The White Stallion

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

One of the many legends about Monomoy Point is that of the white stallion that walked along the beach with two lights swinging from its body. This horse had been put there by its master, named Spider, to confuse passing ships into thinking that the lights were navigational guides, leading them to head toward the point and run aground and putting them at the mercy of the wreckers who would proceed to strip the vessels of their cargoes.

Because of the hazardous waters surrounding Chatham, it is not surprising that a great many ships were wrecked off its shores, resulting in its being referred to as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. Another indication of the frequency of wrecks off Monomoy is found in Giddings Ballou's account of his time teaching at the school in White Wash Village at the tip of Monomoy. He writes that one of his students, whom he calls "Big Hugh," always sat where he could look out the window in hopes of seeing a wreck. When he spotted one, he would shout "Wrack," and the whole classroom was quickly emptied as all the students rushed out to go salvage the cargo. They joined the other members of the community, who would have rushed there for the same purpose.

Too often, however, the townspeople could not wait for a ship to be stranded by the forces of nature but gave her an assist by doing the work of the white stallion. Obviously, these men (sometimes women and children as well) could only carry out their nefarious scheme when there was no moon shining, hence their name. An article printed in a Boston newspaper in the late 19th century explains the origin of the name of these wreckers: "There is a tradition that a band of robbers anciently infested the shores of Cape Cod. These robbers, mounted on horses, are said to have decoyed vessels on to the rocks in the darkest nights by means of large lanterns, and, plundering them of everything, put the sailors to death, etc. They are now usually known by the name of mooncussers."

In his biography "Days to Remember," Joshua Nickerson supports this tradition when he says that Seaview Street is known to many as "Wicked Hill" because it was there that "….on dark and stormy nights men tied a lantern to a lame horse, and then walked the beast back and forth to give the impression that the lantern was a riding light on a vessel safely at anchor, thus enticing unwary mariners to their doom on Chatham Bars." He also tells us that in the Old Village there were so many competing crews of wreckers vying with each other to get to a wreck first that they scrambled as fast as possible to outrun their competitors, and in this way gave rise to the name "Scrabbletown."

That the mooncussers put the crews to death is belied by the historic fact that they considered it their first obligation to save the lives of the crew before proceeding to plunder the cargo. But when the crew of any wreck had been saved, the wreckers would reap their reward, as in the case of one famous wreck, the Horatio Hall that ran aground off Chatham in 1909. It lay on the bottom of a shoal, but her upper decks were out of the water, making it possible for anyone with a boat to make free with her cargo. Many houses in Chatham stocked their china cupboards from this wreck. One of her quarter boards still can be seen on the barn of the house on the corner of Cross Street and Kent Place.

The people of Chatham were so notorious as wreckers that when a member of the crew of a ship that had been wrecked on Shovelful Shoal managed to ride a plank safely to shore and saw some men waiting on the beach, he called out, "What town is this?" When they yelled back "Chatham," he shouted, "Goodbye" and turned his plank

back out to sea.