

Wrangell History Unlocked Presents:

Rise & Fall of the Star of Bengal, II: Farewell

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Introduction

Nicholas Wagner

On April 22, 1908, the Star of Bengal sailed away from San Francisco for the last time. Its captain was a man who would forever be at the center of the story.

NICHOLAS WAGNER: Nicholas Wagner, Captain, Star of Bengal

Nicholas Wagner was a seasoned veteran of the seas, with a flair for the dramatic and a bullish bravado. The San Francisco Morning Call described him:

Captain Wagner is known from Bering Sea to Valpariso, a capable skipper and a brave man. He is described as a heavy set man, about fifty years old, of great strength. When a very small boy he was cast ashore in his father's schooner on the coast of New Zealand, and he is somewhat deaf from exposure...¹

In 1905, Nicholas Wagner impressed the Alaska Packer's Association. He went to Alaska and salvaged sailing ship Balclutha, which had been abandoned on a remote beach the season before. Wagner oversaw repairs, restored the ship, and sailed it back to the San Francisco for the APA — where it still sits today. Wagner was a hero. The APA rewarded Wagner by making him captain of the Balclutha, then the Star of Bengal.

His little daughter, Helen, was five years old when he left for Alaska on the fateful voyage. She described the scene, as the ship left San Francisco for the last time:

JOAN LOWELL: On board the crew, cannerymen and fishermen, one hundred and thirty-eight in all, eagerly awaited the start.

¹ 30 1908.11.14 The_Morning_Call.pdf

One young wife with two babies tugging at her skirts was praying, and here and there a rosary was thrust into the hands of the departing fishermen.

The American friends of the officers and traders were on the dock nearest the stern, and handkerchiefs and jokes of bravado sent the Star off to the Arctic.²

The Star of Bengal left with two less crew members than planned. The San Francisco Examiner:

The Alaska Packers have shown their men this season that they are firm in their intention not to allow drunkenness among the employees if they can prevent it... The company has suffered severe losses through intemperance of its employees and is trying to ship only temperate men.... A cook and waiter who arrived drunk to sail with the Star of Bengal were discharged.³

Those two men had no way of knowing it, but they likely saved their own lives.

I'm your host, Ronan Rooney. You're listening to Part 2 of Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal, presented by Wrangell History Unlocked. Today's episode, Farewell.

² Cradle of the Deep, by Joan Lowell. Chapter 11.

³ 1908.04.22 San Francisco Examiner.pdf

Farewell SF

The voyage north could take weeks, a month, or longer. It all hinged on catching favorable winds. As the ship made for open seas, everyone settled in for the long voyage.

Captain Nicholas Wagner held the only private quarters aboard ship, in the stern below the poop deck. His daughter, Helen, described it like this:

JOAN LOWELL: The walls of the cabins were of bird's eye maple. In the dining salon hung a six foot oil painting of the Star under full sail outriding a hurricane. The swinging lamps were brass, ornately decorated with whales' teeth and carved ivories. In my father's cabin, curtains of red plush proclaimed the captain's aloofness. A "telltale" compass over his bunk and a rack of rifles within easy reach were additional furnishings.⁴

While Captain Wagner could close the door for privacy, the rest of the ship's crew stayed in bunks and hammocks, in shared quarters.

Hell Ship

In the forward hold, men were crowded even more closely together. Below the topmost weather deck, the 69 Chinese, 33 Japanese, and 4 Filipino men sat in the dark, windowless confines of the Star of Bengal's hold.

Few stories about life in the hold persist, but in 1922, undercover journalist Max Stern landed a job with an APA cannery crew, and described life aboard an APA ship inside the hold:

MAX STERN: It was dark, save from a stream of light that came thru the hatchway. Scurrying about in the dim recesses of the ship's insides were the figures of my shipmates. They were holding candles they had bought from a caged-in "store" in the corner... The bunks, the sides and roof had been whitewashed at one time, but they were far from clean now... I could see no means of ventilation, so I selected the one nearest the hatch-hole I could find.⁵

There were 72 men in our Chinese gang, and all of them had been packed into the little forecastle in the nose of our ship.

⁴ Joan Lowell, *Cradle of the Deep*. p. 104.

⁵ 1922.10.10 *Seattle Star*

They had been there only a couple hours, but already the air was heavy and stale to a sickening point. The place was hot with animal heat. I could hardly breathe.⁶

As I followed our evening meal down the companion way and realized what a germ infested hole it was, I felt something like Daniel must have felt as he entered the lion's den. Surely lions could be no more dangerous than the unseen myriads of disease germs that lurked in the dark corners of that damp, warm incubation hole.⁷

Over to the left of the fo'castle, where the Asian men had all gathered, hung the strong foreign odors of Chinatown, a mixture of tea, fish, opium and many other elements, but dominated by the overpowering smell of Chinese tobacco. The fetid stink of sweating, unwashed humans arose from every group and permeated the farthest corner of the "Chinese Hole."

But my troubles had just begun. I turned suddenly deathly seasick. I noticed several of my shipmates leaning over the rail and I joined them. Soon I went below. I found that most of the gang had climbed into their bunks. Several had vomited on the aisles and no move had been made to clean up the gorge. Utterly miserable, I picked my way to my bunk and rolled in.

Max Stern called his series "The Price of Salmon," but it became known by another moniker: hell ships.

Isaac Reed

But the Star of Bengal made excellent time. Crew member, Gustaf Johnson credited the sleek design of the ship. In a letter to historian Harold Huycke, he recalled:

GUSTAF JOHNSON: Being out a few days we sighted a ship called the Isaac Reed. She had all her sail set exactly the same as we had and it did not blow very hard. She was supposed to be a real smart sailer. We sighted her 8am and at 12 noon we were right abreast of her and at 4pm was that far ahead of her that we could not see her at all.⁸

⁶ Max Stern, article 8 of "Hell Ships." Date unknown. Inside large PDF of all Max Stern's "Hell Ship" series.

⁷ Max Stern, article 14 of "Hell Ships." Date unknown. Inside large PDF of all Max Stern's "Hell Ship" series.

⁸ Letter from Gustaf Johnson, Harold Huycke collection

Coronation Island

The Star of Bengal glided north, under favorable winds, passing ships as it went. After a two week voyage north, a landmark appeared on the distant horizon, a sign they had arrived at their destination: Coronation Island.

Coronation Island sits like a sentinel at the mouth of Sumner Strait. It is 35 square miles, sitting on the edge of the continent, exposed to endless pounding waves. It is pocketed with caves, created by water eating away the soft limestone. On the west are large, open bays; on the east, sheer, rocky cliff case. To the south, Helm Point sticks out, marking the southern boundary of Sumner Strait.

There are over 1000 islands in southeast Alaska, for over 18,000 miles of coastline. Sumner Strait is a rare passageway through the islands. In 1793, Captain George Vancouver sailed the HMS Discovery, down Sumner Strait and named the island:

Our course had been directed between Warren's island and the islands lying to the southward of cape Decision. The southernmost of these is the largest, being about seven leagues in circuit; this I called Coronation Island, the day our passing it having been the anniversary of that happy event.

George Vancouver was talking about the coronation of King George the III on September 22, 1761. King George the III is perhaps most famous the monarch to fight the colonies in the American Revolutionary War.

As the Star of Bengal pulled up to the mouth of Sumner Strait, the steamship Chilkat was there to greet them. For the second year in row, in the Chilkat towed the Star of Bengal through Sumner Strait's bends and turns, right up to the dock at the Wrangell cannery.

On May 5, 1908, the ship tied up, and began unloading.

The season had officially begun.

Summer

Wrangell

Wrangell's exports put it on the map.

At first, it was fur. In 1834, the Russian American Company built Fort Saint Dionysius near the north end of Wrangell Island to trade with Tlingit fur trappers. Wrangell's unique position, near the mouth of the rushing Stikine River, makes it an ideal place for trade all the way up into the river's headwaters in Canada.

The Tlingit village at the south end of Wrangell Island moved north, and rebuilt surrounding the Russian fort.

By 1840, the Russians leased the fort for one decade to the British Hudson Bay Company, which renamed it to Fort Stikine. As demand for fur in Europe and Asia declined, so did the fur trade in southeast Alaska.

In 1861, members of the tribe took Alexander "Buck" Choquette up the Stikine River, where he panned for gold until making the discovery that kicked off the very first gold rush in Alaska: the Stikine Gold Rush. Wrangell became the de facto stopping place for fortune seekers on their way up and down the Stikine River.

In 1872, a second gold rush struck the Stikine River: the Cassiar Gold Rush. While Fort Wrangel was under a U.S. flag, and a Collector of Customs was on-hand to levy taxes, the federal government did little in the way of governing. They U.S. Army came, and quickly went. It was mayhem.

In 1898, Fort Wrangel benefited from the biggest gold rush yet: the Klondike Gold Rush. There were many routes to the Klondike, each of them challenging in its own way. The path to the Klondike up the Stikine River may have been among the worst. And still, throngs of eager, opportunity seekers came to Fort Wrangel, and loaded onto ships steaming up the Stikine.

In 1897, Presbyterian missionary Clarence Thwing wrote:

There is quite an increase of business and population in the quiet town of Wrangel, owing to the opening of a trail from the head of the Stickeen River to Teslin Lake at the head of a tributary to the Yukon. This is an excellent way of going to the goldfields, and there has been already a foretaste of the coming rush in the coming year. Hotels, warehouses and dwellings are going up here as fast as the lumber can be turned out by the

sawmill. Sad to say, there is prospect of more saloons, beer shops, dance houses and places of ill fame. Shall we also have more agencies for the extension of the Kingdom of Christ?

While previous gold rushes came and went, the Klondike Gold Rush created a lasting change in Wrangell. Its population swelled, and it became one of the leading cities in Alaska.

But Wrangell couldn't count on a gold rush. It looked for sustainable industry.

Canned salmon came at just the right time.

The Cannery

A report at the turn of the century by APA General Superintendent J.F. Moser included a history of Wrangell's cannery:

In 1887 the Aberdeen Packing Company, of Astoria, Oregon, built a cannery on the Stikine River, about 8 miles above the mouth, with the intention of making the entire pack from the catch of this river. After packing two seasons, in the fall of 1888 and spring of 1889, the cannery was moved to Point Highfield, on the northern end of Wrangell Island, and operations commenced under the name of the Glacier Packing Company. In 1892 it entered the Alaska Packing Association and was closed, and in 1893 it joined the Alaska Packer's Association... In 1896 it was enlarged, and now has a capacity of 1,500 cases per day. The cannery is located in a small bight to the eastward of and just inside of Point Highfield, about 1.5 miles from Wrangell post-office, and 2 miles from the flats at the mouth of the Stikine River. In 1896 the cannery employed 20 white fishermen, and received the catch of 70 natives. In the cannery were 8 whites, 4 native women, and 80 Chinese...⁹

Long, two-story red buildings stretched out over the water on pilings, dotted by rows of white-trimmed windows. Eager seagulls circled the buildings, waiting for scraps. During the season, steamship tenders regularly deposited fresh-caught salmon at the cannery dock.

The cannery was isolated from Wrangell below. No roads connected it to the city. The terrain between was rough, thick, and uneven.

⁹ The Salmon and Salmon Fisheries of Alaska, by Jefferson F. Moser, 1899.

To get there, people typically visited by boat. In 1908, just before the Star of Bengal returned to the Wrangell cannery, the Douglas Island News wrote:

Jens Nelson is the third man in as many years to lose his life in the attempt to navigate a skiff from Wrangell to the A.P.A. cannery, about a mile and a half distant, while illuminated with a brilliant jag.¹⁰

The physical isolation wasn't the only thing separating the cannery from Wrangell. Racial animus kept Asian men at bay. In March of 1908, just two months before the Star of Bengal arrived, a mob in Wrangell prevented Hindu men from landing at the dock. On March 16, 1908, the Vancouver Daily World wrote:

May Forrest [of Juneau] has received advices from a deputy marshal at Wrangell that twenty Hindoos are aboard the Cottage City, bound here. The Wrangell people formed a mob, which declined to permit the Hindoos to land when they reached there. Douglas Island has already sent word that the men are not allowed to go ashore there. The city council called a special meeting there Saturday afternoon to discuss plans to prevent them from coming ashore. The citizens declare that the men cannot come to Juneau.¹¹

The Alaska Sentinel professed sympathy for the Hindu men, while also calling for immigration laws to “eliminate from this country much of this class of people.” Up and down southeast Alaska, this type of mob justice was openly practiced and celebrated. Even newcomers participated in it.¹² The newspaper added, “there are enough English speaking people here to do the work to be done.”¹³

One week later, the same newspaper wrote:

With the sawmill, cannery, shingle mill and Berg's mine running, and with a big cold storage under construction and a saltery projected for the coming year, business should not be dull about this section. In fact, it now looks as if there would be a shortage of laborers to keep these enterprises running.¹⁴

The cannery workers were separated from the community of Wrangell by physical and social distance. There was never any intention, or opportunity, for them to become part of the community.

¹⁰ 1908_04_29_Douglas_Island_News

¹¹ 1908.03.16 Vancouver_Daily_World_Hindoos.pdf

¹² 1908.03.19 Alaska Sentinel

¹³ 1908.03.19 Alaska Sentinel

¹⁴ 1908.03.26 Alaska Sentinel

Fishermen Job

The sailors, on the other hand, jumped aboard steamships and went out to the fish traps. They became fishermen for the summer. The APA kept their fish traps close enough to deliver fresh-caught salmon to the dock in under 24 hours.

Years later, Thoralf Anderson described the summer fishing season of 1908:

THORALF ANDERSON: I was assigned to the crew that was to attend to the stationary trap that we set at the mouth of a small river... We had very little work to do after the trap was set. When the salmon began to run a tugboat with a barge in tow would come out every other day and we'd have to bail the fish out of the trap into the barge... Some days we'd have a heavy run and would bring in from 25,000 to 30,000 salmon. On days when the run is light, we would go out with a perch or drag seine and bring in several thousand salmon, but most of the time we read, play cards or go hunting.

The fishermen were represented by a union, which almost threatened to derail the fishing season of 1908 until an agreement was made with the APA. According to the San Francisco Call:

There is a slight revision of the wages for the fishermen who will work at Wrangell and Pyramid harbor. Instead of the men being paid percentage for the number of fish caught, they will be paid by the case.¹⁵

Cannery Job

The men who packed the cases had no union. They worked with an arm's length relationship to the Alaska Packer's Association. As Superintendent of the Loring cannery, J.R. Heckman, described it:

J.R. Heckman: it is a contract; I suppose you would call it employed direct. One Chinese man takes the contract to do the work for so much a case and he employs his own men.¹⁶

¹⁵ 1908.03.24 2908_03_24_SF_Call_Fishermans_Union.pdf

¹⁶ Whitney Newhall p.195.

Mr. Babler

On May 14, 1908, the man in charge of it all, Jacob Babler, arrived in Wrangell. The Alaska Sentinel wrote:

Superintendent Babler and family arrived up in the Seattle, all looking natural and well. The cannery crew is busy getting the fishing gear and other paraphernalia in readiness for business, and Mr. Babler will probably soon send his trap men out to get the traps in proper condition for fishing.¹⁷

As newspapers and interviews would later reveal, everyone called him Mr. Babler.

Babler was a 50 year-old Swiss immigrant. Years earlier, he moved to San Francisco and joined the Alaska Packers Association. They sent him to Wrangell. Over a decade, proved a shrewd manager of the cannery. As the Alaska Sentinel said in 1907:

If there are any fish in the country, Mr. Babler always gets them.¹⁸

Tlingit Fishermen

Babler pounced on streams used by Tlingit fishermen. In 1898, a government report by Jefferson F. Moser identified sites popular with the Wrangell cannery, including Old Village, Anan, and Kah-Sheets. After Babler seized a stream, he excluded Tlingit fishermen.

In 1899, a group of Tlingit men from Wrangell wrote to the governor of Alaska:

...J. Babler claims he owns the place and want to keep the other Indians away from there. J. Babler tried to buy it from Aaron, provided Aaron keep all the other Indians away from the salmon creek; that Aaron would not do so, the troubles come in. J. Babler break and saw down Aaron's fence and got in on Aaron's garden, using it for camp ground.... We Indians of Wrangell can say this much, that we never tried to keep any white man away from fishing in the creeks; they have always fished every place; but when they tried to keep us out and try to take the ground away from us, we think we have right to kick.¹⁹

¹⁷ 1908.05.14 Alaska Sentinel

¹⁸ 1907.08.22 Alaska Sentinel

¹⁹ Report of the Governor of Alaska, Oct 18, 1899. p. 8

The same year, J.F. Moser wrote a report describing the APA's preferred fishing grounds. The report included places with names like Old Village, Anan, and Kah-sheets along with the number of fish taken from each spot.²⁰

Decades later, in 1949, Francis Paul testified about the elimination of fish traps. He remembered the 1908 season, and one member of the crew in particular:

FRANCIS PAUL: In 1908, Fred Matson, an old-time fisherman who was with a crew which fished for Alaska packers at Anan Creek, one crew with 150 fathoms got over 900,000 salmon at Anan... Between the opening dates in 1906 and the present, comparing catches, there shouldn't be any question as to the fact of depletion.²¹

Canneries in Alaska initially employed Tlingit locals as fishermen and packers. But canneries found they could not exert pressure over these employees. Treated harshly or unfairly, Tlingit employees could walk off the job and live off the land and sea. Chinese workers, on the other hand, were completely dependent upon the cannery system for food, shelter, and the return voyage home. Canneries put pressure on traditional Tlingit ways of life, offering little economic benefit in return.

Fish trap operators didn't just ignore ancestral rights. They ignored Uncle Sam's own regulations, as well. The July 16, 1908 Alaska Sentinel wrote:

Fish Inspector Cobb... found thirty traps wide open and catching salmon during the prohibited hours. Nine were making a feeble attempt to comply with the law, and only one trap was following the law to the strict letter. A remarkable fact about this trap is that the owner had his other traps in full blast. The fishermen and cannerymen who have been caught almost red-handed have rendered themselves liable to a fine of from one to five thousand dollars or ninety days at hard labor, or both... Inspector Cobb has no alternative other than to place his report in the hands of the district attorney.²²

By 1908, Jacob Babler had been superintendent for over a decade.²³ He found work for his family at the cannery. In the past, he employed his sister's husband as a maintenance man, carpenter, and as a winter watchman.²⁴

²⁰ 1899 Salmon Fisheries of Alaska, J.F. Moser

²¹ Elimination of Salmon Traps from the Waters of Alaska, 1949, p. 486.

²² 1908.07.16 Alaska Sentinel

²³ 1900.07.17 Daily_Alaska_Dispatch_1900-07-17.pdf

²⁴ National Register of Historic Places Johnston

In 1908, for the second year in a row, Mr. Babler employed his wife's brother, Norman Hawkins, as a machinist at the cannery. Norman Hawkins would sail home to San Francisco aboard the Star of Bengal with all the fishermen and cannery workers.

With nothing to do all summer while the Star of Bengal sat at dock, Captain Nicholas Wagner went hunting with Mr. Babler's 19 year-old son, Ansell. The Alaska Sentinel reported:

Captain Wagner of the Star of Bengal, "Gassie" Hansen, Ansel Babler and George Snyder went over to Zarembo Island, Saturday, in quest of mowitch. Ansell killed one and captured one alive, while the rest of the party got zero. This was Ansell's first deer, and Mr. Babler senior says the young fellow has killed the same deer forty times since Sunday. The live deer is inclosed at the cannery.²⁵

End of the Season

Thoralf Anderson recalled end of the long summer, fishing season:

THORALF ANDERSON: Without a warning the salmon run is over and we are ready to take up our trap; just the net, the spiling are left. The tugboat company arrived with the bunk scow and we are on our way back to the cannery and hard labor again. Everything is stored away. The cases of canned salmon are loaded on board ship.

In the summer of 1908, the APA cannery in Wrangell produced 52,062 boxes of canned salmon, each box weighing about 65 pounds.²⁶

Down in San Francisco, local businesses eagerly awaited the arrival of the salmon fleet. The San Francisco Call:

The waterfront is waiting expectantly for the ships of the salmon fleet to put in an appearance. Shipping has been quiet for some months and work along the shore scarce. When the salmon ships get in, however, the period of financial stringency will be over for hundreds of those whose money comes as the price of hard physical labor. The Vanguard of the fleet is in, but the rush has not yet started. In a few days the salmon carriers will begin to show up in two's and three, and within a few weeks there will be a salmon ship discharging cargo at nearly every wharf along the city front.

²⁵ 1908.07.02 Alaska Sentinel clipping

²⁶ 1908.09.24 Daily_Record-Miner_1908-09-24_1.pdf

The fishermen will be back, a great army of free and easy spenders, each with a few hundred dollars to get rid of before another job receives consideration. As the fisherman and cannery hands insist upon getting ashore just as quickly as possible after the anchor is down, the launch owners along the front reap a substantial harvest in ferry fairs. The longshoreman will find all the work they can get away with in unloading the ships and reloading the salmon into the steamers, sailing vessels in cars used in distributing the season's catch to the markets of the world. The fees for bringing the ships into port will gladden the hearts of the pilots, and the waterfront saloon keepers are radiant with the kind of smile with which they welcome the fleet.²⁷

Intro Party

With the last salmon case stacked away inside the massive hold of the Star of Bengal, the season was over.

For one night, the work was done. They would sail away in the morning.

For one night, 138 men could celebrate, and let down their guard.

For one night, Mr. Babler allowed a party at his cannery, to reward the men for their service, and let them blow off some steam before their long voyage south.

It was Friday night, September 18, 1908. One last hurrah.

Party

Bill Taylor

In 1908, Bill Taylor was a boy in Wrangell, when his father, William Sr., landed a job aboard an APA steamship towing the Star of Bengal. Young Bill talked his father into taking him along for the ride—including the party the night before. Decades later, Bill described the party like this:

BILL TAYLOR: The farewell party lasted all night, the whole night through, and I understand that nobody went to bed that night! A good party with the cannery people. And there was about a hundred and fifty people all together at the cannery. And there were ninety-eight Chinese men! And there was about the same number of white people.²⁸

Thoralf Anderson

The one man not joining the celebration was the superintendent, Mr. Babler. He had to have his papers in order for his superiors in San Francisco, who would scrutinize his records.

And yet, above his head, Thoralf Anderson was making a racket. Years later, Thoralf Anderson recalled:

THORALF ANDERSON: We are to leave the next morning on high tide for the open sea and home and we are all happy; in fact so happy we were crazy the night of Sept. 18. We nearly tore down the bunk house above the store room and Mr. Babler's office, the superintendent. We marched around the room stamping our feet and dragging whatever we could pry loose, sea chests, tables and chairs. I was marching with a 30-30 Winchester Rifle on my shoulder in the spirit of the fun. I twisted around and pointed the gun at the man behind me and pulled the trigger. I'm shivering now to think what would have happened if the gun had been loaded. Several times Mr. Babler sent his boy up while this mad house procession was going on and asked us to quiet down as he was trying to do some work down in his office but we didn't pay any attention to his pleading. We kept it up until the small hours of the morning.²⁹

²⁸ Bill Taylor transcript.

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

All anybody had to do, was make it aboard the ship the next day by 8am.

Farewell Wrangell

Sunrise

The sun broke over the horizon around 6:00am, filling the gray, overcast skies with light.

Despite the clouds, the morning of Saturday, September 19, 1908 was exceptionally calm. From the end of the cannery dock, off the north point of Wrangell Island, you could see for miles in many directions. Still waters, and no sign of trouble at all.

For years to come, people would talk about how quiet it was. Thoralf Anderson:

TORALF ANDERSON: Not a breeze is stirring. We are calmly eating breakfast after a night of wild disorder. Everyone is quiet like a calm after a storm. After breakfast we move our belongings on board ship. It is time to cast off and be on our way... I wonder if anyone ever thought that the wild antics of the night before were a sign that disaster was to follow.

Lucille

Nobody expected trouble, but shipwrecks were a fact of life. Just one month before, the square-rigged sailing ship Lucille wrecked in Alaska, carrying thousands of cases of salmon. The San Francisco Chronicle wrote:

..The accident, through which the Lucille was wrecked, occurred on August 18th, while the ship was lying off what is known as Smoky Point waiting for favorable tide conditions to get away to this port with her cargo of 39,000 cases of salmon... All preparations had been made for the ship to be towed out of the harbor on the 19th, and extra precautions had been taken to hold the heavily freighted ship by her anchors until morning. During the night, however, the tide began to run strong and a heavy gale sprang up. Suddenly the swivel which held the anchor chains snapped and the ship swiftly turned with the tide and in a short time went ashore on a sand pit.³⁰

Incredibly, everyone survived.

³⁰ 1908.09.10 SF_Chronicle_Lucile_Wreck.pdf

Substitution

Like the Lucille, the Star of Bengal would be towed to sea. For two years, the 172 ton³¹ steamship Chilkat single-handedly towed the Star of Bengal to and from sea. But on the morning of September 19, the Chilkat wasn't there.

As a substitute, Mr. Babler arranged for two smaller steamships to tow the Star of Bengal together. The first was the 115 ton steamship, Kayak.

The steamship Kayak was relatively new, only seven years old, designed and built in California for the APA as a fish tender.³² In 1907, the Kayak towed the Star of England alongside the 42-ton steamship, Arctic. High seas made it impossible to navigate, and the ships sheltered at anchor for three days.

This year, Mr. Babler arranged for the Kayak to tow alongside a steamship twice the tonnage of the Arctic: the 81 ton Hattie Gage.

The Hattie Gage, towing off the port side, was shorter and lighter than the Kayak, but was an old, reliable steamship with nearly twenty years of service in Alaska.³³ When the Hattie launched, the San Francisco Chronicle reported the ship was 82 feet long, 20 feet wide, and featured compound engines capable of 10 knots.³⁴ The newspaper said:

Even without much ballast the vessel rides the waves beautifully.³⁵

Erwin Farrer

As the ship pulling from the left, or port side, of the Star of Bengal, the Hattie Gage was officially in the lead position of the tow. Therefore its captain was in charge of the whole towing operation. He was a man with years of experience in Alaska and beyond.

Erwin Farrer, Captain of the steamship Hattie Gage

September 19, 1908 was Erwin Farrer's 47th birthday. But there was no time for celebration. He had a job to do.

³¹ 1904.03.05 San Francisco Call.pdf

³² 1901.05.10 San Francisco Examiner.pdf

³³ 1889.03.01 San Francisco Examiner.pdf

³⁴ 1889.03.01 San_Francisco_Chronicle_1889-03-01_5.pdf

³⁵ 1889.03.17 San_Francisco_Chronicle_1889-03-17_14.pdf

Erwin Farrer was as experienced as they came. He became a Coast Guardsman at 17, and by 18, he had his master's papers. He spent much of his career taking vessels from San Francisco and Seattle.³⁶

He had a past, that not many in Alaska may have known about. In the early 1890s, he was caught operating a steamship at the mouth of the Columbia River, smuggling Chinese immigrants and opium. The Chinese Exclusion Act had been in full effect for over a decade, making it illegal for Chinese immigrants to enter the United States by legal means.

Newspaper reports say Erwin Farrer was ordered to appear in court, but failed to do so. This may have been when he fled to Alaska, where he became a respected, well-known steamship captain for the APA.

His son, Frank Farrer, followed in his father's footsteps, and served as a member of the crew of the Hattie Gage, including the voyage on September 19th.

Patrick Hamilton

For the Kayak, Mr. Babler selected a man with years of experiences as a mate, but who had never before been a captain of a ship towing to sea.

PATRICK HAMILTON: Patrick Hamilton, Captain of the steamship Kayak

People called the 51 year old Irish immigrant "Paddy." He was most well known at the APA cannery in Loring, near Ketchikan, where the Kayak normally tied up.

Photo Finish

Before departing, Captain Wagner hosted a festive party in the stern of the Star of Bengal. They posed for a photo. There was a well-dressed man with a terrier on his lap. A man holding a drink. A woman dressed in a dazzling, white gown with a hoop skirt. And next to her, Norman Hawkins, Mr. Babler's brother-in-law, slumped at the wheel of the ship, perhaps still feeling the effects of the previous night's celebration.³⁷

Skipper of the Kayak, Patrick Hamilton:

PATRICK HAMILTON: Left the dock at 8:20am, went alongside the ship and put a line aboard on the starboard side, got fast

³⁶ 1936.01.24 Seattle_Daily_Times_1936-01-24_2.pdf

³⁷ 1908.09.27 News_Article__Seattle_Post-Intelligencer_published_as_The_Seattle_post-intelligencer.__September_27_1908__p1.pdf

and went ahead. The bow of the Kayak was past the stern of the Hattie Gage probably 16 or 15 feet.

Young William Taylor was aboard the Hattie Gage, with his father. He recalled:

BILL TAYLOR: We come around the point there and these three accordion players were playing the prettiest tunes. The prettiest music you ever heard comes over the water. Oh, it was beautiful! Steamboats don't make any noise. So, anyway, not being a fireman and nothing much to do, I was out on deck taking in the sights. I come right out here and we hesitated in front of the town where they played. And pretty soon we steamed out. Beautiful day. The sun was shining and the water was just exactly like a mirror. Just exactly. You could see the reflection of the hills and all. So out we went.³⁸

Smooth Seas

Wrangell slipped into the distance. Down in the hold of the Star of Bengal, cannery workers prepared for the long stay at sea. Would it be weeks, or even a month, no one could know.

Up on the weather deck, the fishermen resumed their role as sailors, taking commands from Captain Wagner and First Mate Victor Johansen.

In the Kayak's logbook, first mate Fred Wilkie kept notes:

FRED WILKIE: 9:50AM. Two-tree Island

FRED WILKIE: 10:45AM Station island

FRED WILKIE: 11:55AM Northerly Island

FRED WILKIE: 3:45PM Point Baker

Frank Uberwimer, a deckhand aboard the Kayak, observed:

FRANK UBERWIMER: It was still fine weather after we passed Point Baker, especially in the evening it started calm, dead calm.

The three ships made good time, averaging 5 knots. They reached the bend in Sumner Strait at 8:25pm, the same time as nautical twilight.

FRED WILKIE: 8:25PM Changed course to south. Wind freshening, very dark night, lights and lookout attended to.

Thoralf Anderson:

³⁸ Bill Taylor tapes.

TORALF ANDERSON: By evening we sighted Coronation Island in the far distance on the starboard bow. By now, a strong breeze was blowing off our port beam. It's getting dark now.

Wagner Sleeps

As darkness fell, Captain Nicholas Wagner decided to get some sleep. At ten o'clock, he ordered crew member Alf Olsen to fire up the steam donkey, which the ship would need when it came time to pull up the sails. Captain Wagner then went below deck, into his private quarters, leaving the mate in charge.³⁹

Far ahead, on the distant horizon, beneath the dwindling twilight, sat Coronation Island, and the fate ahead.

³⁹ Whitney Newhall p. 110.

The Rising Storm

Weather Turns

After a half day's journey east, the ships now rounded the bend, heading south. Just before the sunset's last light faded, the crew saw the shape of Warren Island far ahead on the left, and Coronation Island on the right. And in between, the wide, open Pacific Ocean.

The following are direct eyewitness quotations.

Patrick Hamilton, Captain of the Kayak:

PATRICK HAMILTON: Along about 10 o'clock, little swells commenced to come in, not much wind, fresh breeze, nothing to bother about; the vessel didn't seem to be getting through the water very fast; quite the current coming along about that time.⁴⁰

Erwin Farrer, captain of the Hattie Gage, steered the three ships towards the open ocean, carefully avoiding reefs off Warren Island.

ERWIN FARRER: We were going along nicely until about midnight...

Suddenly, the weather turned. Bill Taylor:

BILL TAYLOR: It seemed to break all at once, didn't give any warning. A little wind, not much, but when we got outside of Warren Island it broke and came right in from the ocean.

ERWIN FARRER: ...The wind increased to a hurricane and the seas were running mountain-high.

BILL TAYLOR: When the westerly wind come up in this country here, you'll notice that it comes up with a BANG! like that, really hard, and that's the way it did then.

On board the Kayak, first mate Fred Wilkie wrote in the logbook:

FRED WILKIE: 12:30 A.M. very dark night; steamer making very little headway; ship drifting to leeward having fore and aft sails set...

⁴⁰ Whitney Newhall p. 32.

FRED WILKIE: 1 o'clock when the captain came on deck. We were then off Coronation Island. The weather was very rough and the vessel was drifting rapidly leeward. The engineer had to stand by the throttle all the time because the propeller was racing. The breakers were visible on our starboard about 200 yards away.

Kayak's engineer Walter Neil:

WALTER NEIL: Everything was going all right in the engine room, except she would race once in a while. The stern would go down and then raise up, because of the big sea.⁴¹

Aboard the Hattie Gage, Captain Farrer could see the problem with his own eyes.

ERWIN FARRER: The Kayak was very light-aft, and in the heavy sea her wheel was out of water a great part of the time.

Bill Taylor:

BILL TAYLOR: And the Kayak was blowing off to one side. She wasn't an ocean going tug. So, when she'd hit the water like that, the stern'd come up and the propeller'd come outta water; then they couldn't steer.

Captain of the Kayak, Patrick Hamilton:

PATRICK HAMILTON: I always knew since I have known this ship, we would not come around very fast with a tow. She is a high wood boat, has got a high house on her.

Aboard the Star of Bengal, the crew got nervous. They woke Captain Wagner, who recalled:

CAPTAIN WAGNER: 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.

CAPTAIN WAGNER: I endeavored to attract the attention of the tugs to the danger by blowing the foghorn and shouting to them through a four-foot megaphone till I completely lost my voice.

Star of Bengal crew member Thoralf Anderson:

⁴¹ Whitney Newhall 147.

TORALF ANDERSON: By now it was a real storm and pitch dark. All our sails were fastened down to the yards. Why we didn't set sails and cast loose from the tug while there was still time to clear the Island I don't know. I don't think anyone on board ship knew, including the Captain. We could see we were not making any headway.

Fellow crew member Alf Olsen:

ALF OLSEN: We asked the Captain to cut the hawsers of the Kayak. He said he was not allowed to do it. I was scared to do it without orders, but I thought it was a good thing to be done to save the ship.

The three ships were in a stalemate with the wind, and losing. They were being pushed west. Erwin Farrer turned his bow east, and pulled as hard as he could. If he could pull the Star of Bengal around, point it away from Coronation Island, the ship could fill its sails and cut loose.

ERWIN FARRER: At two o'clock the high bluffs of Coronation Island loomed up on our starboard quarter, and we tacked to port, thinking to safely pass the island and reach the open seas.

ERWIN FARRER: I kept working off to the eastward. When I looked for the Kayak I seen his position was about the same. She didn't follow me... I kept pulling...

Alf Olsen, aboard the Star of Bengal:

ALF OLSEN: We could see the Hattie Gage trying to get us on another tack, to get us off shore. We got on the starboard tack and our jibs, they were full, and we were setting the topsails...

Bill Taylor, aboard the Hattie Gage:

WILLIAM TAYLOR: Captain Farrer went over to the Kayak; the Kayak was on the windward shore and the boats came close together. I looked up once and could see the bluff and trees on top, it looked almost straight up.⁴²

NICHOLAS WAGNER: Vessel's head got pointed to the northeast, I... had just succeeded in getting the main topsail half way up when ship's head was dragged up into the wind again, and she fell off again on a port tack.

⁴² Whitney Newhall 72

On board Hattie Gage, Fred Wilkie recalled the failed tack:

FRED WILKIE: During heavy squall ship came back on port tack, we then steered southeast trying to keep ship off the beach.

ERWIN FARRER: About 3 o'clock in the morning, the steamer Hattie Gage began to show weakness from this heavy strain... Her head stays were the first to go; next the smokestack guides and then the boiler began to shift... We were repairing damages as fast as possible, and at the same time were making towards shore...⁴³

WILLIAM TAYLOR SR: There was one time that a breaker from the bluff came up and brought the two boats almost together. The Hattie Gage was down between two swells and the Kayak on top; when they passed by, I don't think there was more than a foot's space between those two boats... Captain Farrer called all hands on deck to be ready to jump, I thought, because, if the Kayak had ever come down on us, it was all off with us... I was pretty well scared.

On board the Star of Bengal, cook Frank Muir watched it all happen:

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 back and forbidding about 300 yards away. In the cabin, the men were standing around looking very white.

PATRICK HAMILTON: Then I seen the light on her forecastle head, bright light moving around, back and forth, and I made the remark they must be getting anchors ready.⁴⁴

NICHOLAS WAGNER: I then had cast of lead taken, and found 25 fathoms. I ordered anchor let go and dropped in 17 fathoms. Breakers on the rocks in plain view. Immediately I dropped second anchor.

⁴³ 1908.10.08 Seattle_Daily_Times_1908-10-08_2.pdf

⁴⁴ Whitney Newhall p. 41.

THORALF ANDERSON: It didn't take us very long with the first one so we attacked the other one and got it overboard and we payed out all the chain we had.

FRED WILKIE: I then took the lead and sounded 17 fathoms, it was only 15 minutes later I had 10 fathoms; we were about 100 yards off beach, a large rock under our stern 20 feet distance, sea breaking around us.

BILL TAYLOR: Got out there and trying and trying and trying to get away... but she just couldn't make it. Tried and tried and tried and kept drifting toward the reef just outside of Coronation Island.

On board the Kayak, Captain Patrick Hamilton faced an impossible decision.

PATRICK HAMILTON: At 3:50 a.m., the Kayak was in about 10 fathoms of water and about a 100 yards from the beach. A large rock was under her stern. The sea was breaking all around us.

PATRICK HAMILTON: The rain came down in squalls; I was on deck and looked very carefully but could see nothing at all. I told Captain Farrer to get out and hollered to my men aboard my vessel to cut the hawser.

The end of the Kayak's hawser slipped into the sea. On board the Hattie Gage, Erwin Farrer faced the same choice:

ERWIN FARRER: At four o'clock our soundings showed only eight fathoms of water, and by the phosphorus we could tell that there were rocks all around us.

ERWIN FARRER: Then, seeing that all hope of saving the ship was gone, we cut the town line...

Erwin Farrer bid farewell to the Star of Bengal. As he pushed into the darkness, he believed in his heart, that the Star of Bengal had already wrecked. But he was mistaken.

Next Time

Next time, on the Rise and Fall of the Star of Bengal: It's survival. The Star of Bengal's only hope are two little steamships, in a race for their own lives. Before they can save anybody else, they must first save themselves.

Credits

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

Music from today's episode.

- Eternal Father, Strong to Save performed by the United States Marine Band.
- Auld Lang Syne and The Nutcracker from archive.org
- Can Can Dance, by the European Archive, from [Musopen.org](https://musopen.org).
 - In the Pines performed by Mary Rooney.
- Remaining songs from the Wikipedia Commons:
 - Zadok the Priest performed by the St. Matthew's Concert Choir
 - Reflections of the Moon on Erquan performed by Zhang Peijian
 - Jupiter from The Planets performed by Skidmore College Orchestra
 - Parisian by Kevin MacLeod

Sound effects from epidemicsound.com.

Thanks to our voice talent, Mary Rooney, Andrew Helgeson, Wess Strasburger, Brad Angerman, Asia Fisher, John Schenk, and Jake Henry.

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

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 account from Gustav Johnson of the ride north.

Thank you, Greg McCormack, for your help getting the color of the cannery buildings just right.

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 published in 2001 in the Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society's journal, the Sea Chest.

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 third episode, Survival.

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