

DEVIL-FISH TO ARCHAEOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW OF DIVING AND RESEARCH AT THE SITE OF THE S.S. POMONA

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ABSTRACT

In the 92 years since its sinking, the passenger steamer *S.S. Pomona* has attracted considerable attention. Parts of the ship were salvaged by the Whitelaw team in 1906 while the vessel was still impaled on a wash rock. Afterwards, the *Pomona's* bones lay undisturbed for many years on the bottom of Ft. Ross Cove until rediscovered by wreck divers in the 1960s. Grand tales of devil-fish and other mysterious denizens of the wreck began to emerge. Finally, with the site being visited by an increasing number of sport divers within Ft. Ross State Historic Park, the Department of Parks and Recreation began an effort to identify, map and evaluate the site. This paper summarizes the history of diving and research at the grave of one of the largest and most advanced passenger steamers of its day on the Pacific coast, the *S.S. Pomona*.

INTRODUCTION

St. Patrick's Day, 1908, was a typical brisk spring afternoon on the north coast of California. A rising wind swept the sea from the northwest, and a large swell was running. There was an uncomfortable chop caused by wind waves and whitecaps. It was into this sea that Capt. Swansen cleared Pt. Bonita from the Pacific Coast Steamship Company docks in San Francisco, and set course for Eureka. He stood at the helm of the Steamship *Pomona*. His vessel had made this run many times, but he could not have suspected that the great ship, known as the "Pride of the Coaster Fleet," would never again cross the Humboldt bar. Its 147 passengers and crew were about to become witness to maritime history and underwater archaeology.

Sixty-seven years had passed since the Russians had given up their foothold in California and sold to John Sutter. Ft. Ross had become a center for shipping lumber products under a loading chute. Local ranching operations also played an important part in the regional economy. Fishing was also a growing enterprise, and it was not uncommon to see a dozen or more turn-of-the-century vessels moored in the cove. But

March 17, 1908 was a date that would forever be remembered on the Sonoma coast.

THE WRECK

Passengers on the *Pomona* were uncomfortable. Accustomed to celebrating their St. Patrick's Day on more solid footing, they were tossed by a restless sea. Many took to their cabins. Upon clearing Pt. Reyes, the captain ordered a course change to the northeast. He thought they might find more comfortable conditions and better speed in the lee of Pt. Arena. Besides, he could save on coal, as the company requested, and ease pressure on his boilers. He had taken this route many times before, but it proved to be a fateful decision.

White water was everywhere on the horizon and no boil or breaker gave clue to the hidden rocks ahead. One passenger later reported the ship was so close in that, "You could see the color of a cow on the hillside." Shortly after 6 P.M. the ship lurched violently as she struck an uncharted pinnacle two miles south of Ft. Ross reef. Perhaps this was a rock thrust up by the recent earthquake, later reports would say. The crew immediately assessed damage. Although the ship was free of

the reef, a gaping hole had been punched in the steel hull. The pumps were called to prevent the ship's loss. Capt. Swansen, a veteran of many years sailing the redwood coast, calmly decided his only course of action was to beach the vessel in Ft. Ross Cove to save her. He ordered full steam and maximum effort on the pumps. The steamer gave her best. She reached a speed of 13.2 knots as frightened passengers gathered their belongings.

As she approached the fort, the great ship foundered. She was down by the bow with six feet of water in the hold. The helm was sluggish and unresponsive. In desperation, Capt. Swansen steered into the cove, but a wash rock loomed ahead. Passengers and crew braced for the impact. Within seconds, the rock dealt a fatal blow to the great ship. She rode up over the top on her keel, only to become impaled through the hull and held fast in the swirling sea -- a victim of a "stern and rock-bound coast." She slowly twisted her bow to face the sea as she settled ever lower in the water.

Young Carlos A. Call had seen the black smoke from her stack and raced to assist the stricken vessel. Seven years prior, in 1901, he had saved six seamen from the schooner *J. Eppinger* by swimming a rescue line out to the distressed ship before she was smashed to pieces on the rocks of Ft. Ross Cove. When he reached the bluff edge, the *Pomona* had begun to settle into her grave. Passengers were in a near panic as Capt. Swansen ordered the boats away. A guide boat carried a lantern to shore, marking the route for other boats. They disembarked in the growing twilight as Carlos took photos. With considerable seamanship, all passengers were safely landed on shore, with Capt. Swansen arriving in the last boat. Thus began an underwater archaeological site that brings us together today.

INITIAL SALVAGE EFFORTS

Initial salvage efforts of the *S.S. Pomona* were soon commenced. The Coast Wrecking Company purchased rights to the wreck and began work. The plan was to remove most of the cargo and refloat the vessel by inflating canvas bags throughout the hull. Then the ship could be

towed back to San Francisco to dry dock for repairs.

This hardhat diving was begun in earnest, but not without its dangers, as reported by the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Sept. 28, 1908):

Diver Fights With Octopus

Martin Lund, a diver for the Pacific Coast Wrecking Company, had a terrible experience with a monster devil fish while he was in seven fathoms of water Saturday afternoon at Fort Ross cove, working on the *Pomona*, which was wrecked some months ago. Lund was in the hold of the wrecked vessel, when he was seized about the leg by the tentacle of a devil fish. He slashed at the fish with his knife and gave the signal to be hoisted. The devil fish had too strong a hold on him, and he had to signal the helpers to ease their efforts to haul him to the surface because his helmet was giving way. Another tentacle grasped him about the waist, and still another about the neck. Then another grasped him about the legs and he had to fight hard for life. After cutting two of the tough tentacles that grasped him in a deathlike embrace, Lund saw the creature preparing to strike with its beak, and made a lunge for the head just in time to deal a death blow.

It finally became apparent that the *Pomona* would never leave Ft. Ross Cove. Her prop was salvaged, along with most of her triple expansion steam engine. Salvage master Capt. Whitelaw, using his steam schooner *Greenwood*, did the recovery. Many salvageable steam valves, pipes, fittings, tools and instruments were no doubt removed. Finally, she broke in two on Nov. 21 and slipped forever beneath the waves.

SPORTS DIVERS RAISE RELICS

For 51 years, the bones of the steamer were the exclusive realm of abalone, fishes and devil fish. In 1959, a group of skin divers discovered the site. Led by Robert Lanham, the divers explored the *Pomona* wreckage and recovered many nautical treasures. Over the next decade,

portholes were wrenched from hull plates and brass keys, teacups and fittings were raised. Some of these items were given to the new Ft. Ross State Historic Park, but most were carried off as treasures from the site (Anonymous 1971). As SCUBA diving became more popular, the *Pomona* site gave up many more brass pieces and small artifacts.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH EFFORTS

In April, 1981, the first systematic underwater survey conducted by State Parks took place at Ft. Ross Cove. This was a combined effort using the Navy Diving Salvage Team, State Park divers, and many interested divers and supporters. It began with a magnetometer survey of most of both coves from shoal water to the 120-ft. contour. A 200-ft. grid spacing was established by marker buoys. Lanes were run in the research vessel from a north-south and east-west direction. As anomalies were located, they were marked by a chase boat and investigated by dive teams. Position was maintained by LORAN, and anomalies were charted by transit from two stations on the bluff above (Foster 1981).

In conjunction with the electronic surveillance, a systematic swim survey was conducted for this project over a 200 x 1000 ft. anchorage area inside north point. Historical documentation indicated this was the lumber chute anchorage. Using a 10-foot tag line, dive teams covered the bottom in a systematic survey. April visibility averaged about 10 feet or less.

A total of 55 separate anomalies were distinguished by the magnetometer. These could be grouped into six "clusters" ranging in depth from 100 to 40 ft. SCUBA investigation of these targets found four of them occurred on sand bottoms without visible metal artifacts. They may have been false readings or buried in the sand. Cluster 5 was identified as the *Regia*, a 45-ft. fishing vessel. Cluster 6 was a very good approximation of the *Pomona's* wreckage. Although no systematic mapping was attempted, a brief record of the wreck elements was made. The drive train, boilers, forward hull and individual artifacts were noted and photographed. The

overall condition and distribution of wreckage was documented. It became apparent that a more concentrated mapping effort was needed.

The swim survey resulted in the documentation of two large anchors that presumably formed part of the lumber schooner anchorage system. They were "admiralty style" with 6-ft. shafts and 4 feet between the flukes. The anchors were accompanied by six-inch stud-link chain, wrapped around large boulders. They appeared to be intentionally set as part of the mooring system (Foster 1984). The 1981 survey was a success. Many targets were identified, and the *Pomona's* location was charted for the first time.

New information on the *Pomona* shipwreck site accumulated slowly over the years. Using State Park divers and with the help of Jim Delgado, maritime historian from Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), incremental progress was made. The drive train details were documented and measured, but the rest of the vessel remained mysterious.

The next research effort came with Jack Hunter's 1988 survey. Lacking the divers necessary to carry out a mapping effort with traditional underwater techniques, Hunter was asked to perform a mapping exercise using underwater video. The concept was to tag important features and to thoroughly document the wreck from above by video camera. Using still images from the video, an attempt was made to piece together a composite map. Scale and compass orientation were to come from traditional measurements. The concept was sound, but diving conditions would never allow for adequate detail to be documented by video alone. Between the constant surge, bull kelp canopy and murky conditions, repeated video mapping efforts were frustrated. Hunter and his team were able to make some advances. A site record was completed and assigned the number SON-1704H, but the *Pomona* wreck site remained poorly defined (Hunter and Fisher 1989).

The project effort reported today was designed and led by Charles Beeker from Indiana University. Working with students from USD, CSU Northridge, San Jose State University and

Sonoma State, an efficient collaboration made possible a great leap forward in the understanding of the site. From their 1998 field work, not only was a detailed map prepared, but the shipwreck remains were used to prepare drawings of the breakdown of the *Pomona* itself as she slowly broke her back on the wash rock. The site formation process was illustrated. This has brought to life the watery history of Ft. Ross Cove.

One other aspect is worthy of mention for those who may be contemplating similar undertakings. Using Indiana University resources, a web site was established in advance. Then, as the project progressed, daily information was posted on the site. Each student was assigned to write in a "Scientist's Log," giving their own personal account of the work and its meaning. Maps, photos and historical details were placed in cyberspace. This effort allowed others at the university, and potentially anywhere, to stay connected to the project, ask questions, and be partners in the expedition. We had done this before in the Dominican Republic, and it does provide a much greater opportunity for public involvement.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Part of our charge in managing this site is to find ways of involving the public in its stewardship and protection. We believe the *Pomona* is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. It deserves recognition as one of the most significant and complete iron hulled steamers of its

type along the California coast. It will be the responsibility of State Parks to continue research efforts, intensify interpretation of the site and involve local divers in its long-term management. Most of the brass and small souvenirs have been removed. Through the construction of a blufftop interpretive station, installation of marker buoys, and recruitment of "site stewards," we hope to perpetuate the *Pomona* shipwreck site within an expanded underwater park at Ft. Ross.

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