

## Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary

### SS *Selja*

#### History

*Selja* was built as a workhorse cargo steamer, and was chartered by the Portland & Asiatic Steamship Company. Then, as now, trade with the Far East was a vital part of the economy. Loaded with the commodities of the Pacific Northwest, usually lumber, timber and flour, *Selja* was sailed to China and Japan, sell the cargo there, and return to the United States, usually San Francisco, with manufactured "China goods" before heading back to Portland to start the cycle over.

The *Portland Oregonian* of January 22, 1910 noted a typical outbound cargo: "With approximately 25,000 barrels of flour and 600,000 feet of Oregon timber, the steamship *Selja*, operating: for the Portland & Asiatic Steamship Company, will clear this morning; for Hong Kong; and Japanese ports.

The *Selja* will leave dock at noon and will proceed immediately to sea. She will be due at Yokohama about February 10.

#### Specifications

Nationality: Norwegian  
Class: Steam Freighter  
Owner: Wilh Jebsen  
Builder: W. Gray Co. Iron & Steel Ship Builder  
Built Where: West Hartlepool, England  
Launched:  
Hull Material: Steel  
Home Port: Bergen, Norway  
Tonnage: Gross: 4459 Net: 2789  
Registered Length (feet): 380.0 OAL 197.0  
Registered Beam (feet): 49.1  
Registered Depth of Hold (feet): 17.5



Publication: San Francisco Call

Newspaper coverage for the loss of the SS *Selja*



Credit: NOAA US Coast Survey

Historic U.S. Coast & Geodetic chart of shipwreck reported off Point Reyes where the *Selja* would ultimately be lost

SS *Selja* under steam, later lost in a collision with SS *Beaver* on November 22, 1910 off Point Reyes, California. The wreck of the *Selja* now lies in the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary.



Photo: San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park

## Collision between the SS *Selja* and SS *Beaver*

"By his own statement, as we have epitomized it, Lie, the master of the *Selja*, confesses that when he first heard the whistle of the *Beaver* he realized that it was 'forward of the beam' of his ship, and although it is plain that he was not able to ascertain the position of the vessel from which the danger warning came, for he thought it the whistle at Point Bonita, 20 miles away, yet he not only did not stop his engines, as required, but, on the contrary, he continued to run them for five minutes following at half speed (6 knots an hour) in thick fog, until each succeeding whistle of the *Beaver*, sounding nearer than the one before, at length convinced him that it was the whistle of an approaching steamer. But even then, when convinced that the danger signals which he had been hearing repeated at one minute intervals for five minutes were from an approaching steamer still 'forward of his beam,' he did not obey the rule by stopping his engines, but contented himself with reducing his speed to slow, 3 knots an hour, not out of deference to the rule of law, but because, as he says, 'I considered that 6 knots was not moderate enough under the circumstances,' and this speed he continued for five minutes longer, until ten

minutes past 3, when, at length, he ordered his engines stopped, with the result, he is obliged to confess, that at 3:14, two minutes before the collision, his ship still had steerage way upon her, 'was not quite at a standstill,' and a moment later the crash came. It is of no avail for this master to say that at the instant of the accident he thinks the momentum of his ship had been overcome, and that she was commencing to move backward in response to the 'full speed astern' order, which had been given during the instant that had elapsed between the appearance of the *Beaver* through the fog and the coming of the ships together, for the evil had been done and the collision rendered inevitable."

### The final ruling of the Court concludes:

"Both of the masters were palpably negligent in respects which contributed directly to cause the collision; the negligence of each continued to operate as an efficient cause until the moment when the accident occurred, and we agree with the lower courts that the case is one in which the master and owner of the *Selja* must be left to suffer their self-inflicted loss."

## The Wreck of the *Selja*

Today, we have a graphic reminder of the consequences of those actions, 104 years ago, and left unsaid in the court's opinion, but more important than the monetary loss of the vessel and cargo, the loss of two lives of "Chinese" crew members who remain entombed in the dark hulk of the *Selja*."

In seeing the ship down there in the darkness, broken, twisted and torn, we have encountered a ship which featured prominently in a legal case that ultimately was argued before the United States Supreme Court over a key aspect of maritime law, the rules of the road. The Master of *Selja*, Olaf Lie, on behalf of the owners of his ship, as well as his crew, sued the steamer *Beaver* and its owners in Admiralty Court for the loss of *Selja*, its cargo, and his and his crews personal effects. At every stage, Lie and his owners lost as it was demonstrated in court that he has been going too fast in a thick fog, and was culpable. The ruling was important enough that the U.S. Navy made a film

