

Tragedy in Casco Bay: *Continued* — search & recovery

by Stacy Welner

The joyous occasion that began June 29, 1941 as a day cruise to Monhegan for a clam bake was now considered a tragedy. For the 34 persons aboard from Rumford and Mexico, only 14 bodies (11 women & 2 men) were recovered with little evidence as to how the accident occurred and to where the remaining 20 bodies were located.

The *Don* seemed to have disappeared...not many items were recovered, which left much for speculation as to how the accident happened. The majority of concerned citizens believed that the remaining bodies were possibly trapped in the cabin and thus drowned.

There was hope of a survivor when a bottle was recovered off Orr's Island containing a message. The note read: "Am on island. Hurt. Jack." Officials were suspicious, but the report of a light on a small island sent

A bag of brim with German inscription had been found near Bailey Island. Speculation of a German u-boat sinking the *Don* to prevent being reported or possibly capturing the vessel and taking prisoners began to circle among the community. To most this theory was thought to be far fetched, even though in 1941 German boats were often seen off the Maine coast.

Clothing and wood found off Bailey's Island believed to be from the *Don* were given to Lt. John Edward Marks of the state police. Lt. Marks recovered an oar and awning also thought to be from the *Don*. Also given to him was a long guard handle. The Boy Scouts, marshaled for patrol work by Rev. J. Emerson Herrick, found a pair of trousers on the Bailey shore. Scorched clothing was also found on shore of Bailey Island. On the east shore of Orr's (north of Bailey Island) a piece of wood painted green (similar to *Don*) and an old cheesebox were found.

A pillow was discovered near Pond Island Ledges, between Ragged and Orr's Island. A man and woman's hat were found on Ragged Island near where bodies

were recovered. A mattress, a life preserver found with straps damaged, and charred wood also recovered were examined.

A life preserver, new and unopened was found off Broad Cove Rock, west of Cape Elizabeth, and a short distance away a trawl cask was recovered. Nearby a wooden spout used by fishermen with the bilge pump for pumping water out of the boat.

A woman's hat, part of a boat rail (so charred and burned that it broke in 2 pieces when hauled aboard), a thermos bottle (showed indicated that it was exposed to extensive heat) [rail and thermos found a mile south of Jaquish Island]. Thermos was identified by Mrs. Hutchins and believed to belong to her son Harry Hutchins.

Wooden wreckage picked up off Long Island was also believed to be from the *Don*. A boys green felt hat with the trademark "The Longwood" on the inside was found southeast of Long Island. A boys windbreaker jacket and boys white hat were found on the south shore of Peaks Island and picked up by the State Sea & Shore Fisheries.

The Coast Guard found a sec-

tion of wooden grate (used on the deck of boats) partially burned with the impression that the fire had intense heat for a brief amount of time. This grate was found off Richmond Island.

July 10, 1941 a lobster buoy spindle with the name of the *Don* found on the beach of Christmas Cove in Southport. (11 miles from site of accident).

An effort to determine the cause of the *Don* tragedy, when and where it happened, and how to avert another such accident had cause for an investigation. The community had the belief that the only way to determine the exact facts, was to find the passenger boat or the remaining wreckage.

A Maine State Board of Inquiry was appointed by Governor Sumner Sewall. The purpose of this investigation was to determine the facts relating to the *Don* accident, but to also ascertain

whether by further equipment, devices, or additional regulations, recurrences of accidents of this type may be avoided. This investigation took place on July 7, 1941 and board members consisted of: Paul C. Thurston (Bethel), State Police Chief Henry P. Weaver, Sea & Shore Fisheries Commissioner Arthur R. Greenleaf, and Elroy Johnson (Bailey Island). An investigation also took place by an "A" Marine Investigation Board in the Courtroom of the Federal Building at Portland, Maine, on July 24th and 25th, 1941. This board consisted of: J. Frank Staley, Office of the Attorney General, Washington, DC, Captain Thomas A. Shanley, US Coast Guard, Boston, MA, and Captain Charles M. Lyons, US Supervising Inspector, First District, Boston, MA.

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Tragedy in Casco Bay: Continued — final chapter

by Stacy Welner

On June 29, 1941, the tragedy of the *Don* (Captained by Paul Johnson) with the loss of 34 persons (mostly from Rumford and Mexico) set about changes to passenger boating laws. The Board of Investigations that took place determined the *Don* capsized, due to inherent instability and added weight of the passengers when the vessel rolled in the ground swell which was prevailing. There is the possibility the vessel may have struck a submerged object, such as floating logs or part of a derelict, but not the bottom, as the water in this vicinity is quite deep and no shoals are visible to any great extent on our charts.

The Board recommends to the Secretary of Commerce that adequate means of protection by inspection or examination of all motorboats be afforded for the public that patronize these vessels. Proper education of the owners and operators of all motorboats can prevent loss of life.

The following recommendations were made: 1) All inspected motorboats be inclined to determine their stability; 2) that a small dinghy or rowboat be placed on board or towed astern at all times the vessel is underway; 3) stoves for cooking or heating be prohibited from spaces adjoining or in the same compartment as the main gasoline or diesel engine; 4) limit passengers allowed to be carried; and 5) required lifesaving equipment be examined and marked.

The belief is that the *Don* and its passengers perished shortly after leaving the

West Point store and after being sighted by the Seguin Lightkeeper.

Leon Davis, a fisherman from West Point, witnessed the *Don* leaving the West Point harbor and believes the *Don* disaster occurred somewhere between Bald Head, Small Point, and Ragged Island, from the position of recovered pieces of wreckage. The depth in these areas is anywhere from 15 to 18 fathoms and in at least two places nearly 30 fathoms to the southwest of Ragged Island. The course to Monhegan from West Point would be due south to Bald Head with Gooseberry Island as an obstruction marked by Bald Head Ledge Spindle. He also recalled there being a strong southerly wind for several days with a strong undertow.

Funeral services for those lives lost aboard the *Don* occurred at Bailey Island and in Rumford.

Memorial exercises took place at Chisholm Park in Rumford, Maine on July 6, 1941 by the inhabitants of the towns of Rumford and Mexico with some 3500 to 5000 (records vary) in attendance. The Rumford Community Band played a funeral march as opening the memorial program as civic organizations and religious societies entered the park.

Justice Albert Beliveau opened the ceremony with brief remarks and served as master of ceremonies. Reverend Joseph W. Merchant gave a touching invocation bringing tears to many eyes. Rev. Benjamin Rybokas gave a tribute in Lithuanian and Rev. Arthur Cloutier spoke his tribute in French. Both

used Scriptures for words of consolation.

Congressman James C. Oliver expressed the sympathy of the Maine Congressional Delegations and insured legislative steps would be taken to prevent another catastrophe. Rev. Harley A. Shattuck, a former Methodist pastor, gave an inspiring address and read the victims names.

Governor Sumner Sewall delivered a message of sympathy and consolation to the relatives and friends. A whole community was in mourning. He also promised action by the state to prevent such a tragic repetition. And, Rev. Timothy J. O'Mahony spoke of how so many came to share the sorrow of the bereaved.

Many organizations participated in the public expression of sorrow and sympathy. Miss Nathaline Foster, friend of Helen Decker, sang "Ave Marie" bringing many to tears.

Rev. Phillip J. Bolvin delivered the final benediction. The Rumford Community Band played Taps before closing the program with the "Star Spangled Banner."

Services led by Rev. James E. Herrick also took place at Bailey Island, filling the church to capacity, with

many left standing outdoors. Moving to the wharf, included a prayer and roll call of the dead and the missing. The Sea and Shore Fisheries boat dropped wreaths and flowers onto the waters of Casco Bay as it rounded the buoy off Mark Island Ledge, while the flag was lowered and taps sounded. Estimated attendance exceeded more than 500 who tried to attend the Bailey Island services.

The tragedy of the *Don* affected many people. The fact that the vessel was never found was unsettling. On several occasions over the next 14 years there had been three (documented) items retrieved, but never proven, believed to have come from the *Don*.

Approximately 1/2 mile North of Bold Dick Rock (Off Ragged Island), Elroy Johnson had pulled up a rope smeared with yellow paint soon after the *Don* went down. At the same location, on January 26th, 1949 James Harris was hauling his traps fouled 5 fathoms below surface; when hauled up they were smeared with yellow paint, which was the same color as the *Don's* interior.

August 2, 1963 the bow of the *Don* was brought up by

Bernard Johnson and John Lazarou near Round Rock where they were dragging on a known course. The drag went into deep water ("involving a point of no return") and when hauled up the wreckage of the bow held much debris such as foot gear and binoculars. When the fog cleared, Johnson and Lazarou discovered they were off their planned course and this is the only reason for fastening on the *Don* remains. (These items were never proven to be from the *Don*, soon after retrieving them, they were tossed back overboard.)

The information used for this article has been researched from newspaper clippings, other material, a video, and "The *Don* Disaster" printed by Rumford Falls Times in 1941. A thank you to Linda Dyer Dupre and Cathy Johnson for saving a piece of history. A special thanks to Rumford librarian, Karl Aroma and his wife, for allowing an unscheduled research during closed hours and delaying vacation for me to make copies. Also appreciated were those that wrote and/or phoned with their memories and stories.