

# The Mystery Shipwreck

Uncovering Oregon's  
Historic Past

**Top-notch detective  
work—and a lucky  
break—helped experts  
identify a newly exposed  
shipwreck on Coos  
Bay's North Spit.**

STORY BY ROBERT V. SCHWEMMER

Robert V. Schwemmer/NOAA

LEFT: White caulking is still visible between the planks of the shipwrecked *George L. Olson*.

RIGHT: The shipwrecked steam schooner has drawn more than 10,000 visitors.

**A**LTHOUGH NOT AS jaw-dropping as One-Eyed Willie's pirate ship emerging from a hidden cave on the North Coast in the film *The Goonies*, a mystery shipwreck at Coos Bay captured the imagination of thousands of visitors this past winter.

Even though the site is remote and requires four-wheel drive vehicles to traverse the sand road, more than 10,000 visitors have come to view the historic remains of the wreck.

A number of beaches along the Oregon Coast between Coos Bay and Cannon Beach experienced a great degree of sand erosion brought on by this year's winter storm waves. This phenomenon, although not an unusual occurrence, exposed several of Oregon's maritime treasures, including the skeletal remains of a sailing ship, two cannons, and virtually the complete bow section of the mystery shipwreck on the north spit of Coos Bay.

The responsibility to protect this historic resource and to provide public interpretation fell under the jurisdiction of archaeologists (turned shipwreck detectives) Steve Samuels with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Calum Stevenson with Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. They contacted Annie Donnelly, executive director of Coos Historical and Maritime Museum, who was already on the case working with the local community.



Steve Samuels/BLM

Archaeologists and historians were being given the rare opportunity to study ship construction techniques to learn about our nation's seafaring past. Not all shipwrecks are ultimately identified by their official name or nationality. In this case, the mystery shipwreck was so well preserved that there was little doubt she was a steam schooner, but which ship? Was this the remains of one of five steam schooners reported lost at Coos Bay from 1889 to 1944, or could this be another vessel?

The local community and museum staff spent weeks reviewing old photographs and shipwreck files. The interest in solving the mystery was not limited to the public and local federal and state agencies, but was expanded beyond Oregon's borders to include the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. ONMS manages a national system of 14 underwater protected areas that includes shipwrecks. A key mandate of the agency is to explore, characterize, and protect

submerged maritime heritage resources and to share these discoveries with the American public. As the ONMS–West Coast Region's maritime heritage coordinator, I was asked to provide assistance for this important project.

My first response, before contacting Samuels, Stevenson, and Donnelly, was to review historic documents and photographic evidence that might provide some clues to the identity of the wreck. The initial research was focused on the steam schooners *Julia H. Ray*, *Claremont*, *C. A. Smith*, and *Fort Bragg*. Then I read an article in *The World* newspaper, telling about how Jack Long had visited the mystery shipwreck in the 1950s and recalled seeing a name-board with the ship's name starting with "Geo." or "George," the first evidence of a possible identity.

I immediately reviewed historic records and found that a steam schooner named *George L. Olson* had become stranded on Guano Rock inside Coos Bay on June 6, 1944. There was not a great amount of detail reported in the

newspapers at the time because it was during World War II when shipping activities were typically censored, but later we learned she was towed to the north spit six months after the stranding. Consulting vessel registries, I soon learned that the *Olson* was originally built as the *Ryder Hanify* in 1917.

## The mystery unfolds

The final clue to solving the mystery came from Fred Crothers. He saw the photograph of the wreck in the *San Diego Union Tribune*; it was a positive match

to the family photograph he kept on his desk. Fred and members of his family visited the site around 1947 and took a group picture on the wreck. The partial name-board was captured in the photograph, “George.” With this photographic evidence supporting the historic research, the mystery was solved!

The *George L. Olson*’s legacy didn’t end with the shipwreck. It was soon transformed into a floating hardware store. At nearby Charleston, the Community Church was built from the salvaged lumber cargo. A 1945 newspaper article read “No

Miracle—The sea has cast up lumber to build a new church for the Baptist congregation . . . but it wasn’t quite a miracle because they had to pay for it . . . \$301 for 500,000 [board feet] of lumber.”

Today, the local community is uncovering its historic past through the *Olson* legacy. If you visit, remember that the site of the *George L. Olson* is protected under state and federal law. Please take only pictures, so that future generations may enjoy the experience that the Long and Crothers families were so considerate in preserving. □



Steve Samuels/BLM

ABOVE: Interior forecabin of the *George L. Olson*. Note the metal bed frame visible behind the post.

RIGHT: The *Ryder Hanify* off-loading lumber in San Pedro, California in 1917.

FACING PAGE: The Crothers family poses for a photograph on the *George L. Olson* circa 1947.



Courtesy Sherman Library & Gardens



Norman Crothers/ Courtesy Crothers Family Collection

## Early History

The *George L. Olson*, originally named *Ryder Hanify*, was launched on January 22, 1917, at the shipyard of W. Frank Stone in Oakland, California, for her owners J. R. Hanify Co. The *Oakland Tribune* headlines read “Longest Wooden Boat Ever Built Here, Is Launched” accompanied by a photograph of J. R. Hanify’s 4-year old niece Lucinda Hanify, who christened the ship. Held by her mother Mrs. Albert Hanify, she smashed a bottle of California wine across the same bow that over 10,000 visitors to the site in 2008 would come to recognize.

The *Hanify*, along with three other Hanify owned steamers, was sold in 1917 to the French for \$2 million. Renamed *Gabriel*, the steam schooner’s career

under French registry was short lived. She returned to American registry in 1921 and was renamed *George L. Olson* by her new owners Oliver J. Olson & Co. Ironically J. R. Hanify Co. had a second *Ryder Hanify* built at the shipyard of Kruse and Banks in North Bend, Oregon, in 1920. The new ship was christened by 5-year old Mary Granger, who still resides in the local community.

**OFFICIAL NAME:** *George L. Olson*

**OFFICIAL NUMBER:** 215007

**RIG:** Double-Ender Steam Schooner

**REGISTERED DIMENSIONS (FEET):**

LENGTH: 222.8—BEAM: 43.6—

DEPTH OF HOLD: 16.5

**CARGO CAPACITY:** 1,500, 000 board feet lumber

**MACHINERY:** Main Street Iron Works Triple Expansion Steam Engine

—R.V.S.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

To visit the *George L. Olson*, refer to updates from the following websites:

**U.S. Bureau of Land Management** ([www.blm.gov/or/news/index.php](http://www.blm.gov/or/news/index.php))

**Coos Historical and Maritime Museum** ([www.cooshistory.org](http://www.cooshistory.org))

**Oregon Parks and Recreation Department** ([www.oregon.gov/OPRD](http://www.oregon.gov/OPRD))

**NOAA ONMS Maritime Heritage Program** (<http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/maritime/welcome.html>)

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