

"Son, why don't you come along with me," Homer called out. Lawton was eager to join his father on beach patrol. It was exciting to be allowed to accompany a U.S. Coast Guard surfman, and this would be a great adventure. It was August 22, 1925 and Lawton was fourteen years old.

Together father and son set out toward the bald beach, leading Homer's spirited stallion, "Old Bill." Just a quarter mile from their village home the bald beach spread out before them. Wide flats, devoid of vegetation, extended for several miles toward First Hammock Hills, a large dune, prominent because of its covering of trees and bushes. Second Hammock Hills lay beyond that, and barely visible farther north was the first of several small maritime forests, more dunes, and, hidden amongst the thickets of yaupon and myrtle bushes, narrow tidal creeks.

The flats, dubbed the "Plains" by Ocracokers, were littered with seaweed, seashells, starfish, and horseshoe crabs. Terns circled overhead, diving at the interlopers in an attempt to keep their attention from exposed "nests" (really just shallow depressions in the sand) with two or three speckled eggs waiting to hatch.

Homer Howard, Sr.:



But Homer and Lawton were focused on the beach. Turning east, they trudged through the soft sand, shielding their eyes from the sun as best they could. Once they arrived at the edge of the sea, walking became much easier. The sand there was hard and flat. Homer's assignment was to walk along the surf, always with an eye toward the open sea. Schooners and steamers heading south regularly hugged the coast along the lower Outer Banks of North Carolina, trying to avoid the strong northward current of the Gulf Stream. Ships sailing north also had to contend with currents, strong winds, and treacherous shoals. All too often violent storms rose up with little or no warning. Captains and sailors frequently met with disaster as their vessels, blown off course, ploughed into the angry outer breakers of Ocracoke Island. It was the job of the Coast Guard life savers to patrol the beach and render assistance when tragedy struck.

Early in the afternoon of August 22 ship traffic along the Atlantic Ocean was light. Lawton

even convinced his father to stop for a few minutes while he jumped into the warm water. Large waves and a powerful undertow suggested that a storm somewhere out to sea was making itself felt on Ocracoke. Waves periodically rolled far up onto the beach, forcing Homer and Old Bill to retreat. But Lawton was a strong swimmer. He emerged from the water only when his father beckoned him...and then reluctantly.

Walking along the beach, Homer pulled out his fiddle. He would play a tune ("Hand Me Down My Walking Cane," "Bully of the Town," or maybe "Boil Them Cabbages Down"), all the while keeping his eye on ships traveling offshore. Eventually fast-paced square dance tunes yielded to more melancholy numbers. "The Letter Edged in Black." "Put My Little Shoes Away," and "The Little Rosewood Casket" were soothingly popular at a time of high infant mortality. Homer and his wife Aliph had lost more than a half dozen babies to whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, and other childhood diseases. These songs reminded Homer that he was not alone. They helped protect him from debilitating sorrow.

Late in the afternoon, his fiddle back in his saddlebag, and his tour of duty coming to an end, Homer spied a four-masted schooner a considerable distance off shore and sailing south. As he and his son watched, the impressive sailing ship tacked and turned back toward the north. "What is that all about?" Homer wondered to himself.

Then, without warning the schooner turned around and headed south. As Homer and Lawton watched, the boat surprised them again when it turned northward once more.

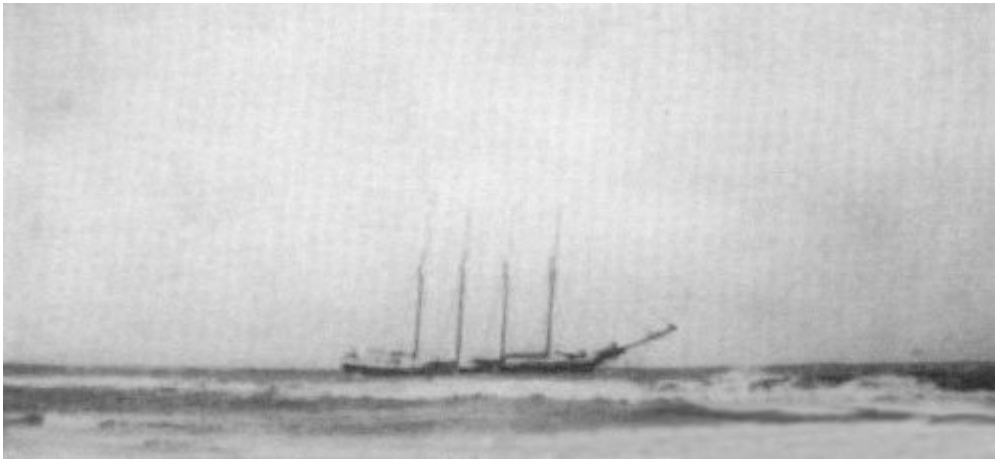
"Mark my words, son," Homer finally said, looking at Lawton. "The captain of that vessel is just waiting for nightfall. He's planning to run her aground, probably for the insurance money."

And then it was time to return to the station. Another surfman was taking over the patrol.

Early in the morning of August 23, 1925 Homer was awakened from his bunk at the station. The announcement, "Ship Ashore!" rang out loud and clear.

The Coast Guard rushed to the rescue. The four-masted schooner, *Victoria S*, was hard aground in the breakers directly across the Plains from Ocracoke village. Using the beach apparatus and breeches buoy the life savers quickly and efficiently pulled all seven sailors to safety on shore. Shortly thereafter the *Victoria S* broke apart in the pounding surf. Her cargo of rough cut pine lumber spilled out of the wreck and tumbled into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Wreck of the Victoria S:



For days large quantities of lumber washed up along several miles of beach. The owners of the cargo were contacted and they immediately dispatched an agent to Ocracoke to coordinate salvage operations.

The agent quickly assessed the situation. There were only two gasoline powered vehicles on Ocracoke Island in 1925. Captain Bill Gaskill, who owned the Pamlico Inn on the sound shore, had a flat bed truck. Mr. Albert Styron, who operated a general store near the lighthouse, also owned a truck. Both men were hired to drive out to the beach and collect as much of the lumber as possible. A steamer was requisitioned, and brought down Pamlico Sound. It tied up to a dock on the northwest shore of Ocracoke village.

For several days Captain Bill and Mr. Albert drove back and forth, from the beach to the sound, and back again, carrying load after load of lumber. At that time the main thoroughfare through Ocracoke village was a one lane, soft sand road that included what today is known as Howard Street.

In front of Stacy and Elizabeth Howard's home the road made a sharp bend, and there the loose sand was especially deep. To negotiate the curve without getting stuck, the drivers of the model T trucks, equipped with narrow rubber tires, needed to accelerate as they approached, and maintain their speed as they rounded the blind bend.

Captain Bill had just loaded his truck at the beach. Piled with lumber, his vehicle was traveling west. Mr. Albert had just unloaded his truck at the steamer, and was returning to the beach, heading east. Both drivers approached the curve in front of Stacy and Elizabeth's house at the same time. Both gunned their engines and rounded the bend simultaneously.

And that's how it happened that Ocracoke experienced its first automobile accident, in early September of 1925, a head on collision, with only two vehicles on the island!