

PIRACY SUSPECTED IN DISAPPEARANCE OF 3 AMERICAN SHIPS

Crew of a Fourth Vanished Mysteriously Off Carolina Coast Several Months Ago.

HINT OF SOVIET SEIZURE

Bottle Message Told of Capture of Deering's Men by "Tanker or Submarine."

5 DEPARTMENTS IN INQUIRY

Captain's Daughter and Portland Pastor Stir Government to Make Its Search.

Special to The New York Times.

WASHINGTON, June 20.—The crew of an American ship is missing, and what seems to be conclusive evidence has been obtained that the men were taken as prisoner to another vessel and carried away to parts unknown, if they were not murdered.

A second American ship is long overdue, and two other American ships are unaccounted for under circumstances that lead to the belief that their disappearance is in some way connected with the capture of the crew of the first-mentioned vessel.

The United States Government has undertaken to solve these mysteries of the sea, which, in the opinion of officials expressed today, point either to old-time piratical methods off the Atlantic Coast or the seizure of the vessels for the benefit of Soviet Russia.

Officials concede that it is difficult to believe that acts of piracy could be committed in and near the territorial waters of the United States in this day, but the evidence is such that they are unable to escape the suspicion, at least, that all these happenings were brought about by persons willing to take the chances of committing piratical crimes, perhaps on account of a sincere sympathy for the Soviet cause or with the merely greedy object of disposing of the cargoes of the vessels at high prices to the authorities of Soviet Russia.

Five Departments Are Investigating

Five departments of the Washington Government are at work in the effort to solve the mysteries. The State Department has instructed its consular officers at ports throughout the world to be on the lookout for the missing vessels or the members of the kidnapped crew. The Treasury Department, through its Coast Guard and Lifesaving Service, is making a search of the Atlantic Coast and adjacent waters. The Navy Department has sent out vessels to assist in the search. The Department of Commerce, through its Bureau of Navigation, is also trying to lift the veil of mystery. The Department of Justice has assigned some of its best Secret Service agents to the case, for the Government is working on the theory that all these mysterious incidents are inter-related.

Several months ago the five-masted schooner Carol Deering of Portland, Me., was found abandoned off Diamond Shoals, North Carolina, with all sails set and her officers and crew missing. The Deering went ashore near Diamond Shoals Lightship, and when the men of the nearest life-saving station went aboard they found evidence indicating that she had been abandoned in a hurry for no conceivable reason, for the vessel was in good shape, with plenty of food. In fact, it was apparent that she had been abandoned when a meal was about to be served. Her small boats were gone, however.

A little later a bottle came ashore near where the ship was found, and in it was a note purporting to have been written by the mate of the schooner, which read as follows:

"An oil-burning tanker or submarine has boarded us and placed our crew in irons. Get word to headquarters of company at once."

The crew of the Deering, including the Captain, numbered twelve men, and not a trace of them has been discovered. The Deering left Portland last December for Rio de Janeiro with a general cargo. It was on her return voyage with another general cargo that she went ashore on Diamond Shoals. The writing found in the bottle has been compared with the penmanship of her missing mate, and handwriting experts have declared that there is no question that the mate wrote the message.

Steamer Hewitt Missing for Months.

The steel steamer Hewitt of Portland, Me., owned by the Union Sulphur Company of New York, is also missing. She sailed from Sabine, Texas, several months ago, with a cargo of sulphur for Boston and Portland. The Government authorities have been unable to get any trace of her. Not a boat or a spar from her has come ashore or has been picked up, and not a body of any member of her crew has been found. She might have been off Diamond Shoals about the time the Deering went ashore, and the authorities believe that she is still afloat, intact.

At the Department of Commerce the statement was made today that two other American steamers had disappeared under circumstances that led officials of the department to believe that they had not foundered, and it was openly admitted by these officials that they suspected that the ships had been the victims of pirates, perhaps Soviet sympathizers who had sailed away with them to ports of Soviet Russia. The names of these vessels could not be ascertained, and officials were extremely hazy as to details of their disappearance. Whether the officials purposely suppressed the names of the steamers did not become clear.

The activity of the Government in endeavoring to find the missing ships is due mainly to the efforts of the Rev.

Addison B. Lorimer, pastor of the Central Square Baptist Church of Portland, and Miss Lulu Wornell, daughter of Captain W. B. Wornell of the schooner Carol Deering. On May 23 the Rev. Mr. Lorimer sent a telegram from Portland to Senator Frederick Hale of Maine, then in Washington, asking the Senator to make an appointment for Mr. Lorimer and Miss Wornell to see Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, in order that they might disclose certain important facts relative to "piracy on the high seas."

The appointment was made, and Mr. Lorimer and Miss Wornell came to Washington. They laid before Secretary Hoover and Senator Hale the evidence they had collected concerning the disappearance of the Deering, including the message purporting to have been written by the ship's mate and the testimony of handwriting experts employed by the New York company which owned the vessel that the message was written in a handwriting identical with that of the letters known to have been written by the mate.

The Rev. Mr. Lorimer and Miss Wornell also saw Secretary Hughes and Commodore William E. Reynolds, the Commandant of the Coast Guard Service. Their evidence was conclusive enough to start a Government investigation. Mr. Lorimer advanced several theories which the authorities here do not discard. He pointed out that the paper on which the mate's note had been written was made in Norway and had ascertained that paper of the same Norwegian manufacture was shipped to Rio de Janeiro, the Deering's last port before her disappearance.

Theory That Deering Crew Are Captives.

According to Commodore Reynolds it was not likely that the men of the Deering's crew were taken to any South American or any accessible European port. In his opinion they have not been landed anywhere. He has also advanced the suggestion that there might have been a mutiny on the oil tanker or submarine, whose crew put the men of the Deering in irons.

After two weeks of effort to get at the bottom of these mysteries, the Department of Commerce disclosed its failure today. These two weeks have been spent in sifting the evidence, and the idea has been implanted in the minds of officials that the disappearance of the three steamers and the crew of the schooner are related. They suspect that this relation is due to some concerted action that began to take form off the North Carolina coast. It is evident that they have some evidence that they do not care to make public which makes them suspect that pirates or seamen sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause are at the bottom of these alleged crimes.

Senator Simmons of North Carolina recently complained in the Senate that there were not enough Coast Guard cutters to patrol the coast. He said that liquor running was being indulged in freely off the North Carolina coast, and that a Coast Guard vessel should be sent there to look out for violators of the Constitutional amendment and the Volstead act.

The Deering was a five-masted schooner of 3,500 tons. Her usual trade route was between Portland and Barbados. She belonged to the G. G. Deering Company of Portland.

It was said at the Department of Commerce that of the two unnamed vessels which had disappeared one was supposed to be loaded with wheat and the other with cotton.

Coast Once a Pirates' Haunt.

If Soviet pirates have really been ranging the North Carolina coast, this is not the first time the freebooters have worked in that vicinity. More than a century and a half ago Edward Teach, the famous "Blackbeard," used to run his pirate ships in through the few and dangerous inlets in the narrow sandbars that separate the Atlantic Ocean from the sounds that front the North Carolina mainland. He made headquarters at Edenton, N. C., where he was commonly supposed to have affiliations with an unsavory British official of the colonies.

Years ago the dwellers on the sandbar islands that form the coast were known as "bankers," deriving their name from the sandbanks on which they lived. They were a wild and free people. Nag's Head, a little Coast Guard station, is said to have been named because the "bankers" tied a lantern to a horse's head, and sent the steed trotting up the coast on stormy nights to lure craft ashore in the belief that the bobbing light was that of a vessel in deep water.

It was off this coast that the beautiful Theodosia Burr, daughter of Aaron Burr, is supposed to have been drowned, and for years there were stories that her little child did not die with her, but grew up among the "bankers."

Even in recent years this coast has had compelling interest. From Diamond Shoals, the treacherous sandbars hidden beneath foaming waters off Hatteras, constantly take their toll of small ships. It was from the great shifting sand dunes at Kitty Hawk, no great distance from Hatteras, that the Wrights made their first secret experiments in gliding, which led to their heavier-than-air planes and their famous flight at Le Mans.

Believes That the Hewitt Was Sunk.

Clarence A. Snider, Secretary of the Union Sulphur Company, owners of the Hewitt, said last night over the telephone from his home in New Rochelle that he disagreed with the Government's belief that this steamer, missing since Jan. 20, was afloat and intact. The Hewitt sailed from Sabine, Texas, bound for Boston and Portland with a cargo of sulphur. She was posted missing on March 16.

"I do not believe that the Hewitt is still afloat," Mr. Snider said. "We would have heard of it long before this. Anyway, we have collected the insurance on the craft."

The Hewitt, built in 1914, was 387 feet long and 54 feet wide. Her tonnage is listed at 2,294.