

Footprints Through the Sands of Time

Personal Memories of the Seagate Shipwreck

Byline: Kelly Calhoun, Executive Director/Curator of Museum of the North Beach

The Seagate, originally named Horatio Allen, was built by the California Shipbuilding Corporation in Los Angeles and completed in February 1944 in response to the need for more war ships. After WWII, the ship was renamed Green Wave when it was sold to the Green Wave Steamship Company in 1947. In 1952, her name was changed again to the Seagate, but still under the same ownership. She was registered with the Seagate Steamship Corporation of Wilmington, Delaware in 1954. The Seagate was sold again in 1955 to the Vousia Steamship Company of Greece and flew the Liberian flag. In June 1956 while in Japan, reconstruction work on the freighter was undertaken adding seventy feet to her length. Once completed, she was on her voyage to Vancouver, B.C.

On September 6, 1956, the freighter Seagate, ran aground more than 100 miles off course on the Sonora Reef on the Quinault Reservation. According to Captain Panos Comninos, the gyro compass began malfunctioning which caused her to navigate blindly in the fog. The Coast Guard cutter McLane brought the rescued crew members and the captain to the Aberdeen fishing base. They were then taken to Seattle by bus. During the rescue, the language barrier became an issue when only one of the crewmen could speak English.

These are the personal memories of Jack Crowell who was a ship rigger. He was sent to the site by the Foss Maritime Company in Tacoma to begin salvage operations:

Jack was sent to Westport where he boarded the Craig Foss, which went to the proposed salvage site on Sonora Reef near the mouth of the Quinault River. The weather was so bad they couldn't board the Seagate, and after eighteen hours, they returned to Westport.

Foss hired the Bill Boeing helicopter (which Mr. Boeing used in support of the hydroplane Miss Wahoo) to transport the salvage crew to the Seagate, and it could only carry one person per trip. The helicopter off loaded them at Taholah on the baseball field, then brought them to the aft deck of the Seagate, where they stepped onto a platform made from two oil drums topped with a hatch cover. Foss and the salvage head were already on the Seagate when Jack boarded.

The Seagate was drifting south so they dropped anchor with the bow pointed to the beach. Jack spent 32 hours straight with no sleep loading equipment onto the Seagate using her winch. The equipment was off loaded from a barge that Foss had brought alongside. On the barge was a large compressor, which they fired up and with long hoses, they cut into the steam lines of the Seagate and tapped into them providing air power instead of steam. This allowed them to use some of the Seagate's equipment including the winch.

During Jack's time on the Seagate, there wasn't any water but they found lots of Japanese beer in the storage locker. Sandwiches were brought by helicopter for their food supply and a cook from the Foss tug made some coffee until his water supply was gone.

The ship was listing to starboard and swinging back and forth on the anchor which was putting stress on the bow. The grounding on Sonora Reef plus this stress was causing the 70 feet added to the Seagate in Japan to separate at the welds. The Seagate was a WWII Liberty ship and modified in Japan with this being her first trip. Jack stated it was very poor workmanship on their modification. So many leaks appeared that they couldn't pump it out fast enough. They were still attempting a full "tow away" salvage.

After the separation got too large, they had to offload all their equipment onto the barge and they were taken off by the Bill Boeing helicopter which Foss contracted for the whole operation. Jack said large chunks of rust were falling off the sides of the ship so they didn't even clean and repaint the Seagate in Japan.

When the salvage crew left the Seagate, a Jacob's ladder was left over the side. They thought that it would be the only future access other than by helicopter. Only problem was that souvenir hunters found it and three died accidentally while using it. Jack also said that the anchors, the anchor chains and some of the brass propellers are still on the beach.

Addendum

On September 10, 1956, the Seagate broke free of the reef and drifted aground near the beach 1/4 mile south of Taholah. The ship broke in half on September 22nd. Fred Rossi and William Waara purchased the shipwreck for salvage on November 29, 1956. Salvage attempts continued through September 1958, two years after the wreck but were plagued with problems.

Other salvagers were the Curtright family of the Ocean Crest Resort in Moclips. They retrieved several items including pots and pans they had used for decades in the restaurant, two of the ship's running lights, and several foreign flags. The Ocean Crest donated the running lights and a Soviet Union flag to the Museum of the North Beach. One of the ship's life preservers was donated to the museum by Ed Burgi, friend of Jack Crowell.

Fresh out of high school, four young men from Seattle rented scuba gear and a rubber raft, all WWII military surplus, and drove out to the wreck site. They were unable to pass the breakers on the first attempt resulting in the raft capsizing. They tried again six hours later with just two from the group and managed to get on board. The ship was listing towards the horizon which made it possible to get on board near the bow. However, they didn't stay long as the ship was moving violently in the ocean swells. One of them, current museum member William Holmes, now living in Copalis Crossing, donated a fire axe that he salvaged off the Seagate. All donated items are currently on display.

(two photos ahead)



**Aerial view of the Seagate with a Coast Guard cutter standing by.
The crew were rescued by the Coast Guard.**



The ship after it drifted north and split apart.