

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Sinking Of The Alva

by spencer grey

Possibly the most luxurious private yacht ever built was made by the Metropolitan Steamship Company for William K. Vanderbilt. Launched in 1886 and named the Alva in honor of his wife, it was a steel-hulled barquerigged steamship, 285 feet long and 32 feet wide and cost \$500,000, which in today's currency would be \$12,500,000. Its salon and staterooms were decorated and furnished with all of the appointments that would be found in the most expensive dwellings. Its size and luxury required the attention of a crew of 52 officers and men.

On the afternoon of Saturday, July 23, 1892, with Mr. Vanderbilt and five male friends on board, the vessel departed Bar Harbor bound for Newport under the command of Henry Morrison, who is described as a "sturdy Englishman." About 6:15 the next morning the Alva ran into such heavy fog off Monomoy Point that Captain Morrison decided to activate the fog horn and drop anchor in the Pollock Rip channel about four miles off Chatham and wait for clear weather. Unfortunately the ship not only was anchored in the steamer lanes but it was lying broadside across the lane.

At 6 p.m. the same day, a 300-foot long freighter, the H. F. Dimock, departed from its dock in Manhattan's North River and headed for Boston. Early Sunday morning when she reached the tip of Monomoy, she encountered thick fog, but with its fog horn blowing, the ship continued its course northward in order to deliver its cargo on schedule.

Shortly after 8 a.m. the men of the morning watch on the Alva saw looming over them the huge bow of the Dimock, and at 8:20 there was a tremendous crash and the sound of flying timbers and deck fittings. When Captain Morrison reached the bow, he found a gaping hole in the Alva's port side, and immediately gave the order to abandon ship. As reported in the New York Times of July 25, 1892: *The water poured through the aperture in torrents, and in a very few moments after the collision occurred the bow began to settle precipitously. The proud queen of pleasure craft was doomed. She had made her last run for the present season, at least, and was fast going down.*

The crew of 52 shortly had all five of the ship's lifeboats, as well as a steam launch, in the water and quickly assisted Mr. Vanderbilt and his five guests safely off the sinking yacht, which sank in 15 minutes.

After picking up the passengers and crew, the boats headed for the Dimock, which had anchored less than 500 feet away. With those it had rescued on board, the Dimock resumed its voyage to Boston. Upon landing there, Mr. Vanderbilt and his party stopped briefly at the Parker House to refresh their clothing before taking the next train to Newport. As soon as he arrived there Vanderbilt cabled the Metropolitan Steamship Company to start construction of another yacht.

After visiting Chatham on Aug. 2 to assess the condition of the yacht and deciding that it was not possible to raise it, Vanderbilt sold it at auction to a Boston salvage company, Perkins and White, for \$3,500, but because of the reputation of Chatham's fishermen as wreckers, he immediately hired a schooner, the Luther Eldredge, to guard it. A photograph of the wreck shows its masts rising many feet above the water, with many small vessels sailing around it. There was an unsuccessful attempt to salvage some of the contents of the wreck, including cases of wine valued at \$6,000.

Wreckers employed by Perkins and White attempted to float the vessel by using a huge box that was fastened to its deck. When pumped out, the box would have huge lifting power, and it was hoped that the hulk could be raised in this way, but the method proved to be unsuccessful. Because it was a hazard to navigation, the Alva was blown up, removing the section that was near the surface of the water but leaving the basic structure intact, resting in 50 feet of water.

There it remained for almost a century, until in 1990 a team of divers using sophisticated underwater search techniques located it. The divers, John Fish, Arnold Carr, Richard Jones, and William McElroy, did not reveal the exact location of the wreck for fear that others might destroy it while attempting to salvage items such as the gold, brass and bronze fittings. Fish said, "We're afraid of scrap salvagers, who have no regard for history, and who might ruthlessly dismember the remains of this famous wreck."

The divers discovered that the stern section was pretty much intact, and one of them, who gained access to the interior, found a number of stateroom fittings, such as brass coat hooks, door locks, and hinges of elaborate design and construction. Although the wreck was gradually being covered with sand, divers reported that much of it was still visible. Starting from the stern and moving forward, they found that the most prominent feature is a large steam windlass. Moving along the starboard side, divers pass four lifeboat davits that appear like arms reaching out of the sand. One reports that "you can squeeze past the remains of machinery spaces and owner's quarters. Continuing forward, you see the chain locker with its large exposed links and follow the path to the massive anchor clearly visible a little off to the starboard side of center. Approaching the foredeck at the bow, you can squeeze past the remains of a marine head into a tight compartment that often holds a few large lobsters...almost always out of reach. Dropping down to the sand, you can pass under the Alva's sharp bow, which still stand proud off the bottom."

Seventeen years after sinking the Alva the Dimock sunk another ship in almost the same location; this time it was the 297-foot passenger steamer the Horatio Hall.



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