

The Wreck of the “Royal Tar”

This story appeared in the magazine *Yankee* in October 1965.

The *Royal Tar* was carrying a circus when it burned in October 1836. The skipper was Captain Thomas Reed.

The *Royal Tar* was built in St. John, New Brunswick, in 1836 and cost \$50,000. She was a sidewheel steamer that ran between St. John and Portland, Maine. She was 160 feet long and 24 feet wide. At the stern (rear), there was a wood-framed tent. The middle was open. Near the bow (front) were two tall smokestacks with a mast between them. She had one square sail and two jibs (triangular sails). The sails were used when the engines didn't work against the tide.

There are many superstitions about the sea. One is that it's unlucky to have birds, snakes and brass bands on a boat. Another is that you shouldn't start a voyage on a Friday. The *Royal Tar* sailed on Friday, October 21, 1836. It carried the brass band, a circus, and a menagerie (collection) of wild animals, bird and reptiles.

There were red and yellow wagons, cages holding cobras and pythons, two big lions, a spotted leopard, a Bengal tiger, and many smaller animals. There were two pelicans, a lot of chattering monkeys, six Arabian horses, two camels, and Mogul the elephant. There were also passengers and a crew of 21, more than 100 people. Many of the passengers were moving from New Brunswick to Portland for the winter.

On Sunday the seas got rough. Captain Reed anchored at Eastport and stayed there until Tuesday. On Tuesday afternoon they started sailing again, even though the sea was choppy. They were heading south toward Fox Island (Vinalhaven) Thoroughfare when the assistant engineer rushed into the pilot house. He told the captain that they had to anchor and fill the boilers. He said the boilers were red hot and smoking. Captain Reed couldn't believe it, but he gave orders to drop the anchor.

There are lots of different stories about what happened, but most people say that the chief engineer had been up all night fixing the boiler. He left his assistant, Mr. Marshall, in charge, but Mr. Marshall didn't notice the water was low in the boilers. When he was told, he just said don't worry.

Almost as soon as the anchor was dropped, someone yelled, “Fire”. When Captain Reed came out of the pilot house, he saw flames and heard the passengers screaming. He ordered the crew to lower the life boats, and then he realized that

three of them had been left behind so that there would be room for the circus wagons and the cages. He told his men to throw the wagons overboard because they would float. Then he saw that the assistant engineer and several of his men had taken one of the boats and were rowing toward Isle au Haut.

Captain Reed took the longboat and picked up some of the people who had jumped overboard. Then he returned to the ship. Captain Reed tried to raise the sail and head to shore, but the sail caught fire and the steamer began to drift out to sea.

All the animals died in their cages. Passengers huddled at the bow (front) and the stern (back), but they couldn't see each other because of the flames in the middle. Some people jumped overboard. One man rolled 500 silver dollars in his stocking, tied it around his waist, and dove over the side. He sank. A young girl with two children pushed the children over the stern. The children held onto a bale of hay and Captain Reed picked them up, but the girl drowned. H. H. Fuller, manager of the circus, stayed on the steamer till his clothes caught fire, then he lowered himself over the side with a piece of rope tied to the tiller chain. Three other passengers, whose ropes had burned, grabbed on to him.

Captain Reed had his men make a raft from floating timbers and wreckage. Just as it came to the side of the steamer, Mogul the elephant jumped, crushing two of the crew. Mogul's body washed ashore a week later on Brimstone Island.

Many of the passengers on the *Royal Tar* were pulled from the water by the crew of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Veto*. It came close to the burning steamer even though it was carrying a load of gunpowder. The *Royal Tar* drifted by Saddle Back Light, and then she went down.

Mason, John. "The Wreck of the Royal Tar." Yankee Oct. 1965: 85, 110-113.
[Edited and rewritten for fourth graders by Ann Dodd-Collins]