

Following is the gripping & dramatic story of a 19th century tragedy, one of the greatest sea disasters in the history of the North Carolina coast, as told by Walter Howard, Ocracoke native, in 1952.

The story is related in two parts. Click on link at bottom of page to go to Part II.

THE WRECK OF THE "STEAMBOAT HOME," October 9, 1837

by Walter Howard

Part One

When I was a small boy, I used to sit at night and listen to the older people tell of the shipwrecks along the coast of North Carolina, especially around Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Island where I was born. "God help the sailors on a night like this!" was, and is to this day, a household saying in our section of the country.

Old Arcadia Williams, who has been dead these many years, is responsible for the tale I'm about to tell. We will call her "Kade" as that was her nickname. Kade "slept out." What I mean by that is she didn't sleep at home by herself, but always slept at some neighbor's house. Kade's people had been dead for years and she was all alone and afraid to sleep at home for fear, as she said, of being "taken with the miseries" and dying without anyone knowing about it.

Kade lived in an old house framed entirely from the beams of old shipwrecks. The rafters and sills still contained the bopper bolts and wooden pegs used in the original construction of some unfortunate derelict of the seas. The stairs were fashioned from a companionway which had been salvaged from a square rigger. The clock over the fireplace had been designed for some "Queen of the Seas". There were wooden windows (as little glass was used in those days) and a wooden chimney which was always a source of wonder to me. I could never understand why it never caught on fire with so many sparks flying up its sooty exit, but it never did. Kade still did her cooking in the fireplace. The boys wanted to take up a collection to buy her a stove but she would have none of it. Her excuse was that old Ben Franklin was an infidel and that she would have none of his doings or inventions in her house, that the fireplace had been good enough for her folks and it would have to be good enough for her.

Kade could "cuss like a sailor" and woe be unto anyone who "ruffled" her feathers the wrong way, or should by any chance, be the recipient of her caustic, venomous tongue

lashing. She is still remembered today for her biting wit and vitriolic sarcasm. Aside from those human weaknesses she was a good soul and didn't have an enemy in the world. As a story teller her equal has never been found, by this writer at least.

It was my good fortune that Kade stayed at our house for five consecutive years. Although she could not read or tell the time by the clock, her arrival and departure didn't vary thirty seconds. She also had the misfortune of being a cripple. She was a short, squat woman with a friendly, round face which boasted of countless fine wrinkles. She parted her hair in the center and drew it into a tight knot terminating in the nape of her neck where she fastened it with two wire nails whose protruding heads gave the appearance that a carpenter had been trying to nail her head fast to her body without any marked success.

In the Days of Red Flannels

She wore a suit of red flannel underwear, seven or eight underskirts and leg-of-mutton shirt waist buttoned down the front, a slat bonnet of a dark grayish material and a black dress whose hem always touched the ground. A cane made from a broom handle served the same purpose as a centerboard and at the same time accelerated locomotion.

A deep pocket was made on the inside of the outer dress for a snuff box which was a half-pound size baking powder can. Last but not least she wore a small checked apron with an additional pocket for her toothbrush. Not the kind of brush we use for scrubbing our teeth, as that art of hygiene and personal cleanliness was wholly unknown to her as it was to the rest of the Islanders. Kade's toothbrush was a small branch or twig from the black gum tree about ten or twelve inches long (varying, of course, in length at the user's discretion) of which the larger end was chewed for an indefinite period of time until a mop had been formed in the shape of a whisk broom. This was then opened in the manner of a shaving brush and dipped into the snuff box until the proper amount of snuff had accumulated with the aid of saliva. Then the so-called toothbrush would be inserted into the mouth, and "seated" in the jaw forming a lump about the size of a goose egg, and giving the alarming appearance to the casual observer that she had concealed an inflated balloon in her cheek, or was suffering from a large wen which had formed spontaneously on that side of her face. That filthy snuff dipping habit is still practiced today in this section of the island, although only by a few of the older people.

We were not allowed to speak during the time that this snuff dipping marathon was in progress, for fear we might upset the equilibrium of this pastime. Sometimes my grandmother would begin her dipping just about the time Kade had finished hers, thereby prolonging the suspense out of pure cussedness. Finally the snuff dipping came to an end

and Kade settled back in her chair and commenced the following narrative.

A Vivid Dream of Death

"It was in the fall of the year," she began, drawing the big cuspidor a little closer so as to get a better range for her spitting. "It was in October, a heavy Northeaster had been blowing for two days and getting worse by the hour. It never blew any harder nor rained any more since Noah's Ark. It blew that big oak down, Clarissa," she said, turning to my grandmother, "that stood to the eastward of our smokehouse, and those two red cedars that stood between our house and old Kit Neal's place. Young'uns, I thought every gust of wind would be the last, as that old house of ours wasn't any too strong. It kept up for eight solid hours. Along about two o'clock that night Father Jack who had lain down upstairs, had a nightmare. Young'uns, he almost scared all hands of us to death. Brother Wid [short for Dinwiddie] pulled him out of bed and sister Beck [short for Rebecca] threw a pitcher of water in his face. During all this time, mind you, the wind and rain was roaring so loud we could hardly hear each other talk. Finally we brought him out of his fit and he told us his dream. He said he had dreamed of going down to the sea and beholding a terrible disaster with hundreds of people washed upon the sand and that he had picked up an infant only to discover it was drowned. As he stood there on the beach holding the child in his arms, the sea had turned itself into a horrible monster and was reaching out with clutching hands trying to grasp him and pull him in with the rest of the drowned.

"While we were listening to this story," continued Kade, "literally hair on end and mouth agape, there came a knocking at the door, and when brother Wid opened the door there stood as fine a figure of a drowned man as ever I laid eyes on. Before anyone had a chance to speak to him, he turned loose the door knob and pitched head foremost onto the floor, landing about two feet from where I was sitting on a stool in the corner of the fireplace. The men folk managed to get him over by the fire and thaw him out. It was fully a half hour before he was able to speak. He told us that he had just washed ashore from a steamer that had struck the beach about five miles away and he believed everybody aboard was drowned. Upon reaching the beach, he had seen a dim light in the distance and had walked toward it until reaching the woods where he lost sight of it. He had groped around in the dark until he spied the light in our window. He said the steamer had sprung a leak after rounding Cape Hatteras and the captain had run her ashore in a futile effort to save the passengers and crew. Her name was the 'Steamboat Home' bound from New York to Charleston with about 130 passengers aboard.

"After his clothes had dried and we had given him some hot coffee and a bite to eat, he told us the whole story. He introduced himself as Mr. Hussy and while we drew our chairs up

close to him he told us his story.

The Voyage Begins

"We left New York Saturday," said Mr. Hussy. "The weather was pleasant and all on board appeared to enjoy in anticipation a delightful and prosperous passage. On leaving the wharf, cheerfulness appeared to fill the hearts and enliven the countenances of our floating community. Already conjectures had been hazarded as to the time of our arrival at the destined port and high hopes were entertained of an expeditious and pleasant voyage. Before six o'clock a check to these delusive expectations was occasioned by the boat being run aground on the Roamer Reef Shoal near Sandy Hook [New Jersey]. It being ebb tide, it was found impossible to get off before the next flood; consequently the fires were allowed to burn out and the boat remained until the flood tide took her off, which was between ten and eleven o'clock at night, making the time of detention about four hours. As the weather was perfectly calm, it cannot reasonably be supposed that the boat could have received any material injury from this accident, for during the time that it remained aground it had no other motion than an occasional roll on the keel from side to side. The night continued pleasant.

"The next morning (Sunday) a moderate breeze prevailed from the northeast. The sails were spread before the wind, and the speed of the boat, already rapid, was much accelerated. All went on pleasantly till about noon when the wind had increased and the sea became rough. At sunset the wind blew heavily and continued to increase during the night. At daylight on Monday, it had become a gale.

"During the night much complaint was made that the water came into the berths, and before the usual time of rising, some of the passengers had abandoned them on that account.

"The sea raged frightfully from the violence of the gale, causing a general anxiety among the passengers. But still they appeared to rely on the skill and judgment of the captain and officers supposing that every exertion would be used on their part for the preservation of so many valuable lives entrusted to their care. Early on Monday land was discovered, nearly ahead, which, by many, was supposed to be False Cape on the Northern tip of Hatteras."

Ship Springs Leak

"Soon after this discovery, the course of the boat was changed from southerly to southeasterly, which was the general course through the day, though with some occasional

change. The condition of the boat now was truly alarming-it bent and twisted when struck by the wave as if the next one would rend it asunder, the panels of the ceiling were falling from their places and the hull, as if united by hinges, was bending against the feet of the braces. Throughout the day the rolling and pitching were so great that no cooking could be done on board.

"As I have already stated, the boat was, during the day, on a southeasterly course and consequently in what is called the trough of the sea, as the wind was from the northeast. Late in the afternoon the boat was reported to be in 23 fathoms of water when the course was changed to a southwesterly. Soon after this it was observed that the course was again changed to northwesterly, when the awful truth burst upon us, that the boat must be filling, for we could imagine no other cause for this sudden change. This was but a momentary suspense, for within a few minutes all the passengers were called on to bail in order to prevent the boat from sinking.

"Immediately all were employed, but with little effect, for notwithstanding the greatest exertions on the part of the passengers, including even many of the ladies, the water was rapidly increasing, and gave the most conclusive evidence that unless we reached the shore within a few hours, the boat must sink at sea, and probably not a soul left to communicate the heart-rending intelligence to bereaved and disconsolate friends.

"Soon after the boat was headed towards the land, the water had increased so much so as to reach the fire under the boilers and it was soon extinguished. Gloomy indeed was the prospect before us, with about 130 person in a sinking boat far out at sea on a dark and tempestuous night, with no other dependence for reaching the shore than a few small and tattered sails; our condition might be considered tragic. But with all these disheartening circumstances, hope, delusive hope, still supported us."

Women Were Lashed to the Boats

"Although it was evident that we must soon sink, and our progress toward the land was slow, still we cherished the expectation that the boat would finally be run ashore and thus most of us be delivered from a watery grave.

"Early in the afternoon the ladies had been provided with strips of blanket that they might be lashed to such parts of the boat as could afford the greatest probability of safety.

"In this condition and with these expectations, we gradually, but with a motion nearly imperceptible, approached what to many of us was an untried and almost an unknown

shore. At about eleven o'clock those that had been employed in bailing were compelled to leave the cabin as the boat had sunk until the deck was nearly level with the waters and it appeared too probable that all would soon be swallowed up by the foaming waves. The heaving of the lead indicated an approach to shore.

"Soon was the cheering intelligence of land — land announced by those on the lookout. This, for a moment, aroused the sinking energies of all when a general bustle ensued, in the hasty, but trifling preparations that could be made for safety as soon as the boat should strike. But what were the feelings of an anxious multitude, when instead of land, a range of angry breakers were visible just ahead, and land, if it could be seen at all, was but half perceptible in the distance far beyond."

No One Would Listen to Reason

"As every particular is a matter of interest, it may not be improper to state that one individual urged the propriety of lowering the small boats and putting the ladies and children into them for safety with suitable persons to manage them before we struck the breakers. By this arrangement, had it been effected, it is believed that the boats might have ridden out the gale during the night and have been rescued in the morning by passing vessels and thus all, or nearly all, have been saved. But few supported this proposition and it could not be done without the prompt interference of those who had authority to command and who must be obeyed.

"Immediately before we struck, one or two passengers, aided by some of the seamen, attempted to seek safety in one of the boats at the quarter deck when a breaker struck it, swept it from the davits and carried with it a seaman who was instantly lost.

"A similar attempt was made to launch the long-boat from the upper deck by the chief mate, Mr. Matthews, and others. It was filled with several passengers and some of the crew but as we were already within the verge of the breakers, this boat shared the fate of the other, and all on board, about ten in number, perished.

"Now commenced the most heart-rending scene of all. Wives clinging to husbands, children to parents and women who were without protectors seeking aid from the arm of a stranger, all awaiting the results of the next moment, which might bring with it either life or death. Though an intense feeling of anxiety must, at this time, have filled every breast, yet not a shriek was heard nor was there any extraordinary exclamation of excitement or alarm."