

# Rise & Fall of the Star of Bengal, IV: Accusations

**Air Date: September 23, 2022**

## Introduction

The last man Alf Olsen saw as the waves overtook the Star of Bengal, was Norman Hawkins:

ALF OLSEN: Norman Hawkins and I left the ship together, but could not swim except with extreme difficulty on account of the debris in the water. Norman became exhausted and I tried to help him and succeeded in holding his head above water for about ten minutes. When Norman saw that I was almost exhausted, he said 'Good-bye' and sank from view."<sup>1</sup>

Alf Olsen was the last survivor to wash ashore.<sup>2</sup> Norman Hawkins never made it.

Weeks later, Alf Olsen joined the chorus of crew members testifying in San Francisco. They accused the captains of the steamships that towed them to sea of cowardice, for cutting and running, and not coming to their rescue in the morning, leaving 111 men to their death. After the testimony, the survivors scattered, and attempted to return to life as normal.

Except Alf Olsen. For Alf Olsen, the wreck wasn't over. The family of Norman Hawkins beseeched him to go back and find Norman's body. One month after the wreck, Alf Olsen was back in Alaska.

The November 5, 1908 Alaska Sentinel:

A party of four or five men left Tuesday morning... for Coronation Island, to search the wreckage for the body of Norman Hawkins, for the recovery of which a reward of \$1,000 is offered. The search will be under the direction of Alf Olsen, survivor of the wreck, who was despatched here from San Francisco to find the body, if possible.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1908.09.27 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1908-09-27\_1.pdf

<sup>2</sup> 1972.01.05 Boston\_Herald\_1972-01-05\_45.pdf

<sup>3</sup> 1908.11.05 Alaska Sentinel clipping

For the long, somber journey to Coronation Island, the group took the steamship Hattie Gage, still under the command of the captain on the fateful night, Erwin Farrer.

In the press, Erwin Farrer was pilloried as criminal, incompetent, and responsible for the for the tragic wreck of the Star of Bengal.

For the first time, Alf Olsen became acquainted with the man he accused of cowardice. And for the first time, Erwin Farrer would get the truth.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. You're listening to Part 4 of The Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal, presented by Wrangell History Unlocked. In today's episode, it's the investigation. While accusations fly, the truth sits somewhere at the bottom of the sea.

# Inquiry

The investigation into the wreck of the Star of Bengal fell to the Steamship Inspection Service. For decades, John Bermingham ran the Steamship Inspection Service on the west coast with an iron fist. He was 78 years old, and showed no signs of slowing down. One newspaper said:

Were it not for his gray hair and beard, the extreme age of Capt. Bermingham would not be suspected, for his eyes are bright, his mind alert and his movements decided and firm...<sup>4</sup>

He alone held final say over all investigations. He could overturn charges on appeal, or hand out even harsher sentences if he felt the punishment was not enough.

For Captains Erwin Farrer and Patrick Hamilton, the only path to clearing their names lay through John Bermingham.

John Bermingham set into motion a three-ring circus of hearings in Seattle, San Francisco, and ending in Alaska — where he gave inspectors the privilege of rendering the first verdict in the case.

## Seattle

The first official hearings began in Seattle, home of Erwin Farrer, captain of the Hattie Gage. He testified:

ERWIN FARRER: I think the cause of the wreck of the 'Bengal' and the loss of so many lives was due to the inability of the steamer 'Kayak' to steer... The 'Kayak' was pulling nearly in an opposite direction.<sup>5</sup>

Weeks after the wreck, Erwin Farrer read about himself in the papers. According to accusations, he was a coward, incompetent, and even a drunkard. He fought back:

ERWIN FARRER: Capt. Wagner calls the master of the two tugs cowards and claims that had he been master of either of those tugs he could have gone right alongside of the wrecked Bengal and taken off every person aboard... I would have considered it suicide to have attempted to go alongside the Bengal with either of them.

Nicholas Wagner, and the surviving crew, claimed to newspapers and in the San Francisco hearings that there were two hours, from 6am daylight until 8am, where the Hattie Gage and

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<sup>4</sup> 1908.09.26 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1908-09-06\_25.pdf

<sup>5</sup> 1908.10.08 Star\_of\_Bengal\_tug\_captain\_story.pdf

Kayak could have come alongside and saved everyone. Erwin Farrer threw the argument back at Nicholas Wagner:

ERWIN FARRER: I would ask Capt. Wagner if the sea was as smooth as he claimed it was, while he lay those two hours at his anchors, why did he not land his crew and passengers on the beach...<sup>6</sup>

## San Francisco

The public hearings one week later, in San Francisco, drew an audience. Bugler and Bolles, Inspectors of Boilers and Hulls, interviewed Captain Nicholas Wagner, survivors of the Star of Bengal, and several crew members of the Hattie Gage and Kayak — except captains Farrer or Hamilton.

The San Francisco inspectors focused most of their energy asking about the decision to cut the hawsers towing the ship.

Inspector Bolles caused a stir in the room when he suggested the tugboat captains should be criminally charged:<sup>7</sup>

BOLLES: Common sense would tell a master who had seen rocks on the starboard side of his steamer that such territory was dangerous, and that if a ship was left by herself, as the Star of Bengal was, she would go ashore.<sup>8</sup>

At no point had Captains Farrer or Hamilton been able to face their accusers. As the investigation moved to Wrangell, they would get their chance.

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<sup>6</sup> 1908.10.10 Daily Colonist.pdf

<sup>7</sup> 1908.10.27 Daily\_Alaska\_Dispatch\_1908-10-27\_[1].pdf

<sup>8</sup> 1908.10.27 San\_Francisco\_Call\_Bulletin\_1908-10-27\_9.pdf

# Wrangell

The hearings began at the Wrangell Hotel on Monday, November 16, 1908.

John Bermingham's inspectors from Juneau, Captain George Whitney and Engineer Frank Newhall, prepared to collect the final testimony, review all the evidence, and render the first decision in the case.

The inspectors spent the first two days arguing with Erwin Farrer and Patrick Hamilton. The steamship captains protested the testimony taken in San Francisco without their knowledge or right to cross-examine. Inspectors Whitney and Newhall were sympathetic, and persuaded the captains that this was their opportunity to plead their case, present their facts, and—for the first time ever—be able to cross-examine witnesses.

But there was absolutely no budget to bring anyone to Wrangell. That was okay for Erwin Farrer. He had only one witness he wanted called.

ERWIN FARRER: Alf Olsen.

Q: His testimony was given in the “Star of Bengal” case in San Francisco, was it not?

ERWIN FARRER: Yes, sir.

Q: And you wish him called in this case?

ERWIN FARRER: Yes, sir.

## Alf Olsen

When Alf Olsen sat down in the witness chair on the third day of testimony in Wrangell, everything changed. For the very first time, Farrer and Hamilton faced one of their accusers under oath.

Q: Alf Olsen, Do you really believe there was any chance for the Star of Bengal after the anchors were down?

ALF OLSEN: No, sir, no chance at all.<sup>9</sup>

Alf Olsen's words landed like a bombshell. When they read his testimony from San Francisco back to him, he claimed the written record was incorrect.

ALF OLSEN: They could have come at daylight, but not saved all hands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Whitney Newhall 103.

<sup>10</sup> Whitney Newhall 99.

Erwin Farrer asked Alf Olsen how exactly he was supposed to rescue everyone off the Star of Bengal that morning:

ERWIN FARRER: You said previously that you thought provided the steamers had dropped within 500 yards to the windward and dropped a line down, we possibly might have saved some part of the passengers?

ALF OLSEN: Yes, sir.

ERWIN FARRER: Do you think you could have launched those boats and got in them after you got this line, so we could pull you out?

ALF OLSEN: No, sir.

ERWIN FARRER: How would you expect us to pull you off with a line, tie the line around the body and yank you out?

ALF OLSEN: That's the only chance.

ERWIN FARRER: The boats could not be used?

ALF OLSEN: No, sir.

The inspectors asked Alf Olsen, point blank, about the treatment of the Asian passengers:

Q: Is there any truth in the newspaper reports that the Chinese were battened down in the tween decks?

ALF OLSEN: No, that's a lie. They all had life preservers on, we showed them how to put them on.

Up to this point, all the survivor testimony indicated there were two hours in the morning, after daylight, when the steamships could have saved everyone. Alf Olsen shattered that story.

## Patrick Loftus

To corroborate Alf Olsen would require another eyewitness, and the inspectors had no money to bring anyone to Wrangell.

But they were in luck. There was another survivor in Wrangell. He was badly injured in the wreck and stayed behind in Wrangell when the others went south. He was a Wrangell man, did not owe his livelihood to the APA, and had never testified or told his story to the newspapers.

With the hours in Wrangell ticking away, Whitney and Newhall issued a subpoena for Patrick Loftus.<sup>11</sup>

Q: Is there anything you are withholding on any other man's account?

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<sup>11</sup> Whitney Newhall 202.

PATRICK LOFTUS: No, sir, none whatever; no, sir, I don't care for nobody.

Exactly two months after the Star of Bengal left Wrangell, Inspectors Whitney and Newhall sat down with Patrick Loftus.

Q: Patrick Loftus, do you think that there was any time between the time that the ship anchored and the time she broke up that those boats or either of them could have come and got a line to the vessel and towed her out?

PATRICK LOFTUS: When they could not tow her at first, they could not tow her then, the wind was about as severe then as it was before. A heavy sea and a heavy wind, strong wind.

Patrick Loftus corroborated Alf Olsen's story.

Q: Did you ever hear of a tug going alongside a ship like that and taking the crew off, in conditions like those?

PATRICK LOFTUS: She could not do it, it would break her up; I don't think she could have come alongside at all. The tug could not.

Again, the inspectors asked about the treatment of the Asian cannery workers:

Q: Did you get a life preserver?

PATRICK LOFTUS: Yes, sir, every man I saw had one on.

Q: Did the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and sailors of the cannery crew?

PATRICK LOFTUS: Yes, sir, every body. And showed how to put them on, because they were putting them on every old way at first.

In the final hours before leaving Wrangell, Inspectors Whitney and Newhall interviewed Alf Olsen a third time, asking him to point out all the inaccuracies in the transcript of his testimony from San Francisco. Once in Ketchikan, the inspectors sent a telegram to John Bermingham:

Will you summon Wagner, Johansen, and Torlof Anderson Government witness here or Juneau. Olsen's testimony given at Wrangell much different.

John Bermingham wrote back the same day, from San Francisco, declining the request:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: Note Farrer and Hamilton protests on proceeding with their testimony. You can sift the facts from evidence taken here, Seattle and by yourselves... I don't believe

the Government wishes to go to expense of transportation to Alaska of witnesses you name.

Once again, John Bermingham said no, thwarting the last chance for Wagner and others to face cross-examination.

Whitney and Newhall returned to Juneau to spend the winter trying to make sense of it all.

Nothing in the testimony supported the rumor that cannery workers were locked below deck as the ship sank. In fact, every eyewitness—including Gustav Johnson and Thoralf Anderson decades later—said the cannery workers were brought on deck and fitted with lifejackets before the ship struck the rocks.

One group could answer this question, but may never get a chance. The investigation and newspapers failed to ask any of the Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino survivors. This is a gaping hole in the Star of Bengal story. Without their voices, there will always be doubt.

Through the winter in Juneau, Whitney and Newhall looked for evidence of cowardice, and they found it.

## Verdict

On January 14, 1909, Whitney and Newhall reached a verdict. They were unanimous. They wrote to Erwin Farrer:

Sir: We find that the charges of cowardice and neglect were not proven. You held on to the Star of Bengal as long as it was possible, and that after the anchors of the Star of Bengal were let go, you were powerless to give further assistance under the condition of wind, weathers and sea prevailing at the time. We hereby exonerate you from all blame in connection with the loss of the Bark "Star of Bengal" and 111 lives.

Signed, George Whitney, and Frank Newhall, Local Inspectors, Juneau, Alaska.<sup>12</sup>

## Wagner License

~~For Erwin Farrer and Patrick Hamilton, it was over. They were officially exonerated.~~

But Inspectors Whitney and Newhall weren't done. They came after Nicholas Wagner.

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<sup>12</sup> 1909.01.14 Exoneration



The inspectors mailed Wagner a list of nearly one hundred questions, mostly about the time after the hawsers were cut.<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Wagner protested. He said he already addressed these issues in San Francisco. He accused the Alaska inspectors of coming under the influence of Erwin Farrer and Patrick Hamilton in Alaska.<sup>14</sup>

The San Francisco Call wisecracked:

If Captain Nicholas Wagner ever had his horoscope cast, the astrologer must have failed to warn him that his unlucky star was the Star of Bengal.<sup>15</sup>

On April 6, 1909, the Alaska inspectors revoked Nicholas Wagner's license. In a brief, two-sentence statement, they found him "negligent and unskillful." It was a stunning turnaround for Nicholas Wagner, and even further vindication for the steamship captains.

## Birmingham Appeal

Nicholas Wagner appealed directly to John Birmingham. For the first time since Nicholas Wagner accosted Erwin Farrer on the streets of Wrangell, the captains were brought together in a hearing before John Birmingham. Four days later, John Birmingham restored Nicholas Wagner's captains license:

JOHN BIRMINGHAM: I find the charges unsubstantiated by the evidence in the case taken before the Local Board at San Francisco in October 1908... It appearing to me from said evidence that Captain Nicholas Wagner was in no way to blame for that disaster...<sup>16</sup>

In June 1909, John Birmingham issued his full, final written opinion. It was 17 pages long. It contains a summary of the investigation, and—for the first time—a detailed reconstruction of the ship's final day on earth.

It was riddled with errors, contradictions, and double-standards.

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<sup>13</sup> Birmingham decision, 11.

<sup>14</sup> 1909.03.11 Star\_of\_Bengal\_Wagner\_grilled.pdf

<sup>15</sup> 1909.03.12 San Francisco Call.pdf

<sup>16</sup> Birmingham Decision, p. 4.

# What Happened

What really happened?

Almost twenty years after the wreck, the Wrangell Sentinel wrote:

There are men in Wrangell who remember the sea tragedy of the Star of Bengal... It is hard to get the story right after all these years.<sup>17</sup>

There are many voices in the wreck of the Star of Bengal. For over a century, the final say has gone to John Bermingham. If not for him, history would remember Nicholas Wagner as the man responsible for the loss of so much life in the wreck of the Star of Bengal. John Bermingham undid all that, when he wrote a report designed specifically to exonerate Nicholas Wagner, even if it meant overlooking or changing key facts.

## Meltdown

At 1:45am September 20th, Nicholas Wagner came on deck, saw how close the ship was to shore, and had a complete emotional meltdown. He shouted into nothingness. The wind was so loud, even the people on his own ship had trouble hearing him. In his own words:

Nicholas Wagner: ...Having strained and taxed every vocal organ I possessed in calling and beseeching those miserable and cowardly curs of tug captains to come and save our lives. I used the megaphone, tried it for hours without number, and yelled to no purpose.<sup>18</sup>

Wagner admitted he overstrained his vocal cords.<sup>19</sup> At some point, he wasn't even yelling at the steamships anymore. He was cursing. Harry Lewald:

HARRY LEWALD: One of the sailors cursed as I never heard a man curse, growing more wild until he could not utter a word and was speechless from his anger.<sup>20</sup>

Patrick Loftus:

PATRICK LOFTUS: He was of course swearing at the Irish, naturally, and said "The S.O.B.s of the Irish, they go off and

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<sup>17</sup> 1931.03.27 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>18</sup> 1908.09.27 SF Examiner.pdf

<sup>19</sup> 1908.11.14 The\_Morning\_Call.pdf

<sup>20</sup> 1908.09.27 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1908-09-27\_8-2.pdf

leave us in this position... They are square-heads, or they would not leave us in this position.”

The Douglas Island News caught wind of this meltdown, and wrote a scathing editorial:

The panic which starts with the captain soon spreads to the crew, and what wonder is it that the passengers, crazed with fear, go down to their death like so many sheep to slaughter?

By losing his cool, and losing his voice, Nicholas Wagner lost his command of the situation. And it wasn't even daylight yet.

## Boats & Ladders

When Wagner and the others filed charges in San Francisco, they said there were two hours where the weather was fair enough to rescue everyone aboard the Star of Bengal. John Bermingham bought this hook, line, and sinker:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: Wagner, his officers and crew naturally expected the return of the tugs to their assistance, between daylight and 8AM, during which time the force of the wind and sea was but little in excess of what it was when he anchored and the tugs cut the lines... (p.14-15)

But everything that happened between the 6 and 8am undercut this argument.

At 6am daylight, the crew threw a stepladder overboard just to see if it would drift ashore, a clear sign that the currents were strong and unpredictable.

Encouraged by the currents pushing the stepladder ashore, the crew immediately moved to deploying lifeboats. It was a disaster. In their haste and panic, they forgot to tie a rope to the first lifeboat before placed over the rail in the hanging davits. The swinging lifeboat splintered a block of wood in the rope holding its bow, dropping the lifeboat into the sea, with no way to pull it back. Patrick Loftus observed:

PATRICK LOFTUS: No painter at all, not aboard the ship...<sup>21</sup> When she got adrift they commenced to curse about the boat going adrift... She went out without taking a drop of water. I paid particular attention to her and wished I was in her as she was going ashore.

The crew quickly mounted a second lifeboat in the davits. As it lowered, the swinging sent it crashing against the bullwark rail of the ship, smashing it into pieces. Frank Muir recalled:

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<sup>21</sup> Whitney Newhall, p. 130.

FRANK MUIR: Another boat lashed to the rail was torn away about 7 o'clock. It was blowing with tremendous force, spraying over the bow.<sup>22</sup>

John Bermingham unwittingly confirmed the strong wind and seas, when he wrote:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: Her port anchor took all the strain until about 7:30A.M., when it dragged and brought a strain on her starboard one....<sup>23</sup>

The mere fact the Star of Bengal dragged at anchor is more evidence of strong wind and currents during the 6 to 8am window.

There's no doubt the seas hindered the crew's attempt to rescue themselves, and yet the crew claimed the seas were not so bad to prevent them from being rescued. It was a clear double-standard.

Bermingham openly sympathized with the Star of Bengal crew:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: One of those boats broke away and the other one was smashed against the bulwarks. I don't believe any sailor, and there were several good ones on board, would negligently and calmly view the destruction of equipment that might be the means of saving his life. (p.16)

Bermingham commits the logical fallacy of an appeal to authority. In his opinion, these are 'good' sailors, so he doesn't question their handling of the lifeboats. He even had an explanation for why both lifeboats were empty:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: No one seemed to care about getting into those boats while they were being dropped over the rail. (p.10)

In Wrangell, Alf Olsen testified why the lifeboats were empty.

Q: Did any of the crew think it was safe going in a boat to try to get ashore?

ALF OLSEN: Nobody wanted to go in a boat.

Q: They thought it was dangerous?

ALF OLSEN: Yes, sir.

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<sup>22</sup> 1908.09.27 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1908-09-27\_8-2.pdf

<sup>23</sup> Bermingham Decision, p. 9.

# Swimming

John Bermingham did not just make excuses for the crew of the Star of Bengal. He showed he was willing to outright invent a whole new reality.

JOHN BERMINGHAM: It was believed by many that the people could reach the beach more safely by swimming, aided by the life preservers than getting ashore in boats... I am impressed with the belief that the people of the vessel then had more confidence in safely reaching the pebbly beach, five to six hundred feet distant... through the kelp and surf than aided by the boats.<sup>24</sup>

This was a complete fabrication. Nobody said they preferred to go in the water. Hypothermia, exhaustion, and drowning, were all real possibilities. Waves could pick you up and drop you on the rocky shore with razor-sharp barnacles. Despite what Bermingham said, this was no mere pebbly beach. Even today, it's still a dangerous place to land.

There's no reason to believe the cannery workers even knew how to swim, either. These weren't mariners, just men from the city who took a seasonal job in Alaska. Tellingly, all the eyewitnesses commented how the cannery workers had to be shown how to put on a lifejacket. No one preferred to go in the water.

One of Bermingham's most glaring problems was to get the timing of the first two lifeboats wrong. Multiple witnesses, including Wagner, describe the first two lifeboats going over between 6 and 7am. But John Bermingham places the lifeboats after 8am:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: About 8:00am, the wind and sea still increasing, both anchors began to drag slowly. Matters began to look serious. Two boats were gotten off the forward house...<sup>25</sup>

Bermingham simply changed the timeline and placed the lifeboats after 8am to protect the idea of a two hour window of rescue.

One piece of the story that John Bermingham likely didn't know was that Wagner had been evolving his accusations from the start. Early on, Wagner claimed that more towing would have saved the Star of Bengal:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: Fifteen minutes more of towing—a half hour at the most—would have taken our ship free of the lee

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<sup>24</sup> Bermingham Decision, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> John Bermingham Decision, p. 10.

shore and into the Pacific where the stout ship would have been ready to safely ride through a more severe gale.<sup>26</sup>

Wager lied about being on a lee shore, as he was clearly on the windward side of Coronation Island. Wagner left out that he dropped his anchors before the steamships cut the towlines. Towing wasn't going to do anything with the anchors down. The parking break was on. Wagner abandoned this argument.

The first utterance of the alleged window of rescue began in Wrangell, and it was originally a much bigger window.

In the beginning, Wagner said both steamships working from 4am to 8am could have rescued everyone. This window begins around the time the hawsers were cut, while the Hattie Gage and Kayak were fleeing for their lives into the darkness.

Wagner shortened the window, by starting at sunrise, beginning the window at 6am. Though this cut the window in half, Wagner continued to maintain two steamships could have saved everyone. When John Bermingham adopted this argument in his final report, he said everyone could have been rescued by just one steamship in two hours:

JOHN BERMINGHAM: If those tugs had returned, one of them could have held tandem the other with a long line and so dropped her down abeam; or, for that matter, off the BENGAL's port quarter and received all the people from that vessel, as the sea was not then breaking there.<sup>27</sup>

From the start, there were obvious problems with this claim that went unexamined.

The Star of Bengal sat at anchor, dangerously close to the rocks. In order to come alongside, a steamship would have to come just as close, if not closer to the rocks. The same rocks which prevent the Star of Bengal from getting out, are the same rocks which prevent another ship from getting in. It was double-standard.

If the Star of Bengal somehow managed to get a rope across to a steamship, getting all 138 men off in exactly two hours would mean one man crossing the rope every 52 seconds. It was unrealistic by any calculation.

And if the Star of Bengal managed to cram all 138 men onto one of the much smaller steamships, that steamship ran the risk of upsetting in the waves. The USS Burnside could

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<sup>26</sup> 1908.09.27 News\_Article\_\_Seattle\_Post-Intelligencer\_published\_as\_The\_Seattle\_post-intelligencer.\_\_\_September\_27\_1908\_\_p1.pdf

<sup>27</sup> Bermingham Decision, p. 15.

absolutely fit every man from the Star of Bengal, which explains why Erwin Farrer spent so much time attempting to get it to help.

The truth is two hours was simply not enough time to rescue everyone. It was always an arbitrary figure, one Wagner settled on after trying out other arguments. It took two hours just to rescue 27 survivors off the beach on September 22nd.

All this goes to prove that the window of rescue was a lie. In San Francisco, the surviving crew members testified to it. But Olaf Hansen refused to sign his name to it. In Wrangell, Alf Olsen took it all back. Patrick Loftus, who was independent of everyone, said there was no chance of rescue. Decades later, neither Torlef Anderson or Gustav Johnson described the window in their memoirs.

Once people got away from Nicholas Wagner, they simply stopped alleging there was a two-hour window of rescue.

Wagner used this lie in an attempt to destroy Erwin Farrer and Patrick Hamilton. He put them in the cross-hairs of the public, press, and the U.S. government.

In the wake of the Star of Bengal disaster, Wagner made other outrageous statements that displayed his narcissism. Of 106 Asian cannery workers, only 10 survived, and yet in a private letter to a friend, Nicholas Wagner credited himself, while affecting a Chinese accent:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: The Chinese behaved fine; better, I think than the same number of white men would. I pacified them at the very outset and they said I saveyed.<sup>28</sup>

When confronted with the story of the steamships fleeing for their lives during the storm to make desperately needed repairs, Wagner only offered:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: I have learned that the towboats rolled heavily in the strong wind, and fearing that their funnels would roll out, both skippers thought the time opportune to save their own lives.<sup>29</sup>

Wagner thought he was the reason the crew and passengers didn't leave the ship:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: Seeing that the vessel would break up shortly and litter the sea with wreckage, I asked the men to jump and swim, but they preferred to remain with me til the last.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 1908.11.14 Morning Call

<sup>29</sup> 1908.09.27 News\_Article\_\_Seattle\_Post-Intelligencer\_published\_as\_The\_Seattle\_post-intelligencer.\_\_\_September\_27\_1908\_\_p1.pdf

<sup>30</sup> 1972.01.05 Boston\_Herald\_1972-01-05\_45.pdf

Wagner almost got away with it, until Alf Olsen sat down in Wrangell and told the truth. Alf Olsen caused a sea change, finally exposing the absurdity of the claim that rescue was even a remote possibility. The shocked inspectors sought out Patrick Loftus, who backed up Alf Olsen. It seemed to confirm what the Hattie Gage and Kayak had been saying all along. There was no chance of rescue.

But why did Alf Olsen, and the surviving crew members, testify to it in San Francisco? Why did they go along with something that was so obviously impossible?

It's hard to imagine what the survivors saw and went through. No man came ashore unscathed. The sea took its toll on everyone. The men lost brothers, friends, and each of them nearly lost their lives. From the start, they depended on each other for survival. They huddled together on the beach, and stayed together for the somber journey home by ship and rail.

A week after the wreck, Torlef Anderson described his nightmares:

THORALF ANDERSON: The dead were floating about among the living and the wreckage and salmon cases. The scene was awful and I've been seeing it and going through it every night in my dreams.<sup>31</sup>

The crew weren't just bonded by trauma. Each of them played some role in the ship's final hours of mistakes, missed opportunities, and coming up short.

## Alf Chain

One piece of Alf Olsen's story may give us a glimpse into why he decided to finally tell the truth. It came up on his second day of testimony in Wrangell.

Q: Do you think it would have been any advantage to the chains and let the ship run up on the rocks?

ALF OLSEN: If we slipped the chains, I think she would have smashed up quicker.

But according to Alf Olsen, that's exactly what Wagner assigned him to do.

ALF OLSEN: Yes, sir, when struck the first time the Captain gave orders to slip the chains.



Slipping the chain was a desperate last act. If the ship could be free of its anchors, the waves might push it up against the shore, allowing men to leap for their lives. The sailing ship *Lucille*, laden with canned salmon one month before, had done just this and saved everyone's lives.

Unable to access the chain locker below deck, Alf Olsen grabbed a hacksaw and started filing the port chain.

Q: Were you cutting yourself?

ALF OLSEN: Yes, sir, me and another man.

Q: Did you get either of those chains cut or sawed off?

ALF OLSEN: No, sir. I don't know about the starboard one; she slacked up and I think he got that one cut, I am not sure.

In Seattle, one of the survivors revealed who the other man was, with tears in his eyes:

Sigard Nelson worked like a man possessed in his endeavor to save not only his comrades, but the ship as well, the huge anchors pounding the deck near where he stood with every lurch, and the vessel rapidly going to pieces. When he saw it was no use and that his end was near he shouted: 'This is a hard old death, but I'm going to die fighting!' When my time comes, I ask no more glorious ending than the passing of Big Nelson, the Norwegian.<sup>32</sup>

At some point, Alf Olsen gave up cutting the chain, and fled to the stern, where he joined Norman Hawkins and others. Minutes later, they watched as the bow and Sigard Nelson dipped below the surface forever.

Just like Erwin Farrer, Alf Olsen saw his chance to save everyone's lives slip through his fingers. Both men had to save themselves and live with that decision.

Nicholas Wagner pinned everything on the steamship captains, and forgave himself and his crew for any mistakes. Whatever happened after the anchors were down didn't matter. None of the living—or dead—were responsible. Nicholas Wagner offered absolution.

Wagner still controlled the crew, long after the ship went down. Though he lost his voice, he directed them on the beach. In Seattle, newspapers identified him as their leader and prominently featured his long, dramatic speeches.<sup>33</sup> He controlled the allowance given to the men<sup>34</sup> and led the testimony in San Francisco just 10 days after the wreck.

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<sup>32</sup> 1908.09.27 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1908-09-27\_1.pdf

<sup>33</sup> 1908.09.27 SF Examiner.pdf

<sup>34</sup> Gus Johnson letter, 1940s.

For the exhausted, beleaguered survivors, challenging Wagner may have simply been too much. He was, after all, the expert, and their captain, and bonded by the same shared experience. All they had to do, was remember the morning of September 20th, to look out to the sea, and to imagine that somebody was coming to save them.

# Epilogue

## Season of 1908

1908 was a banner year for the Alaskan canned salmon industry. It hit a six-year record, producing 2.6 million cases, half a million more than the year before.<sup>35</sup> The APA earned a gross profit of \$880,682 for the season.<sup>36</sup>

The loss of the sailing ships Lucille and the Star of Bengal only reduced the pack by about 90,000 cases. By October 1908, the APA purchased replacements for both the wrecked ships.<sup>37</sup>

Not everyone was so quick to move on. Wrangell's newspaper, the Alaska Sentinel wrote:

By the wreck of the Star of Bengal, widowed mothers have lost sons upon whom they depended for support; wives and little children have lost the husbands and fathers who were their all in all; young women's hearts are torn with grief over the loss of lovers who are not to return to them. But the Alaska Packers care nothing about the tears and broken hearts. They have lost a vessel and cargo worth many thousands of dollars through the fault of grasping at the few paltry dollars that it would have cost to bring the Chilkat here to take the ship to sea.<sup>38</sup>

## Burnside

Incredibly, the only captain who faced any consequences in the story of the Star of Bengal was Captain Stamford of the cable ship Burnside. On the morning of Monday, September 21st, when the Hattie Gage pulled up to the Burnside, Erwin Farrer begged for help. Instead, the Burnside delayed rescue by returning to Wrangell to send a telegram to Washington, asking for approval. This decision was thoroughly derided in the press. The Seattle Star wrote:

Doubtless the master of the cable ship was following the strict letter of his instructions when he failed to answer the call of distress without official sanction. This is part of the governmental red tape system that sometimes causes reasonable human beings to wonder if the bureaus in Washington possess any of that faculty which we term common

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<sup>35</sup> 1908.12.31 News\_Article\_\_Seattle\_Post-Intelligencer\_published\_as\_The\_Seattle\_post-intelligencer.\_\_December\_31\_1908\_\_p9.pdf

<sup>36</sup> 1909.02.04 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1909-02-04\_1.pdf

<sup>37</sup> 1908.10.27 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1908-10-27\_1.pdf

<sup>38</sup> 1908.10.14 Star\_of\_Bengal\_Sentinel\_editorial.pdf

sense... Poor old Uncle Sam, with his leagues of red tape wrapped about everything, utterly ignorant that such things as emergencies ever arise...<sup>39</sup>

While Captain Stamford received the blunt of the criticism, the decision to telegram for approval was actually made by the Quartermaster Captain, who held power over the ship, as well. Despite this, the public outcry meant the end for Captain Stamford. In June 1909, the Seattle Daily Times wrote:

Captain Stamford, who has been in command of the vessel for years, was in charge last year when the Star of Bengal was wrecked in Alaska, when 111 lives were lost, and the cableship subjected to considerable criticism for her delay in responding to an appeal for help from the ill-fated vessel. He will go only far enough north to turn over to his successor the property of the office.<sup>40</sup>

## Fishermen's Union

The San Francisco Fisherman's Union observed the death of eight<sup>41</sup> union members aboard the Star of Bengal, and ordered shipwreck benefits paid to five survivors. The union ordered "a vote of thanks... given to the Alaska Packer's Association for the kind treatment extended to the survivors of the wreck of that vessel."<sup>42</sup>

## Asian People

Newspapers reported that the APA volunteered to compensate the families of the cannery workers "from \$100 to \$250 will be given to each family, according to its needs."<sup>43</sup> A follow-up newspaper account reported that these families fell into squabbles, over who would be the rightful heir to the money.<sup>44</sup>

A brief newspaper clipping, from Kentucky, says the Chinese company that employed the cannery workers was "arranging to send an expedition north to recover all the bodies

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<sup>39</sup> The Seattle Star (Seattle, Washington) · 17 Oct 1908, Sat · Page 4

<sup>40</sup> 1909.06.12 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1909-06-12\_14.pdf

<sup>41</sup> 1908.10.06 SF\_Call\_Union\_deaths.pdf

<sup>42</sup> 1908.10.11 San\_Francisco\_Call\_Bulletin\_1908-10-11\_38.pdf

<sup>43</sup> 1908.12.19 San Francisco Call

<sup>44</sup> 1909.01.12 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1909-01-16\_3.pdf

possible, that they may be properly interred in their native land.”<sup>45</sup> There’s no record of this ever happening.

On the last day of 1908, the Wrangell Sentinel published an article entitled “Afraid of Alaska,” about how Chinese workers had become “superstitious.”

The awful wreck of the Star of Bengal carried to death scores of Chinese laborers, and it is stated that an impression prevails among the laborers that it was the work of fate, and that they are likely to meet with a similar destiny if they continue in this work. If it comes to a point where cannery men must employ white help it will mean a higher cost in the production of red salmon and of the other grades packed in Alaska, and a consequent increase in the selling price is bound to result.<sup>46</sup>

For the 1909 season, the APA sent the Star of England to Wrangell. On the way home, it ran into a fierce 3-day gale off Vancouver Island, which stove in lifeboats, and blew away sails.<sup>47</sup>

The Star of England survived. It sailed to Wrangell until 1927, when the APA stopped sending sailing ships to Wrangell. A few years later, the APA was done with all square-rigged sailing ships. It was the end of an era, a flicker of the Age of Sail snuffed out.

## Patrick Hamilton

Captain Patrick Hamilton, of the Kayak, stayed in Alaska. In 1914, he was charged for operating an improper fish trap, and was defended by his employer. He died of heart disease at the age of 56 in Ketchikan on April 9, 1923.

## Kayak

In 1913, just five years after the Star of Bengal sank, the Kayak ran into high seas outside Yakutat. The ship attempted to turn, hit rocks, and sank. The crew narrowly escaped aboard lifeboats.<sup>48</sup> Said the Alaska Daily Empire:

The Kayak has a dark record. This boat had in tow the Star of Bengal when she was wrecked and 138 people perished. She has been a sort of trouble maker, it is said, ever since she took to

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<sup>45</sup> 1908.11.03 Kentucky\_Post\_1908-11-03\_2.pdf

<sup>46</sup> 1908.12.31 Alaska Sentinel clipping

<sup>47</sup> 1909.10.16 San\_Francisco\_Call\_Bulletin\_1909-10-16\_28 Star of England.pdf

<sup>48</sup> 1913.09.11 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

the water and every seaman who ever shipped aboard her was glad when his time was out.<sup>49</sup>

The Kayak was always an accident waiting to happen. Everyone familiar with the Kayak discussed its underpowered engine, extremely light stern, and high center of gravity. The Kayak was designed as a fish tender — not a tugboat. As one friend of Erwin Farrer wrote in the weeks after the wreck:

The tug boats are not built for towing but for carrying fish and in a gale of wind they have all they can do to take care of themselves, as they have little power, being built for inside waters. With a ship in tow they would be helpless.<sup>50</sup>

## Erwin Farrer

Captain Erwin Farrer, of the Hattie Gage, restored his reputation. He continued to work for the APA as master of steamships. He moved around, evening living in Wrangell for a while.<sup>51</sup> At the age of 73, he reportedly became despondent over ill health, and died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He is buried in Seattle, Washington.<sup>52</sup> His headstone reads: “Captain Erwin Farrer.”<sup>53</sup>

## Hattie Gage

The Hattie Gage continued to steam around Alaska, until finally being sold to owners on the east coast. In 1918, the Hattie Gage capsized off the coast of North Carolina, and sunk.<sup>54</sup>

## Pat Loftus

Patrick Loftus recovered from his injuries. Nine months after the wreck of the Star of Bengal, he and his wife, Mary, welcomed a son, Manuel. When Patrick Loftus died at the age of 71, he left behind a large family. There is a lake in Wrangell, not far from the town, where Patrick Loftus once homesteaded, that is named for him: Pat Lake.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Alaska\_daily\_empire\_1913-09-02\_4.pdf

<sup>50</sup> 1908.10.05 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1908-10-05\_1.pdf

<sup>51</sup> 1955.08.22 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1955-08-22\_34.pdf

<sup>52</sup> 1929.01.05 Seattle\_Daily\_Times\_1929-01-05\_13.pdf

<sup>53</sup> [findagrave.com](http://findagrave.com)

<sup>54</sup> 1918.07.07 Hattie\_Gage\_\_Hartford\_Courant\_\_July\_7\_\_1918.pdf

<sup>55</sup> Decisions on Geographic Names in the United States by the United States Board of Geographic Names.

## Alf Olsen

Months after the wreck, Alf Olsen kept going out to Coronation Island to tend to the bodies, which continued to wash ashore. Unlike the other survivors, who scattered, Alf Olsen decided to stay and make Wrangell a home. His brother joined him, bringing his wife and children.<sup>56</sup>

In 1912, the Wrangell Sentinel described what Alf Olsen was up to:

Bills have been distributed advertising a wrestling match to be pulled off at Red Men's Hall. Alf Olsen, who has boxed his way to the title of "Terrible Swede" among the Frisco sailors, will try to get two falls out of three from Ed. Lynch, "Champion of Chemawa." The contestants have been training faithfully this week, Lynch at the Wrangell Hotel and Olsen at his training headquarters at the A.P.A. cannery. Everything has been arranged for a fine bout, except, of course, who will win, and the division of the motion picture rights. A dance will be given after the match, both for the one admission.<sup>57</sup>

Alf Olsen fell to Ed Lynch twice, breaking a rib, but putting on an enjoyable show for a Wrangell audience of 200 men and women.<sup>58</sup> Just as he had done on the beach, Alf Olsen got back up. Alf Olsen passed away in Seattle one week before his 47th birthday.

The remains of Norman Hawkins were never found.<sup>59</sup>

## Star of Bengal

The final resting place of the Star of Bengal has been an open secret for over a century. Coronation Island is still as remote, and uninhabitable, as ever, but people have visited.

In 1922, according to radio engineer Dexter S. Bartlett, men from a surveying ship went ashore to hunt, and found a steel tank they believed came from the ship.<sup>60</sup>

Around 1929, a cannery owner, Harry W. Crosby, wrote to a friend:

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<sup>56</sup> 1915.03.25 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>57</sup> 1912.12.05 Wrangell Sentinel clipping.

<sup>58</sup> 1912.12.12 Wrangell Sentinel clipping

<sup>59</sup> 1908.11.16 Daily\_Record-Miner\_1908-11-16\_3.pdf

<sup>60</sup> Sea Classics. p. 6-7.

The Star was wrecked on Coronation 15 miles from where I had cannery and I have seen her remains just under water at low tide!

In 1961, the U.S. Geological Survey added to the confusion around the location of the Star of Bengal, by naming the large opening on southeast Coronation Island, “China Cove.”<sup>61</sup> In fact, the Star of Bengal is not inside China Cove — just north of it, insight of a narrow bight.

In 1997, Louise Brinck Harrington wrote in the Alaska Southeaster that Ketchikan diver Frank Sarber dove the Star of Bengal in 1966 and 1971. He reportedly found a pocket watch, deadeyes, and the ship’s rudder. She quoted Frank Sarber as saying:<sup>62</sup>

“When she broke up, a lot of her washed ashore... To this day, you might find things out there—the gravel and rocky bottom keeps changing.”

In 2020, Wrangell fisherman and diver Gig Decker published an article in National Fisherman, describing diving the wreck of the Star of Bengal. In 2022, Decker and a group of scientists, artists, and researchers visited the narrow bight to map the seafloor and identify the remains. The group discovered a wide, scattered debris field on the sea floor, and recovered a sheet of metal, with evenly spaced holes — a tantalizing clue in the process of confirming the eternal resting place of the Star of Bengal.

## Captain Nicholas Wagner

Just six years after the wreck of the Star of Bengal, Nicholas Wagner survived another large shipwreck: the Paramita, which wrecked off a remote Aleutian island. This time, everyone survived. Years later, he came up with an invention, he believed could save lives at sea. He described it, in a situation eerily similar to that of the Star of Bengal:

NICHOLAS WAGNER: With a sufficient number of kites aboard, the members of a shipwrecked crew—providing the wind is blowing toward shore, as is usually the case in a shipwreck—could each take a kite with a line sufficiently strong and plunge into the surf, trusting the kite to pull sufficiently to keep them on top of the waves and pull them ashore.<sup>63</sup>

Nicholas Wagner always had a story to tell. In the wreck of the Star of Bengal, he tried to make the story about the steamships. But no matter how much he tried to blame and bluster, he was always the center of the story.

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<sup>61</sup> 1961.10.18 Fairbanks\_News\_Miner\_China\_Cove.pdf

<sup>62</sup> Alaska Southeaster. Vol 6, No. 6. Page 23.

<sup>63</sup> 1921.05.13 Los Angeles Herald.pdf



# Prelude to Joan Lowell

The story could end here. But it doesn't.

Little Helen Wagner was five years old when her father came home from Alaska. He was bruised, bitter, and broken. She never forget it. As a grown woman, she gave her father's story a new life, a second wind.

## Next Time

Next time, on the Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal: It's the Captain's Daughter.

It's the fever pitch of the Roaring 20s. This is the true story of Hollywood, Broadway, a best-selling book, and a beautiful young woman with a story to tell — including one about an old ship called the Star of Bengal. Just when it all seemed perfect, it all fell apart. It's a tale of fame, fortune, fiction, and the invention of a great American hoax.

## Credits

Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal is a Wrangell History Unlocked production.

Sound effects from [epidemicsound.com](http://epidemicsound.com).

Featuring music:

- Shenandoah performed by the United States Air Force Academy Band.
- Rhapsody in Blue performed by the Presidents Own United States Marine Band.
- Auld Lang Syne performed by Megan Wofford from Epidemic Sounds.
- Music from Museopen:
  - Moonlight Sonata performed by Stefano Ligoratti
  - Claire de Lune
  - The Carnival of Animals
- Remaining music from the Wikipedia Commons:
  - Finlandia performed by Antwerp Symphony Orchestra
  - Four Seasons performed by Wichita State University Players
  - Jupiter from The Planets performed by the Skidmore College Orchestra
  - Reflections of the Moon on Erquan performed by Zhang Peijian

Thanks to our voice talent, Tyler Naab, John Schenk, Gary Bacon, and Jake Henry.

Thanks to the Clausen Museum in Petersburg, Alaska for the transcript from Edward Thoralf Anderson.

Thanks to the staff of library at the University of Alaska Southeast at Ketchikan, for a copy of the Alaska Southeaster from 1996 featuring the Star of Bengal.

A big thanks to the team of researchers who visited Coronation Island in the summer of 2022 to search for the wreck: Sean Adams, Jenya Anichenko, Gig Decker, Shawn Dilles, Tessa Hulls, Ray Troll, and Bill and Patsy Urschel. Thank you for sharing your passion and research, particularly the exciting discoveries made this summer.

Thanks to Bonnie Demerjian, Alice Rooney, and Steve Lloyd for offering feedback on early drafts of this episode. Bonnie Demerjian is the author of several wonderful books on Wrangell history, and Steve Lloyd is the author of two gripping articles about the Star of Bengal.

You can learn more about the Star of Bengal at [wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star](http://wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star). You can read a transcript of today's episode, along with photos, maps, a timeline, and more.

There are many mysteries about the Star of Bengal just waiting to be solved. You can email us at [wrangellpod@gmail.com](mailto:wrangellpod@gmail.com).

Tune in next week for our final episode, The Captain's Daughter.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. Thanks for listening.