

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Salvagers

by spencer grey

For the owners and the crews of ships that ran aground, the wreck could be a disaster, both financially and personally. But for those on the shore the wreck could be a great boon, as they could salvage valuable and useful items from the ship's cargo.

One of the more famous wrecks that stranded on Chatham shores was the Onandaga, a freighter of 2,969 tons that was stranded on the beach near the Old Harbor Station on Jan. 13, 1907, at 1:30 a.m. by a fierce winter storm. She had a crew of 28 men and carried a cargo valued at \$160,000. The weather was foggy and a high sea was running. The men at the Old Harbor Station saw her coming ashore and used their rescue gear, including a Lyle gun and line, to bring the men safely to shore.

Two tugs tried to pull the freighter off the beach, but the hawsers broke several times resulting in a dilemma which was solved by hiring a crew of "wreckers" from Chatham to lighten the ship by unloading some of the cargo. As was their custom in all weathers, they wore oilcloths that provided room to hide many items. They unloaded the cargo that included a variety of items from Dutch chocolate bars weighing five pounds each to smoked tongue, bolts of cloth, shoes, potatoes and other useful items. The usual windy and stormy winter weather kept the Onandaga broadside on the beach for so long that the salvage crew had plenty of time to help themselves to whatever they wanted from the cargo. One man struggled with a large box of shoes and finally got it ashore, only to discover that it contained only shoes for left feet. Enough potatoes were acquired to feed many Chatham families for the winter. The late Joe Nickerson made off with a bolt of heavy oxford wool fabric known as "steamer cloth" that his mother used until the middle 1930s, with the last bolt providing her with fabric for a winter coat.

The wreckers also were hired as a temporary crew for the ship and remained on board through March 14, when she finally was freed and towed to Boston.

In 1937 a 155-foot freighter, the Lutzon, on a voyage from Nova Scotia to New York, suffered the same fate when a winter storm blew her onto North Beach near the Orleans/Chatham town line. She rested on the beach waiting for a tide high enough to float her, but after three days a northeast storm pushed her even higher on the beach. A salvage crew was hired to off load her cargo of cases of blueberries and bags of salt cod in an effort to free her, with a crew from the Chatham Coast Guard Station watching over their work to keep them honest. During the night, however, some illegal stripping was undertaken.

One night they had freed a donkey engine from the deck and were in the process of lifting it off the deck when one of them called out "someone's coming." As the scrambled ashore, the Coast Guard man on duty heard them and came to see what was happening. When the Chatham men saw him approaching, they ran for the high beach. They escaped without injury but the rope that was hold the engine in the air broke, dropping it into the sand. On that section of beach a huge coil of rope that had been taken off the Lutzon was being guarded by another Coast Guard man. But one of the wreckers found a loose end of the coil and began pulling it from a safe distance by walking back from the beach until they could pull it no further, at which point they cut it off. Being two inches in diameter, the purloined hawser provided several fishermen with new mooring lines.

When the guard was not watching, some young men rowed a 14-foot dory out to the wreck and loaded it with cases of blueberries and bags of salt cod. Throughout the Chatham area there were many blueberry pies made that winter, but those enjoying the treat had to put up with sand crunching between their teeth. After one meal of salt cod filled with sand, it was thrown away, as no one could stand eating it.

It is little wonder that the cry of “wreck ashore” was heard anywhere along the coast of Chatham and Monomoy. In fact, Giddings Ballou reports that when he was teaching at the school in White Wash Village, one boy always sat near the window so that he could cry out “wreck ashore” when he spotted a vessel stranded on the beach, at which point, “...the boys were apt to leave pretty suddenly, forgetting even to say ‘By’r leave”



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