

The Haunted Coast

FROM SHATTERED HULKS ON RUGGED
COASTLINES TO LOST SOULS ROWING
PHANTOM SHIPS, THE GRAVEYARD OF
THE PACIFIC HAS ENOUGH SPOOKY
STORIES TO GIVE ANYONE THE CHILLS

BY DIANE SELKIRK

PHOTOS COURTESY
VANCOUVER MARITIME MUSEUM.



Some say ships like the *Melanope* still moan and creak with the residual despair of all the souls that were lost along B.C.'s haunted coast.

They found her first—the lady in the red coat. Her hair had come unpinned and lay about her head like spilled gold. She looked as if she would speak but her face was cold, so cold. She clutched a lifejacket so tightly beneath her coat they would have to bury her with it. But it was not a lifejacket she held, but an infant.

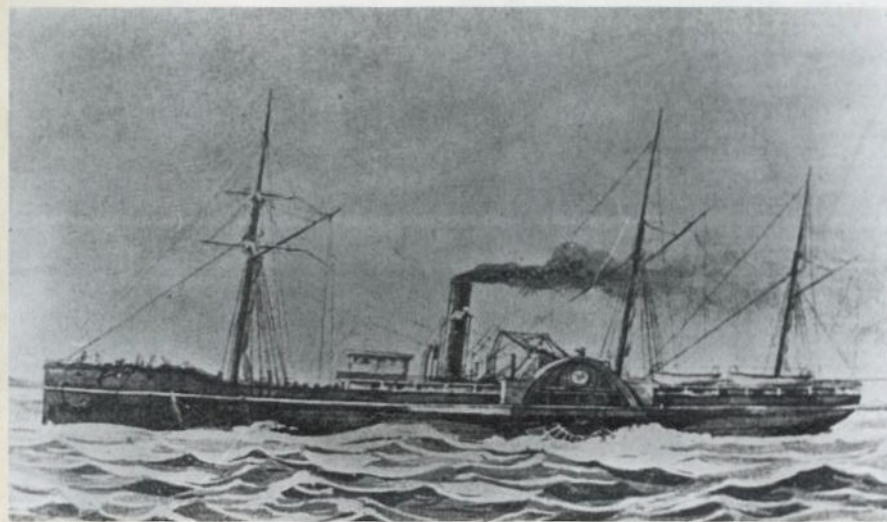
THE PHANTOM SHIP My daughter Maia squealed with fear, “Oh, this is a horrible story! The baby was dead too, right? Don’t stop. Keep going. I want to know who else died.” I looked closely at Maia. Even though I was telling her a ghost story, and the whole point of ghost stories is to scare the heck out of someone, her bloodthirsty reaction was giving me cause for concern.

I continued with the story: *The infant’s eyes were closed and one hand, china white*

hopefully to the rigging, only to be drowned or dashed to pieces. The few lifeboats that were launched capsized in the surf. One story told how the women and children, so sure they would be rescued, refused to even attempt to board the lifeboats. Instead, rescuers were powerless as a final huge wave swept them, and the battered remains of the *Valencia*, into the sea. There were only 37 male survivors, and reports say 136 people died.



After the *Valencia* sank, there were reports of a phantom ship, with ghostly forms clinging to her rigging, plying the waters off Cape Flattery.



The *Pacific* and its 275 passengers were the victims of a hit-and-run accident by a mystery ship that was soon found wrecked in Barkley Sound.

like a doll’s, gently touched her mother’s shoulder... “Are you sure you’re ok?” I asked, noticing Maia’s suddenly pale face, “This is pretty scary.”

We were just coming to the end of the story about the sinking of the *SS Valencia*. On January 22, 1906, the coastal passenger liner, on a trip from San Francisco to Seattle, lost its way during a fierce storm. The ship ran aground on a southern Vancouver Island reef, three miles east of Pachena Point. Accounts describe how it was trapped between “sheer rock cliffs and pounding breakers” while helpless rescue ships stood just offshore, unable to approach the stricken craft.

Onlookers watched in horror for two days as the ship’s passengers clung

The sea and death have one thing in common: neither will refuse anything or anyone.

The story of the *Valencia* could have ended here, I tell Maia. Except that when people are taken in a violent or sudden way, they sometimes leave shadows of themselves behind: ghosts.

The same, it’s said, is true for ships. And after the *Valencia* broke up and was taken to the bottom, there were reports of a phantom ship, with ghostly forms clinging to her rigging, plying the waters off Cape Flattery. Maia’s eyes grew saucer-like at the thought of the ghost ship, and eager to capitalize on her fear, I finished off the story with the best bit: *There were also rumours of a lifeboat, crewed by eight skeletons, rowing on endlessly for shore. And 27 years after the Valencia was destroyed, lifeboat #5 washed ashore in Barkley Sound, still in as good condition as the day the ship met her cruel fate.*

ABANDONED TO DROWN Living, as we do, along the shoreline of the Graveyard of the Pacific, there is no end to the gruesome tales we can scare our kids—and ourselves—with. Numerous books detailing savage storms, murderous rampages and mysterious sinkings have been written about the coast. And over time, most sailors will pick up their own favourite story or two.

These tales of despair are perfect for reciting on a foggy night, in an isolated anchorage, when each creak and groan of the hull can be blamed on drowned spirits. The story of the *SS Pacific* is a personal favourite of mine—especially because I like my ghost stories to come with a moral. And, whenever possible, lost treasure...

On November 4, 1875, the *SS Pacific* sailed out of Victoria headed for San Francisco. She was bulging with at least 275 passengers and a freight, which may have included as much as \$400,000 in gold. What the passengers didn’t know about the freshly painted ship was that she was actually a rotting hulk—cold-heartedly pressed into service by a greedy company that was eager to capitalize on the gold rush.

Within a few hours of listing her way out of port, the decrepit sidewheel steamer would be on the bottom. The mysterious ship that struck her steamed off into the night, never rendering



The *Melanope* was thought to be bewitched due to the violent and mysterious deaths of many of her captains.

assistance, or even stopping.

No deadly gale screamed through the rigging, no angry billows curled over her deck. A staunch, well-equipped ship floated near her, and the death wound was received while she was so near a port that the body of one of the victims, a fair young girl, drifted almost to the dooryard she had left, full of life and happiness, a few hours before. The news report in the *Victoria Times Colonist* of the time tells the story with a melodramatic flourish. It goes on to describe the callous captain of the mystery ship sailing away, as the sea churned with a mess of wreckage and screaming, struggling men and women.

With all hope gone, and the ship and her rotten lifeboats on the bottom, the women succumbed first, their heavy gowns quickly weighing them down. In the final hours, just 20 people clung to the wreckage. Then the cold and mounting seas took their toll, and in the end, only two men survived to be rescued.

For weeks, wreckage and bodies washed onto Vancouver Island, retelling the tale of the ship's sorry demise. In eerie coincidence, a portion of the *Pacific* was found near the Victoria home of Sewell Moody—the man who ran a sawmill on the north shore of Burrard Inlet and who was among those drowned on the *Pacific*. On the wood scrap, written by Moody as the ship went down: "S.P. Moody, All lost."

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The law of the sea says you must render aid to those in need. But the boat that struck the *Pacific*, and sailed off with part of the ill-fated ship's rigging tangled across her bow, broke this rule. However, the sea will exact her own revenge. And the *Orpheus*, the mystery ship that caused the fatal collision when she drifted too close to the *Pacific* in an ill-guided effort to check her position because her incompetent captain was lost, was soon found wrecked in Barkley Sound.

The *Pacific's* treasure—gold dust and bullion from the gold rush, now worth millions—is still on the bottom, resting off Cape Flattery in only 12 or 13 fathoms.

SUPERSTITIONS There are rules to life at sea. Sailors, who know how perilous maritime life is, heed a long list of warnings: Don't look back once your ship has left port. Do not kill a seagull; they contain the souls of sailors lost at sea. Hold tight to mops and buckets; losing them overboard will bring bad luck. Do not use the final match in a packet; instead throw it over for Neptune.

Ignoring the superstitions of old sailors is done at great risk, as a young and healthy sailor with Victoria Tug and

MORE GHOSTLY TALES

LOOKING FOR a few more nautical ghost stories to round out your Halloween?

THE MARITIME MUSEUM OF B.C. in Victoria, the 1889 landmark that was previously Victoria's original provincial courthouse, is offering ghost tours of the building. You'll hear creepy tales of ghost ships, cursed vessels and real accounts of ghostly activity in its hallowed halls.

The ghost tours run twice a night at 19:00 and 20:30 hours, October 19, 20 and 21, and again October 26, 27 and 28.

For more information on reserving tickets, contact Marc Vermette, Maritime Museum of B.C.; 250-385-4222, ext. 106; programs@mmbc.bc.ca; <http://mmbc.bc.ca>.

THE GULF OF GEORGIA CANNERY in Steveston also offers Halloween ghost tours. You'll hear stories of Fraser River phantoms, including Lulu Sweet, the Bloody Butcher and Crispy Carl during a tour of the national historic site.

Haunted History Tours are offered October 27 and 28 at 13:00, 14:30 and 16:00 each day. A very scary twilight tour will be held October 27 at 17:30.

Tour space is limited, so reservations are recommended; call 604-664-9031. —DS

Barge was fated to learn. His shipmate, an old Swede, was willing to share his hard-won knowledge of the sea. The old man set to teaching the young sailor the ropes, but the young can be headstrong, and the youthful sailor used the last match himself, refusing to offer it to Neptune. Soon after, the young sailor was found dead.

Maia looked concerned as I finished the short account. "I look back. I always look back when we leave port," she said.

Maia is only six. So I soothed her well-placed worry by explaining we would simply pour a little wine on the deck as an offering to the gods, which would counteract the bad luck that came from her looking back. If she were just a little bit older, I would have told her the story of the *Melanope*, a story that reminds us never to ignore warnings, counsel or curses.

BEWITCHED The Cape Horn windjammer *Melanope*, launched in 1876, was thought to be bewitched. When the ship was towed down England's Mersey

GHOSTLY BOOKS

Shipwrecks of British Columbia, by Fred Rogers, Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1973.

British Columbia Shipwrecks, by T. W. Paterson, Langley: Stagecoach Publishing Co. Ltd., 1976.

Lost Bonanzas of Western Canada (Vol. II), Edited by Garnet Basque, Surrey: Heritage House, 1996.

West Coast Adventures: Shipwrecks, Lighthouses, and Rescues Along Canada's West Coast, by Adrienne Mason, Canmore: Altitude Publishing Ltd., 2003.

"Breakers Ahead!" A History of Shipwrecks on the Graveyard of the Pacific, by R. Bruce Scott, Victoria: Self-Published, Fleming Review Printing Ltd., 1970.

River, setting off on her maiden voyage, an old crone was found on board, selling apples. She was kicked off by the ship's master and set onto a tugboat that was heading back to port. The old woman obviously took being removed badly and cursed the ship and her captain. The captain ignored the bad omen and sailed on, only to

be struck dead in a freak accident.

That was not the end of the iron sailing vessel's problems. Many of her captains died both violently and mysteriously. The *Melanope* eventually ended up in B.C. where the sinister ship was demoted to work as a coal hulk, until her hull was finally sunk as a breakwater at the Royston wharf in 1946. At low tide, visitors to the wharf can see the *Melanope's* twisted bones, along with the hulls of the other broken vessels that make up the breakwater.

Some say these ships still moan and creak with the residual despair of all the souls that were lost along our haunted coast. Whether or not that is true, it still remains that our coast is filled with the echoes of shattered ships and lost lives. The ghosts are out there.

Much of the information regarding the wrecks of the Valencia and Pacific, along with all the photos, came from the excellent archives at the Vancouver Maritime Museum. 📖