepped and had been grinding four tides a day since Christmas. Silence. The ship dropped down like the iron from which she was made and was never raised again. When you visit Captain Kortling's grave, visit also his ship, the bark *Frances* at low tide at Head of the Meadow Beach, using the western most entrance. So only these two tangibles remain, from what are otherwise artistically rendered versions of one of the most dramatic parts of our nautical past.

