



Heroes and rascals ... shipwrecks and lost gold ...

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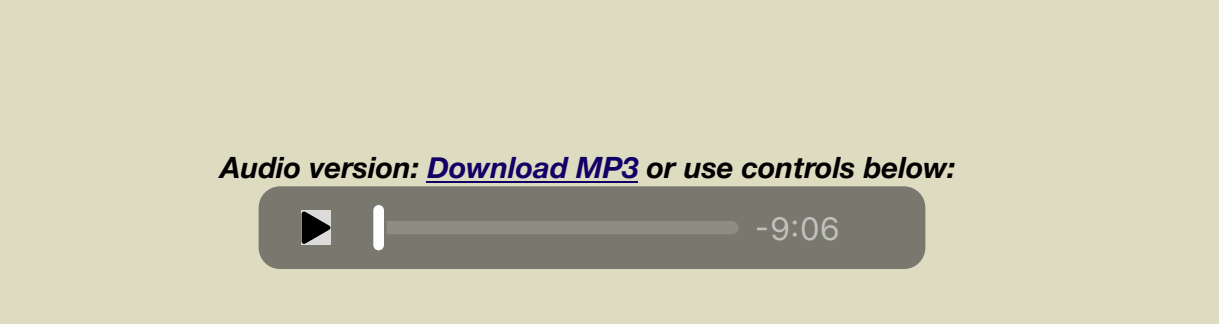
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ASTORIA, CLATSOP COUNTY, 1870s:

Wreck of the U.S. Grant: A baffling historical mystery



By Finn J.D. John
November 16, 2014

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS in 1871, a little steamboat called the U.S. Grant came to grief on the legendary Columbia River Bar — as had dozens before, and as would hundreds after.

What makes the U.S. Grant's demise unusual is that it wasn't trying to cross the bar. It had been set adrift in the middle of a dark and stormy night to drift helplessly onto a raging bar — with its two owners on board.

Whether that happened accidentally or deliberately, we can't know for sure, but it's at least a possibility that it was done on purpose.

At the time, the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSN) was the only way to get to Astoria, Clatsop County, 1870s:

THE U.S. GRANT was actually built by a farmer named Clinton Kelly, who lived in the East Portland suburb of Brooklyn, in 1865. The boat, a modest 70-footer, soon was doing a tidy business shuttling people back and forth around the mouth of the river at Astoria, and occasionally towing sailing ships across the bar when seas were calm enough for it.

In '68, the steamboat was sold to Captain J.D.H. Gray, a former employee of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company — which was doing a thriving business on the Columbia River runs. In fact, OSN at that time had a nearly airtight monopoly on Columbia River traffic.

Gray put the U.S. Grant into service making a regular run from Astoria to Ilwaco, on Baker Bay just inside the mouth of the river. It soon became very popular. The beaches of Southwest Washington are lovely and long, and easily reached across the narrow peninsula that today is home of Cape Disappointment State Park.

Alas, Captain Gray didn't have long to enjoy the fruits of his enterprise.

On the wildly stormy evening of Dec. 19, 1871, Gray and his brother were the only two men aboard the U.S. Grant. The little steamer was moored at Fort Canby, which was pretty much the closest point on the entire river to the mouth of the Columbia. A storm was blustering up the river without. The two men were deep in the engine room, performing a little maintenance on the power plant, when it suddenly came to their attention that the vessel was no longer making the sounds and movements of a ship that's tied to a dock.

Hustling to the deck, they found that the ship had come free from its mooring lines. The blasting winds, tearing out of the west, had pushed the ship out into the current, and the current, augmented by a fast-ebbing tide, was shoving the boat out to sea at a frightening pace.

The two brothers ran belowdecks to try to bring up steam. But the boiler was stone cold. It wouldn't be able to make power for at least half an hour, and by that time it would be far too late.

They raced up on deck and dropped the anchors. That bought them a little time, as the relentless current dragged the anchors through the sand, but it didn't buy them enough — and soon the little steamer was hard aground on Sand Island.

Moving now with desperate haste, the brothers launched a lifeboat and managed to scramble into it before the surf could snatch it and break or capsize it. Unable to make landing through the towering surf, they stayed out on the bar all night, and the following day were found drifting on the river, huddled together for warmth and nearly frozen to death.

They both soon recovered. Their riverboat, however, did not. The relentless surf soon pounded it to pieces for a total loss.

At the time, the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSN) was the only way to get to Astoria, Clatsop County, 1870s:

AND THAT'S THE story — on the face of it, a fairly straightforward tale of shipwreck. And yet, several things about this story are puzzling, if not suspicious.

For instance, why were they riding the storm out at Fort Canby instead of Ilwaco, just a mile or two inland along the shore of Baker Bay? Ilwaco, at that time a major stagecoach stop on the land route to Puget Sound, would have been a much more pleasant place to spend the night. It also would have been a more convenient place to perform maintenance on one's steam engine. And what about crew members?

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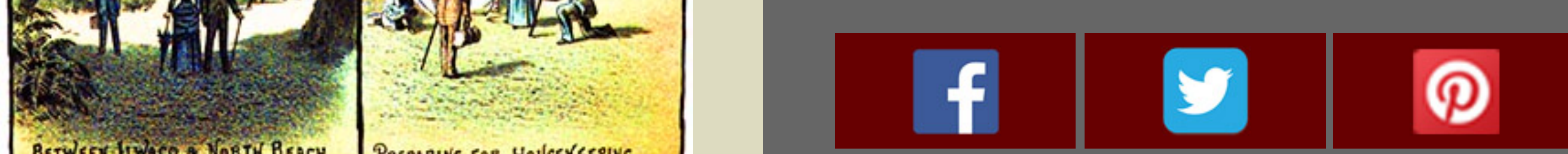
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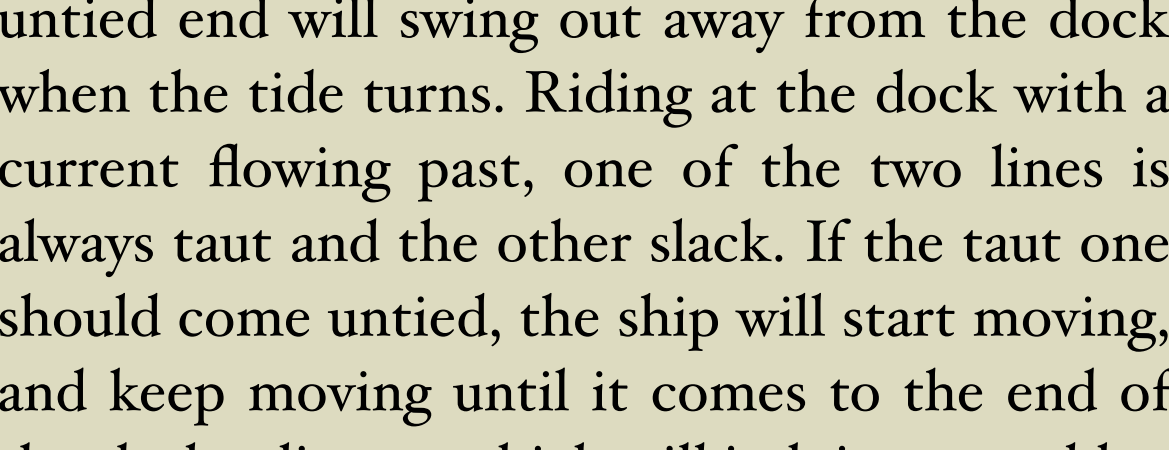
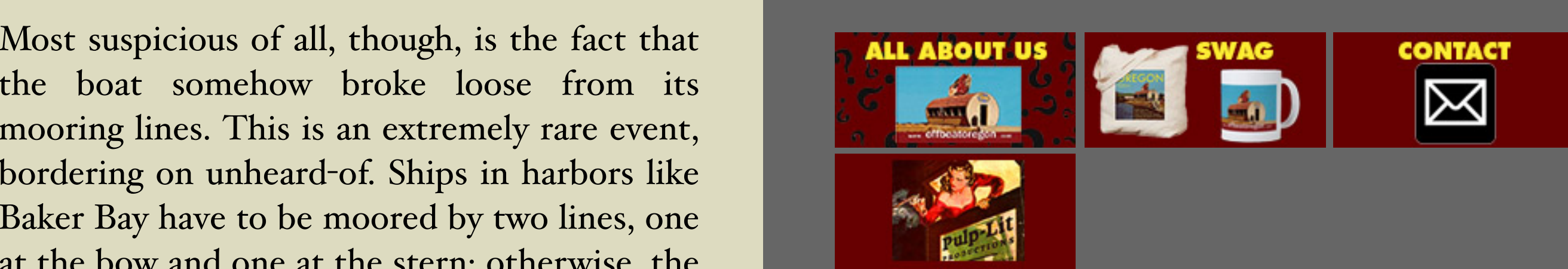
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A color lithograph from *The West Shore Magazine*, July 1886, of a steamboat full of happy beachgoers leaving the docks at Portland, headed for Ilwaco and the beach.

At the time, the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSN) was the only way to get to Astoria, Clatsop County, 1870s:

Had such a thing happened to the U.S. Grant, the brothers — seasoned mariners both — would have been on deck in a flash, and had the boat back snug against the dock in a few minutes.

But that's not what happened.

There are really only two ways a moored ship can stealthily leave the dock without the crew knowing there is aught amiss: Either the same line was used to tie both ends of the ship — a mistake that no seasoned skipper would ever make; or someone cut her loose, slack line first.

So, who would have done such a thing? Could it have been sabotage by the Oregon Steam Navigation Company?

Maybe. OSN was known for a certain degree of ruthlessness. But then again, probably not. For one thing, the brothers, having suffered a big loss, would have asked all sorts of questions and raised all kinds of suspicions — none of which seems to have happened. For another thing, had OSN wanted the Gray brothers out of business, it could easily have accomplished the job without breaking any laws. They'd only have to put one of their boats on a competing run, slash the prices to under the Gray brothers' operating costs, and wait for them to go out of business. Indeed, that sort of thing was common in those pre-antitrust-law years.

What about an inside job? Could the brothers, for some reason, have turned their own boat loose?

It would have been easy enough for them to do. They'd simply have to tie off at Fort Canby, remove the lifeboat, wait until the time was right and untie the mooring lines. At the best moment, with the ship well offshore away from any breakers, they'd hop in the lifeboat. They might have to pull fiercely against the ebb for a while to avoid getting sucked out to sea, but after that, they'd have a full ten hours before the next ebb would start. True, there was a storm raging, but the inside of the Columbia is relatively protected. It could be done, and done with every expectation of coming through safely.

But again — why? Unless the boat was secretly insured, it simply makes no sense. If they wanted to get out of the business, why would they destroy their boat, rather than selling it?

It's an event that makes no sense. It makes no sense as an accident, and it makes no sense as a deliberate act.

But then again, we're talking about a dark and stormy night, nearly 150 years ago, on the wild outer edge of the world. Who knows what really happened that night?

(Sources: Gibbs, James A. [Pacific Graveyard](#). Portland: Binford, 1950. Wright, E.W. [Lewis & Dryden's Marine History of the Pacific Northwest](#). Chicago: Dryden, 1893)

TAGS: #EVENT #shipwreck :: # #mystery #marine :: LOC #clatsop

