

Star of Bengal Bonus: The James Kennedy Tape

Episode Website: <http://www.wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star>

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(James Kennedy's tape recording is sometimes a little difficult to hear. If you think there is an error in this transcript, please let us know! You can always email us at wrangellpod@gmail.com).

Introduction

Q: This Coronation Island?

KENNEDY TAPE: Coronation.

This interview you're hearing...

Q: And that's where the ship was wrecked?

KENNEDY TAPE: That's where the ship was wrecked.

Is with a man named James Kennedy.

Q: And the mate was throwing the lead?

KENNEDY TAPE: The mate was throwing the lead...

Q: And you're on the tug?

KENNEDY TAPE: I was on the tug, of course.

...on the night the Star of Bengal was lost forever.

Q: And then what happened, Jimmy?

In you're host, Ronan Rooney. You're listening to Wrangell History Unlocked Presents, a Star of Bengal Bonus: The James Kennedy Tapes. Stay tuned.

Chapter 1. A Brush With Fate

Biography

First off, I want to thank Bob Kennedy originally from Ketchikan, for sharing these tapes of his grandfather James Kennedy with us! Thanks, Bob!

James Kennedy was born in 1868 in Glasgow, Scotland. As a teenager, he boarded a steamship and crossed the Atlantic Ocean and landed in New York City on May 3, 1883.

By 1908, James Kennedy was about 40 years old, the married father of four children and one step-child with his Indigenous wife, Mary.

The Kennedy family of 1908 lived at the Loring cannery, not far from Ketchikan. The Alaska Packers Association employed James Kennedy as an engineer aboard the *Kayak*, a 115-ton steam-powered fish tender that also towed ships out to sea at the end of the season.

In September 1908, the *Kayak* reported to Wrangell to tow the *Star of Bengal* out to sea. Another fish tender, the *Hattie Gage*, would serve as the lead towboat. Tragically, a fierce gale would push all three ships into Coronation Island, leading to the wreck of the *Star of Bengal* and the death of 111 lives.

James Kennedy was interviewed in the investigation weeks after the wreck:

Q: How long have you been engineer of the “*Kayak*,” Mr. Kennedy, how many different seasons?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Five.

Q: You probably have served a longer time in the “*Kayak*” than any other man, have you not?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Yes, sir.

Q: How long have you been at sea on square rigged sailing vessels?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: I guess four years altogether.

My friend, John Schenk, is the voice of James Kennedy. John appeared throughout our series *Rise & Fall of the Star of Bengal* in many places, but his appearance here is special. John is the great-great-grandson of James Kennedy.

Today, you'll hear James Kennedy's own voice, at the age of 78, recorded in 1947. And you'll hear John reading his great-grandfather's testimony from 1908, at the age of 40. Together, they provide a complete picture of one man's experiences on a harrowing, deadly voyage. If you'd like to follow along with a transcript, visit us at wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star.

Be advised, James Kennedy holds nothing back — and his language is, shall we say, quite salty. Listener discretion advised.

Chapter 2. In His Own Words

Q: This recording was made in an interview by Ralph W. Carr, MD. In 1947 in his office at 325 Dock Street, Ketchikan, Alaska. Chatting with Jimmy Kennedy who had been chief engineer of the tug Kayak at the time of the Star of Bengal disaster at Coronation Island.

Before Departure

KENNEDY TAPE: Well the ship was laying over there. And we were at this wharf here. And we... wait there with the... get a little lower, and Jake came down. And the sky was one of the whitest looking skies I ever saw.

Q: Yeah

KENNEDY TAPE: And I said, "Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"You aren't going to send that ship out today, are you?"

"Oh yes," he says, "she's got to go." (Sigh) Well, I says, you'll be sorry for it. I says, look at that sky. I says, if you don't know anything about weather, I says, you'll never send that ship out!

"She's gotta go, she's gotta go." Well his, his wife's, his wife's brother got drowned in the operation, anyway. We had that satisfaction, anyway.

This Hattie Gage, she wasn't a big a boat as we were, but she was a good boat. And the pilot, his name was Farrer, Captain Farrer. Where he ought to have been workin' was on a farm.

Q: Sure.

KENNEDY TAPE: That's where the son of a bitch ought to have been. Anyway, we left.

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: We left Wrangell around eight o'clock sometime, light breeze and fine weather. We towed through those islands in front of Wrangell, I forget the name of them... We were towing in close Point Baker between the rock and the shore, and toward six o'clock, the wind begun to freshen a

little; at half past twelve, we were close Coronation Island on our starboard hand.

Q: Provided you were a stranger in this country, do you think it would have been, in your opinion, dangerous to go to sea then?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: If I had been a stranger I think I would have went to sea, yes, sir.

Q: But knowing as much of the country as you do, you would have thought it not safe to go?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: I probably would have run back up the straits then.

The Voyage

KENNEDY TAPE: Now, I told... now I used to towboat too, I used to towboat all through the sound, up to Cape Flattery. Now a towboat man he never crawls along the shore. He always takes the middle of the strait. Now, if he gets a killer wind from that side, he's still got some chance. A towboat man knows these things. Well anyway, we left Wrangell. Now there's islands outside of Wrangell, I think they're called Five Mile Islands.¹ And damned if we didn't go between them. Tow that big ship draws 24 feet of water.

Q: 24 feet?

KENNEDY TAPE: Yeah. And the...

Q: She had a full pack then, huh?

KENNEDY TAPE: Well, they had the cannery... the seasons' pack in there. And the mate's name was Fred Wilkie. He was a German. But he was a good man. Well, he objected to the two boats... we were towing on the starboard bow. Our hawsers were fast to the starboard side of the ship, and the Hattie Gage was on the port side. Well, Wilkie was in the pilot house, our pilot house, and so he called our attention to this going by Five Mile Island. And Farrer's son was at the wheel. And Farrer was

¹ learn more about Five Mile Island: <https://alaska.guide/island/fivemile-island>

laying dark. And woke up he says, "You haul ass. We're doing this." Oh, alright. Well, then we went along. Then there's that rock called the Eye Opener.

Q: The Eye Opener?

KENNEDY TAPE: The Eye Opener. That's on Prince of Wales. Well damned if he didn't go between that rock and the main island! Well, we made, even in spite of all this, we made seven knots from Wrangell. I called the knots. Now, I don't know if you know anything about the the lay of the land there. Well anyway, Coronation Island is over here. And over here is Kuiu Island.

Q: Kuiu, yeah.

KENNEDY TAPE: As soon as they cleared that, it's only a short distance from here outside there, and then they could let the ship go and she's out in the Gulf of Alaska, where she could take of herself. But no, instead of going that way, Farrer goes to work and heads inside here and tows along the Coronation shore.

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Between Warren Island and Coronation, with Coronation Island close aboard.²

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: We were towing in close Point Baker between the rock and shore, and toward six o'clock, we were close Coronation Island on our starboard hand... It was blowing a very fresh breeze at half past twelve and the sea was rising; once in a while the wheel would race; the wind kept increasing from that on...³ The first racing she made was half past twelve, and from that on we stood by, she would race, not all the time.⁴

KENNEDY TAPE: So I thought, well, I'll go up on deck. So, I went up on deck. And Patsy was up there in the wheelhouse,

² Kennedy Testimony, p. 163.

³ Kennedy Testimony, p. 161.

⁴ Whitney Newhall p. 164.

with one of the deckhands, steering, and asked him, "Is it time, about time you whistled for the canvas?"

"Well," Patsy says, "Do you know where you are?"

"No," I says, "I don't know where we are, but I know where we ought to be. I says, "We ought to be clear out Cape Decision." I says, "We got to be clear of Cape Decision, Patsy."

"Aye," Patsy says. He was a tough, tough son of a bitch. "Aye," Patsy says, "We ain't going that way."

I says, "What way are we going?"

He says, "We are going up inside. Take Warren Island over, and and this is Coronation."

"Well," I says, "There's obviously a fuckin' belly out..." Farrer could hear me talkin', and the chief, from Five Mile Islands he was by us, flashed us, and he threw the talk. So, another mate come up. And he comes in, you know, going, "Jim," he says, "We're going to lose this ship."

I says, "I know that." I says, "What do want me to do, you got me some?"

"No..." But! We were going to lose her there. Well, he started throwing the lead. You know what that is?

Q: Yeah.

KENNEDY TAPE: For the depth of the water. He called the depth every time he felt it catch. And a ship drawing under four feet of water needs a little water under her keel!

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: When I heard him throwing the lead, I was standing at the door of the engine room, lee door. I generally stand up at the door when we are handling a tow until we tighten the line, I watch the line as the man at the throttle cannot see it. A man had to stand there all the time, we had to stand there to protect our engine, of course she was not racing all the time.

I heard them talking about the rock. I looked at the rock myself. Well I seen the breakers, the sea breaking on it. I thought about

50 feet away to the rock when I looked, they may have got closer afterwards though.⁵

KENNEDY TAPE: So he was calling the depth, and Patsy says to –he could talk across at this time– “Well,” he says, “I can’t stay here much longer, ain’t much water under my keel, and there isn’t much under the ship.” And just that quick they cut the hawser! They must have had the man standing out with an ax. And they cut the hawser and off we went to Warren Island. And I... no others, we couldn’t do that. The ship had had her anchors down and we didn’t know it.

Cutting and Running

KENNEDY TAPE: And another thing the ship didn’t have, is the captain. I know the captain drunk. He was drunk. He had no side by himself. Well, Patsy says, “We can’t stay here.”

We cut our hawser. That’s the last thing what I said, I think. We cut our hawser. And not being locally acquainted, Patsy ran out to sea, and hold to out there. So I went in my room and laid down a while, and I had the boiler there, in there.

Q: Yeah.

KENNEDY TAPE: So, Patsy whistled down to the engine room, and he told them he wanted me to come up. And I thought, goddamn him, anyway. So, I went up. And while the sea did grow, and it did from the main deck. Jesus, Patsy, I says, I see it on every ask. Well, Patsy says, we can’t stay here. Well, I says, why don’t you go in? Well, I know Patsy was a’scared to turn. I didn’t blame him very much.

“Well,” Patsy says, “did you ever turn in a sea like this?”

I said, “Oh yes,” but I lied like hell. Now, I know that if you didn’t start something, then we’ll never get out of here.” Well alright.

⁵ Whitney Newhall, p. 165.

“Well,” he says, “You know, generally, even off Cape Horn, there’s three seas around, and in them three seas generally there’s one a little smaller than the rest.

“Well,” Patsy says, “I look for a small sea.” And then we was under a slow bell then, you know. And he says, “Well, what type of bell? Hand it to her?” Oh, and I says, “We’ll hand it to her, alright.”

So I stood by the engine room door on deck, and Patsy found the smallest sea, at least he said he did. But I think he found the biggest one! Because when she come up on that sea—now, the Kayak as a long smokestack—come up on that sea, and she’s got that right there, the higher she went, then that taking my breath went away. Then when when he put his wheel down, and she came around. I thought she was going to dip her smokestack in that sea. And my heart stopped beating for a minute...

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Then we went out and stood off Coronation Island and lay there till daylight. At six o’clock in the morning the Captain called me up to the wheel house and we talked about the advisability of turning around as it was evidently blowing a stiff gale, and the Captain decided to turn around. We turned about with Coronation Island on our port hand but we could not see anything of the ship; from there we went to Warren Island. It was blowing a heavy gale then.⁶

Resting at Anchor

KENNEDY TAPE: And we got over to Warren Island, and the Hattie Gage was laying there. We laid there about, oh, I think it was half an hour there, when our anchor carried away. We had our anchor there with about an eight in shank. And that broke off with the current. Well, we were adrift then.

⁶ James Kennedy Testimony, p. 161-2.

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: From there we went to Shipley Bay; it was still blowing heavy; we anchored at Shipley Bay and lay there all night.⁷

Q: After you parted from the ship and had gone out, lying outside, what were you lying there for, did you know what the master's idea was in lying there?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Waiting till daylight to see if anything could be done for the ship.

Q: Then you think it was his bonafide intention to give assistance to the ship if possible?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Yes, sir.

Q: Do you think it would have been impossible at daylight?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Yes, sir. He called me up to the pilot house, the sea was so big and he was a little leery and afraid to turn around. He asked me if I had been to sea like this before with her and I told him, "No."⁸ It was a heavy sea. The wind was still increasing at that time and the sea was still increasing.⁹

Sighting the Wreck

KENNEDY TAPE: So this Farrer said, "Well I'll go to Wrangell and report this."

Patsy says, "You go to hell and report yourself there. That's where you ought to be, anyway." Well, he went and reported it.

The next morning, we went out to the scene of the wreck. And all I could see was one of the yards bobbing up and down. And you could see men on the beach though, and I was up and got the glasses and was looking at them, the beach was just strewn with bodies. It was all in the one little piece of sand beach on that island on that side! And it seemed to be an act of Providence that it went ashore there. Anyway, the mate put the

⁷ James Kennedy Testimony, p. 162.

⁸ Kennedy Testimony, p. 175-6.

⁹ Whitney Newhall p. 168.

boat out, but he couldn't land. The sea was rolling in there, you know, and there was boxes of salmon and drums and one thing or another rolling in there. Well, what he told them, he says, "First of all, where's all the white men that was there?" He says, "I can't take you off just now, but we'll come out tomorrow. We'll come out tomorrow."

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: We went back to Shipley Bay that day and lay there till next morning. The weather was beginning to get fine. We left Shipley Bay at five in the morning and met the "Hattie Gage" outside, both boats went to the scene of the wreck and we took the men aboard there...¹⁰

KENNEDY TAPE: And the sea was a little less. And we did get the men off. Out of the Oriental crew, we got two Chinamen.

Q: And how many drowned?

KENNEDY TAPE: A hundred and eleven drowned. An that is quite certain.

Q: Whites and Orientals?

And the Chinamen.

Captain Wagner Reaction

Q: When you took the survivors away from the wreck, was Captain Wagner aboard the "Kayak"?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: He was.

Q: Did you have any conversation with him?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Yes, sir.

Q: He is difficult in hearing?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: He is deaf.

Q: Did you have any trouble making him understand what you were talking about?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: I had to bellow, yes, sir.

¹⁰ Kennedy Testimony, p. 162.

Q: Did he state to you during that trip that he thought the Captains acted cowardly?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Yes, he intimated as much.

Q: He didn't make the direct charge?

KENNEDY TESTIMONY: Well, he said they left us there to die.¹¹

KENNEDY TAPE: There was a mistake made, some ways, when the captain of that ship got off. That sonofabitch ought to be drowned! He was a Montenegrin. Do you know where that country is?

Q: Roughly.

KENNEDY TAPE: It's in the Europe, somewhere. Some little place about there... Anyway, the sonofabitch moved off here, and I thought, "You bastard, you. I'm sorry to see you here, because you ought to be on the beach there with the rest of them."

Babler Reaction

No, went to Wrangell then. We had all the men that was alive. And Babler, Jake Babler, was there. His wife was there. And she was whining and hollering. "You... you... your boat drowned my brother! Your boat drowned my brother!" Well, Heckman had came out there to Wrangell. Well, Heckman says, "Don't you think your boat had something to do with it, too?" The cause of the whole thing was Jake Babler, sending the ship out in that kind of a weather.

Q: Ah huh.

And blowed for week afterwards!

Q: Oh wow.

JAMES KENNEDY TAPE: Yeah. I know. We came down the narrows afterwards, we would come back to Loring, and I went

¹¹ Kennedy Testimony, p. 170-171.

down there and the other boats went down then. By God, we could hardly stand it in here.

Q: Well thank you, Jimmy!

JAMES KENNEDY TAPE: Aye!

Chapter 3. Takeaways

James Kennedy had an incredible memory. He remembered minor details, like the fact that the captain of the Star of Bengal was from Montenegro, and that the captain of the Hattie Gage was, in fact, a farmer. James Kennedy even proved me wrong on something: Patrick Hamilton's nickname was Patsy, P-A-T-S-Y, not Paddy, as I had previously thought.

James Kennedy's two stories, told nearly 40 years apart, are consistent — but it's his tapes that reveal new insights.

Drunk Accusations

James Kennedy accuses Captain Nicholas Wagner of the Star of Bengal of being drunk. As far as I know, that's not a corroborated statement, but it's not exactly hard to believe. Captain Wagner was below deck in his private quarters after 10pm by himself. When he came on deck after 1:45am, he acted like a raving maniac. Even Wagner admitted to shouting hopelessly into the dark for hours. His conduct was strange.

Twenty years after the wreck, Wagner's daughter would write a book, and accuse the steamship captains of being drunk. Again, no corroborating evidence supports this.

In the investigation after the wreck, the steamship captains Farrer and Hamilton teamed up to defend themselves. But James Kennedy reveals Patrick Hamilton's great anger at Captain Farrer in their meeting the morning after the Star of Bengal was lost. Captain Farrer faced critics from all sides — among the Star of Bengal survivors, newspapers, investigators and even his fellow captain Patrick Hamilton. But if the two men had any hard feelings towards each other, they never showed it publicly.

Norman Hawkins

One last, final observation. James Kennedy's description of the survivors arriving at the dock in Fort Wrangel is shocking. The cannery superintendent Jacob Babler was there with his wife Jeannette, whose brother, Norman Hawkins, was announced among the missing when the survivors arrived.

Jeannette Babler began accusing the steamships of killing her brother, to which another cannery superintendent, J.R. Heckman of Loring, fights back, suggesting her husband might share some responsibility.

More than any other victim of the wreck, Norman Hawkins' death would generate the most headlines. The Babler family offered \$1,000 to anyone who found his remains. He was never found.

James Kennedy Rest of Life

James Kennedy went on to live a long, full life.

His wife, Mary, passed away only a few years after the Star of Bengal wreck. At the age of 50, he remarried, to a 22 year-old Tsimshian woman named Joanna, and had even more children.

James Kennedy died on May 18, 1949 in Ketchikan, Alaska. He was 80 years old.

That's all for Wrangell History Unlocked Presents: a Star of Bengal Bonus: The James Kennedy Tapes. I'm your host, Ronan Rooney, thanks for listening.

Credits

Thanks again to Bob Kennedy for sharing this recording with us, and thanks to John Schenk for reading the testimony! If you have any tapes or pieces of the Star of Bengal story you'd like to share, please get in touch! Our email address is wrangellpod@gmail.com

Thanks to Alice Rooney for performing our theme song, Alexander Archipelago.

If you'd like to learn more about the Star of Bengal and read a transcript of today's episode, visit us at wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star.