

Rise & Fall of the Star of Bengal, I: A Star is Born

Transcript Date: September 2, 2022

Introduction

It was late in the evening on September 22nd, 1908 when the survivors returned to Wrangell. Just days before, there had been so many. Now, there were so few.

Of the 138 men who set sail aboard the Star of Bengal, only 27 survived.

Most of the dead were Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino cannery workers returning to San Francisco at the end of the long, summer canning season.

They had been towed to sea, from Wrangell, down the windy bend of Sumner Strait, through the islands of southeast Alaska, out to the wide, open Pacific Ocean. They almost made it.

Wrangell clamored for answers. And the crew had a story tell. Here, in their own words, are the final hours of the Star of Bengal.

Survivor Story

Nicholas Wagner: Nicholas Wagner, Captain, Star of Bengal. I was called from the cabin at 1:45 on Sunday morning and found the wind freshening from the Southeast. The first intimation of danger was the sound of breakers alongside. It was readily clear that we had been towed too close in shore.¹

Nicholas Wagner: [I] endeavored to get [the] ship on starboard tack and tried to hail steamers by use of megaphone and foghorn, to draw their attention to the proximity of the land,

¹ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.__September_27_1908__p1.pdf

yelling 'Starboard, starboard,' til I got hoarse, but got no response of any kind from either steamer.²

Frank Muir: On deck I saw through the darkness breakers all around, from the starboard bow to the port quarter, a small reef on the port side and the land towering black and forbidding about 300 yards away. We heaved two anchors but the wind drew us nearer to shore.³

NICHOLAS WAGNER: I ordered anchors let go in 17 fathoms of water, which held the ship, the towing steamers cutting the hawsers shortly afterwards.⁴

Nicholas Wagner: Without daring to take any chance whatever, they... put off like cowards while we drifted to death. The ship was not wrested from them by force of the storm.⁵

Nicholas Wagner: The tugs cut loose, then ran like dogs.⁶

Nicholas Wagner: Fifteen minutes more of towing—a half hour at the most—would have taken our ship free of the lee shore and into the Pacific...⁷

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. Gabriel with his trumpets might have made them hear us, but it would have done no good.⁸

² 1972.01.05 Boston_Herald_1972-01-05_45.pdf

³ Alaska Shipwrecks 12 Months of Disasters By Captain Warren Good

⁴ Official Report of Captain N. Wagner to US Local Inspectors, Sept 29, 1908 (thanks to Tessa Hulls for the source)

⁵ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_27_1908__p1.pdf

⁶ 1908.09.23 East_Oregonian__1908-09-23_2.pdf

⁷ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_27_1908__p1.pdf

⁸ 1908.09.27 SF Examiner.pdf

Harry Lewald: As the danger grew and the men realized how they were caught like rats in a trap, some of them strode here and there like mad men, cursing with terrible oaths the cowardly men on the tugs who left us to such a bitter fate. 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.⁹

Frank Muir: ...all donned life belts, some of us aiding the Chinese, who did not know how to manage them.¹⁰

Nicholas Wagner: For four hours the Star of Bengal rode at anchor, during which time every man aboard might have been saved. We were lying in seven fathoms with comparatively no wind... At any time between daylight and 8 o'clock the tugs could have come alongside and rescued all.¹¹

Nicholas Wagner: I called for volunteers and four men came forward.¹²

NICHOLAS WAGNER: As every tragedy furnishes its hero, ours came into existence with a call for volunteers to man a boat to carry a buoy line ashore. Into what seemed certain death Henry Lewald, Olof Hansen and Fred Matson, sailors, and Frank Muir, a cannery cook, came forward... With their safe landing depended the safety of the 134 men who remained on the ship.¹³

Harry Lewald: We had to do something. It was a time for action and some one had to go ashore in that boat and get out a lifeline.¹⁴

⁹ 1908.09.27 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-27_8-2.pdf

¹⁰ 1908.09.27 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-27_8-2.pdf

¹¹ 1908.09.24 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_24_1908__p1.pdf

¹² 1908.09.23 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-23_1.pdf

¹³ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_27_1908__p1.pdf

¹⁴ 1908.09.27 SF Examiner.pdf

David Wilson: When the captain called for volunteers, I put axes, shovels, and tools in the boat, also a rifle.¹⁵

Frank Muir: Then Fred Matson and I jumped into the port lifeboat, where Olaf Hanson and Harry Lewald were sitting and we took the oars while the others stood by to cut the falls as soon as she touched the water.¹⁶

David Wilson: The surf gave us a hard struggle. It... surged back and forth until I thought we would never get it on the beach. Finally we made it fast to a rock. I rigged the breeches buoy to a tree on top of the bluff.¹⁷

Nicholas Wagner: Martin Carstensen thought the chance was one for life and slid with the breeches buoy away from the ship landward.¹⁸

Olaf Hanson: About half way over the ship careened to one side throwing the chair and man sixty feet in the air and dropping him down again to the breakers which roared beneath his feet. As he went up with another roll of the ship he clambered out of the chair and sailed high into the air, landing in the foaming waves. He was washed ashore and piled in an exhausted mass on the beach, where we hauled him to safety.¹⁹

Nicholas Wagner: The ship struck at 9:45.²⁰

Nicholas Wagner: ...As she struck every man aboard was thrown from his feet. It was an awful shock.²¹

¹⁵ 1908.09.24 SF_Chronicle 2.pdf

¹⁶ 1908.09.27 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-27_8-2.pdf

¹⁷ 1908.09.24 SF_Chronicle 2.pdf

¹⁸ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_27_1908__p2.pdf

¹⁹ 1908.09.27 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-27_8-2.pdf

²⁰ 1908.09.23 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-23_1.pdf

²¹ 1908.09.24 San_Francisco_Examiner__Star_of_Bengal.pdf

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.²²

Harry Lewald: One Japanese who went up the mizzen mast, was torn from the rigging by the plunging of the ship and fell headlong to the ship where his brains spilled on the deck. Others were in the rigging when it was shaken out of the ship and carried overboard.²³

Olaf Hanson: The Chinese were objects of pity in their helplessness. Many were drowned outright; others were crippled or killed in the falling wreckage and floating piles of salmon cases.²⁴

Frank Muir: Swimmers had but little chance in the water, as the waves looked like solid walls of salmon cases and gasoline tanks. Probably as many were crushed by wreckage as were drowned.²⁵

David Wilson: The poor fellows could not swim well in the wreckage which was filled with all manner of debris. Every huge wave, rolling shoreward, looked like a wall of salmon cases.²⁶

Frank Muir: The great danger was that the cases would dash their brains out before we could reach them. Peter Peterson shouted, "Grab me, Harry, grab me," but the wreckage prevented and by the time we got near him an awful breaker full of cases and drums broke right on top of him and we saw him no more.²⁷

²² 1972.01.05 Boston_Herald_1972-01-05_45.pdf

²³ Alaska Shipwrecks 12 Months of Disasters By Captain Warren Good

²⁴ 1908.09.27 SF Examiner.pdf

²⁵ 1908.09.27 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-27_1.pdf

²⁶ 1908.09.24 SF_Chronicle 2.pdf

²⁷ Alaska Shipwrecks 12 Months of Disasters By Captain Warren Good

Harry Lewald: The waves were running twenty feet high and the poor fellows deserted there by the tugs were clinging as best they could to the rail or riggings.²⁸

Thoralf Anderson: Then what we had been expecting to happen any moment happened, a large wave lifted her up sky high and smashed her down on a rock.²⁹

Olaf Hanson: We could see the ship rolling and plunging through the rain and sleet. Soon her foremast went and she broke in two at that point. Then part of the main mast went over and the mizzen mast was carried away. The pitching of the vessel was horrible and sickened one to watch it, the little black dots, representing human figures, showing at the distance huddled like so many sheep near... far astern. My brother was among that number, and it was plain to be seen that all could not survive.³⁰

Nicholas Wagner: The Star of Bengal appeared to heave up her entrails in three sections when the final shock came. As I was thrown into the water I saw the midships beams of solid iron come out in a tangled mass. The force necessary to produce this is scarcely conceivable.³¹

Nicholas Wagner: From the time the vessel first struck till she had completely disappeared was exactly 45 minutes.³²

Nicholas Wagner: If I live to get to a place where it can be done, I propose to bring charges against the two men who were acting as captains of the tugs. To them alone do I blame the loss of life that has resulted...³³

²⁸ Alaska Shipwrecks 12 Months of Disasters By Captain Warren Good, p. 199.

²⁹ Edward F. Anderson, collected by grand-daughter Janet H. Elmore, nee Cramer. Transcript from the Clausen Museum in Petersburg, Alaska.

³⁰ 1908.09.27 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-27_8-2.pdf

³¹ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.___September_27_1908__p1.pdf

³² 1972.01.05 Boston_Herald_1972-01-05_45.pdf

³³ 1908.09.23 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-23_1.pdf

Nicholas Wagner: Those two captains are criminally cowardly and will have to answer to the authorities and to God for 110 human lives.³⁴

Nicholas Wagner: If there is any law under which I can do it, I will send both of those tugboat captains to San Quentin for their cowardice.³⁵

These quotes splashed the front pages of newspapers along the West Coast. It was a sensational story. But it contained a lie.

A lie too big to be an accident, and too useful to be an oversight.

For the Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal is a story of truth, lies, legends, and a mystery sitting at the bottom of the sea.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. You're listening to the first, in our five part series, The Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal, presented by Wrangell History Unlocked. Our first episode: A Star Is Born.

³⁴ 1908.09.24 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.__September_24_1908__p1.pdf

³⁵ 1908.09.23 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-09-23_4.pdf

Bill Taylor

Fast forward to Wrangell, 1981. The Star of Bengal is a distant memory.

But there is a man in Wrangell who remembers it, who was there as the ship was towed out to sea, and saw the Star of Bengal on its final night. His name is Bill Taylor.

Bill was 12 years old, and aboard the lead steamship towing the Star of Bengal, the Hattie Gage. His father, William Sr., secured a job aboard the Hattie Gage as an assistant engineer and brought his son along for the ride.

It was a trip Bill never forgot. In 1981, at the age of 86, Bill Taylor sat down, and told his story into a tape recorder.

BILL: 'Course, I didn't see anything, anything but what I was doing.

ALICE: Well, you sure worked hard down there shoveling coal.

BILL: Shoveling coal. Well, I wa... was just handling the door for my dad.

ALICE: Yeah.

The young woman you hear is an Episcopal church volunteer. She wanted to capture Wrangell's oldest stories before they disappeared forever. She is also my mother, Alice Rooney. For decades, she kept these tapes in a shoebox. In 2007, she gave them to me.

BILL: The day that they pulled out... Well, I, I cried. I wanted, I had to go. I was eleven years old. So, uh, Dad didn't want me to go and neither did Mother. The school, oh, I said, heck you're only two days. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday I'll be back to school. Oh, well, I begged so hard that they finally let me go. And when they pulled around here from the AP cannery³⁶ where the airport is now--big cannery, great big cannery--we towing the ship around and, uh, and we had a companion tug called The Kayak, captain, uh, Patsy Hamilton.

³⁶ Alaska Packers cannery.

Born in 1895, Bill is Tlingit through his mother, and white through his father. My mother remembers Bill Taylor as a master storyteller.

There is one piece of the Star of Bengal story that Bill tells, that shocks her:

BILL: They battened the hatches down with canvas like that, had a great big square hole they batten it down real tight with about six layers of heavy canvas, and on the edges of the hole like that there's iron locks that they put down there, and they wedge it, and they pull the canvas down so tight that there's no water that can get in or out. It lets it airtight in the bottom... inside. And there's where the Chinamen were. They were locked in the hold inside. They had two air vents, of course, up in the corners for fresh air and they were like stacks. They reached up quite a long ways. [coughs] So when she hit this reef they opened up a hole in the bottom of the weight of the ship went down like that and compressed the air inside of the, uh, hold inside the ship and made such a big heavy, uh, compression in there that the stacks of fresh air stacks really take care so it blew the hatch covers right blewey! Blew the hatch covers right open. Well what do you know? Out came Chinamens. Chinamen and, uh, salmon cases and everything that was in here that the water would rush up and spew out on top. There she was. Well, we didn't see that; I, I couldn't see; I was in the engine room. I didn't see anything as far as that goes, but I know how it happened and from talking...

The scene Bill describes is horrific, thoughtless, and unconscionable: Asian men separated and locked below deck, as the ship sank, crushed and drowned as the ship slipped beneath the surface of the cold ocean. Of 106 Asian cannery workers on board, only 10 survived. This fatal outcome seems to support Bill's grim story.

And Bill isn't alone.

In 1922, undercover reporter Max Stern went inside the hold of an APA ship, and heard the legend by lamplight:

[Tom] told me of the Star of Bengal which went on the rocks in Southeast Alaska. The sailors, so the legend goes, battered down the scuttle of the Chinese Hole to save themselves. It was their intent that the Chinese crew would perish while they got the boats. But it helped them not at all, for most of them drowned, too.³⁷

³⁷ Max Stern, Price of Salmon.

In 1960, sailing historian Harold Huycke mentioned the legend in passing, writing:

There was the Star of Bengal, gone these 50 years with the bones of a hundred Chinese entombed in her rusted hulk...³⁸

The legend appeared in the 2001 documentary, *Sockeye and the Age of Sail*, quoting Jonas Simundson, born years after the Star of Bengal wreck:

Tradition says that in case the ship was sinking at sea, the china gang would be locked down in the hold, where they'd stay, and let go down with the ship. Without any chance to save themselves.³⁹

The legend hangs like a dark cloud that never goes away, an everlasting reminder of racial segregation. Versions of this story have survived over a century. But there are reasons to doubt the legend is true.

This is just one of many mysteries surrounding the Star of Bengal.

To make sense of it all, we have to go back to the beginning. The very beginning.

Our story begins in India.

³⁸ Harold Huycke, *Sea Letter*, Feb 1960, p. 1.

³⁹ Jonas Simundson (APA doc, 18minutes)

India

Bengal is an ancient place, a region where rivers and the Indian Ocean collide. It is a place along Asia's great Silk Road. Centuries of trade built empires and spurred advances in science, art, and culture. Bengal's rich, fertile farmland provided abundant raw materials.

In the Age of Sail, Europeans sent ships to Bengal to trade for gold, spices, textiles, and more. The journey took them around around Africa and deep into the furthest reaches of the Indian Ocean.

Many European powers tried, and failed, to control the India trade. But the British East India Company succeeded. In the middle of the 18th century, with support from the British crown and parliament, the company put down Indian insurrections, seized the power to collect taxes, and expanded its control over the Indian sub-continent. One of the most valuable and strategic centers of power was Bengal.

By the middle of the 1800s, the East India Company was merely a formality. Everyone knew the real power in India was the British crown. Queen Victoria established a puppet government in India, called the British Raj. Though the East India Company's influence waned, the same goal remained: money.

Intellectual and mathematician, Dadabhai Naoroji, known as the Grand Old Man of India, looked around and saw the once-prosperous empire turn into famine and poverty. He coined the analogy that would define the British policy in India for the rest of history:

Materially: The political drain, up to this time, from India to England, of above, 500,000,000, at the lowest computation, in principal alone...The further continuation of this drain at the rate, at present, of above, 12,000,000 per annum, with a tendency to increase.⁴⁰

“The Drain of Wealth” became an influential rallying cry.

On the other side of the world, in Belfast, Ireland, shipping magnate J.P. Corry saw an opportunity.

⁴⁰ <https://quotepark.com/authors/dadabhai-naoroji/>

1874 is the year it all came together. At the beginning of the year, J.P. Corry joined Parliament, giving him an opportunity to shape British policy in India and around the world.

J.P. Corry owned an impressive fleet of large, iron, square-rigged sailing ships. He used them for shipping cargo around the world. It started with the Star of Erin, in 1862, named for his mother. It was 949 gross tons and 200 feet long. He commissioned more ships, each one larger, and more grand, than the last. There was the Star of Denmark, the Star of Scotia, the Star of Albion, the Star of Persia, the Star of Greece, and, by 1872, the Star of Germany. And they called it the Star fleet.

Each ship was personally designed, and constructed, for J.P. Corry by two men who used science and engineering to usher in the Golden Age of Sail: Harland & Wolff.

Harland & Wolff occupied an inlet on the northeastern shore of Northern Ireland, at the mouth of the River Lagan, surrounded by timber, across the sea from Britain. It was an ideal place to build the ships that would change the world and put Belfast on the map. Harland & Wolff transformed Belfast, drawing thousands to work at their shipyard.

By 1872, after 12 years of shipbuilding for J.P. Corry, Harland & Wolff managed to add 335 tons and 32 feet of length compared to their first ship for J.P. Corry, the Star of Erin.

But J.P. Corry needed a bigger boat. He saw the opportunity in India, and wanted to seize it while the opportunity was hot.

Launched

With the doors of India wide open, J.P. Corry tasked Harland & Wolff with building him something bigger, and better, than ever before.

It featured a deep, cavernous hull capable of carrying hundreds of tons of cargo.

It was 262 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 22.5 feet deep, with a concrete weather deck.

It's bulging, black hull was made from steel.

Shortly after New Years 1874, the Freeman's Journal reported:

On Saturday was launched from the extensive iron shipbuilding yard of Messrs. Harland and Wolff, Belfast, the largest sailing ship which was ever built in Ireland, and one of the largest of the kind afloat. She is for the firm of Misters J.P. Corry and Company, of Belfast, and is the ninth of the splendid fleet of vessels which they have engaged in the London and Calcutta trade. Her name is the Star of Bengal.⁴¹

Travels the World

JP Corry wasted no time putting the Star of Bengal to work.

Newspapers around the world reported its arrival, and departure.

It was frequently photographed, sitting in harbor.

The Star of Bengal's first journey to Australia was an unforgettable one. Melbourne's "The Age" newspaper wrote:

The ship star of Bengal, that has been hovering about off this port for the last week, has at length arrived... she is a very handsome clipper, of 1797 tons register, and a remarkably fast sailer, but being on her first voyage, the rigging was continually stretching, so that when a fair opportunity of testing her full powers occurred, it had to be done with the utmost caution. Her masts and yards are of iron, the lower mast and top mast being in one, and some idea of their appearance may be formed from the length of the main mast, which is from heel to mass head 132'6".... The passage out of the star of Bengal has during the latter part being very stormy, and several mishaps occurred, one being the loss of a passenger, who was either washed or fell overboard during a gale, and was not missed until the following day; another was the smashing up of the horse boxes and the death of one of the animals, a very fine draft horse, and another was the parting of all the running pendants of the braces, both of topsail and topgallant yards.⁴²

The man who died left behind an orphaned son aboard the Star of Bengal. The paper wrote:

⁴¹ The Freeman's Journal (Dublin, Dublin, Ireland) · 5 Jan 1874, Mon · Page 3

⁴² 1874.07.16 Star_of_Bengal_in_bad_weather.pdf

A little boy ten years of age, named Benjamin Hazell, was brought up as a neglected child. The child's father was a passenger by the ship Star of Bengal, and was washed overboard on a voyage from India, about three months since. As soon as the vessel arrived in Melbourne, the little fellow was handed over to the police as a neglected child, and was given in charge of a respectable woman. He has several times been brought before court, and remanded in order to allow of some respectable person adopting him. When he was again brought before the court yesterday, and about being sent to the Training Ship for three years, a person named Martin offered to adopt him as his son. The little fellow seemed highly delighted that he had escaped being sent to the ship.⁴³

A week later, the Star of Bengal was back in the news when it collided with another ship, punching holes in the iron bulwarks.⁴⁴

Wrecked

On December 10, 1880, newspapers reported the tragic news that the Star of Bengal sunk:

A collision occurred... on Saturday night, between two large English iron ships, the Corby... and the Star of Bengal... The Star of Bengal, which was from London to Calcutta with salt, fell across the bows of the Corby, which had her jib boom carried away and other damage. The vessels were in collision nearly ten minutes... After parting a boat was seen to be lowered from the Star of Bengal and then she disappeared. The officers of the Corby believe her to have sunk with all hands.⁴⁵

And yet, the Star of Bengal had not sunk. On December 15, the London Daily News reported a telegram from the Star of Bengal, confirming the collision but requiring no assistance.⁴⁶ The Star of Bengal lived to sail another day.

⁴³ The Age (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia) · 26 Jan 1875, Tue · Page 4

⁴⁴ The San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, California) · 6 Feb 1875, Sat · Page 3

⁴⁵ The Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet, and General Advertiser (Truro, Cornwall, England) · 10 Dec 1880, Fri · Page 6

⁴⁶ Daily News (London, Greater London, England) · 15 Dec 1880, Wed · Page 6

Steamships

When it first appeared on the horizon, it was just a speck. But gradually, it came closer, building up speed. Soon, it would pass everyone, and bring the Golden Age of Sail to an end.

It was the steamship.

To operate, steamships burned coal, heating water, which forced an engine to move. They could break, even explode, and required constant fuel. But scientific innovation and engineering improved on the design, making them safer and more reliable. Steamships did not require wind to navigate, and they could more nimbly move around inland passageways. They reduced trips of weeks down to days.

Harland & Wolff always wanted to put a steam engine inside J.P. Corry's ships.⁴⁷ J.P. Corry refused. He was not interested in new technology.

But another client of Harland & Wolff was interested. White Star Line commissioned the world's first three steam-powered ocean liners: Oceanic, Atlantic, and the Baltic. The ships were a success. Years later, in 1912, White Star Line commissioned its biggest ocean liner ever: the Titanic.

By the end of the century, steamships put square-rigged sailing ships out of business. The Golden Age of Sail was over. J.P. Corry's Star Fleet began to look like relics of the past.

In June 1898, J.P. Corry sold the Star of Bengal to San Francisco businessman J.J. Smith.⁴⁸

Smith found a new home for the Star of Bengal, a place where it could ride out its years, sailing in warm seas, with miles of open ocean in all directions. The Star of Bengal was going to Hawaii.

⁴⁷ McCluskie, Tom. Ships from the ARchives of Harland & Wolff. p. 9.

⁴⁸ [http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Ships/Merchant/Sail/S/Star_of_Bengal\(1874\).html](http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Ships/Merchant/Sail/S/Star_of_Bengal(1874).html)

Hawaii

The Hawaiian Islands were a fitting retirement for the Star of Bengal. It would spend the rest of its life in wide open, tropical seas.

In March 1899, the Star of Bengal nearly exploded. The San Francisco Chronicle reported:

The ship Star of Bengal, from Newcastle [Australia] to San Francisco with coal for J.J. Smith & Co., put into [Honolulu] Wednesday with her coal getting hot and almost ready to break out in flames. Captain Henderson asked for a board of survey, which recommended that all or part of her cargo be discharged here, as conditions should require, and she is now discharging.⁴⁹

But the coal wasn't the only thing getting hot.

When the Star of Bengal first arrived in the Hawaiian Islands, the Republic of Hawaii teetered on collapse. It was a government only four years old, established after American landowners staged a coup of Hawaii's sovereign queen, Lili'uokalani. While under house arrest, Lili'uokalani transcribed her own songs, including one which became a popular anthem: Aloha Oe.

Several months after the Star of Bengal arrived in Hawaii, the Republic of Hawaii collapsed.

The United States officially annexed the islands, along with everyone, and everything, inside.

And that included the Star of Bengal. For its whole existence, the Star of Bengal sailed as a registered ship of Ireland, where it was designed and built. On June 6, 1900, the United States Congress changed that:⁵⁰

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Commissioner of Navigation is hereby authorized and directed to cause the foreign-built ship Star of Italy and foreign-built ship Star of Bengal, owned by citizens of the United States or

⁴⁹ 1899.03.25 Star_of_Bengal_almost_catches_fire.pdf

⁵⁰ Compilation of the Acts of Congress, Treaties, and Proclamations Relating to Insular and Military Affairs from March 4, 1897 to March 3, 1903. By United States, United States. Bureau of Insular Affairs · 1904, p. 74

citizens of Hawaii, to be registered as vessels of the United States.⁵¹

With that, the Star of Bengal became an American.

But the future was still uncertain. The Star of Bengal was enormous, expensive, and a relic of a bygone era. Whole neighborhoods in San Francisco were constructed from the scraps of old sailing ships, showing they were sometimes more valuable in pieces than at sea.

In order to entice a buyer, Smith's company took one piece of the Star of Bengal away forever. Smith's company stripped the third mast of its spars, sails, and rigging. They turned the Star of Bengal into a barque. This was a simpler design, one that required less people and gear to operate. The only tradeoff was less wind-power. Anyone interested in buying the Star of Bengal had to be willing to spend more time at sea.

It worked. Smith's company received an invitation from across town, from another San Francisco company.

The Alaska Packers Association was calling.

⁵¹ 1900.06.06 Compilation of the Acts of Congress, Treaties, and Proclamations Relating to Insular and Military Affairs from March 4, 1897 to March 3, 1903

The APA

For years, the Alaska Packer's Association acquired the remnants of J.P. Corry's Star Fleet. The ships sat clustered together, like towering skyscrapers, along the waterfront of the San Francisco Bay. It was said to be the largest private navy in the world.

Just thirteen years before purchasing the Star of Bengal, the Alaska Packer's Association was nothing.

In the 1890s, small, independent canneries around southeast Alaska threatened to destroy each other.

When they showed up at markets in places like Seattle or San Francisco, they all sold basically the same product: canned salmon. To compete, they slashed prices, cutting profits to nothing, even taking losses just to make a sale. They should have been making a killing. Instead, they were killing each other.

To break the cycle, they took a new approach. They stopped competing and began colluding. Working together, they could share expenses, and most important, set a fixed price for canned salmon. This arrangement became the Alaska Packer's Association.

Henry Fortmann

Despite its name, it was a thoroughly San Francisco company. And its president, for its first thirty years, was one man: Henry Fortmann. He began as the heir to a San Francisco beer brewery established by his German-immigrant father. Henry invested the family business profits into other ventures. A newspaper clipping about Henry's son foreshadowed the family future in the salmon industry:

Emil Fortmann, the ten-year-old son of Henry Fortmann of Alameda, while bathing in the surf near Schuetzen park, secured a salmon weighing fifteen pounds by means of stabbing it six times with a pocket knife.⁵²

For thirty years, Henry Fortmann was the APA. He proved a shrewd steward of the Alaska Packer's Association. Where competition drove down prices, he simply colluded. In 1897, the Emporia Gazette wrote:

President Henry Fortmann of the Alaska Packer's Association and Managing Superintendent H.J. Barting of the Alaska Fruit

⁵² 1888.09.27 Daily_Astorian_1888-09-27_4.pdf

company, have arranged to combine, instead of competing, as heretofore, in the salmon industry, thus raising the price of canned product all over the country.⁵³

Henry Fortmann made grand gestures for charity and publicity. In 1898, American troops stationed in San Francisco received a letter from Henry Fortmann:

Dear Sir, Believing that canned salmon would prove a welcome addition to the army rations, we take the liberty of sending you 4800 cans of King salmon, which you will please distribute among the troops at your post. Yours truly, Alaska Packer's Association, Henry Fortmann, President.⁵⁴

The company thrived. This business model was simple. Men signed a contract in San Francisco, sailed up to Alaska for the summer, and got paid when they came back home. In 1900, one group of men working at Pyramid Harbor learned the hard way: be careful what you agree to.

To help us out, here's a song by R.B. Craswell memorializing this famous event.

Come all you bold sailors
who fish for your pay
I'll sing you a song
from a time when they say
That the salmon ran thick
and were heavy as sin
and the canneries caught 'em
and wrapped 'em in tin.
It was a haul away, Johnny,
and haul again strong!
You'll be hauling these nets
for the whole season long
So attend to this story of what can go wrong
If you're sailing to Pyramid Harbor.

At the Pyramid Harbor cannery, the APA paid fishermen either \$50 or \$60 for the summer, plus an incentive of 2 cents per red salmon a man might catch. This was enough to get men to sign on in San Francisco. But once they got to Alaska, reality set in...

⁵³ 1897.01.20 Emporia_Gazette_1897-01-20_[1].pdf

⁵⁴ 1898.05.17 San_Francisco_Call_Bulletin_1898-05-17_8

But it's haul away, Johnny,
and haul again strong!
You'll be hauling these nets
for the whole season long
So attend to this story of what can go wrong
If you're sailing to Pyramid Harbor.

The fishermen protested they'd be given lousy nets, which let too many fish through. The APA manager said,

"You know for our profits,
we need those fish, too.
So we've chosen the nets
both for us, and for you."

Was it really about the nets? Was it about something more, like the conditions, the food, the dorms, or that the pay really was low? It's hard to say. But what happened next would set off a chain of events, that still holds precedent to this day.

So the others rejected
the boss's defense,
But the step they took next
didn't make too much sense.
They said to the boss
he must double our pay,
Or we'd walk off the job
on that very same day.
Now, we all of us knew
that this wasn't too shrewd,
cause the canneries owned
all the ships and the food.
You don't walk off a ship
in some far northern bay...
But the boss said, "You win
and we'll double your pay!"

<15 sec>

sounds of cheering

The fishermen celebrated. They fought the APA, and won! For once, they had the APA over a barrel. The men worked the whole season through, and sailed back to San Francisco. When they got home, they were in for a surprise.

When we got back to 'Frisco
and asked for our pay,
We politely were told
we could jump in the bay.
They spoke of our duty
and spoke of our greed,
and they said we'd exploited
the cannery's need.

We had already promised
the work that they got,
And a promise is scared...
...except when its not.

And remember this song
when you're safely in port:
Though your pay may be nasty
and brutish—and short—
You'll do better by far
if you stay out of court...
And say farther from Pyramid Harbor!⁵⁵

The fishermen sued, and lost. They'd made a bargain, and had to stick to it. The case became a famous legal precedent, *Alaska Packers Association vs. Domenico*, one still taught in law schools today.

Henry Fortmann did well as the president of the APA. At the age of 39, Henry Fortmann purchased a large, ornate San Francisco mansion for \$42,500 — around one and one-half million dollars today.⁵⁶ The Fortmann mansion become a San Francisco landmark.

In 1905, the *Seattle Daily Times* wrote:

⁵⁵ Music and lyrics by R. B. Craswell, shared under Creative Commons Attribution License (Reuse Allowed). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKtZ6DTB8Qc>

⁵⁶ SF Chronicle, 2019.01.26. "Mansion with Odd, Brief Scene in *Vertigo* Has Bizarre Story."

The association, which controlled about two-thirds of the pack of the season just closed, is the largest institution of its kind in the world, it is said, and being so, with its base of operations in San Francisco, thousands of miles from the canneries in Alaskan waters, is viewed by stockholders and by well informed jobbers as being top heavy... Harsh criticism on the part of the stockholders of the company has arisen because of the slump in the stock of the company and other events. It appears that all power to handle the operating work of the company as well as its finances is vested in President Fortmann.⁵⁷

Buying up J.P. Corry's Star Fleet was all part of Henry Fortmann's strategy. He didn't mind that sailing ships weren't as fast as steamships. After all, he only needed his ships to travel twice a year: once to Alaska, and once back. And canned salmon didn't spoil.

Sailing historian Harold Huycke described it like this:

The waters of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest teemed with salmon. The relative inaccessibility of the fishing grounds called for ships that could sail across more than 2,000 miles of open, oft-times stormy seas, and bring a season's pack of salmon home in the fall. Supplies and workmen could be taken to the cannery and fishing sites by sea only. The need for ships of large carry-capacity was thus obvious.⁵⁸

And the lack of passenger space didn't bother Fortmann, either. Henry Fortmann looked below deck, into the to the deep, dark, cavernous hold. Once built to store cargo, Henry Fortmann used this space to store men.

⁵⁷ 1905.10.09 Seattle_Daily_Times_1905-10-09_2

⁵⁸ Sea Letter by Harold Huycke, p. 5

Asian Workers

It took time for Asian labor to become the main workforce inside canneries.

In the mid-1800s, American demand for Chinese labor brought many young Chinese men to the United States. They built railroads in California and began settling along the West coast, some of them starting families.

But this caused racial panic among White Americans, who fought back.

In 1882, President Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred immigration from China — and led to a wave of immigration from Japan and the Philippines.

In 1885, a white mob—including future Alaska politician Judge James Wickersham—invaded a Chinese immigrant community in Tacoma, Washington, destroyed homes, and forced everyone onto a train for Portland, Oregon. They were hailed as local heroes.

In 1886 in Juneau, Alaska, 100 Chinese miners were rounded up, packed onto a steamship, and sent to Wrangell. Two years later, in Juneau, Chinese miners were bombed while asleep, destroying their building leaving them injured.⁵⁹

White Americans saw Chinese men as an economic opportunity, but a social threat. As Asian labor grew as the bedrock of the cannery business, this tension held.

By design, the Alaska Packer's Association kept its Asian cannery workers at arm's length. These men were strictly contractors — not employees. The Alaska Packer's Association vested responsibility for the Asian workers with a single contract holder, who was responsible for paying each worker, even including food and provisions.

Jack Chen, writing in *The Chinese of America*, says:

Conditions of work in the canneries were such that rascally contractors could and did exploit the packers, greatly increasing the hardships they faced under “normal” contracts that set low wages, minimal amenities in living, and long hours of hard work. A packer had to agree to an eleven-hour work day, on-demand until the canning of the hauls of fish was done.

⁵⁹ 1888.11.14 San Jose Mercury-News

Contractors sold the packers shoddy outfits at high prices, demanded “kickbacks,” and doctored accounts. Seventy-seven percent of a gang of packers might be illiterate, so it was easy to take advantage of them.⁶⁰

In 1908, the same year the Star of Bengal sank, one group of cannery workers returned from Alaska, only to find the contract holder had run off with the money. The San Francisco Chronicle reported:

A turbulent crowd of disappointed cannery hands, recently arrived in this city from Alaska, blockaded Dupont street... yesterday afternoon, and for a few minutes a riot seemed imminent... Quang Ham Was & Company... had taken the contract from the Alaska Packers' Association to furnish laborers. Seventy-two of all nationalities were supplied and these, after working at the canneries in the north, returned five days ago. The Chinese company had sub-contracted with Sotaro Okuda and K. Iriye, and yesterday delivered into the sub-contractors hands between \$2000 and \$3000 in gold coin to pay off the laborers. Okuda acknowledged having received the money and assured the police that he had given it in turn to Iriye to pay the men. He said Iriye had suddenly absconded with the gold, and although he had searched for him frantically, he was not to be found.⁶¹

Chinese cannery workers also risked coming home at the end of the long season, just to be arrested before getting off the boat. In September 1903, the San Francisco Call carried one example, under the headline, Big Haul of Chinese:

Twenty-four Chinese fishermen returning from Alaska canneries on board the Agate were taken into custody yesterday by the Chinese Bureau in order that the residence certificates presented might be examined.⁶²

This threatened the way the canned salmon industry did business. In 1907, the industry appealed to Congress, for a relaxation of the Chinese Exclusion Act, by

⁶⁰ Jack Chen, “The Chinese of America,” published 1980. p. 106. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.87281/page/n131/mode/2up>

⁶¹ 1908.10.01 SF_Chronicle_Cannery_pay_embezzled.pdf

⁶² 1903.09.18 San Francisco Call

allowing bonded immigrants to enter the country — or else, the industry might produce less salmon.⁶³

The canned salmon industry needed Chinese labor. Japanese, Filipino, and other Asian immigrant groups entered to fill the need. These men needed pay, but also a chance to work among their peers, in a place separate from the troubles of life in the cities.

The masterful history of canned salmon in Alaska, Tin Can Country, features a description of the canning process from government agent Howard Kutchin. Here's an abridged version.

The fish are carried on the vessel's deck, and are pitched upon the wharf.

The butcher, seizing a fish by the tail, with one stroke beheads it; with another sweep of his long, sharp knife he removes the back fins; with a quick twist he throws up the belly and slices off the under fins; one swift cut lays it open, and about two or three scrapes take out the row and entrails; another cut removes the tail; and all of the body fit for use is pushed into a tank of fresh water.

The slimers hook the fish from the water and carefully complete the cleaning operation. It goes into another tank of water, and after being taken from this is placed upon a draining table.

They are dumped on the floor beside the cutter, which has a revolving carrier on the principle of an endless chain, with receptacles taking one fish each. This passes under a cylinder with four blades, which cuts the fish into five pieces. The three inner pieces are pushed into a long incline spout, which carries the meat to the filler.

The meat is fed into a hopper by two men.

The cans come down a spout from the loft in an endless stream. Before the cans are sent down one-quarter of an ounce of salt is put in each.

⁶³ 1907.10.25 Press Democrat

They are poured out at the other end onto a table surrounded by eight or ten Chinese men, who in turn clean off any scraps, weigh an occasional can... and put in or take out meat as occasion requires.

They are passed on to men who place a bit of scrap tin on top of the meat. This is done to protect it from the muriatic acid which is used in soldering vents.

They go along to the toppers, who place the tops by hand.

They are... carried to the crimping machine which fastens the tops on.

The cans go into a chute, a groove in one side of which is filled with molten solder, which is kept in a liquid state by a row of jets of flame. As the cans roll along they take up all the solder required to render them air-tight.

They run under a stream of water to cool and harden the solder. The tops have small vents in them to permit the escape of gasses.

The vents are soldered up. The trays are submerged in hot-water test kettles, and leaks detected by bubbles. The trays run on a tramway into the steam chests. Here the first cooking is done, the cans remaining in the chest from forty-five minutes to an hour.

Each can is vented with a wooden hammer with a short sharp nail in its head. The steam and water spurt up a foot or more.

The holes are at once soldered up by two men.

Cooking is repeated for one hour. The racks are submerged in lye kettles to remove all grease and dirt. They are scrubbed and put under a stream of cold water.

The trays are... left twenty-four hours to thoroughly cool. The cans are again tested for leaks by an expert operator, who taps each one on the top with a tiny hammer.

The cans are transferred to the lacquer vats, dipped into a preparation composition of rosin and turpentine, which gives them the golden brownish color.

The cans are piled in great pyramids. After labeling, they are left until the paste is thoroughly dry. They are once more tested and are ready for the case.

This process became so associated with Asian labor, when Edmund Smith invented a machine to replace these workers, he called it “the Iron Chink.” It was a slur, one that revealed both the contempt for and reliance on Asian labor. The invention was successful, revolutionized canned salmon, and pushed the industry to new heights.

Some men spent the whole season assembling wooden cases for the finished canned salmon. Estimates vary, but each case may have weighed around 65 pounds.⁶⁴ Business measured success by the case. Each case was the physical symbol of everyone’s labor, a growing mountain created by hard work. And yet, in the wreck of the Star of Bengal, it was these cases that would cause the greatest loss of life.

⁶⁴ 1908.09.24 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-24_1.pdf

Next Time

Next time, on the Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal: It's farewell, San Francisco. Hello, Alaska. It's the summer of 1908, and the salmon are running. What nobody knows, is that this will be the last voyage of the Star of the Bengal. All that, and hell ships, next time on Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal.

Credits

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

Music from today's episode:

- Mars from the Planets performed by "The President's Own" United States Marine Band.
- The Star Spangled Banner performed by the United States Air Force Band.
- William Tell Overture performed by the United States Marine Corp Band.
- Sitar and Tabla Duo performed by Bruce Miller from the Free Music Archives.
- Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy from archive.org.
- Stompin' Jazz Night from Epidemic Sounds.
- Alexander Archipelago written and performed by Alice Rooney.
- Remaining songs from the Wikipedia Commons:
 - Whiskey You're the Devil by Edit Kovács.
 - Also Sprach Zarathustra, Shenyang, and Corncob provided by Kevin MacLeod.
 - Waltzing Matilda by unknown artists.
 - Jupiter from the Planets, performed by the Skidmore College Orchestra.
 - Aloha Oe performed by William Smith and Walter K. Kolomaku.
 - Fur Elise performed by Sebion7125.

Sound effects from epidemicsound.com

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

Thanks to R.B. Craswell for the amazing song, Sailing to Pyramid Harbor. Check out R.B. Craswell's other songs on YouTube.

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.

Thanks to the eternal spirit of William Taylor. And thanks to Alice Rooney for capturing his voice, and sharing so much more.

You can learn more about the Star of Bengal at wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/star. You can read a transcript of today's episode, along with photos, maps, a timeline, and more. Browse around and check out some of our other features from Wrangell's rich past.

Think you have a piece of the story, that you'd like to share? I'd love to hear it. There are many mysteries about the Star of Bengal just waiting to be solved. You can email us at wrangellpod@gmail.com.

Tune in next week for our second episode, Farewell.

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