

The Wreck of the Victor

By MRS. BESSIE WILSON DuBOIS

Unravelling the mystery of two barnacle encrusted, sea-grown boilers of a sunken steamer south of Jupiter inlet, about 300 yards in the Atlantic off the Jupiter Civic Center, proved to be one of the most fascinating quests in researching we have ever attempted.

The old ship had rested there so many decades that her identity had long been forgotten. The place was known to fishermen as simply "the boilers". Grouper and snapper abounded in the shady depths. The twenty or so feet of water covering the wreck was usually crystal clear and of that lovely blue green so characteristic of south Florida sea water. A huge jewfish made the old fire box of the ship his private retreat until one day he was hauled forth to become the prize trophy of his generation.

Searching in the Florida material in the Memorial Library in West Palm Beach we came across a small item from the memoirs of Charles Pierce which gave us our first clue to the identity of the vessel. It told of the Steamer *Victor* which sank off Jupiter in 1872.

Our first inquiries to the Coast Guard and National Archives were not fruitful. There was no record of the *Victor*. Finally however a letter was received from National Archives with the following information about the *Victor*:

"A Steamboat Inspection Service casualty report states that on October 20, 1872, the S. S. *Victor* (Official No. 25686), while enroute from New York to New Orleans, "broke her shaft" near the Jupiter, Florida, lighthouse, filled with water and sank quickly without the loss of life. The vessel, which was valued at \$140,000, was described as having three decks, a round stern, and a carved head; and as measuring 205.5 feet in length, 36 feet in width, 19 feet in depth, and 1326 gross tons. The cargo, which was valued at \$150,000, was also a complete loss. Charles Mallory of Mystic Connecticut, was listed as the *Victor's* owner. No crew or passenger lists for this voyage have been located in the National Archives."

A much more graphic account of the shipwreck came however from Mrs. Lillie Pierce Voss of Boynton, Florida. Her father was assistant keeper of Jupiter lighthouse for one year, 1872. The shipwreck occurred before she was born but she had heard her father relate the story of that stormy October day many times and her brother Charles had recorded many of the details.

Her father, H. D. Pierce, was on duty in the tower of the Jupiter lighthouse. A northeaster was blowing. Shortly after midnight he saw a glare of Coston lights south of the inlet and knew a ship was in distress. He ran down the spiral stairway to the dwelling occupied by the three keepers and awakened Captain Armour and the other assistant Charles Carlin. The three men climbed the tower and presently more lights indicated the location of the distressed vessel.

The three men were all resourceful and used to the sea so they immediately set about loading Captain Armour's sailboat, the *Almeada*, with ropes and other paraphernalia necessary to rescue operations. Before daylight they sailed down to the inlet and landed on the south side. Captain Armour carried a lantern shielded by his coat. They dragged the ropes and other tools down the beach.

At daybreak they could see the steamer lying broadside with waves breaking over and around her. People were huddled amidship. The three men on the shore were the only white men along this desolate shore for a hundred miles. The gleam of the Captain's lantern must have been like an answer to a prayer.

When daylight came signs from the ship indicated that a buoy was being sent ashore. Even with a shore breeze blowing it came in with tantalizing slowness after it was lowered from the stern of the *Victor*.

For nearly two hours the men attempted to capture it, wading into the surf almost up to their armpits. They had planted a big timber from the beach in the sand. It took the combined strength of the three men to haul the heavy cable attached to the buoy up the beach and make it fast to the buried timber. Then the men on the steamer took up the slack and they were ready to launch the first boat. This was in charge of the first officer and carried the passengers and the stewardess. This boat was pulled to land

without any mishap. The second one also came in safely but the last one was capsized by an extra big sea. Those on shore managed to pull the half drowned men up on the beach.

Mrs. Libby, her 7 year old daughter and a Jewish merchant from New York were the only passengers. Mrs. Libby was on her way to New Orleans to join her husband who was captain of a barque loading in New Orleans preparing to sail for Bordeaux, France. She hoped to accompany him on the voyage.

They were told that when the shaft first broke they anchored the steamer but the torrents of water rushed in so fast, they feared the steamer would sink, so slipped the cable to let the ship drift toward the beach. Mrs. Libby said no one could imagine what a relief it was to them to see the lantern moving along the shore.

There were sheep and pigs on board but they all drowned, washing about in the surf. There were three fine dogs who swam to shore safely and were adopted by the lighthouse families. The two small boys on lighthouse hill were Henry Carlin 4 and Charlie Pierce 8. The Pierce dog was named "Wreck", the Armour's dog, "Vic" and Carlin's was "Surf". Poor Wreck never forgot that storm and sought refuge under the bed whenever the northeasters blew.

The captain and crew made tents of the sails and camped on the beach. The Libbys and the stewardess were taken aboard the *Almeada* to be cared for at the lighthouse.

This proved to be an exciting day of days for the lighthouse families for Charlie Pierce came running up from the dock to announce the arrival of seven canoe loads of Seminoles. These Indians always stopped in to visit Captain Armour on their rare visits from far south. Mrs. Armour managed to somehow convey to them, the story of the shipwreck.

One by one as if they did not trust the tower with their combined weight, they climbed up and looked down past the inlet where the steamer lay. Then to the great relief of the three ladies the Indians embarked in their canoes and paddled down to the inlet.

At 10 P. M. that night the *Victor* began to break up. The valuable cargo was given to the sea. The beaches were strewn with merchandise of all sorts. Packing cases and boxes surged into the inlet with the incoming tide and floated around in the river. H. D. Pierce was standing beside an Indian on the lighthouse dock when a particularly interesting case appeared. The Indian moved toward it but Pierce had read the markings and knew what was inside. "That's mine", he cried. That is how Mrs. Pierce came by the Wheeler and Wilson sewing machine that did a lifetime of stitching for her family. Indeed salvage from the *Victor* provided many much needed items for this family had lost all their possessions in a fire on Indian river a short time before they came to Jupiter. Three fifty yard bolts of black silk came ashore twisted and full of sand to be sure, but usable, and a case of fifty men's suits and bolts of bleached and of unbleached muslin which must have been useful for sheets, shirts and any number of garments.

On October 24th the steamer *General Meade* upon signals from the lighthouse stopped and took the passengers and crew of the *Victor* from the beach and the next day transhipped the crew to the steamer *City of Austin* bound for New York. The *General Meade* proceeded with the passengers to New Orleans.¹

Down on the beach near the shipwreck were encamped the seven canoe loads of Indians. Among the debris coming ashore was a case of Plantation Bitters. Other eatables were plentiful and a feast was in progress with joyous whoops heard all the way to the lighthouse.

According to Mrs. Voss the Seminoles stayed on the beach for several days salvaging food and merchandise that came ashore, which must have been as great a bonanza to them as to the lighthouse families.

When we learned the *Victor* was a Mallory ship one of our friends suggested we write to the Marine Museum at Mystic Connecticut. This led to an extremely interesting correspondence with Mr. James Kleinschmidt assistant to the Curator of the Mystic Seaport Museum of the Marine Historical Association Inc. He gave us information about the *Victor* from the personal diary of Mr. Charles Mallory. Most exciting of all, he was able

¹ This information comes from the personal diary of Mr. Charles Mallory—Marine Historical Assn., Inc. The *City of Austin* was lost in 1881 at the Fernandina Bar.

to provide us with a picture of the *Victor*. By now our interest in the old steamer was becoming intense and each new development fascinated us anew.

Mr. Kleinschmidt told us the *Victor* was built at the Mallory shipyard, Mystic Conn. in 1863 and her sole owner was Mr. Charles Mallory. Her first master was Capt. Elihu Spicer, Jr. of Mystic. In 1865 Capt. Gurdon Gates became her master and was with her when she came ashore at Jupiter. Her description tallies with that given us by National Archives except for a few more details such as, Iron screw steamer, two masts, brig-rigged. He says "the stern tube was damaged by the thrashing shaft and great volumes of water entered the vessel."

"The *Victor* was a total loss and although insured for \$50,000 her actual value amounted to about twice that sum. Mr. Mallory stated that his personal loss amounted to at least \$12,000, the balance being carried by the company. Ship owning could be a discouraging business in those days."

There seems to be no record of the part played by the Jupiter lighthouse men in the rescue of the passengers and crew of the *Victor*. Mr. Mallory says "Capt. Gates and eight men landed at 11 A. M. The passengers were landed soon after. During the afternoon wind and sea increased and by 10 P. M. the *Victor* began to break up."

Mr. Kleinschmidt was much interested in the Florida report of the shipwreck of this Mallory vessel, many of which had been sunk in the early coastwise service.

Captain Armour continued at the Jupiter lighthouse for forty years. Mr. Pierce moved in 1873 to Hypoluxo. Charles Carlin was in charge of the Jupiter Life Saving Station from 1886 to 1896 located only a short distance from the resting place of the *Victor*.

The story might well have ended here but strangely at this point in May of 1957 we were approached by two young men, Harry Akers and Herb Michaud. They had been scouting the coastline in a small plane and saw through the clear green water the bones of the *Victor* swept clear of a deep blanket of sand by an unusual current. They wanted to salvage the metal from the engines of the steamer and asked permission to keep their barge and equipment at our dock. This was something we could not resist. The

day soon came when the *Victor* like a great shaggy dog we have petted only to have it follow us home—was piled piecemeal beside our dock. By that time not only ourselves but our children and grandchildren were obsessed by the *Victor* and we eagerly awaited the first diving expedition to the wreck of the old steamer.

The two young divers set forth before day on a May morning. The outgoing tide helped the twin outboards on the aluminum skiff to move the barge out of the inlet to the gentle sea. Presently they were anchored over the *Victor*. All day they dove and hoisted. When Zeke, our oldest grandson, ran in at sundown shouting that they were coming in the inlet with their first load, the whole family assembled on the dock to gaze at the great pile of fascinating debris piled on the scow. Each sea grown relic was eagerly inspected. With a feeling of sadness, we looked at the piece of unworn brass Harry held up as he said, "She was a young ship."

The divers found part of the wooden stern still in place and also the great shaft that, breaking, had brought the *Victor* to her grave on this shore. The iron blades of the propellor were also embedded in the sand and the dynamite used to break away the rust and coral formation, stirred up intriguing odds and ends.

Our none too gentle hint for souvenirs was not forgotten. We were presented with a heavy white china plate with a serving of six nice oysters growing right on it. The plate was made in England with the stamped address of J. M. Shaw, Chatham and Duane St. N. Y. Then we were handed what appeared to be a lump of rust and shells, but proved to be a clock. The face fell off in my hands and wheels and works could be seen in the growth. Next was a copper plate from the steam pump, green with verdigris and frail as lace with the name "A. S. Cameron" and a patent date of 1866 still discernable.

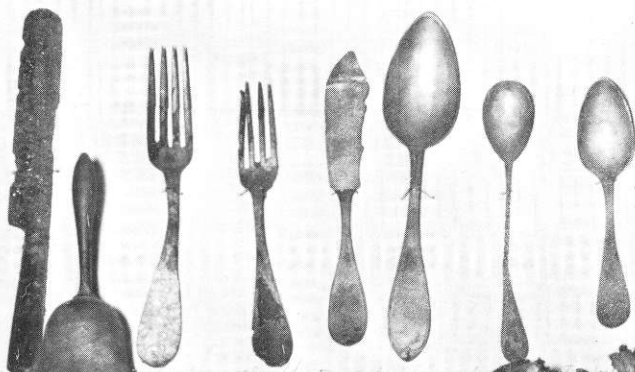
Photo by Shirley Floyd

Salvaged from the Wreck of the *Victor*

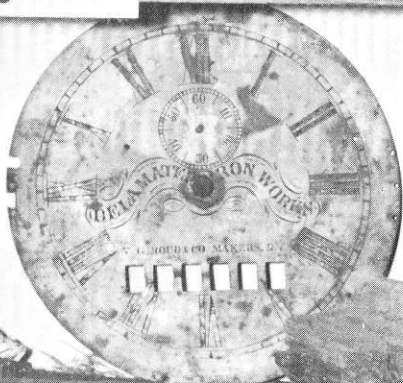
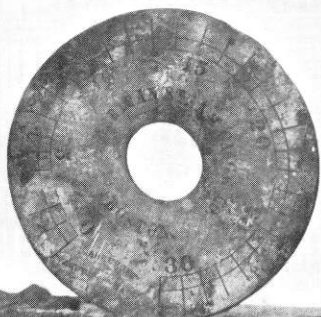
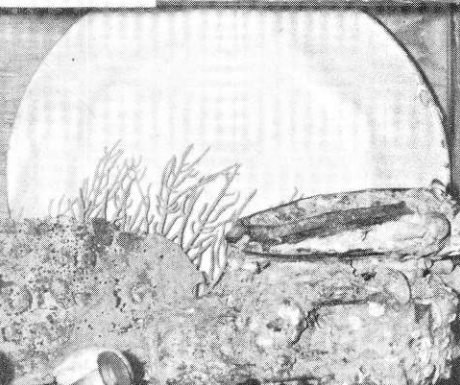
Top shelf: hand bell, silverware and baggage tag

Middle shelf: china plates, clock, door knobs, plate from steam pump

Bottom shelf: brass vacuum gauge, clock face, and hames



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One day, the men came in with great lumps of coal on the barge. Pieces of metal stuck out at every angle from the coal and proved to be some of the ship's table silver so well buried that it had hardly become corroded by the salt water. There was a box of steel knives and another of three dozen axe heads all rusted solidly together. The contents of a box of several dozen curved wooden things fitted with iron rings had us all puzzled until someone identified them as hames for horses harness. Several little handbells when soaked free of shell growth and the clappers repaired, still rang merrily for waiters who were long gone.

On another trip down, the divers found a shotgun. As they lifted it the rusted barrels fell away leaving only the worn and wormeaten stock. The large brass face of another clock, doorknobs, hinges and even buttons were added to our array of relics.

We continued to hope something would be found with the name of the vessel on it. One day Harry came up with an impish grin and handed us a small brass tag in the form of a shield with the words *Steamer Victor* and the number 26 below engraved in the metal. Of the several picked up, one still had a bit of leather in the slot. They were evidently baggage tags with the numbers of the staterooms still resting in the debris of the luggage.

One of these baggage tags was sent to the Marine Museum in Mystic, Connecticut where the *Victor* was built.

The scrap metal from the *Victor* had long since been hauled away and sand drifted again over the remains of the old shipwreck. We thought the story ended, believing that no tribal records existed among the Seminoles. We were wrong for these stories of the past are graven upon the memories of the elders of the tribe. Billy Bowlegs III recalled hearing of the 1872 shipwreck although he was not one of those who paddled up to the lighthouse dock that October day. This is his version of the shipwreck as told to his friend, Mr. Albert DeVane.

The seven canoe loads of Seminoles were a band living in that territory from there to Ft. Lauderdale. Billy said four clans or families were at the wreckage and got quite some articles strewn along the beach.

Old Tom Jumper's family, he was Otter clan, his wife Wildcat. He had quite a family, one daughter, Annie, who married Dr. Tommy, and who died

at Big Cypress a few years ago, had eight children. One of them is Rev. Sam Tommy of the Brighton Reservation. Another family there was Indian Henry Clay and his family, his wife Bird clan. Their descendants at Dania and Big Cypress were the Osceola boys.

Another was the Wind clan who were from the sister of Billy Cornpatch, Billy Fewell (Billy Bowlegs III's father). There were probably some from Bear clan now represented by Josie Billy's present wife and Bobby Jim, her brother, at Brighton Reservation.

I asked Billy what all they got from the wreck, "Cloth and clothing, barrels of flour, kegs of rum, brown sugar in barrels, different articles in trunks and suitcases and boxes, also cured and salt bacon that floated and washed ashore."

He had heard the story many times—Mr. DeVane estimated the seven canoes held twenty-five or thirty Indians including the children.

With this last piece in place the story of the wreck of the *Victor* closes. Neither the old bones of the ship, nor the snapper and grouper seeking its shady recesses are assured of much peace. It is close enough to attract young skin divers who almost daily visit this most accessible shipwreck. One, getting a glimpse of part of the great shaft which still lies on the bottom, excitedly imagined he had discovered a cannon.

Old ships seem to assume a personality of their own and judging from the way their history comes to light when researched, we feel they like to be remembered.