The Phantoms of the Ocean

By JONATHAN COHEN

It was a clear evening, Ed Bellfountain of Groenpoint recalls, and he and Capt. James Davis were out looking for monkfish and cod in the coastal waters of Piscataqua. Suddenly they were surprised by sights of the 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 were right, for, at that moment, they saw a big ship sail mysteriously into the night.

The sighting, imagined or real, took place in 1944, 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, 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. Some are linked to no meaning at all. Some reportedly appear 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 swarming 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 reputed to have been seen across the Sound. The new vessel sailed from New Haven in January 1667, according to Capt. Lambert, who felt that she was cranked and he had a foreboding of disaster. She was never seen or heard of again. This is the only phantom that he ever heard of, though he still prays for word of their fate.

These prayers were (perhaps) answered in June, six months later. After a storm, she was reported coming dead to the eye of the wind under full sail an hour before dark. The Rev. Cotton Mather, in his "History of New England," described 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 their sight could take, one could smell a man might have been standing on board her, her main-top seemed to be blown off, but left hanging in the rigging; and there they stood-nobly, then her missen-top; then all her mastings seemed blown away by the board; quickly after the hulls brought to a career, she oversteamed, and so vanished into a smoke cloud, which in some time dissipated, leaving, as everywhere else, a clear air. The amazed onlookers could make out the shop's colors, the principal rigging, and such proportions, as caused not 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
Gladly lifted up his God in prayer
That to quiet their troubled spirits
He had sent this ship of Air.

According to a newspaper editor M. A. Jagendorf, in that same era, when Peter Stuyvesant was Governor of New York, a ship set out from Pequot Bay for the West Indies was attacked by pirates. They set fire to the vessel and on its deck tied a white sail to the mast. The pirates then sailed away, but the burning ship followed them to their haven on the Island. And the ship has sailed 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, Kuillet Cove and other spots in Suffolk County. The ship, though on fire, never fully burns, and the phantom sailor'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 "beast" men saw it doing battle about 10 in the morning of Feb. 3, 1725, between Gardiners Island and Plum Island. And among the hardy barker fishermen of the East End there was a tradition that this strange phenomenon was an omen for the destruction of the remaining Puritans in the area. The story is this:

A letter appeared in the newspaper of Mr. Stuyvesant's time, which was delivered to "Messrs. Printers" and designated Plumb Island, Feb. 4, 1725, in which "Eye Witnesses" were ready to attest to the truth of it. According to them, it was this 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 said there were a great deal more than that; they wanted to beBIGGER, but the men on board wanted to beBIGGER."

The fire ship, which has reportedly been seen at intervals for 200 years on the Sound, is (folks say) the ghost of a British warship seized by farmers of all the Island off Thames Neck in the black 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 1939, tells of the story of the phantom ship of Peconic Bay. He says that many years ago "firewood" of produce, lumber and coal was a major industry throughout Peconic Bay and eastern Long Island.

One stormy night in early March, around 1850, a schooner was sighted laying a course through the South Race, between Block Island and the mainland, bearing down toward Peconic Bay. She was observed by several ships fishing on the South Race and suddenly disappearing by the old rock. A few Sufolks people, including a former district attorney of the county, Judge George W. Hildred, have heard of this phantom.

Another report seen in Gardiners Bay was reported in The New York Sun of March 22, 1902. 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 stiff wind, windy night. The mate and the vessel's guest stretched out on deck. The sea wind awoke with a jerk. The mate, shaking like a leaf, pointed out over the rail.

"A big schooner was bearing down on us! at 10-knot rate," the story goes, "and not a breath of wind in the bay. At the last moment, it crashed into us, the Sun writer says; it dissolved into thin air.

Capers are described in the Weather Review, published by the War Department at that time, a bad storm hit the Island.

Today the seafaring men of Groenpoint say flatly that they don't believe in ghosts. In Duff's Tavern, which 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. Never, never, not seen it at sea, never heard of a ghost of ship...no, sir."

The phantom ships of the Island, it seems, are going out of style. For this 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 Greengrode Steam or the Titanic.

And, of course, shipwrecks today are reported from shore, not from the stories of the days of sail.

It is much different, then, when men, clinging to icy rigging, in the bitter cold, are slowly to death within sight of the land, when they are in the most embarrassing of positions to help, when pirates fly the Jolly Roger and plundered ships; when "the treasure of passengers," in Cotton Mather's words, "just vanish from the world of the living."