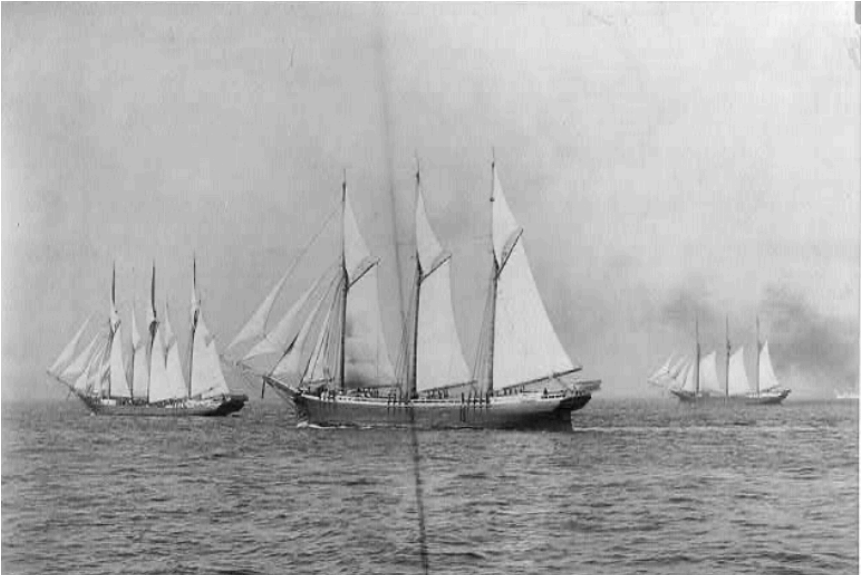


The Wreck of the Schooner Alianza



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Full sails again, I've a true story to tell
Many years a good life upon the sea
Knowing these East Coast waters well
They nearly stole the breath from me

Alianza, a wooden three masted schooner
Three hundred seventy tons gross burden
Seamen were sought to fully crew her
I signed on without a boast, in debt certain

She was an old trade vessel, sturdy well worn
Maine designed and built down in Pembroke
Out of Point Bergen, bound for St. John
With four hundred tons of black anthracite coal

Several rain days, shifting winds took their toll
Anchored in Tarpaulin Cove, awaiting the sun
Then up to Martha's Vineyard, Holmes Hole
Next afternoon to Pollock Rip on a downwind run

Up the coast slowly, at start with barely a wake
Light steady winds now from the Northeast
Off Chatham town past the elbow of the Cape
All sails set well to catch the freshening breeze

February 8th, we passed Cape's Highland Light
Turned to bear north under full sail strong
Intending for safe Salem harbor that night
Hard wind and light snow drove us along

By 8AM on that fateful 9th's morn
We'd made good time in smooth rolling seas
Our speed increased as sizable swells formed
Her northward course held fast to please

Soon all her topsails were well clewed
When the captain took over the helm wheel
He quickly ordered us up and all sail reduced
By 2PM the good weather fast became a gale

The ship labored on in heavy rising seas
On a starboard tack her rigging cried
Rumbling from below heightened our unease
Coal shifted noisily over to the leeward side

We felt the full weight of a sudden swell
Pushed us hard over on her port side
Soon all space there below filled with coal
Held her rail down, threatened to capsize

The captain stood his place at the helm
The ship no longer subject to its control
High waves on deck washed into the hold
Thick fog and snow turned our view dismal

We manned the pump with fear's energy
Darkness fell, the main boom dragged in the wash
Newburyport's Harbor Light showed momentarily
Breakers port side, whistling buoy, last hopes were lost

She struck bottom hard several times
The breakers drove us up over the sand bar
And turned her to meet the waves broadside
In deeper water, fast closing to the shore

Two men struggled for the stern to reach
The aft boat still on its davits to save
Doomed ship lurched, turned hard bow to beach
Its stern awash blocking that path to escape

Crewmen clambered to the starboard side rigging
As large breakers drove her onto the shallows
Surf turned her broadside with offshore listing
The sea pummeled all as the ship wallowed

The mizzen mast fell first, then main and fore
The hull split open as we sought a handhold
Broken spars and debris the furious surf tore
The white sands of shore we could now behold

A great wave took me, the captain and steward
I dodged and struggled to swim to shore
Cast upon the sand by wind and breakers hard
My shipmates submerged, were seen no more

On the wreck I spied two desperate crew mates
Wrapped arms and legs on stanchions and rails
Which buoyed both upon the chaotic surface
Huge waves smashed down, yet strength prevailed

One was lifted up and out, hard over thrown
Landed drenched near me on the frozen sand
With barely a bruise and no broken bones
We gathered, urged each other to withstand

On the forward house roof the mate kept hold
Last man alive on the wreck, we heard his yell
And watched waves pound it free into waters cold
He rode that roof to the beach on another tall swell

Four survivors shivering battered frozen
Found an empty cottage way up a dune
Out of the wind recovered, limbs loosened
Walked towards a faint light in the stormy gloom

We found the shuttered Plum Island Hotel
And slammed down loud its door knocker
The caretaker wondered who would so travel?
Found exhausted men and gave them succor

Captain Melonson of St. John, Alianza was his
Good Steward McCarron, Nova Scotia born
Fellow Mainer Seaman Reed's home was Calais
All lost that night in the relentless storm

Luck and endurance saved four men
Mate Nelson of Brooklyn, New York
Seamen Keefe and Codroy of Newfoundland
Patrick Campbell of Oldtown, escaped the devil's fork

I'm thankful for our redeemed lives
Returned to the sea, no life for me ashore
No matter how desperate the money tries
I'll not test my luck again on an old schooner.



*Copyright© 2022 Theodore A. Olsson III
All rights reserved.
www.prosodictalesinpoetry.com*

*Reference: Annual Report of the Operations of the
United States Life-Saving Service,
For The Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1896, pages 36-44.*

*The Alianza was built in 1874,
wrecked and repaired in the West Indies in 1888,
wrecked and destroyed on February 9, 1896.
125 years later, coal is still washed up
on Plum Island's beaches.*