

Gaetano E. Seeno saves Balclutha

Boat builder Gaetano E. Seeno supervised the work in saving Balclutha, the famous square-rigged vessel owned by the San Francisco Maritime Museum, when it was wrecked in 1904 in Alaska. Seeno, a long-time Black Diamond (Pittsburg, CA) resident, was highly regarded as a man of unequalled qualifications. A versatile craftsman as equally at home building boats or constructing a cannery or patching up a damaged ship, he was a favorite for years throughout the building trades. His services were repeatedly used in the improvements and expansions of cannery facilities in the remote Alaskan territories.

. . . In 1904 the vessel, in command of Capt. Bernard Bremer, was on its way to Karluk cannery. In heavy fog she ran on to a reef near Kodiak Island. The vessel was hard aground listing at a 45% angle. The cargo and all 100 persons aboard survived the accident.

William Munn, a superintendent of the Alaska Packers Cannery at Atilak arrived to make assessment of the damage and possible salvage of the Balclutha. To determine how much was involved in refloating and recovery., an opinion was made covering all aspects of possible trouble. A final assessment and assurance completed the analysis for Mann, and it was with confidence and the backup of nearby men and equipment of the Packers that he offered Capt. Bremer \$500 for the Balclutha where she lay. Bremer acted in the best interest of his owners in making a final judgment to accept the offer. He could hardly be criticized for this acceptance for the Balclutha was considered badly wrecked.

The Alaska Packers merely sent the needed gear to start the salvage operations. Cargo shuttles to Karluk continued without let-up. Seeno was at Karluk Cannery when news of the Balclutha arrived. His knowledge of boat building in Black Diamond worked miracles in the stricken ship's recovery.

They used a hodge-podge of temporary work practices, defying the sea. They concluded that the best weapon against the sea, to wrest this ship from the reef's hold, was to use the power of a full moon flood tide. Small holes were plugged as best they could. Gaping holes were sheathed (boarded) and covered with heavy canvas and sheathed over again and braced, shored, bolted or nailed against anything that was firm.

These stubborn individualists supervised by Seeno provided the skills, manpower and ingenuity to patch and plug all leaks and brought pumps that siphoned off the salt water from her insides at low tide. All the weakened portions of the vessel were strengthened. Empty barrels were placed inside for buoyancy and empty barges were fastened to Balclutha's side.

At high flood tide she floated free and was towed to a local shipyard for repairs. With Seeno's expertise and \$500, the Alaska Packers had a new ship in their fleet. They renamed her Star of Alaska.

Each year in April, the Star of Alaska sailed from Alameda, CA carrying cannery workers, fishermen and supplies until September. Early in that month she would start the 2,400-mile voyage back to San Francisco Bay loaded with cases of canned salmon.

. . . the Star of Alaska was modified to make berths for 200 Italian fishermen and Chinese cannery workers that made the trip to Alaska and back. The Alaska Packers in 1930 retired the vessel

The Star of Alaska is now restored and under its original name of Balclutha is based at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.