

THE WRECK OF THE ALFRED D. SNOW

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The loss of this classic sailing ship brought out the best and the worst in humanity

It was late in the afternoon when a “tall and lofty” ship passed The Heads and entered San Francisco Bay, just one of 26 deep-sea sailing craft and steamships to enter the Bay that particular day.

Her arrival may well have been routine, but the sky was unusually “beautiful and clear,” so much so that many years later an aged seaman on another ship anchored in the vast Bay, who watched the *Snow* enter the harbor, recalled how she sailed up to her anchorage “in a stiff breeze.”

Her black sides, he remembered, “were wet with spray, sparkling and glittering in the sunshine, whilst her gleaming cotton canvas glowed with a rosy blush as it was touched by the golden beams of the setting sun.”

As the ship approached the anchorage, “she began to take in her sails, and as each was clewed up in the fresh breeze its rounded folds took on all the colors of the rainbow as the transparent pink of the sun’s backstays mingled with the

green reflections of the water and the pure azure of the upper sky.

“The golden ball of the sun sank beneath the western horizon,” and the newly arrived *Alfred D. Snow* “rounded-to under her mizzen-topsail and dropped her hook” within hailing distance of, as chance would have it, another Thomaston, Maine-built ship, the *Joseph B. Thomas* — named for a prominent Boston businessman and considered a “happy ship” under the command of her part-owner, Capt. William Lermond.

Judged to have “a very fair turn of speed” and a popular visitor to the Bay, the *Snow* was 143-days out from New York via Cape Horn, when she entered the Golden Gate to “drop her hook.” Her master, Capt. W.H. Willey — described by one contemporary as “handsome with his jet black hair, moustache, and side whiskers” — was held in high regard not only by

the city’s growing business community, but by the men he sailed with, as well.

As commonplace as her 20 July 1887 arrival in San Francisco was, her voyage from the East Coast was one marked by the kind of tragedy so common in the days of sail.

The day after her arrival, the *Daily Alta California* reported that “the ship *Alfred D. Snow*, which arrived in port last night, 148-days from New York, reports fatal accidents to two of the crew on the voyage. On 28 March, Charles Lindgren, a Swede, aged 26-years, fell from the mizzen topsail yards and struck head foremost on the rail, killing him instantly. On 8 April, the main topsail staysail block gave way at the deck and struck Chas. Brown, a German, aged 30-years, on the head, breaking his skull, from the effects of which he died in two-days.” Both men, as was the custom, were buried at sea.

The 1987-ton, 232-ft, full-rigged *Snow*, the *Thomas* and their Maine-built sisters — partly owned by the Nevada Bank of San Francisco and known as the “Wheat Fleet” — plied the lucrative “triangular trade” connecting New York with San Francisco and Liverpool, their holds

filed with California-grown winter wheat in season, but case oil and a merchant’s manifest that included just about everything from kegs of iron nails and bolts of indigo-dyed cloth to canned fruit. On this particular voyage, according to an announcement in the *Daily Alta California*, the *Snow* also carried “1000-tons of steel rails for the Pacific Improvement Company,” for good measure.

The *Snow’s* arrival was a blessing for the *Thomas*. Despite a brief coastwise voyage to haul coal back to San Francisco from Seattle, she had sat lolling at anchor in San Francisco Bay since arriving on 12 April after a 116-day voyage from Liverpool, with 2651-tons of coal in her holds.

In the days of sail, life at sea was hard and lonely and, anchored so close together and far from their New England home, the crews of the two ships availed themselves of every opportunity to row across to their neighbor and wager on a game of cards, spin “yarns,” and share memories of home, all the while waiting to load their outbound cargoes.

The camaraderie between the two ships’ crews was cemented when Capt. Willey of the *Snow*, his wife, and Capt. Lermond of the *Thomas* discovered that Willey had a close friend, an unnamed Englishman, among his own officers.

Friendships flourished, but the day

of inevitable separation came. A prominent San Francisco businessman William Dresbach — known as the “Wheat King of California” — had chartered the *Snow* so, on 31 August, after loading her cargo in Oakland, she cleared the Golden Gate, bound for Liverpool with 3150-tons of wheat, valued at \$95,000, and 36,000-ft of dunnage lumber stowed in her cavernous holds.

Her sailing was duly noted in a one-line announcement in the “Arrivals & Departures” column of the *Daily Alta California* — “Ship *A.D. Snow*, Willey, Liverpool: Wm. Dresbach.”

Southbound, she crossed the Equator, shouldered through the “Roaring Forties,” and rounded Cape Horn to ride the South Atlantic’s northeast trade winds to Liverpool.

There is no record of any other ship sighting, and later “reporting,” a chance mid-ocean encounter with the *Snow*. In effect, nothing

