

Janet H. Elmore nee: Cramer, granddaughter of Edward F. Anderson, is editing a hand written story written by E.F. Anderson while he was living in Lakeport, California sometime before 1950, the year of his death, regarding an experience he had while working for the Alaska Packers Association from April 1908 to September 1908. This copy was typed in August 1994.

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The Wrecking of the Bark "Star of Bengal" as told by one of the survivors, E. F. Anderson.

Yes, she was a beautiful sailing ship. The fastest of a fleet of several ships belonging to Alaska Packers Association making annual trips to the Alaska fishing grounds for salmon fishing.

We left San Francisco on one rainy morning in April, 1908. Sailing under Capt. Wagner with a mixed crew of several nationalities including Swedes, Scandinavians, Norwegians, Fins, Estonians, Latvians, Scots, and Irish and one German, if I remember right. There were 25 of us but just about half of us had sailed before and were competent A.B.s (able body seamen). It was the first experience for the rest of the crew. There were one hundred cannery workers consisting of Chinese, Mexican's, and Filipino's whose quarters are in the forward hold while the crews' quarters are under the poop deck with a bulkhead separating them from the officers' quarters. With clear weather and fierce wind, after twenty some odd days we arrived in Fort Wrangel, Alaska that was to be our home port for the next four months.

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After unloading provisions for the season and a supply of sheet tin for the cannery and oil and coal for the cannery boilers and machinery, we unloaded coal for the company tugboat with its leaky boilers. She should have been put in a tugboat grave yard long before she towed this beautiful ship to her grave. After the unloading of the ship we are kept busy preparing for the fishing season that begins in July including cutting spiling for the fish traps and repairing the torn nets. This work kept us busy from morning till night until it was time to pull out for the fishing grounds.

I was assigned to the crew that was to attend to the stationary trap that we set at the mouth of a small river; a beautiful spot. Mr. Olson was crew boss. We had our quarters on shore, a two room cabin. One room had several bunks and the other a kitchen. We did not have a regular cook but each one of us did the cooking for one week at a time.

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Our meals are made mostly of fried or boiled salmon and can goods. Occasionally we had deer meat. 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 that took about an hour and half or two hours according to the size of the catch. 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.

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. Every thing is stored away. The cases of canned salmon are loaded on board ship. Our entire catch for the season was 25,000 cases.

After many days of hard work everything is ship shape and all the cannery hands are put on board.

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. 19. We nearly tore down the bunk house above the store room and Mr. Barbler's office, the superintendent. We marched around the room stamping our feet and dragging what ever 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 right now to think what would have happened if the gun had been loaded. Several times Mr. Barbler send 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 of Sept. 20 that was to be the last day for 12 of us and 100 cannery hands. A total of over 112 lives lost. I believe this disaster could have been avoided as you will see.

It is now the morning of September 20, 1908. The sky is overcast and it is dead calm.

Not a breeze is stirring. We are calmly eating breakfast after a night of wild disorder. Everyone is quite 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. We pass a towline to the tugboat and cast off our mooring lines from the small cannery wharf. We are beginning to move as the tug takes up the slack of the line and we are on our way to Davy Jones' locker. I wonder if anyone ever thought that the wild antics of the night before were a sign that disaster was to follow. Anyhow we are on our way and the old tugboat pulled us for all she was worth; which wasn't much. We have 75 miles to go through Summer Strait to get to open sea. By evening we sight Coronation Island in the far distance on our starboard bow. By now, a strong breeze was blowing off our port beam. It's getting dark now. We can just see the Island. The wind is increasing to gale proportions with occasional snow flurries and it's cold. We are still heading for the weather side of the Island. Why we didn't go towards the lee side of the Island I didn't know and I don't know now. We could have ridden out the storm by anchoring off the lee side of the Island. 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 didn't know. I don't think anyone on board ship knew, including the Captain. We could see we were not making any head way.

It is now four bells: 10 p.m. The wind is still increasing with mountainous waves. There was no sign of the tugboat ahead of us. One of the mates sings out for the lookout to check the towline. He does and it's slack. Two or three of us help him haul it in the full length and we see t's been cut. Without a warning the tugboat has cut us loose. By now we can see the Island looming up through the darkness on our lee side. We can also see the phosphorus waves breaking on the rocks and we can hear that we are close to shore and drifting closer every minute. What do we do now? Just wait to be driven on shore and to be smashed to pieces on the rocks for which Alaska is famous?

I didn't like the Idea of dying yet. I was young and full of life. Captain Wagner had a bright idea to save his ship and us. He got hold of one of those little hands operated fog horns used on sailing ship those days and a hand full of fire crackers. He advanced to the forecastle head and by turning the crank on the box like affair he could get out a toot, but I don't think it could be heard from one end to the other of the ship. Most of the crew crowded on to the poop deck watching the shore approaching closer every minute. I realized that if any of us was to be saved something had to be done and done immediately. I figured if we smashed on those rocks now in pitch darkness none of us would ever see day light again. I remembered when I was a kid, my first voyage on a sailing ship,

whenever a storm came up, I wondered why don't we run in someplace and drop anchor. Although I knew it couldn't always be done, I always had an idea there is safety in dropping the anchor, so I thought to myself, 'Why not now? It may hold her from drifting ashore until day light. There is nothing else to do now. It's too late. If someone else had a better idea I will never know.

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I persuaded two of the crew to help me get at least one of the two anchors over board. These anchors weigh about 2000 lb. and are lashed down on the forecastle head with chains. Mr. Olson, our trap boss, attended to the windless. The two of us with capstan bars pried one of the anchors over the side. We didn't ask anyone's permission to do this and no one stopped us. Captain Wagner was still busy with the fog horn. It's a mans job to undo the chains' lashings and pry the anchor over the side in the dark with no lights of any kind but it didn't take us very long with the first one so we attacked the other one and got it over board and we played out all the chain we had although we were in the breakers now and the wind is blowing as hard as ever the anchors are holding. We hoped and prayed for the wind to die down by morning but no such luck. By daylight it was blowing harder then ever and the waves were getting higher and higher but still the anchor held. It is now two bells 9 A.M. and light enough to see.

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The shore is about a hundred and fifty yards a stern of us. Luckily we have drifted in toward a small strip of sandy beach with jagged rocks sticking out of the water. On one side of us there is a high cliff with a small water fall tumbling down which supplied us with drinking water for three days. On the other side there is a strip of rock running in to the sea for about hundred feet. It obvious she is drifting again. We knew that the anchors wouldn't hold us much longer so we had the cook prepare some kind of breakfast for us. After a breakfast, consisting of mush and hot coffee, some of us went down in the forward hold to breakout the life preservers for the cannery workers. We showed them how to put them on and ordered them on deck. Up to now none of them have showed up on deck. Next we tried to launch one of the two life boats we had on board. The first one we got over the side smashed to splinters against the iron side of the ship but we had better success with the other one and three men managed to get ashore with a line. We intended to rig up a Breeches Buoy. One man got ashore by this method.

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Then what we had been expecting to happen any moment happened, a large wave lifted her up sky high and smashed her hard down on a rock. Someone said, "It won't be long now." With a sickening grind after the first hit the cannery workers got panicky and started climbing up the port and main mast rigging. I noticed there were fifteen or twenty men in the rigging when she hit the bottom the second time. That jarred her from stern to stern and whip lashing the masts she broke off the main top mast and shook loose most of the men clinging on to the rigging with a sickening thud they dropped on to the steel deck far below but still more attempted to climb up but no one of the crew or officers paid any attention to them. By now we were sure she would break up and sink; which happened in the next twenty minutes. She would break in two abaft of each mast and that section turned over and disappeared. Now there is only the poop deck and the mizzen mast left, leaning at 45(degree) to starboard. In a minute or two this section turned over. As we go overboard, we shout good-bye to each other.

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By now the little bay is full of wrecked salmon cases and empty oil and gasoline drums. We had 50 on board. Most of the men that lost their lives, died from this wreckage. Luckily the three men got ashore in the life boat. All the men that reached shore alive were too weak to get out of the water by themselves. I was washed ashore several feet away from the three men who were watching for survivors and they didn't see me for some time. A wave threw me onto a large rock and the next



one washed me off again. This was going on for I don't know how long I know I swallowed quite an amount of the salty North Pacific Ocean. By now I was getting very weak so the next wave decided I had had enough punishment. It lifted me high on top of the rock and left me there, all in but alive. I tried to shout. I could open my mouth but no sound would come out. I was very cold. Now my teeth were chattering and I was shaking all over. I never felt cold while in the water. Luckily one of the men saw me. He ran over and helped me to get on my feet.

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After taking roll call we discovered that three men were missing from the ones that survived. I think one of them was Capt. Wagner. We started to search for them and found them more dead than alive cuddled up under a bush not far from the beach. In the meantime someone has started a fire by finding among the wreckage an unopened 5 gallon can full of kerosene and one of the crews' sea bags full of clothing. By going through them they discovered a water proof box full of matches, so by the time we got these three men on their feet again and back to the beach a good fire is burning. We all crowded around trying to get warm and dry out as much as possible. There are 16 of us standing around the fire out of 125 or so human beings. One more to be added later on made a grand total. Nobody is saying much just glad to be alive. All are young men; none over 25. All of our watches are water logged and it's snowing again. We can't see the sun so we don't know what time of the day it is but we are getting pretty hungry and thirsty as each one of us has swallowed quantities of salt water. We can't get close to the waters edge to look if something has washed ashore that we could eat because it is high tide and the wreckage has piled up ten feet high.

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We decide to wait until low tide and we all go back to the fire again but we did get some fresh water from the small fall. Time drags on some are lying down fast asleep. Finally evening arrives and with it low tide and now we can look for something to eat. We start tearing the pile of wreckage apart. While we were doing this someone shouted listen! We all stopped and listened. A faint sound came to us from somewhere around the pile of broken boxes. We followed the sound and cleared the boxes away and found a China man at the bottom of the pile, alive and well with only a small cut across the forehead. We got him out and welcomed him back to the leaving. He doesn't speak English so he can't tell us how he managed to survive. He did not have a life preserver on him. He must have been under that wreckage for over four hours. Someone helped to get him to the fire as the rest continued to search for anything we could eat. The wind hasn't slackened any. It may be days or weeks before someone would come to look for us. We may starve to death before someone does. I don't think there's anyone living on that little Island.

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Luck is with us and we find a barrel of hardtack [sea biscuits] and a few cans of salmon. Some biscuits are water soaked but in the center of the barrel they are dry so we have hard tack and canned salmon for supper, washed down with cold water [we never did find any coffee] by now it is dark again and we all try to find a place to lie down by the fire as close as possible but there is nothing but drift logs to lie down on. We have built the fire on top of these logs that pile up on all Alaska beaches but from sheer exhaustion we are soon all asleep. Lucky for us someone woke up in the night and discovered there was fire all around and under us. Talk about going through fire and water. There was no more sleep for the most of us that night. We just sat around and waited for day light. When morning came, as it must even on these little islands, the skies were clear now and the sun came up which was a welcome sight. After a delicious breakfast of water soaked hard tack and canned salmon, we walked down to the waters' edge. During the night at the high tide the waves had swept practically all of the

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wreckage back to sea again. We could see lots of dead bodies on the beach with not a stitch of clothing on them. We picked up all the white men we could find, carried them above the high water

line and buried them in a shallow grave dug out with sticks and hands, and piled rocks on top of them. To my knowledge only one man was brought back to San Francisco and buried. There is not much more to tell. On the morning of the fourth day the sea was calm again. The sun was shining brightly but not a sign of the once proud ship "Star of Bengal". About noon that same day, the same tug that cut us adrift came in sight, dropped anchor close to shore, and took us on board. On our way back to Fort Wrangel I asked the fireman why they cut us adrift. His answer was that the boilers of the old tug were leaking so badly they couldn't keep up enough steam to hold us. If they did they would have drifted ashore with us. From Fort Wrangel we all took steamers to Seattle but on the way I developed pain in my chest and was taken to a hospital in Seattle.

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While the rest proceeded to S. F. on a passenger steamer, I spent three days in the hospital and boarded the next steamer for S.F.

The next spring two or three of the survivors and I again shipped for season fishing to Fort Wrangel but on another ship the "Star of Finland". Nothing happened that summer and we arrived safe and sound back in home port. It was my last trip to sea. I soon got married and settled down on shore. The only sailing I have done since is on a 36 foot sailing boat that I own and sail around on this beautiful large lake situated 100 miles north of San Francisco in Lake County in the town of Lakeport.

Sometime I'm telling this story to my grandchildren of which I have seven or eight.

Tear comes to my eyes whenever I think of the gallant ship "Star of Bengal" the only ship I fell in love with

She was such a lady.

The End