

PORTLAND DAILY PRESS.

ESTABLISHED JUNE 25, 1862—VOL. 111

PORTLAND, MAINE, THURSDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 7, 1898.

REPRINTED FROM

PRICE THREE CENTS.

W. S. Parker Co.



A Privately Announced OUR FIRE AND SMOKE SALE

Men's and Children's GARMENTS

will continue until our remaining stock is disposed.

BARGAINS Every Department

With our increased force of Salesmen we are now prepared to give all patronage.

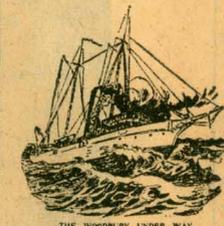
Stores at Freeport & Waterville

STORE OPENS AT 9.30.

W. S. Parker Co., 522, 524, 526 CENTRE ST.

LOSS OF THE PORTLAND.

Graphic Story of the Awful Disaster Off the Shores of Cape Cod.



Told by Press Reporter, First Newspaper Man to Visit Scene.

The Cutter Woodbury's Trip Looking for the Lost Steamer.

THE WOODBURY UNDER WAY.

Center Down! ... LACONIA 100 Clear ... ALASKA BO CLAR

In Pain? ... Dr. Ager's Cherry Pectoral Plaster

The Medical men... The cutter was... The cutter was... The cutter was...

... The cutter was... The cutter was... The cutter was...

... The cutter was... The cutter was... The cutter was...

... The cutter was... The cutter was... The cutter was...

... The cutter was... The cutter was... The cutter was...

Center Down! ... LACONIA 100 Clear ... ALASKA BO CLAR

In Pain? ... Dr. Ager's Cherry Pectoral Plaster

FAIR ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

NECK OF CAPE COD ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

ALASKA BO CLAR ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

ALASKA BO CLAR ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

FAIR ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

NECK OF CAPE COD ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

C. A. Weston & Co., Portland ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

C. A. Weston & Co., Portland ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

FAIR ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

NECK OF CAPE COD ... THE WOODBURY'S TRIP

Telling the tale of New England's worst maritime disaster in graphic headlines is this Page One of the Portland, Maine, Daily Press of December, 1898. The steamer Portland sailed from Boston for Maine with a gay crowd of passengers headed home for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and went down off the Cape with all aboard. Benjamin O. Eldredge, 89, of West Harwich, whose story appears here today, believes he is the last man alive who was on board the cutter for the Life Saving Service that night.

ROYAL BAKING POWDER ... Makes the food more delicious and wholesome

Beach Patrolman Says 'Portland' in Collision

By FRAN BLAKE

The phone's insistence jangled me awake but I was instantly alert as I assured the questioner on the line that I really am the one who writes the Sunday woman's page.

"There's a gentleman here who wishes to speak with you," she said. The phone was transferred and the man said in a voice in which not a quaver was heard, "I've been reading about the steamer Portland in your column. I'll bet I'm the last man living who was patrolling the beach that tragic night. I'm 89 years old."

Arrangements were immediately made for me to go to West Harwich to talk with Benjamin O. Eldredge, the following day. On the appointed morning a friend and I stopped before the small neat house on Joe Lincoln Road. The friend had heard many tales told, and theories advanced by her grandfather and her mother, of the Portland's mysterious disappearance in the freak November gale of 1898.

"Uncle Ben" as everyone calls this genial gentleman had a fascinated audience and you may well believe he made use of this. "You'll want to know, no doubt, many of the facts about my early life and upbringing. So I'll start way back and lead up to the Portland."

He was launched and the tale that was to cover the span from 1878 to 1966 began. He told that he was born in Chatham and lived there until his wife died in 1955.

In those early days bicycles were not the means of a boy's locomotion. "No it was dories. I think I could row before I could walk. My first official trip I almost couldn't take. Captain Kendrick of the Emulator asked me to go with him to New Haven after seed oysters.

"I was just 14 so I rushed home to ask my mother who emphatically said 'No. I made your father stop going to sea because I knew he'd take you boys all together some day. I have no intention of going through all hands lost at sea experiences.'"

Voyaging Begins

When his father came home for lunch Ben said casually to hide his disappointment "Captain Kendrick asked me to sail to New Haven." To Ben's surprise and ill-concealed delight his dad said "Well why don't you go?" And thus began his seafaring days.

He was a cook on a mackerel seiner, the Leander F. Gould which seined around Menemsha on the Vineyard. This was in 1897 from March to November.

He told of a seven-mile row he and another boy had taken while with the seiner. They rowed across Boston Bay to borrow ice to stretch their ship's dwindling supply packed around their mackerel,

of this freak storm. Then it blew again and for a long time. The sea and the tide came rushing through the hollows. The sand and the shore were such narrow ridges I could have tossed a pebble from the outside to the inside beach.

On this friendly ship they "mugged up" before rowing the seven miles back to their mother ship. Translation: ate!

As he continued his chronicle, Uncle Ben showed an amazing facility for remembering exact dates, names of ships, and their captains.

He retired only last January as a director of the Cape Cod Five Cents Savings Bank after 43 years on the board, and his mind is still as keen as a knife.

The year after Ben's voyaging on the seiner, the Life Saving Service was formed, in 1898, at Old Harbor.

He recalls this important development came about after the Calvin B. Olcott, four-masted schooner struck off Chatham. The ship broke up and all hands were lost before anyone took notice of her plight.

Ben was chosen to become a member of the new service May 1, 1898, the day Dewey took Manila, and soon joined the Life Saving Station crew at Monomoy, as a substitute. It wasn't until 1916 that the stations became part of the Coast Guard.

Ben reached his new station at dark and went out almost immediately on beach patrol.

His four-hour watch began at midnight. It was two hours North and two hours back on the beach. Here he inserted that though patrolling was difficult for a substitute the worst and most dangerous time during his or anyone's patrolling, occurred not in blizzards but from the danger of being blinded by lightning in rain storms.

That first night while he was having his breakfast at four in the morning, the watch came down from the tower to report spotting a little schooner with "its flag at half mast and the Union down." "We took her to Hyannis."

Strange Calm

"On this station we had June and July off, without pay, except when we were on active duty year round during the Spanish-American war. Each man had his cook week except the skipper. Mine was ending Saturday the 26th just before the Portland disappeared.

"I was outside doing a bit of washing and as I looked across the Bay there was a queer blue light over everything. The men were strangely quiet . . . not a joke among them. Even the gulls were hovering around the flats and not screaming. I had the 4 to 8 p.m. watch . . . South patrol and it was pretty good weather though it was blowing a stiff breeze.

"The next day was Sunday. My partner started his patrol at four a.m., but didn't get back until ten in the morning. It blew very, very hard. Then all was very quiet and we knew we were in the eye

of this freak storm. Then it blew again and for a long time. The sea and the tide came rushing through the hollows. The sand and the shore were such narrow ridges I could have tossed a pebble from the outside to the inside beach.

"Monday morning came and I was up in the cupola looking through the spy glass when I spotted something that appeared to be a log. I took along another man and we went in the dory and picked up the body of a woman. She was Mrs. Cordelia Mitchell, who, we learned later had been to spend Thanksgiving with a son in Braintree. All she was wearing were shoes, stocking and gaiters."

From then on the beach was walked and bodies were washed up in the full course tides due to the full moon.

"Sometimes we could see just a hand and dig to expose a fully clothed body. One was a Captain Elbert Williams, fisherman out of Boothbay Harbor. He had clothes on complete to comforter wrapped tightly around his head. One man must have been what we in those days called a 'drummer.' His pockets were filled with lead pencils.

"Another who came washing ashore was a discharged Spanish-American war veteran. In his pants, not in his vest pocket, was his watch and chain. Altogether we found nine bodies—one thrown up in the surf on Dec. 5 had his pockets and his sleeves so full of sand I don't see how he floated. Orleans found the same number and Old Harbor, too with one pair being identified as a bride and groom.

"I'd say that the night of that storm there must have been 100 ships out there and surely some of them went down and were never reported."

The theory of Benjamin Eldredge is that the Portland, side wheeler that she was, was in collision with another unknown ship. He bases this belief on the fact that the nude woman, the man with his watch and chain not properly worn, and the others, must have been taken by surprise.

"It was all quick, of that I am sure. That we found bodies here makes me sure the Portland never struck on Peaked Hill Bars. If she had struck on the other side of Highland Light, debris, bodies and all else would have gone around Provincetown and floated into Barnstable Bay. Because the railroad tracks were down all along the Cape, the news did not reach Boston for a long time.

"I still think Peaked Hills Bar

is not the grave of the ill fated Portland and I still believe it was a collision."

So spoke Uncle Ben the last man living to be out on beach patrol in the gale the night of the unsolved, ill-fated loss of the steamer Portland with only 300 Thanksgiving passengers aboard. Should she have sailed from Boston is another question which will never be answered.

Knowing the idiosyncrasies of genuine Cape Codders we asked Uncle Ben whether he spelled his name with an 'i' or an 'e'.

"It was Eldred when they all came over," he said with a tinge of dry humor. Where do they get that 'i'? Even though my great grandfather's tombstone has an 'e' on it, there's a 'i' on my birth certificate. I just say, if you don't know which, spell it with an 'e' and dot it."



(Photo by John Kerr)

Eldredge of South Harwich, believed to be the last man living who was on beach
when the steamer Portland went down, points out to sea on another bleak, cold day.