

The Phantoms of the Ocean

By JONATHAN COHEN

IT was a clear evening, Ed Bellfountain of Greenport recalls, and he and Capt. James Davis were out 12 miles in Peconic Bay, trap-fishing.

Suddenly they were surprised by lights off Jessups Point, where they thought it was just the buoy lights. But then a fantastic windjammer rounded the point under full sail.

"Impossible!" the captain exclaimed. "The water's too shallow there." But they swear that, for a moment, they saw a big ship sail mysteriously into the night.

The sighting, imagined or real, took place in 1934, and Mr. Bellfountain still talks about it. It is one of many sightings of what might be called U.S.O.'s (unidentified sailing objects) off the Island. In taverns, among groups of men from windbound vessels who collect on shore, at gatherings around the cabin fire and in small craft plying the Sound, there have been stories of phantom ships for centuries.

Traditionally, a purpose is ascribed to most of these phantom ships. They are said to forecast some kind of disaster, such as a storm, the loss of a vessel or a family death. Some are linked to no meaning at all. Some reportedly reappear on the same date on which they met their tragic end. Others, like the Flying Dutchman, are under the age-old curse of never making port; not only do they bring storms, but also these ships bring plague, madness.

They can't be boarded. They are luminous. If you take letters from them you are lost. On their decks, ghosts are seen rolling dice for souls. They make no sound. The figurehead is a skeleton, ghosts swarm over the yards, and so on. The folklore is rich.

In almost every case these are ships whose end was violent because of crime or incompetence. Vessels on which murder has been committed and vessels that have gone down with loss of life are most likely to become phantoms.

Around the time that many Long Island communities were first settled by Puritans, a phantom ship was reported seen across the Sound. The new vessel sailed from New Haven in January 1647, though Captain Lambert felt that she was cranky and he had a foreboding of disaster. She was never seen or heard of again, and this grieved the Puritans, who then prayed for word of their friends.

These prayers were (perhaps) answered in June, six months later. After a storm, she was reported coming dead

into the eye of the wind under full sail an hour before dark. The Rev. Cotton Mather, in his "History of New England," describes it:

"Many were drawn to behold this great work of God; yea, the very children cried out, There's a brave ship! At length, crowding up as far as there is usually water sufficient for such a vessel, and so near some of the spectators, as that they imagined a man might hurl a stone on board her, her main-top seemed to be blown off, but left hanging in the shrouds; then her mizen-top; then all her masting seemed blown away by the board; quickly after the hulk brought unto a careen, she overturned, and so vanished into a smokey cloud, which in some time dissipated, leaving, as everywhere else, a clear air. The amazed onlookers could make out the ship's colors, the principal rigging, and such proportions, as caused not only the generality of persons to say, This was the mold of their ship, and thus was her tragic end."

Then, Longfellow reports in his poem "The Phantom Ship":
*And the pastor of the village
Gave thanks to God in prayer
That to quiet their troubled spirits
He had sent this Ship of Air.*

According to the noted folklorist M. A. Jagendorf, in that same era, when Peter Stuyvesant was Governor of New York, a ship set out from Pelham Bay and was attacked by pirates. They set fire to the vessel and on its deck tied a white stallion to the mast. The pirates then sailed away, but the burning ship followed them to their haven on the Island. And the ship has been sailing on the Sound ever since.

From time to time, this spectacular fire ship is reportedly seen on the Sound—especially from Gardiners Island, Fishers Island, Halletts Cove and other spots in Suffolk County. The ship, though on fire, never fully burns, and the phantom stallion's cries are said to have been heard over the centuries.

The story of Captain Kidd's ship is recorded in the old New York Gazette. Several "honest" men saw it doing battle about 10 in the morning of Feb. 3, 1754, between Gardiners Island and Plum Island. And among the hardy bunker fishermen of the East End there used to be a tradition about this strange phenomenon.

A letter appeared in the newspaper of March 18 of that year, sent to "Messrs. Printers" and datelined Plum Island, Feb. 4, 1754, in which "Eye Witnesses" were ready to attest to the truth of it. According to them, this is what happened:

"It all looked like three ships full-



rigged, with their sails spread, the largest of which had a Pendant at her Main-Top Mast Head; those who saw it were so near them that they could plainly discern the Men upon the Quarter-Deck, as well as their Yards, Tops, Blocks, and Rigging; and in a few minutes they seemed to engage each other; they could see the Smoke of their guns, but hear no Report.

"During their engagement they put about several Times, and the large ship

haul'd up her Courses; the whole was performed with the utmost Dexterity, as tho' they were navigated by the most skilful Mariners; and thus it continued for the space of a quarter of an hour and then by Degrees vanished away. As we look upon it to be a supernatural Production so the Consequences of it we shall not pretend to determine."

Another fire ship, which has reportedly been sighted at intervals for 200 years on the Sound, is (folks say) the

ghost of a British warship seized by farmers of the Island off Throgs Neck in the bleak winter of 1777, when the British crew were bent on felling their trees for firewood.

An old and grizzled seafarer, in the Long Island Forum of January 1955, tells the story of the phantom ship of Peconic Bay. He says that many years ago, freightage of produce, lumber and coal was a major industry throughout Peconic Bay and eastern Long Island.

One stormy night in early March, around 1830, a schooner was sighted laying a course through the South Race between Robbins Island and the mainland, beating through a heavy northwest wind toward upper Peconic Bay. She was observed under shortened sail in the vicinity of a rock as large as a small house—now marked by an appropriate buoy—then suddenly vanished.

The oldtimer says that if you are in that area on an early March night and on the anniversary of the wreck, you'll see a vessel under sail making through the South Race and suddenly disappearing by the old rock. A few Suffolk people, including a former district attorney of the county, Judge George W. Hildreth, have heard of this phantom.

Another apparition seen in Gardiners Bay was reported in The New York Sun of March 22, 1882. The Sun writer had joined a menhaden fishing schooner at Promised Land for a short outing. The mate said solemnly when he came on board: "I hope we don't go off Montauk Point. I've seen ships sailing around in the night in a dead calm out there." The Sun writer laughed.

Two nights later, they came to anchor in Gardiners Bay with a load of fish on board. It was a stifling, windless night. The mate and the vessel's guest stretched out on the deck. The Sun man awoke with a jerk. The mate, shaking like a leaf, pointed out over the rail.

"A big schooner was bearing right down on us at a 10-knot rate," the story goes, "and not a breath of wind in the bay." When the ship should have crashed into them, the Sun writer says, it dissolved into thin air.

Curiously, according to the Weather Review, published by the War Department at that time, a bad storm hit the Island soon after.

Today the seafaring men of Greenport say flatly that they don't believe in ghosts. In Duffy's Tavern, where many of them meet after work, they laugh at these stories of phantom ships. In fact, they don't even seem to recognize this tradition of our folklore, most of them saying instead: Lived here all my life, spent most of it at sea too, and never seen or heard of a ghost ship. . . no, sir.

The phantom ships of the Island, it seems, are going out of style. For some reason, the ghosts of great mechanical marine disasters aren't haunting our waters. You don't hear of any phantom steamers—just sailing craft. There are no reports of ghosts of the Great Eastern, the Gwendoline Steers or the Titanic.

And, of course, shipwrecks today are relatively rare compared with the those of the days of sail.

It was different then, when men, clinging to icy rigging in the bitter cold, froze slowly to death within sight of the land and of those who were willing but powerless to help; when pirates flew the Jolly Roger and plundered ships; when "a rich treasure of passengers," as Cotton Mather says, would just vanish from the world of the living. ■