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Wreck of the Whaling Bark *Atlantic*

Excerpted from the *Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1887.*

One of the most melancholy and disastrous wrecks of 1886 was that of the whaling bark *Atlantic*, of New Bedford, Massachusetts, which occurred on the 17th of December, 1886, just outside the harbor of San Francisco, California. The vessel was totally destroyed, and out of the crew of 38 men, 27 were lost.

The *Atlantic* was a staunch, well-built craft of 290 tons register, engaged in the whale fishery. She left San Francisco under the command of Capt. T. H. Warren, at half past two in the afternoon on the 16th of December. She was bound for the whaling grounds of the Pacific. The tug *Sea Witch* towed her beyond the headlands and cast her loose at 4 p.m. near the nine fathom buoy, 2 3/4 miles beyond Point Lobos and about the same distance inside the bar channel which extends in a crescent shape across the mouth of the harbor from Point Bonita, on the north, to an area south of Point Lobos. When the bark made sail the tide was at its height. Captain Warren expected, although the breeze was light from the north west, that the ebb tide which was just beginning to flow out of the Bay would allow him to make a good distance off-shore before dark. However, this expectation was not realized as less than twelve hours from the time the bark was cast off from the tug and cheery goodbyes were said, the vessel was broken into fragments and her twisted and shattered timbers lay scattered along the shore a mile or two south of Point Lobos.

Upon casting off from the tug, the *Atlantic's* sails filled and she made off to the southwest on a starboard tack. All would have gone well had the breeze lasted. Unfortunately, it died out to a dead calm and soon after that a ground swell rolled in from seaward. The swell increased so rapidly that its strength counteracted the strength of the ebb tide and the bark was unable to even reach the bar channel. To make matters worse a heavy fog descended shortly after dark. It was so dense that objects couldn't be seen a half a ship's length away.

The vessel drifted slowly and steadily shoreward. About 8 p.m., as the soundings showed, she was entering shoal waters. The captain dropped the anchor in seven fathoms (42 feet) of water. No sooner had the anchor set than heavy ground swells began tumbling over the bow, flooding the deck. At about 10 p.m., when a light breeze sprang up, the captain raised the anchor in hopes of sailing into deeper water. This proved futile, as there wasn't enough wind for the ship to make headway, and by midnight, when the wind died out again the anchor was again let out, this time in 6 1/2 fathoms of water and with a scope of 60 fathoms (360 feet). The swells became so strong that the anchor wouldn't hold. About 1 a.m. a second anchor was dropped. This had little effect and the *Atlantic* soon grounded stern first in the breakers. Then the terrible work of destruction began.

The *Atlantic* was stranded off Golden Gate Park, about 1 1/4 miles south of Point Lobos and not more than 1/4 mile south of the Golden Gate Life Saving Service Station.

Every incoming swell poured an immense volume of water over the vessel, and the crew with no certain means of escape became badly demoralized. Strange as it may seem, no signals

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were made, not even the firing of a gun to alert the people on shore. In fact the watch below was not called on deck, nor does it appear that there was any organized effort on the part of the crew to escape the danger they were in. The bark lay hard and fast some two hundred yards offshore, and was completely hidden from the Life Saving Service beach patrol by the darkness and fog.

Testimony of the survivors reveals that very soon after she grounded an unusually heavy sea swept several of the men on deck watch overboard, stove in the starboard bulwarks, smashed all but two of the boats, and caused such havoc that the vessel immediately began to burst open.

Finally the men below were summoned on deck and made an effort to launch the two remaining boats; one at the waist [amidships] and one hanging at the quarter. Several survivors stated that even under these circumstances some of the watch off-duty refused to obey the summons and remained below decks. The instant that the quarter boat was lowered with six of the crew in it, it was swamped and stove under the ship's counter (stern). Four of the men were lost, the other two, Antonio Margarita and Joseph Santos succeeded in swimming ashore.

Captain Warren then ordered the remaining boat cleared away with himself, second mate James Ring, a boat steerer named John Lombo, blacksmith H. L. Walling and two foremast hands. After they were launched they realized, too late, that they had failed to equip the boat with oars. As they quickly drifted away from the ship there was no chance to rectify the situation and within a few minutes the boat was broadsided by a heavy swell and capsized. Apparently the boat's equipment was stowed away while the vessel was in port, as was customary, and the crew had neglected to prepare the boats for sea prior to leaving port.

The captain, second mate, blacksmith and boat steerer managed to make shore, but the two seamen drowned.

To those still aboard, surrounded by fog and darkness, with the spars and rigging tumbling about their heads, timber splitting like match sticks and the seas constantly sweeping the decks and entering huge gaps in the hull, the situation was appallingly dreadful. Many were killed outright and others gave up in despair and were easy prey to the pounding surf.

The six men, including the captain, who had miraculously escaped, drenched, shivering and exhausted, set out for assistance to aid the men still aboard the ship.

By following the beach northward they came upon the Life Saving Station about 2 a.m. and reported the situation. The fog was so dense that it was impossible to see objects more than 40 or 50 feet away, and it is not surprising that the beach patrol, which passed opposite the wreck shortly after the ship grounded, had failed to see it.

As soon as the men of the station were aroused they set out with their beach apparatus, and with the captain as a guide were soon abreast of the vessel. It was now 2:40 a.m.. Although the vessel still couldn't be seen, fragments of boats, casks and other material was strewn along the beach. Life Saving Service Keeper Kroger lit two Coston signals, which were evidently seen through the gloom as faint cries could be heard above the crashing surf from the crew remaining on the wreck.

Twenty minutes later there was a slight lifting of the fog, just enough for the men on the beach to see the vessel. The Lyle line-throwing gun, which had earlier been made ready, was aimed and fired a shot line toward the wreck. There being no wind, the shot and light line reached its destination with unerring accuracy and the men on board began hauling it in along with its trailing heavier line (rope) After the heavier line had been hauled about 180 feet toward the vessel, progress ceased. The line had fouled somewhere between the wreck and the shore. Efforts to unsnag the line resulted in the lighter shot line parting. The heavier line was pulled back ashore. The shot line had been cut by floating wreckage. Before the men could reload the line throwing apparatus a large crash was heard and the vessel broke completely to pieces. The few remaining men were swept into the surf.

Just prior to this, one of the crew, Manual de la Rose, reached shore by clinging to a box. He was fortunately uninjured and he, Captain Warren and boat steerer Lombo were taken to the Cliff House, a short distance from the Life Saving Station, where the proprietor, Mr. Hichguertel, provided shelter and attended to their needs.

Another boat steerer, Andrew Look, washed up on the beach while the Life Saving crew was trying to free the line. He was badly hurt and unable to help himself, and would have drowned in the surf had it not been for Surfman Timmerman who ran to his aid and dragged him to safety, with the help of two civilian bystanders. While Timmermen and the civilian were dragging Look out of harms way, they heard a cry a little further south. Timmerman hurried toward the cry and located the Hawaiian crewman Louis Tahiti. He was in fairly good condition and soon gained his feet. Look and Tahiti were carried to the nearby house of Mr. and Mrs. Danehy who attended to their needs.

Shortly thereafter a portion of the bark's stern washed ashore with a seaman named Edward Kuhn clinging to it. He was almost nude and he, too, was taken to the Danehy's home. Another rescue was that of a seaman named Carroll who was pulled from some wreckage by Keeper Kroger and Surfman Smith. He was carried to the station on their backs, an ambulance was summoned which took him to the Marine Hospital for treatment. Seaman Carroll was the last of the crew to make it ashore alive.

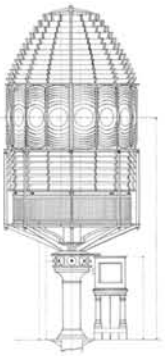
The residents of the area acted with great generosity and extended much hospitality and aid to the survivors. Mr. Adolph Sutro, of Sutro Heights, a man of great wealth, came to the shore as soon as he learned of the wreck and distributed dry clothing and donations of money to the survivors. The only body washed ashore and recovered was that of Joseph Sniedley, the others most likely having been carried offshore.

The earliest accounts of the wreck published by the San Francisco papers were highly sensational and the life saving crew were blamed for inefficiency. But when all the facts were known, public sentiment changed and the lifesavers were accorded the highest praise for their efforts. A later investigation proved that the Keeper and his life saving crew did all that they could and were a credit to the service.

The bark was firmly held in place by her anchors, far out from the beach where she was hidden by fog. Few vessels could have withstood the onslaught of the heavy surf. As strong as the *Atlantic* was, she was literally battered to pieces, while the people on shore were helpless to do anything.

When floating wreckage severed the lifeline, all hope of saving the crew by breeches buoys was lost. Had her cables been slipped when it was apparent the vessel was doomed, she no doubt would have been driven ashore, well up on the beach, and probably all would have been saved.

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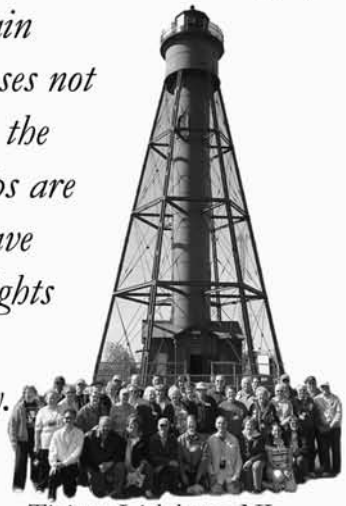
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