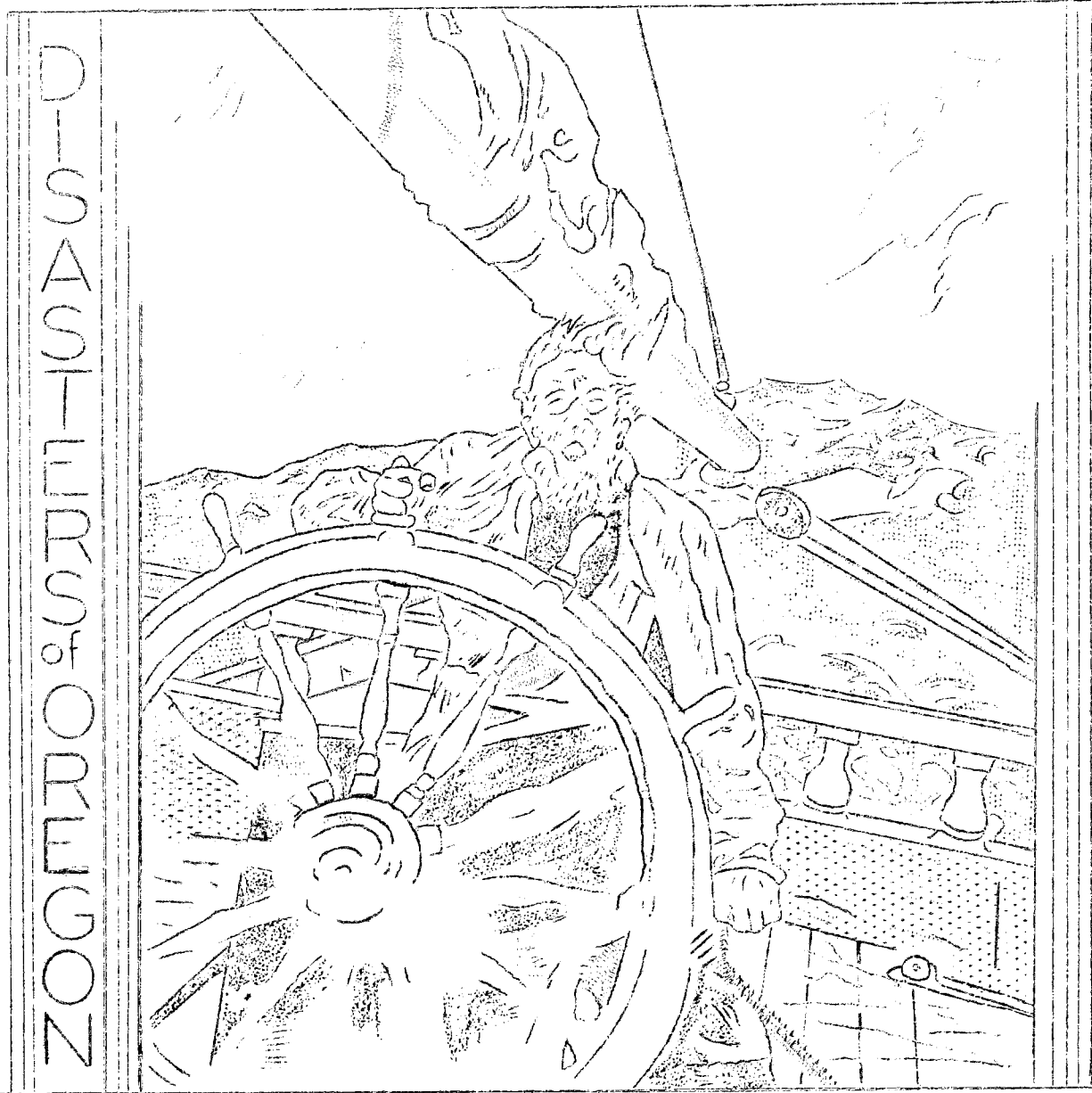


# OREGON ODDITIES



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Since January, 1938, the WPA Oregon Writers' Project has issued Oregon Oddities twice monthly during the school year and sent the publication, free-of-charge, to a request mailing list. Beginning as a leaflet devoted to a few miscellaneous and odd items pertaining to Oregon history, the publication has evolved into a monograph on various events and circumstances peculiar to this state. The request mailing list has grown until now Oregon Oddities is sent to over eight hundred names, including schools, libraries, newspapers and individuals from almost every state in the Union.

In May the Fourth Series of Oregon Oddities will end. It is possible that the publication will not be resumed next fall unless an adequate sponsorship can be obtained to meet the demands of the rapidly increasing mailing list.

A sponsor for any Oregon Writers' Project publication must be a non-profit body that will pay other than labor costs such as supplies, materials and mimeographing. Exact figures for the very reasonable expenditure of issuing Oregon Oddities will be submitted on request. Should any non-profit organization be interested in sponsoring Oregon Oddities for the 1941-42 school year, and wish further details about how this may be done, they may write to the

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## DISASTERS OF OREGON

### Shipwrecks

Like a phantom and a monstrous sea-serpent, spasmodically enraged by whipping gales and crushing waves, the sandy spits at the mouth of the Columbia have wrecked a hundred ships and snared many sailors and passengers into "Davy Jones' Locker." Perfectly charted today, however, the mouth of the Columbia is considered a safe channel for the great ships from ports all over the world.

The first recorded disaster, claiming the lives of American white men at this point, occurred on March 22, 1811. During the preceding September, John Jacob Astor, New York financier, had outfitted the ship, Tonquin, commanded by Captain Johnathon Thorn, to support the Astor overland party and to trade for pelts at the mouth of the Columbia.

Captain Thorn was an able and expert seaman but he was inhuman in disciplining his men. His officers were treated with harshness; his sailors with cruelty, and everyone else with contempt. Twice he wilfully set sail from ports of call leaving groups of sailors ashore. He returned to rescue them only after being threatened by passengers on board ship. Leaving the royal port of Ourourah, Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, Thorn abandoned the sailor, Emms. The Captain had, however, enlisted seventeen island natives to augment the crew and laborers on the Tonquin.

The Tonquin sighted Cape Disappointment on March 22nd, during a spell of stormy weather. Although he bitterly objected, First Mate Fox was ordered to examine the channel at the bar. With him, in a small and unseaworthy boat, five set out: one sailor, two carters, a barber and a very old Frenchman. As the boat was being lowered Fox remarked that the giant waves would crush the small craft.

"Mr. Fox, if you are afraid of water," growled Thorn, "you should have remained in Boston."

As Fox stepped into the boat he said: "My uncle was drowned here not many years ago, and now I am going to lay my bones with his. Farewell, my friends! We will perhaps meet again in the next world."

The small boat was shoved off under the eyes of the anxious crew. When they last saw her she was flying the distress flag. A few minutes later they saw the boat splintered by the mountainous waves.

Three days later Captain Thorn ordered Third Mate Aikens to make soundings. A sailmaker, an armourer and two islanders formed his crew. They found the channel and signaled the Tonquin. Refusing to pick up the sounding crew, Thorn sailed past them and anchored in Baker's Bay. Shortly afterward huge breakers capsized the small boat. All were drowned, except one of the white men and an islander, who were tossed upon the beach and revived by the Tonquin's crew.

Later the Tonquin sailed north to Clayoquot Sound to trade with the Indians. While there Captain Thorn aroused the enmity of the natives who retaliated by massacring all the crew, except four men who secreted themselves

In the ship's powder magazine. Realizing that they were trapped, the men lighted the powder thus ending the tragic voyage and their own lives in a terrific explosion. With over a hundred lives destroyed, this tragedy marked the greatest single loss of life ever recorded on the American northwest coast.

#### GENERAL WARREN GOES DOWN WITH 42 LIVES LOST

The year 1852 set a tragic record for the loss of life when the General Warren went to pieces on treacherous Peacock Spit with a loss of 42 lives and a valuable cargo. On January 28th Bar Pilot George Flavel steered the General Warren, bound from Portland to San Francisco with her holds heavily laden with grain, across the bar and left her outside in charge of Captain Charles Thompson. The ship stood out to sea with a stiff breeze blowing from the south. About midnight the topmast was whipped loose and the ship, shaken by the rough sea, began slowly taking water. Captain Thompson decided to return to the River. Although by morning he sighted the Columbia he was unable to get word to the pilot house, and it was not until about four o'clock that Flavel came on board. He declared that the strong ebb tide made the bar unsafe. Passengers, fearful for their lives, huddled around the bar pilot, begging and even threatening him if he did not make the attempt to cross.

"If you insist on going," Flavel finally declared, "I will try to take you in, but I will not be responsible for what may happen."

The ship reached the bar in about an hour, but the mountainous waves made it impossible for the accompanying pilot schooner to be of assistance. Realizing the futility of continuing to port, the captain ordered the pilot to beach the ship. This was accomplished about seven o'clock. By that time waves were breaking over the vessel and by nine o'clock had swept away all the superstructure abaft the foremast.

By three o'clock in the morning the windjammer was rapidly breaking up. Captain Thompson called for volunteers to launch a lifeboat, and Pilot Flavel assumed charge. However, most of those on board preferred to take their chances with the foundering craft rather than to volunteer for the apparently suicidal lifeboat trip through the beating and boiling waves. The ten volunteers, by some miracle, arrived safely at Astoria within a few hours. A rescue party immediately set out in a large whaleboat for the scene of the disaster but when they reached the position of the wreck the General Warren had disappeared. Only the twisted debris of the vessel and the battered forms of several victims gave evidence of the catastrophe.

#### WRECK OF THE VANDALIA

An unknown number on board the bark Vandalia, inbound from San Francisco, were lost at sea off the Columbia bar on January 9, 1853. The Grecian, last to see the doomed ship, standing in, supposed that the Vandalia had missed stays while beating in and was caught in the breaking surf where she went to pieces. Several days later her hull was found on the beach near the mouth of the Columbia.

#### BRIG PALOS, TOTAL LOSS

The fall of the same year witnessed another catastrophe of the sea when the brig Palos, bound from San Francisco to Shoalwater Bay with several

passengers on board, piled up on Leadbetter Point during a thick fog. The captain drowned, but all passengers and the crew reached shore safely. The vessel became a total loss.

#### EXPLOSION OF THE GAZELLE

Marine disaster in Oregon went inland on the morning of April 8, 1854. The new side-wheeler, Gazelle, with her safety valves tied down and fires raging under forced draft to provide maximum pressure for a race down the river, docked at Canemah on the Willamette River above Oregon City, to take on passengers and freight. Without warning the boilers burst. Twenty-five people were instantly killed by scalding steam, flying timbers and splinters of steel. Thirty or more were critically injured, and an unknown number were hurtled into the Willamette, never to be recovered.

A pandemonium of indescribable cries, noise and confusion prevailed. Few physicians were available in the sparsely settled community, and several of the wounded were said to have bled to death for lack of first-aid. As soon as the news of the disaster reached Portland, a ship left immediately for Canemah with doctors and equipment.

Since marine law was not highly organized in the Oregon Territory at that time, a thorough investigation was never made. However, the coroner's jury did make an inquiry and placed the blame for the tragedy upon Chief Engineer Moses Tonie, who, apparently seeing that an explosion was inevitable, had fled shortly before the disaster.

#### TUG FIREFLY CAUGHT IN TIDE

The Firefly was towing a raft of logs from Young's River near Astoria to Welsh's Sawmill, February 24, 1854, when, in rounding Smith's Point, she was caught in the ebb tide. Tug and raft drifted, finally grounding a short distance from Fort Stevens where they lay until the flood tide seized the logs, swinging them in over the sands and dragging the tug with them. Captain Thomas Hawks refused to cut the tug loose. The little steamer capsized, drowning the captain and four others on board. Welsh, a passenger, cut adrift the raft and floated up to Astoria where he sounded an alarm. A rescue party hurried to the scene but when they arrived only the fireman, who was clinging to the top of the smokestack, was still alive.

#### THE DESDEMONA WRECKED

The Desdemona, one of the pioneer coasters, was wrecked January 5, 1857, when Captain Francis Williams attempted to bring her into the Columbia without a bar pilot. Loaded heavily with general cargo, the ship came in with a fair wind and flood tide. Williams testified that the lower buoy at the Columbia's mouth was adrift and mistaking his position in the channel stood up for Astoria, searching the waters for the buoy until he struck the sands. The commander left the stricken craft and went to Astoria for assistance but when the rescue party reached the scene the Desdemona was beyond help.

The revenue cutter, Joe Lane, had previously tried to get her afloat without success. As much cargo as possible was placed on lighters and moved to Astoria. The crew stayed by until January third when they were taken off by the pilot boat. Two days later when an attempt was made to salvage the remaining

cargo, the scow was swamped, and one man was drowned. The rest of the crew narrowly escaped death. The timbers of the Desdemona, visible for several years, gave the name to the bar, Desdemona Sands.

#### BARK INDUSTRY FOUNDERS

Another score of lives were given up to the sea early in 1865 when the bark Industry, coming from San Francisco in a two weeks' struggle with bad weather, reached the rough waters of the Columbia's entrance where the ship went to pieces in attempting to enter the channel.

After standing outside the mouth of the river for several days waiting for the weather to clear, the skipper decided to run in. On March 15th he stood up for the south channel. When the vessel was on the bar the pilot ran down and raised a flag. The captain of the Industry, thinking he should head for the north channel, missed stays and was forced to anchor to, going onto the sands. A breeze sprang up shortly afterward. The ship floated but in getting into her course she drifted into shallow water, striking heavily and unshipping her rudder. A life boat was lowered but was quickly swamped. During the night all hands took to the rigging. In the morning two rafts were made, one out of spars and the other out of pumps. Five persons safely reached the shore on the first raft, but only two out of eight on board the second raft were saved.

#### STEAMER PORTLAND GOES OVER FALLS

In 1877 the river steamer, Portland, with part of the crew on board, went crashing over the falls of the Willamette River at Oregon City. Early in March the steamer left Canemah to unload freight at the Oregon City basin. Only Captain Archibald Jamieson, Fireman Peter Anderson and a deckhand named Bell were on board at the time of the accident. While attempting to swing into the basin under very low steam, the ship swung too wide and was caught in the unusually strong current above the falls. The fireman leaped into the water and was rescued by a lifeline from the shore. The other two men, after vainly trying to save the boat, also jumped overboard but were too late. Both men and the S. S. Portland went over the falls. Ironically the cabin house separated from the hull at the base of the falls and floated down the river to be picked up by another steamer at the mouth of the Willamette. Had the men remained in the cabin they might have been saved.

#### J. C. COUSINS SEA DISASTER STILL UNSOLVED

A mystery, still unsolved, surrounds the wreck of the schooner, J. C. Cousins, near the mouth of the Columbia on October 7, 1883. The schooner, used by bar pilots, was brought into Astoria for supplies by Boatkeeper Zeiber. With three others on board he sailed for the open sea again. The ship was sighted passing Fort Stevens and in the afternoon was seen at anchor off Clatsop Spit. The crew of the tug Mary Taylor which was lying at anchor in Baker's Bay, watched the schooner sail out into the breakers that evening.

The next day observers reported seeing the craft sailing about occasionally. About one o'clock she headed for Clatsop Spit and came gracefully in before a gentle breeze, striking about 2:15 o'clock. People in the vicinity who saw the ship supposed she was properly managed, but investigation showed there was no one on board. All hands, the ship's papers and a lifeboat were missing. The story behind this strange tragedy of the yacht-like schooner is still unexplained.

### OVER 100 DISASTERS OCCURRED

The U. S. Engineer Office, First Portland, Oregon, District officially lists 93 ships wrecked and sunk, seven ships grounded and 308 lives lost in disasters near the mouth of the Columbia River from 1829 to 1936, inclusive. Although federal statistics are not available for the years before 1829, many more lives and ships may be counted in the toll of the sea off the Oregon coast beginning with legendary Spanish treasure shipwrecks and early exploring and fur trading voyages which came to tragic ends.

Recorded marine disasters show that out of the 100 or more wrecks near the mouth of the Columbia, twenty-eight involved loss of life with an average of slightly less than eleven persons lost for each death-ridden vessel.

The latest such tragedy occurred on Peacock Spit, nemesis of shipping, on January 12, 1936, when the S. S. Iowa wrecked with all of her crew of thirty-four seamen lost. Near the same spot the S. S. Rosecrans foundered with thirty-three lives lost on January 7, 1913. The bark, William and Ann was first of the major losses on Clatsop Spit with the drowning of twenty-six seamen on March 10, 1829. The U. S. Peacock, sloop of war, gave name to Peacock Spit and was the first major catastrophe to be recorded there with the entire crew of ten officers and sailors giving up their lives to the sea. Of the twenty-eight vessels involved in loss of life there were eight barks, seven steamers, three steam tugs, and two each of warships, brigs and motorships.

Rigid rules of navigation, federal and local inspection, increased efficiency of navigation knowledge, stronger and better built ships and well charted channels and understanding of weather conditions insure modern shipping a maximum of safety in the Columbia River and its gateway to the ocean.

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