



FLOTSAM FROM an ill-fated steamer, gathered by beachcombers.

BY JOHN BELL

Above doors are referred to in Edward Rowe Snow's letter on previous page.

REMINISCENT OF '98

Tragic foundering of the tanker Keo last week, in a storm undetected 12 hours earlier, and the sinking of a 41-foot sloop from which seven persons were rescued, plus this wild night (the ocean was seething white as far as the outer bar) brought the Portland Gale to mind again.

Steamer Portland had left Boston for her namesake city in Maine despite worsening weather; her master, Capt. H. H. Blanchard had told a fellow captain, "It looks like a snowstorm." From 2 am Sunday morning, Nov. 27, 1898, until late that day, "a hurricane prevailed."

At dawn Sunday morning, out at Race Point Life Saving station, Capt. Samuel O. Fisher heard a steamer blow three short and one long blast of her whistle. He and his crew patrolled the beach looking for the vessel but saw nothing.

At 7 pm that night, surfman Johnson picked up a life belt marked Portland. In the following days, Portland wreckage and bodies

washed ashore from Race Point to Nauset. Hull and ironwork of the steamer have never been definitely located although she is supposed to have foundered a few miles offshore.

NEWSPAPERS ERR

To this day everyone who speaks of this tragedy also speaks of "175 lives lost" on the Portland. How this fable got started is interesting, too.

John N. Swift, editor of the original Provincetown Beacon at least until 1890 (Cora M. Fuller was editor later), wrote an eyewitness account of the gale for the Advocate's editor Howard F. Hopkins. His article is headlined, "175 LIVES LOST. Stmr. Portland Founders off Provincetown."

At the end he writes, "The city papers make the Portland victims number, say, 150 . . ." He added local victims to this number.

But his account ends Tuesday, the same day that "Three tugs with 25 or 30 reporters arrived from Boston . . ." Until then the ocean had been too rough. Meanwhile, telegraph wires were still down between Provincetown and Boston.

That same Tuesday the Boston Globe's headline read; "SEARCH BEGUN. Two Cutters Dispatched to Find the Portland."

In a subhead: "Has 25 to 30 Passengers, 14 Officers. Two Stewardsesses and Crew of 15 Men, and is valued at \$250,000 — No Trace of Her Since She Steamed Out of Boston Harbor Saturday Night, but

Officials of the Line Still Entertain Hope of Her Safety." At most, 61 people had been aboard.

So Swift, of whom his father wrote proudly in 1897 ("Cape Cod" p. 353 ff.), "Mr. Swift's accounts of marine incidents and shipwrecks . . . are very full and accurate," followed today's journalistic motto: "When in doubt, write it worse."

And if anyone, including me, thinks this story will erase that "175 LIVES LOST" from memories, we've got another think coming.

Swifts detailed account of what happened in Provincetown Harbor, however, is accurate. At least, it corresponds neatly with other eyewitness stories, though I suspect he ghosted them.

More than half the fleet had dragged anchor or broken from moorings and piled up on the west end flats. Six men on two boats had frozen in the rigging after their craft foundered. Three more drowned when the Boston schooner Butler drove across Peaked Hill Bars without touching bottom and struck high on shore. Marine despatches later said 225 vessels had sunk between Hatteras and Maine.

From Provincetown

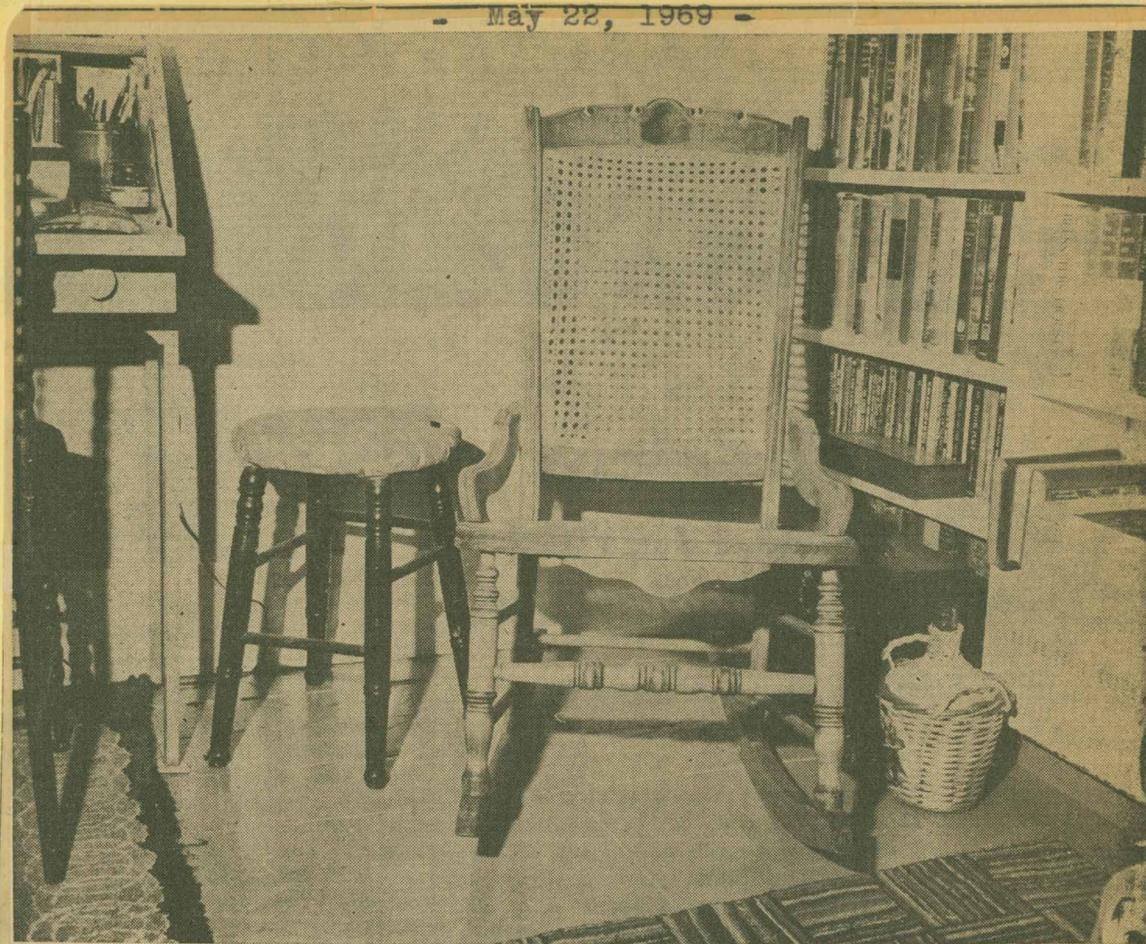
Advocate -

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- November 28, 1968 -

FRIDAY WILL BE THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY of the sinking of the steamer Portland in the hurricane gale of November 29, 1898. Associated relatives and descendants of the victims drop flowers on that day in the sea off Cape Cod Light in North Truro, to the memory of the more than 100 men, women and children lost in that memorable storm.

- May 22, 1969 -



. . . Plucked from the surf when the remains of the steamer Portland floated ashore after "The November Gale" of 1898, this small rocker and the stool were brought back by Capt. Manuel Enos. His granddaughter, Mrs. Manuel Lewis of 1 Conway Street uses them today. The chair came ashore covered in red velour ruined by salt water. Stripped, the chair showed it had once been caned, so Manny refinished and reanod it. There is no telling how many other Portland items are still in use by thrifty Provincetowners.