

Ship WRECKS



By Doris Ecker

Crashing waves. Howling winds. Wood splintering on jagged rocks. Like the eerie requiem of a crazed composer, screams of anguish pierce the icy January night. Floundering off Vancouver Island's treacherous west coast, *Valencia's* lifeboats and their desperate passengers are swallowed by gigantic waves. Freezing sleet whips the drenched bodies of those still desperately clinging to the rigging. Forty hours later, the steamship has been smashed to pieces on the rocks and 136 of her passengers are missing.

James Delgado calls it "the worst maritime disaster in BC waters." He should know. Familiar to viewers of the *National Geographic* TV series *The Sea Hunters*, the underwater archaeologist and author is also executive director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, permanent home to a *Shipwrecks* exhibition. An odd assortment of flotsam is gathered there, including the only remnant of *Valencia*, a fragment of the ship's Number Five lifeboat; the

bell from ill-fated *Princess Sophia*; and a "message from the grave" scrawled by a Vancouver pioneer in his final hours on the Pacific. Some items, such as the boiler from the *Beaver*, relate to local wrecks, or to Canadian ships and passengers connected to Vancouver, like *Princess Sophia*. Hundreds of ships have foundered off the Pacific coast, and the museum displays show how a variety of causes can lead to horrendous maritime disasters.

PHOTOS COURTESY VANCOUVER MARITIME MUSEUM.
BELL PHOTO BY ANDY MONS



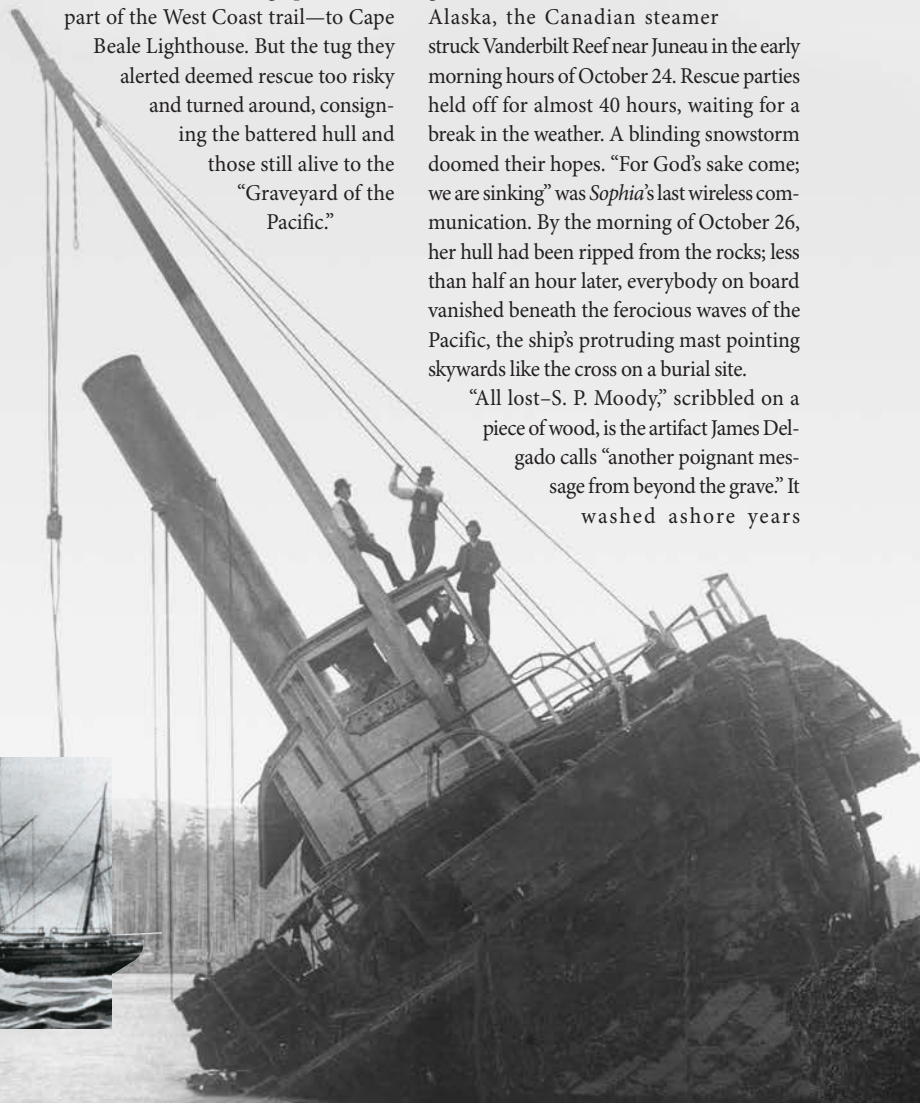
LOST AT SEA: (ABOVE, L-R) ALL ABOARD PRINCESS SOPHIA PERISHED OFF ALASKA IN 1918—MANY ARE BURIED IN VANCOUVER. HER BELL SURVIVED. THE PACIFIC WAS NEVER FOUND

Such a concatenation of circumstances—poor navigation, heavy seas, violent winds and strong inshore currents—set the dramatic scene for the running aground of *Valencia* at Pachena Point in January 1906. What turned the accident into a human tragedy of nightmare proportions was the apparent unwillingness of those called to the rescue to intervene. A few brave souls managed to reach shore in a lifeboat and hiked for over two hours on a rough path—now part of the West Coast trail—to Cape Beale Lighthouse. But the tug they alerted deemed rescue too risky and turned around, consigning the battered hull and those still alive to the "Graveyard of the Pacific."

A graveyard of a different kind, Vancouver's Mountain View Cemetery bears witness to the worst shipwreck disaster ever on the North Pacific coast. Sixty-six graves grouped together in the southwest section are the final resting place of local men, women and children who perished in the sinking of the steamship *Princess Sophia* in 1918. En route from Skagway to Vancouver, with over 350 passengers from BC, the Yukon and Alaska, the Canadian steamer struck Vanderbilt Reef near Juneau in the early morning hours of October 24. Rescue parties held off for almost 40 hours, waiting for a break in the weather. A blinding snowstorm doomed their hopes. "For God's sake come; we are sinking" was *Sophia's* last wireless communication. By the morning of October 26, her hull had been ripped from the rocks; less than half an hour later, everybody on board vanished beneath the ferocious waves of the Pacific, the ship's protruding mast pointing skywards like the cross on a burial site.

"All lost—S. P. Moody," scribbled on a piece of wood, is the artifact James Delgado calls "another poignant message from beyond the grave." It washed ashore years

ON THE ROCKS: DRUNKEN SAILORS RAN THE BEAVER AGROUND IN STANLEY PARK, 1888



after the maritime disaster that prompted the bleak note. Sewell “Sue” Prescott Moody built up the first major lumber export business on the BC mainland and founded the exemplary company town Moodyville—now site of the SeaBus terminal in North Vancouver. He boarded the steamer *Pacific* on an investment trip to San Francisco on November 4, 1875, but never arrived; the *Pacific* and the *Orpheus* collided near Cape Flattery. Continuing on her route, the *Pacific* took water through her rotten hull and sank fast. Those not dragged below the surface in overturning lifeboats clung to the wreckage. Eventually the ocean swallowed the vessel and all but two of the 400 people aboard. By a cruel twist of fate, the *Orpheus* too was lost the next day when she crashed ashore at Barkley Sound. Her wreck still lies at the bottom of the ocean, now a registered provincial heritage site. The *Pacific* was never found.

Not all shipwrecks leave such a small legacy. The North Pacific’s first steamer, the paddlewheeler HMS *Beaver* has left so much “Beaverabilia” that only a small part of the VMM collection can be displayed. It includes original parts of the vessel, like the boiler, both

shafts and fragments of the hull, as well as furniture made from the ship’s timbers and numerous souvenir medals cast from salvaged copper and brass.

In part this abundance of relics has to do with the pedestrian way in which the *Beaver* came to grief. Strong inshore currents and the captain’s close-in course were the official causes cited for the ship running aground at Prospect Point in Stanley Park on July 26, 1888. Rumours of the crew’s pre-wreck visit to Vancouver’s Sunnyside Hotel bar make a more compelling yarn. The crew, once the vessel had hit the rocks, allegedly waited for the tide to go out and walked ashore, straight back to the bar. Until her wreck was swept away and submerged four years later, the *Beaver* was an accessible landmark, stripped by souvenir hunters and collectors.

BC shipwrecks and the traces they have left—landlocked and maritime graves, sunken hulls, heritage sites, museum artifacts or stories—are vestiges of the province’s colourful early years, shaped so profoundly by the Pacific Ocean. They are not just a thing of the past, of course: our turbulent maritime history continues to play out in the waters that James Delgado calls “the world’s most fascinating museum.”

PHOTO OF JAMES DELGADO COURTESY VANCOUVER MARITIME MUSEUM. LIFESAVER PHOTO BY KA-KEI LAW



DIVING INTO HISTORY

James Delgado (above), executive director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum and one of *National Geographic*’s “sea hunters,” has dived shipwrecks worldwide, most notably that of the *Titanic*. He points out that while wrecks within Vancouver’s protected harbours are the privilege of researchers, North Shore sites such as Indian Arm and Howe Sound offer great possibilities for divers to explore local shipwrecks. Armchair divers can take a virtual plunge with *The Sea Hunters* crew at www.shipwreckcentral.com.