

Shipwrecks in Oregon

By Chris Dewey

Approximately three thousand ships have met their fate in Oregon waters. Many wrecks occurred at river bars where strong currents carrying sand and other deposits cause the river bottom to continually change. The flow of fresh water from rivers into the Pacific Ocean can cause intense and unpredictable sea conditions. Strong ebb currents pushing against the opposing forces of the ocean can build enormous swells in a very short time, threatening to overcome unprepared ships crossing the river bars. Other causes of shipwrecks include mechanical failure and rough coastal weather on unforgiving rocky shores. The causes of some early shipwrecks remain unknown, including that of a Spanish Galleon which spilled its cargo along the Nehalem Spit, c. 1693-1705.

The Columbia River Bar

The majority of Oregon shipwrecks have occurred on or near the Columbia River bar, where the ebb tides of the Columbia run into the flood tides of the Pacific. Strong currents, a shallow channel, and powerful winds—which can capsize poorly loaded ships and create foggy conditions—have made the bar one of the most deadly in the world. Its nickname is the Graveyard of the Pacific.

The U.S.S. *Peacock*, a naval sloop of war, grounded on the north shore in 1841 near Cape Disappointment, where heavy seas broke up the ship. The crew escaped by boat with no casualties, and the area where the ship wrecked is now called Peacock Spit. Five years later, another naval ship, the schooner U.S.S. *Shark*, grounded on the southern bank of the Columbia River bar. Tremendous seas broke the ship into pieces, and some of its carronades drifted south along the coast. One came ashore in the area now called Cannon Beach. Two additional carronades from the U.S.S. *Shark* were discovered at Arch Cape in 2008.

The American steamer *Great Republic*, the largest passenger ship on the Pacific Coast at the time, turned late and grounded near Sand Island at the mouth of the Columbia in April 1879. Despite many attempts to refloat the ship, it was broken up by heavy seas and abandoned. The passengers and much of the cargo were saved, but eleven members of the crew were drowned when the last lifeboat sank.

Before the availability of radar and Global Positioning Systems, mariners' eyes and ears were the principal tools for detecting hazards on the Oregon Coast when approaching from the sea. Coastal weather is often foggy and misty, and ships sometimes discovered the rocky shore too late to avoid disaster. The morning mist along Clatsop Spit, for example, confused the captain of *Peter Iredale*, which found itself in the breakers in October 1906. The currents and tides held the ship on the beach, and the crew was rescued by breeches buoy, which uses a life ring with attached canvass breeches to allow survivors to slide down a rope between the ship and shore. The ship was a total loss, and the remaining hull is a tourist attraction at Fort Stevens State Park.

The freighter *Mauna Ala* was on its way to Hawaii with its holds full of Christmas trees and holiday items when the captain was ordered back to Astoria after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On December 10, the darkened wartime coast was unfamiliar to the captain, and the freighter ran aground on Clatsop Spit, just south of the old *Peter Iredale* wreck. All hands were saved, but the wreck remains buried on the beach or under the surf.

Other Oregon Bars

In 1808, the British fur trading vessel *Sea Otter* ran into stormy weather and wrecked at the mouth of the Umpqua River near Reedsport. The six survivors had to walk across half the continent to Louisiana to arrange transportation back to England.

The U.S. Navy's minesweeper YMS-133 learned the lesson of treacherous swells where the river meets the sea. When the ship attempted to cross the Coos Bay bar in February 1943, the captain tried to come about in the channel when the minesweeper was rolled over on her beam and smashed into the sandbar. Thirteen of her complement of twenty-nine were lost.

The freighter, *New Carissa*, grounded on the North Spit near North Bend, on February 4, 1999. High winds and twenty-six-foot swells drove the ship onto Horsefall Beach, leading to one of

Oregon's worst oil spills.

Mechanical Failures

Problems inside a ship have led to disaster. On May 18, 1910, for example, the captain and crew of the steamer *J. Marhoffer* were enjoying a calm afternoon on the passage from San Francisco to Portland when a gas torch exploded, setting fire to the engine room. The captain steered toward the rocky shore as fire engulfed the ship, and the steamer went onto the rocks just north of Depoe Bay. The crew escaped in small boats. The rusted boiler is all that remains of the wreck, at what is now known as Boiler Bay,

The steamer *Argo* was on the final leg of its voyage from Portland to Garibaldi on November 26, 1909. The ship's port screw snapped off and forced it onto a sandbar at the entrance to Tillamook Bay. The Garibaldi Lifesaving Station dispatched rescue boats, while some of the crew and passengers took to the ship's boats. The raging sea took the lives of several passengers, crew, and lifesavers as rescue boats capsized in the rough surf.

The Russian freighter *Vazlav Vorovsky* lost steering control and grounded on the north side of the Columbia River, approximately a half mile south of the Cape Disappointment lighthouse, on April 3, 1941. Despite the efforts of the captain to free the ship from the shoreline, the *Vazlav Vorovsky* broke up and disappeared. No lives were lost thanks to quick efforts by the Coast Guard.

Foggy Shores

The British bark *Cairnsmore* became lost in the fog off Clatsop Spit in September 1883. The ship drifted into the surf and grounded on what is now Fort Stevens State Park, and the steamer *Queen of the Pacific* rescued the *Cairnsmore's* crew. The remains of the bark were visible for many years.

The American bark *Emily Reed* crashed into the fog-shrouded sand near Rockaway Beach on February 14, 1908. Eight of the seventeen crew and passengers died. The wreck is buried beneath the sand, but storms occasionally uncover the well-worn wooden beams.

The captain of the German square-rigger *Mimi* mistook the entrance to the Nehalem River for the Columbia Bar. In thick weather in February 13, 1913, the ship ran hard onto the Nehalem Spit. Up to eighteen men drowned when the ship capsized during an ill-fated salvage attempt in April.

Improved Safety

Efforts to reduce the number of shipwrecks on the Oregon Coast include documenting hazards and changing the environment. The U.S. Navy and the U. S. Coast Survey documented the treacherous shores and bars of the coast on nautical charts, and the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the U.S. Coast Guard developed lighthouses and buoy systems that mark rocky coasts and shoalwater. Stone jetties on the south and north ends of the Columbia River Bar were constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between the 1885 and 1917, and the Corps maintains the depth of the water by dredging. Jetties were also built at Garibaldi and other dangerous river entrances to stabilize water depth and sand movement. Jetties decreased the number of ships wrecked while crossing the bar, but with rough weather and rocky coastline Oregon remains a dangerous place for ships.

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