

Disaster At Monomoy

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

On Tuesday, March 11, 1902, when the tug Sweepstakes was towing two coal barges, the Wadena and the Fitzpatrick, around Monomoy Point while traveling from New York to Boston, the barges became stranded on Shovelful Shoal, a bit south of the Point.

The owner, William H. Mack, hired Captain Elmer F. Mayo to free the Fitzpatrick, but to float the Wadena he hired two tugs from Hyannis, the Sweepstakes and the Peter Smith, along with their crews, who intended to oversee the project themselves.

Five men remained aboard the Wadena, including William Mack. On Saturday, four days after the stranding, the crew made preparations to free the stranded barge by dumping coal over the side. On Sunday at high tide the tugs pulled on the hawsers they had attached to the Wadena, only to have them part from the strain. The tug Sweepstakes headed for Boston to secure new hawsers.

That evening when signs of a southeast gale became evident, Mack had the tug take off all but five of his workers, leaving Captain Chris Olsen, Steward Robert Molanox and two deck hands, Walter Zaved and Manuel Enos, on board. By Monday morning when the storm had become a fierce gale, Captain Hansen was unable to get his tug near enough to the shoals to take Mack and his crew to safety. He headed for Hyannis where he was able to telephone Captain Marshall Eldredge of the Monomoy Station Chatham to inquire about the Wadena and the men remaining on board. It was only then that Captain Eldredge realized that there were men still on board the Wadena.

He ran down to the point to look at the barge and found that she was flying distress signals. The huge waves were breaking over her, and the barge crew was huddled on the stern behind the deckhouse. Aware of their danger, he called the lifesaving station and asked Surfman Seth Ellis to launch the surfboat and come down the Sound side of Monomoy. Ellis picked up Captain Eldredge, who took the helm and ordered the six husky life savers to row out to the Wadena. They rowed furiously for an hour before they reached the stranded barge, where the seas were breaking so heavily around it that it was difficult to get close. Nevertheless, they managed to bring their dory under the lee, where one by one the crew lowered themselves on a rope from the rail that was twelve to thirteen above. But the Captain, a big heavy man, let go of the rope part way down and dropped so forcefully into it that he broke the after thwart.

The rescued men were told to sit quietly and keep close to the bottom of the boat. In order to get away from the barge quickly and head to shore, the Captain instructed the surfmen on the port side to back hard on their oars while those on the starboard side pulled forward. At this moment a big wave struck with such force that the boat was flooded with water. The rescued men became panic-stricken and jumped up, throwing their arms around the crew so that they could not manage their oars.

Heavy seas continued to break over the boat until it turned bottom up, spilling all of the men into the raging sea. They righted the boat twice, only to have more heavy seas capsize it each time. The five rescued men were swept into the frigid 45-degree water, where they drowned before the eyes of the surfmen, who were unable to reach them. The remaining men clung desperately to the overturned boat, encouraging each other to hold on. But

first Surfman Chase was swept into the sea and drowned, followed by Nickerson and Small. Captain Eldredge and four surfmen managed to hold on to the boat, even though each sea that swept over it almost smothered them. Before long, however, the men were dragged one by one into the raging seas until only Captain Eldredge and surfmen Rogers and Ellis remained.

Rogers was clinging to the boat about midship, while the Captain and Ellis clung to it near the stern. When Captain Eldredge begged Ellis to help him get a better hold, he managed to pull him on to the bottom of the boat, but a heavy sea washed them both off. Ellis was able to get himself back on to the upturned boat, but the Captain drifted away and soon drowned. When Rogers asked Ellis to help him climb further up onto the boat, he had become so weak from his exertions that he could only tell Rogers to hold on, as they were drifting slowly toward shore where help would be on hand, but Rogers lost his grip and went down.

The overturned boat with Ellis clinging to it drifted over the shoals, eventually reaching the tug Fitzpatrick that was stranded there. When Ellis managed to get their attention, they put a dory over the side with a man rowing through the fog toward him. The dory was manned by Captain Elmer F. Mayo, a skilled boatman, who carefully made his way over the rips and succeeded in reaching the shore. They were spotted by surfman Bloomer, who ran into the surf, seized the boat and pulled them to safety.

In 1903 the mother and sister of William H. Mack commissioned a monument to be erected on the northern edge of the Chatham Light property. The marble obelisk is in memory of Seth Ellis, the sole survivor of the crew of the Wadena, who in addition to Ellis were Captain Christian Olsen and crew members Robert Molaux, Walter Zaved, and Manuel Enos.

In addition to the five crew members of the Wadena, all seven members of the lifesaving crew died in the attempted rescue, making it the worst loss in the history of the Life Saving Service..

