Our Ocean Backyard

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Stranded on the Beach

While the remains of two “shipwrecks”, the *SS Palo Alto* at Seacliff and the barge at the Salinas River mouth, can still be seen along the shoreline of Monterey Bay, there have been a number of other shipwrecks that are no longer visible. A statewide database of shipwrecks reveals that the Santa Cruz County coastline has been a whole lot safer for ships than many other sections of California’s coast. We come up pretty infrequently compared to Humboldt, Mendocino, San Francisco or Monterey counties.

A catalog of ship losses compiled by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary lists 463 individual vessels within the present boundaries of the Sanctuary, but only 25 of these met their end along the coastline of Santa Cruz County. Most of these listed the cause of loss as foundering or sinking offshore, with a handful of others stranded on the shoreline and two burned at sea.

On the night of October 1, 1924, the combination of high seas and a course too close to the shoreline put the *La Feliz* on the rocks directly in front of where the University’s Seymour Marine Discovery Center exists today. The 100-ton vessel was carrying canned sardines from Monterey to San Francisco when she was wrecked. Local residents drove out to the top of the 30-foot bluff and used their headlights to illuminate the ship and help rescue the crew of 13. The mast was removed, leaned against the cliff and used with a block and tackle to recover the cargo of sardines as well as equipment from the ship. Amazingly, the mast of the *La Feliz* is still standing proudly against the cliff 96 years later.

The *La Feliz* wasn’t the only local shipwreck. Forty-eight years earlier in October 1876, the *Active*, a 92-foot boat, went aground on Its Beach just below the old lighthouse. The *Active* had taken on a load of railroad ties from the wharf in the morning, but didn’t set sail until 8 pm that evening. Shortly after getting underway, however, the wind died, and left her about a mile off the lighthouse. When the wind came up later in the evening, and as the crew was working to get underway, the *Active* was hit suddenly by heavy seas. Even dragging two anchors, the waves still washed the schooner onto Its beach. At daylight a line was thrown from the cliff below the lighthouse to the vessel. The crew used the line to work their way to shore, hand over hand.

October seems to have been a bad month for shipwrecks. On October 11, 1912, a U.S. submarine named F-1 was washed ashore at Port Watsonville, which was a short-lived wharf located at the end of Beach Road. Two seamen were washed overboard and drowned.

On October 7, 1972 another ship was stranded, this time right in front of the Boardwalk. The 125-foot *Shamrock IV*, an elegant two-masted schooner, was anchored near the wharf while the crew and captain left to get some parts to repair the engine. While they were gone, strong winds came up very quickly and pushed the boat towards the beach. She was soon resting on the bottom, with her 30-ton keel buried in 9 feet of sand. The boat was owned by a Dr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Wolohan of San Francisco and had a crew of 28.

Initial attempts by a Coast Guard cutter to pull the 100-ton *Shamrock IV* off the beach were unsuccessful. The wooden schooner soon ended up broadside on the beach and was being impacted by every breaking wave. Cracks began to appear in the hull from the continuous pounding by waves at high tides and then seawater started to flood the interior.

Her owner decided she couldn’t be saved and soon sold the salvage rights to the vessel for $5000. The *Shamrock* became a local curiosity over the subsequent weeks with locals and the press coming to the beach, morning, noon and night, to watch the salvage operation, all anticipating that she could be extricated from the sand.

Salvage efforts went on for nearly a month, with two boats tugging from offshore and two bulldozers working from the beach, typically with dozens of spectators. I vividly recall watching from the beach one day around noon, with the action heating up at high tide. A heavy steel cable had been attached to the bow of the boat with the other end tied to a large bulldozer about 150 feet up the beach that was being used as a deadweight. The second bulldozer was pushing against the taut cable with its blade when each wave broke, with the cable looking exactly like a tightly drawn bowstring.

The bulldozer operator seemed to be enjoying the audience he had on the beach and wasn’t watching the cable closely. As he was pushing on the cable with his head turned toward the crowd assembled on the beach, the dozer blade was tilted a bit, and the very tight cable, under a whole lot of pressure, slid up over the top of the blade. Just like the release of a tight bow string, the cable flew backwards, passing barely over the head of the driver. We all missed a near disaster.

But on November 3, after 26 days of pushing and pulling, the 100-ton schooner was finally broken loose from its sandy grave and was pulled off the beach. Despite the cracks in the hull and all of the stress the boat had been through during the efforts to free her from the sand, the salvage crew felt the *Shamrock* *IV* was seaworthy enough to be towed to San Francisco for repairs. She was about 4 miles off Ocean Beach just south of the Golden Gate, when the three pumps that were laboring to remove water from the cracked hull began to fail, and combined with 12-foot seas, the *Shamrock IV* sadly sunk in 30 feet of water.