

The Wreck of the Rum-Runner *W T Bell*

In 1927, a lumber schooner that had been converted into a rum-runner went aground at Bayville with a cargo of \$500,000 worth of bootleg scotch and whisky... which was rumored to be headed for Glen Cove.

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On the night of 19-20 February, 1927, the New York City area was being pummeled by one of the worst storms of the decade. On the western end of Long Island Sound, the frigid winds had reached speeds of 70 miles an hour around midnight.

At 2 am in the morning, at the height of the gale, an old two-masted schooner named the *W T Bell* was driven ashore at

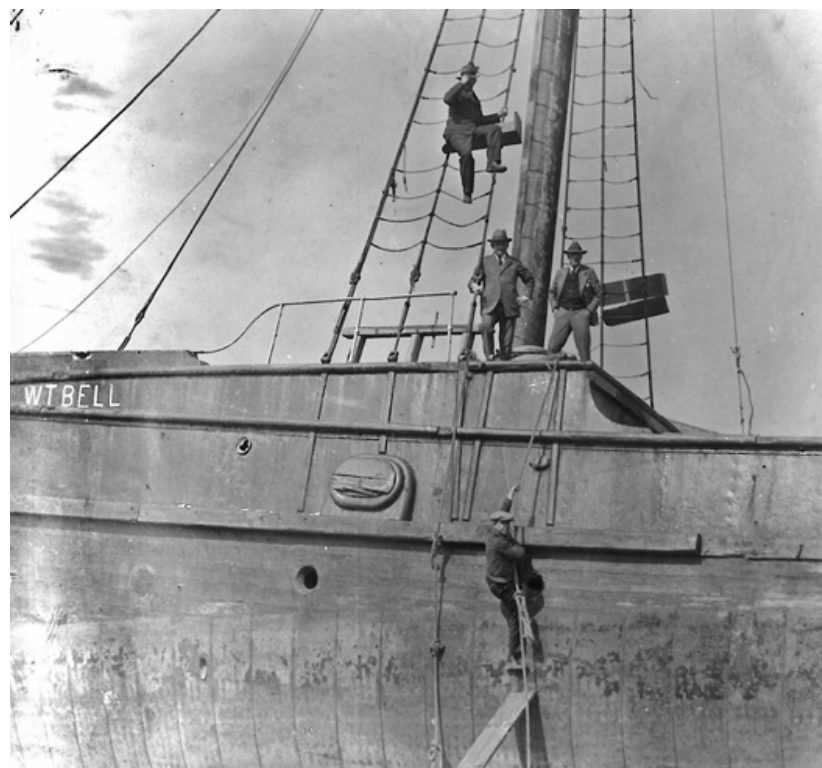
Oak Neck, a point of land on a long sandy peninsula which connected the tiny village of Bayville with Center Island. The *W T Bell* had been constructed in 1889 at Linwood, Pennsylvania, a small community on the Delaware River just southwest of Philadelphia. She was 119 feet long, and of 180 tons burden. Originally the vessel was known as *Number 26*, but was re-named the *W T Bell* in 1923 when it was sold to a Norfolk, VA

businessman. (Burgess, 1963) Ostensibly, the *W T Bell* was carrying a load of lumber – specifically, plasterer's lath – from Halifax, Nova Scotia to New York.

The storm had pushed the ship hard aground on the beach about 100 feet from the estate of Winslow S Pierce, a wealthy New York City lawyer who served as counsel for the Union Pacific Railroad. Pierce had purchased the Oak Neck property in 1900 from the estate of the late Colonel Stephen Van Rensselaer Cruger (NY Times, 1900).

Realizing how desperate their situation was, but unable to abandon ship in the high surf without assistance, the crew of the schooner signaled shore for help. Russell McGrady, a Bayville resident, spotted the ship's distress signal and went to assist. The crewmen on board the schooner, using a Lyle gun or something similar, fired a life-line to McGrady, who tied it off to a boulder on the beach, (GC Record, 1927). He then went into town to gather more men to help evacuate the ship's crew.

Once McGrady reappeared with a team of men from the Bayville Fire Dept, it was possible to rig up a "bosun's chair" (boatswain's chair) on a rope



Law enforcement officers pose on board the *W T Bell* while sequestering her cargo of illicit booze.
(Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)



Law enforcement officers take a break from recovering barrels of whiskey hidden on the *WT Bell*. (Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)

between the shore and a block and tackle on the boat. The bosun's chair was a simple seat (sometimes just a plank) dangling from a rope by two straps. It was a common piece of equipment on board larger sailing vessels, used to hoist sailors aloft when they were repairing the ship's rigging. The bosun's chair was a time honored way of moving sailors between ships while they were underway at sea, and was also one of the principal methods of evacuating ships that had grounded during severe weather (dangling precariously on a plank suspended by an all-too-thin rope over rocks and churning water was enough to cause even the most seasoned sailor to consider getting religion).

One by one, the crew of the stricken vessel were hauled ashore by the Bayville firemen. Accounts vary as to how many men were aboard... the New York Times states there were 6 crewmen, the Glen Cove Record claims it was 7. (NY Times, 1927a; GC Record, 1927).

Soaked to the skin, the men were taken to the Pierce estate superintendent's house where they were provided with hot drinks and food and dry clothes. (GC Record, 1927) "The rescued men thanked them, remarked that the storm was a little too much for a two-masted schooner and said they'd go out now to look

at the wreck." (NY Times, 1927a)

After waiting until noon for their return, the Bayville residents decided to go out to the wreck site to see what was keeping the sailors. The beach was deserted. Several of the locals got a rowboat and went out to the ship. After boarding her, they realized that the ship was abandoned.

The crew of the *WT Bell* had vanished... never to be seen again.

Puzzled, but emboldened by the fact that none of the *WT Bell*'s crew was on board, the Bayville men began to look around the wreck. They soon discovered that beneath a few layers of lath were barrels distinctively marked "Blended Whiskey, Newfoundland" It was evident why the crew of the *WT Bell* had not waited around for the arrival of the police or Coast Guard. The ship was a rum-runner, smuggling what would be one of the largest shipments of illegal scotch and whiskey ever to hit the north shore of Long Island.

Rumors circulated that the ship had been headed for Glen Cove, where its cargo of alcohol was to be delivered to gangsters and then taken overland into Manhattan. Smugglers had realized since the late 17th Century that Glen Cove was a choice location for landing illegal goods. It was far enough from Man-



Boarding the W T Bell was a hazardous undertaking. (Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)

hattan to be out of the watchful eye of customs authorities, yet close enough to Manhattan to make transportation of contraband to market in the city quick and cost effective. And, unlike nearby Oyster Bay or Manhasset Bay, Glen Cove's harbor was easy to navigate. Lord Bellomont, the colonial governor of New York, had even written to London citing Glen Cove as one of the four leading ports for smuggling in New York Colony.

The unattended windfall of whiskey was too much for many of the Bayville residents to resist. It was an ancient and honored tradition on Long Island, from the earliest colonial times, that whatever the sea offered up to the residents of Long Island was free for the taking. This was included the cargo of any wrecked, abandoned vessel, especially if that cargo was contraband alcohol. The residents of Bayville began to remove as many barrels of whisky and scotch as possible while it was still daylight. Men on board the schooner would toss barrels overboard while men on shore waded out into the surf and dragged the barrels onto shore. Some of the kegs floated away, and the Bayville townsfolk chased after them in rowboats, looking somewhat like 20th Century Ahabs rowing after 25



The US Coast Guard Cutter Manhattan; constructed in 1873, the vessel was involved in customs and revenue service in the New York City area for the last decades of her service. (Photograph courtesy of the Linbrary of Congress).



The W T Bell being blown up by a US Coast Guard explosives charge (Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)

gallon Moby Dicks.

News of the discovery of the *Bell's* secret cargo began to leak out. Two different gangs of bootleggers from Oyster Bay arrived on the scene in trucks and began unloading barrels of whiskey and scotch. Rather remarkably, the gangsters “did not molest the townspeople who wanted a wanted a keg for their personal use.” (NY Times 1927a) With considerable efficiency, the gangsters and townspeople removed an estimated 125 barrels of scotch and whisky before sunset.

It was not until after sunset that police arrived at Oak Neck to put an end to the looting. Officer Edward DeMott of the Nassau County Police Department was the first to arrive. He succeeded in stopping the Bayville men from taking any more whisky off the ship. But numerous kegs had already been stock-piled at different spots along the beach. Since he was the only law enforcement officer at the scene, DeMott could do nothing to stop the locals from rolling those away into the darkness. Shortly afterwards, two Nassau County police sergeants, William McKinley Hurley and Andrew Wilson, arrive with twelve officers armed with machine guns. An unidentified federal agent soon rounded out the group. (NY Times, 1927b).

William Sanders, Surveyor of the Port of New York, sent a

team of agents lead by John H McGill, Deputy Surveyor in charge of enforcement, to Oak Neck to supervise the unloading of the wreck. The Surveyor of the Port and his deputies were agents of the United States Treasury, tasked with assessing customs duties on any materials being imported into the United States from foreign ports as well as seizing any materials being brought into the country illegally. McGill was one of the more eccentric characters in the fight against rum-runners in the New York City area... he claimed to be clairvoyant, and that images of the individual ships carrying shipments of liquor would appear to him in dreams. He was uncannily accurate and was responsible for interdicting quite a number of rum-running ships carry sizeable cargoes – which probably meant his claim of “psychic powers” was intended to protect his informants. However, his odd quirks did not endear him to his superiors. Once the Volstead Act was repealed, and Prohibition ended, McGill was removed from his post. (NY Times, 1934)

Sanders also dispatched United States Coast Guard cutter Manhattan to Bayville to make certain that there was no attempt by the regional gangsters to try to force their way on board the *W T Bell* from the sea.

In addition to the kegs and whisky already discovered, the

agents of the Survey of the Port recovered an additional 337 barrels of malt extract were recovered from the wreck. Each barrel contained 16 gallons, each gallon worth \$40.

The New York Times reporter covering the effort was clearly a little confused as to what the importance of “malt extract” was to bootleggers, stating that “with the aid of distilled water” the malt extract would produce “many additional gallons of scotch” and that it would sell for considerably more than its list price “after diluting it into ‘night club Scotch...’” The journalist seemed to be under the impression that “malt extract” was some sort of “scotch concentrate.” In fact, malt extract was used in fermenting the barley that was used to make scotch. It had the highly desirable property of helping to convert starch (which barley contained a lot of) into sugar (which barley didn’t contain nearly



Torn to shreds by explosives, the W T Bell would never carry contraband alcohol between Canada and the United States. (Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)



The end of the W T Bell. (Photograph courtesy of the Glen Cove Public Library Robert R Coles Long Island History Room)

enough of). The sugar was then converted into alcohol by yeast, and the alcohol was then recovered by distilling. The more starch the distiller could convert to sugar, the more alcohol the distiller would get at the end of the distilling process. While malt extract was also commonly used as a dietary supplement (it was even marketed as “liquid bread” during the later part of the 19th Century) the purchase of thousands of gallons of malt extract would certainly have attracted the attention of law enforcement once Prohibition became the law of the land.

In total, the contraband seized aboard the *W T Bell* included:

Whiskey – 50 kegs of 25 gallons each, valued at \$20 per gallon	\$ 25,000
Scotch – 200 kegs of 15 gallons each, valued at \$60 per gallon	\$180,000
Malt extract – 337 kegs of 16 gallons each, valued at \$40 per gallon	\$215,680

Total Seized: \$420,680

Factoring in the roughly 125 kegs carted away by the local residents and two gangs of bootleggers, the value of the *W T Bell*’s cargo would easily reach \$500,000

Because the *W T Bell* could have posed a significant hazard to navigation if she had re-floated during a storm, the hulk was dynamited by the US Coast Guard in March of 1927.

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