

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

RECALLING TWO OF THE MANY TALES
OF SHIPWRECK AND CASTAWAYS ON
THE SHORES OF GASPEZIA OF MORE
THAN A CENTURY AGO.

KEN ANNETT

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TALES OF SHIPWRECK AND CASTAWAYS ON GASPESIAN SHORES

Many a tale remains to be told of shipwreck and castaways on the coasts of Gaspesia. For the Gaspé Peninsula, projecting into the Gulf of St. Lawrence at the entrance of the historic and much travelled Seaway from Europe to Quebec and the Canadian hinterland, saw many a ship end its career on its shores in times of fog and tempest. The readers of SPEC may be familiar with some of the published accounts of such maritime tragedies. In her book, "TREASURE TROVE IN GASPE AND THE BAIE DES CHALEURS", Mrs. Margaret G. MacWhirter wrote a vivid account of the wreck of the "COLBOURNE" on the shore of Bay Chaleur near Port Daniel, including the personal recollections of one of the few survivors, Joseph Jones Acteson of L'Anse aux Gascons. Again in Bay Chaleur, tradition held that it was at Cap d'Espoir that one of the ships of the ill-fated squadron of Rear-Admiral of the White, Sir Hovenden Walker, was wrecked with the loss of all on board. At Cap des Rosiers a seaside monument recalls the tragic wreck of the immigrant ship "CARRICK". It is with the view of supplementing such accounts that the following tales of the wreck of the brig, "WELLINGTON" and the grounding and near wreck of the masted steamer, "ALBATROSS" are brought to the attention of readers.

The story of the wreck of the "WELLINGTON" was told by Andrew Learmont Spedon in "RAMBLES AMONG THE BLUE-NOSES". Writing in 1862, Spedon recounted the experience of his childhood in the 1830's as follows:

In the good old classic town of Edinburgh, Scotland, I was ushered into the world of life : three years afterwards, my parents being influenced by the opening prospects of Canada, resolved to emigrate thither. We embarked

at Leith on the brig "WELLINGTON", commanded by Captain Young and bound for Quebec. By boisterous seas and contrary winds our voyage over the Atlantic was rendered long and extremely rough. And when we entered the gulf of St. Lawrence, it being early in Spring, large quantities of floating ice rendered our condition anything but safe and agreeable.

On the morning of this memorable event I am about to relate, a dense fog, preceded by a dark night, had settled upon the waters; a calm prevailed and the floating vessel was borne onward by the landward tide, which was running extremely high. At length a tremendous shock, followed by a fearful crashing of the ship's timbers, was felt, which vibrated with convulsive terror through every soul on board : but, for the present I leave the vivid imagination of my readers to picture the frantic and bewildered scene that immediately ensued. On examining the vessel it was discovered that she had struck upon a reef and was in immediate danger. The shore was apparently at no great distance. Signals of distress were fired - boats lowered - but before many minutes had elapsed, two fishermen from shore in a small boat came to our assistance. The Captain gave orders that the women and children were the first to be taken ashore ; this having been accomplished, every man on board was more desirous than ever of saving his own life, as the vessel by this time was filling up fast by the immense volume of water that found entrance by the shattered hull ; but all were not so fortunate in the attempt. One of the last boats with its living cargo, ready to leave, was swamped by the heavy swell of the plunging vessel as she sank, and all were suddenly swallowed up in the fatal and overwhelming vortex.

The winters of Cape Rosier are extremely severe, and continue several weeks longer than those in the district of Montreal ; the snow frequently falls to the depth of ten and fifteen feet. At the time we landed upon its shore, it being the fifteenth of May, the cold was intense and the snow averaged three feet in depth. On the cape there were only one hut and the walls of another.

At the distance of half a mile, on the receding bend of the coast, were also other two hovels ; and these were the only visible specimens of the house species there in those days. Imagine for a moment the miserable condition of one hundred and fifty persons, thrown upon the barren coast of that cold and uncongenial climate, huddled together in dirty hovels ; and destitute of the common necessaries that human nature requires, as nothing of any consequence had been saved from the wreck.

Cape Rosier, though not assuming an extremely dangerous position, has some underlying reefs around it, that have frequently proved treacherous and even fatal to benighted mariners .

The scattered inhabitants along the coast, once having shared in the spoils of shipwreck, were ever afterwards ready to seize upon the effects of a wreck, and murder the passengers if any resistance whatever was shown. But few were the apparent allurements of our wreck. Few, if any, had saved more than the common coverings of their person; yet, prudence in the protection of life was essential, even under our meagre circumstances.

At the time of the wreck, the Captain, aware of our future danger, had ordered the guns and ammunition obtainable to be taken ashore. Such foresight was rendered available, - a regular guard was immediately organized, to be relieved by turns. The intelligence of our wreck was soon conveyed to the neighbourhood; and, on the morning after the event, a banditti of about twenty rough-looking fellows, armed with weapons, came down among the passengers. The appearance of such barbarous and apparently blood-thirsty ruffians, struck terror even to the stoutest heart. In person they were tall and stoutly built, swarthy in colour and bearded with hair of the coarsest black. They had probably originated from a union of the French and Indian, as they spoke the

bastard language of the former in a very gruff and confused tone. They existed by fishing, hunting and ship-plunder, and might with propriety be called coast-pirates or rather "land sharks". On their approach, the Captain cautioned the passengers not to assume fear; yet to show them all possible kindness and civility, unless harsh treatment in return rendered it otherwise; however, nothing of a disagreeable nature occurred. Having surveyed the men at arms and the passengers in general, either from fear to attack, or the poverty of our condition, they behaved themselves wisely, and at length walked off, robbing like geese, and apparently much disappointed.

Imperfect as our accommodations were, our fare was still worse. For several days we subsisted entirely upon fish. The Captain, however, succeeded in obtaining a few barrels of flour from a Mr. Butler, who kept a small store at the head of Gaspé Bay - the only thing of that kind in existence in those parts. The flour was converted into biscuits, and each person allowed but one per day. A young grampus was caught, and boiled and roasted for the common want. Circumstances, it is said, alter cases; such indeed was truly verified in our condition. Many, who had previously lived in comfort and abundance, were here necessitated to slumber in a dirty hovel and satisfy their sharpened appetites with the "dainty bits" of a reeking grampus. The women and children suffered severely, many of them never wholly recovered. Day after day in this miserable condition we continued in anxious anticipation of removal; but owing to the severity of the Spring, and being distant from the regular course of the sea vessels, our chances for some time appeared rather a matter of uncertainty. Two weeks elapsed ere a favorable opportunity occurred; but, only one-fourth of our number could then be taken, - lots were cast - and the fortunate removed. Three weeks - and three-fourths of the passengers had gone; but, one month had elapsed ere the remaining part were removed; and amongst that unfortunate number it was our lot to be cast. But thanks be to Providence

that we survived the consequences of that fearful and conflicting calamity. Twenty odd years have run their rounds since that eventful period, and, young as I was at the time, the deep impression that was then engraven upon my mind will live while my spirit has an earthly existence...

.... Seven miles from Cape Rosier is Gaspé Head; a bold promontory of solid rock rising perpendicularly to the height of 400 feet and projecting a considerable distance from the mainland. A tragedy of the most barbarous nature is traditionally connected with this place. During the early part of the last century many deeds of a piratical nature were perpetrated in the Gulf of St. Lawrence: its geographical position affording the most favorable opportunities. A noted banditti of pirates, having for many years pestered the mariner on his course, were at length captured in Gaspé Bay, - into which they had run their vessel to evade their pursuers. Nearly all of them were taken alive and then conveyed to the extremity of Gaspé Head. Ropes were tied to their feet, and they were thrust over the verge of that fearful precipice, and left, suspended by the heels, to suffer a miserable death, and become as carrion to the eagle and the raven of the rock.

THE TALE OF THE "ALBATROSS"

The "ALBATROSS", a masted steamer of 1100 tons of clipper form, was built in Philadelphia and bought by Lieutenant-Colonel Sleigh, C.M. to ply between the Maritime ports and those of the St. Lawrence. The incident recalled in the following tale occurred in 1852 and is recounted by Lieut.-Col. Sleigh in his book, "PINE FORESTS & HACMATACK CLEARINGS OR TRAVEL, LIFE & ADVENTURE IN THE BRITISH NORTH AMERICAN PROVINCES", published in 1853. The "ALBATROSS", with the owner on board, was in-bound from Halifax to Quebec.

... The mention of Cape Rozier and Gaspé, forcibly brings to my recollection an extraordinary accident which befell me at this spot last August as I was proceeding in my steamer to Quebec. It was about five in the morning, and I was asleep in my berth, in a cabin which was on deck, when a violent concussion sent me flying out. I opened the cabin door and stepped on deck to see what had occurred, when I found a dense fog hanging on the waters, obscuring everything. The masts could not be seen, and forward of the funnel all was enveloped in mist and cloud. The Captain was running about undressed, shouting "STOP HER !", "TURN ASTERN !". Passengers were in dishabille, flocking up from their berths in a great state of consternation, while remarks, "WE'RE ASHORE !", "WE'RE AGROUND, HARD AND FAST !", passed from lip to lip. Greatly interested, being owner of the ship, in our fate, I lost no time in summoning the Captain, and found from inquiries that he had been down in his cabin fast asleep, the ship having been left entirely in charge of a drunken pilot we had taken on board at Halifax, who had, judging by the log and dead reckoning, imagined we must have been ten miles to the North of Cape Rozier, and well in the mouth of the River St. Lawrence. He accordingly altered the ship's course from North to North-West, and instead of our being up the river we had gone ashore; but whether to the Southward or Westward of Capes Gaspé or Rozier, we could not, on account of the fog, determine.

On my expressing to the Captain my surprise that he should not be on deck at such an important and dangerous point of our voyage, and going at full speed, from ten to eleven knots an hour, when from the fore-castle the end of the bowsprit could not be seen, wrapt as it was in mist, and further, my surprise at the state of the weather not having been reported to him, he at once threw all the blame on the first officer, whom he said he had ordered to call him at three in the morning. This the first officer flatly denied, and begged to be excused the responsibility on his shoulders: he asserted that the Captain's orders, on retiring the previous night at eleven, were, that he was not to be called until six a.m. From such gross negligence, in nine cases out of ten, ships and valuable lives are lost every year.

One of the boats was cleared, and, jumping into it with the Captain, we lowered it, to take soundings. There was only one fathom of water at the bows, and nine aft. We had thus gone up on a pretty even keel: but whether on a sand-bank or on the shore we could not determine at the moment. We pushed off in a direct line from the bows, and after two or three pulls the boat rounded. We jumped out, knee-deep, and wading for a short distance, were soon on a fine pebbly beach. We walked forward, and at about thirty feet observed a line of seaweed and broken drift on the shore: here was evidently high-water mark. We had rounded at low water.

Thus far, this was in favour of the chances of getting off, if her bottom was uninjured. While determining this point, the vapour which hung so heavily, gradually rose, and before us we saw, within ten feet, a pine forest stretching down to the sand. On turning to look at the steamer, we saw her just emerging from the fog, her bows and bowsprit standing out in bold relief; then her foremast and yards were uncovered, and before many minutes, her funnel, main and mizzen masts and entire hull, were visible. There she lay, like a huge monster of the deep, reclining a little on one side, her bows high and dry.

To render apparent our escape from a worse fate, her bows were not twenty feet removed from a long, sharp ledge of rocks, rising some thirty feet perpendicularly, which ran out beyond her. Had she struck on this ledge, going at the rate we were, we must have split up in the centre and become a total wreck, with an inevitable loss of life and property.

The fog had now cleared off; the sun shone out brightly, and we perceived a clearing, with a cottage, about half a mile to our right. Towards this I advanced, and proceeding through some fresh clover grass, smelling deliciously fragrant with sparkling dew drops clustering around, I crossed a zizzag fence and was within the precincts of the cottage. An elderly woman, a Canadian, came out, and in answer to our questions informed us we were within Gaspé Bay, on a beach called Grande Grève; and that in a direct line from her cottage, over some high hills in the rear, the St. Lawrence river was not more than six miles; we also learnt that it was low water, and that about two the tide would serve. Thanking the good-hearted woman for her information, and rewarding her for her trouble, I had a refreshing draught of new milk, and we hurried to impart the information we had gathered to our expectant friends on board.

The scenery where we lay was most enchanting; but what part of this noble continent is not? It is all, from New Orleans to Gaspé, one continued panorama of interest and beauty. The further North, the more bold it becomes, with dense forests of pine and hacmatok, skirting the shores.

We now had all the coal in the bunkers shifted to one side, the cargo also, as far as possible; and on the rise of the tide we gave her an uneven keel, and threw her off the perpendicular, - thus gaining the advantage of her round bottom to bring her up in shallower water. Full steam was put on, and her propeller reversed, with a stern movement, while all hands ran from side to side with measured tread, to "rock her". She soon gave evidence of "life", vibrated uneasily, and with a start ran off the ledge, stern foremost, into

deep water. Three cheers were given for the gallant craft, and going, as we would say in the Army, "right about face", her bowsprit was pointed out of the Bay, in which we never should have been, had common prudence and seamanship been exercised; and we gave this time Cape Rozier a wide berth, and were steaming up the St. Lawrence, on our right course, by nightfall. All the damage this untoward event caused, was a loss of copper off her keel. Before leaving, we were surrounded by a perfect fleet of fishing-boats, which came to proffer assistance.