



Collective MEMORIES



The Story of the Spar: An Oral History of the *Hazel Pearl*

Edited by Heather Elliott

With research by Terra Barrett & Sarah Hannon

Collective Memories Series #02

THE STORY OF THE SPAR:
AN ORAL HISTORY
of the
HAZEL PEARL

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Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador
Intangible Cultural Heritage Office
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Introduction

BY TERRA BARRETT

On the grassy lawn in front of the yellow and green Ella Freeman Heritage House in Champney's West, Trinity Bay sits a curious object. To someone unfamiliar with the community or with boatbuilding it appears to be an old rotting piece of wood with various metal fittings and rings. This piece of wood is the source of many local stories and memories and is locally known as a spar. The term spar is defined in "The Sailor's Word Book" by William Henry Smyth as:

SPAR. The general term for any mast, yard, boom, gaff, &c. In ship-building, the name is applied to small firs used in making staging.

Definition of a spar, from The Sailor's Word-Book.

This particular spar was once a part of the schooner *Hazel Pearl* which sunk in the Champney's West harbour. There are many people in the community with stories about the boat's sinking and the wreck which continued to lay 15 fathoms under the surface of the water. A local fisherman accidentally brought up the spar while cleaning his net several summers ago. The community decided to give the spar a place of honour in front of the Heritage House where the history of the community is housed.

In the summer of 2015, Dale Jarvis and Terra Barrett completed several workshops and interviews in Champney's West. Two of the interviews were with Ben and Roy Hiscock, two brothers aged 83 and 90 who had memories of growing up in the community and of the shipwrecks in the area. The *Hazel Pearl* and the spar were central to the interviews, and so the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, in partnership with the Champney's West Heritage Group Incorporated, decided to do a follow-up project in the summer of 2016. The follow-up fieldwork included three more oral history interviews on the shipwreck with Albert Hiscock, Sarah Hiscock, and Wayne Freeman, archival research, and field recording measurements of the spar.

As noted by Dr. Gerald Pocius, "Oral materials gathered from a local community — be they about objects or any other aspect of thought or behaviour — must be recognized as a distinctively cultural commentary." There is local knowledge about the sinking of the *Hazel Pearl* which is unique to Champney's West, and has brought the story of the spar to life in ways a simple object could not. This booklet aims to record and share some of the memories and stories of the *Hazel Pearl* in order to promote pride in community history and the practice of storytelling in Champney's West.

— St. John's, August 2016

CONSTRUCTION

The story of the *Hazel Pearl* begins under her first name, the *Coronet*. The schooner was built in a shipyard in Devon, England and launched in 1887. Made of oak, the *Coronet* was designed to be a sturdy fishing vessel, capable of sailing through the rugged seas of the North Atlantic. Her solid construction kept her afloat for almost sixty years, through harsh storms and the tight grip of ice off Newfoundland's coast. She underwent some changes to keep up with the times, including the installation of an auxiliary engine sometime during the 1930s. The engine wasn't a large one though, so her captain's would usually opt to travel by sail.

LENGTH: **77 FEET**

WIDTH: **20 FEET**

DEPTH: **9 FEET**

GROSS TONNAGE: **90 TONNES**

REGISTERED TONNAGE: **53 TONNES**

SHIP HISTORY

Built as a fishing schooner in 1887, the *Coronet* moved from owner to owner throughout her early years until she was purchased by a company in the Faroe Islands. With a new crew of twenty-one fishermen, *Coronet* would sail every spring to the cod fishing grounds off the coast of Greenland, and return home in the early fall at the end of the fishing season.

The season of 1935 was no different. On September 4th, after a successful summer, the crew of the *Coronet* pulled up their nets and sailed for home, leaving the fishing grounds in their wake. What they didn't know at the time, but would discover soon enough, was there was a brutal storm heading straight for them.

The storm caught the ship on September 7th, slamming the schooner with high winds and heavy seas that ripped her wheelhouse, and all the navigation equipment in it, from her deck. Another heavy wave took her lifeboats, and yet another the masts and sails. The crew was forced to stay on deck as water poured into the engine room and half-flooded the galley and crew quarters. The ship was left adrift, with all on board fearing they would never see their homes again.

Eventually, the weather calmed. One evening, the crew spotted a lighthouse in the distance, but it was too far away to hear their cries for help. It was the Cabot Island lighthouse; they were drifting off the coast of Newfoundland.

SHIP HISTORY

On September 20th, George and Henry Knee, two fishermen from Valleyfield, Bonavista Bay, decided that with the worst of the weather now passed, they would try and head out for some fishing on the grounds near Flower's Island. Accompanied by George's 9-year-old son, Baxter, they set out in their 25-foot motor boat.



Boats in Champney's West Harbour
courtesy of Minnie and Albert Hiscock.

Shortly after arriving on the grounds, they were shocked to spot the beaten *Coronet* drifting in the bay. As Baxter Knee said years later in an interview with *The Downhomer*, "I can remember going out in the boat in the morning and seeing the old schooner nearly wrecked."

With the *Coronet* lying low in the water, obviously in trouble, the Newfoundlanders approached the vessel and quickly realised they had a second problem; a language barrier. Through creative body language and hand gestures, the two crews managed to communicate that the *Coronet* definitely needed to be towed into safe harbour, and the Knees were going to do it. A rope was thrown from the schooner, and the motor boat slowly pulled her into Valleyfield.

SHIP HISTORY

Upon arriving, a Swedish man named Carl Anderson was summoned. He lived in the community and was multilingual, allowing him to serve as a translator for the Danish sailors. Eventually, after some repairs, the *Coronet* and her crew were towed to St. John's by Captain Abram ("Abe") Winsor of Wesleyville.

The initial plan was that the ship would be repaired and given a refit before returning to the Faroe Islands. For one reason or another, that never occurred.

Instead, her crew returned home, and the ship remaining in St. John's harbour. Crosbie and Co. Ltd. of St. John's purchased the vessel and paid for her to be repaired. They then placed the ship under Captain Winsor's command. Captain Winsor renamed the ship *Hazel Pearl*, after two of his daughters, and sailed her for one summer off the coast of Labrador. When he returned home, it was sold to James "Jim" Tiller of Wesleyville.



Schooner coming into
Champney's courtesy of Minnie
and Albert Hiscock.

SHIP HISTORY

This wasn't the only accident involving the *Hazel Pearl*. According to Roy Hiscock of Champney's West:

The *Hazel Pearl* was a Norwegian vessel. There was two of them came over to the seal hunt in the spring. I don't know what year it was now but and they got stuck in the ice off Cape Bonavista and I don't know how long they were stuck in the ice but quite some time I think. Anyways the crew, I suppose it was more or less mutiny than anything, they left and walked ashore to Cape Bonavista. The crews of the two vessels, there was two of them, Norwegian vessels, and they walked ashore and left the vessels. And Mifflin's went out after and salvaged the *Hazel Pearl*. Brought her in and I don't know how that worked because they could only claim part of her because there was a wreck commissioner used to be around then, I suppose there still is now probably, wreck commissioner, and he took charge of that kind of stuff and whatever there was he had to share it equal parts. I suppose Mifflin's probably bought out their share and got the boat.

Samuel William "S.W." Mifflin was a merchant out of Catalina. After salvaging the *Hazel Pearl*, he planned to use her to bring some equipment into St. John's from his hometown. This, it would turn out, would be the last trip the *Hazel Pearl* would ever make.

WRECK

It was the afternoon of February 28th, 1945, when the *Hazel Pearl* left Catalina and sailed for St. John's. As Clayton Moody stated in Robert Parsons' book *Any Strange News; "Hazel Pearl"*, under skipper Matthew Mason of Catalina, had to come to Champney's because there was a storm coming on. His engineer was Robert House."



View of Catalina, ca. 1900, from the Geography Collection - Historical Photographs of Newfoundland and Labrador, Digital Archives Initiative, Memorial University.

Sarah Hiscock daughter of Charles and May Hiscock of Champney's West was twelve years old when the *Hazel Pearl* sank. She can remember when the whole harbour from Champney's Arm to English Head would freeze over. Adults would skate on the ice and men would pull wood across the frozen ice. She recalls:

In 1945 the thick ice broke up and shifted out except part of the thick ice from Champney's East to West was leaved. My father Charles needed to pull down a load of wood by land there appeared to be a storm coming on so I decided to walk up the hill known as Jack's Hill to meet my dad. I met my father. Dad looked out on the water, we saw a schooner coming fully sailed, coming

WRECK

fast my dad said to me, “There you are my dear. There’s a wreck coming they must be coming in for shelter from the storm”. But I didn’t know what a wreck meant so he said, “That ice is so hard they will hit that ice and sink”. Sure enough as soon as we got down to the water side near our house the boat was in, and hit the ice. We heard it was the *Hazel Pearl*. She sank later, no loss of life.



Portrait of Sarah Hiscock,
taken Ella Freeman
Heritage House, 2016.

Rushing to beat the weather, the skipper of *Hazel Pearl* had the ship at “full sail” as he rounded into Champney’s. Though he encountered some slob ice near the harbour entrance, he continued on and was surprised when the ice conditions suddenly changed. Clayton Moody continues:



View of Champney’s West from
the Champney’s West Heritage
Group Incorporated.

The schooner came in through the slob ice - snowing - the skipper thought he could sail on up through the harbour to the gut, but when the *Hazel Pearl* struck the ice, it beat in her bow. There was a lot of cod oil in drums on the deck and these drums went adrift in the slob ice. People got the cod oil from the ice when they got their rodneys off. They made as high as a hundred dollars for the casks of oil and that was a good amount of money in those days.

WRECK

Ben Hiscock, of Champney's West, was on the ice in the harbour, watching the *Hazel Pearl* come in:

We were all off on the harbour ice down there and wind came southern and it started to snow. We saw the *Hazel Pearl* coming in around, coming in here on their full sail, fully rigged. And I don't know why he didn't see us off there. He must have seen us I don't know but he kept his sail up and he never pulled the sail down until he got within perhaps 100, 150 feet from the hard ice. She come on in and she hit the hard ice and he holed her up, holed her upward and the water started pouring in, eh? But she didn't sink.

The ship had crashed into the ice, leaving a hole just below the waterline. As seawater began to rush into her, those who were on the ice tried to offer aid, only to meet resistance from the ship's captain. Roy Hiscock, Ben's brother, was also there at the time of the collision. He explains:



Portrait of Ben Hiscock, taken
Ella Freeman Heritage House, 2015.

So he came in, straight in and he saw us we were out on the ice standing up there watching her come in and of course when she went into the ice so far it bounced off but it put a little hole in the back from her stem about like so. And he wouldn't let us go aboard and for a long time because it was only two and a half hours and she was gone done but we could've, it was not

WRECK

necessary for her to sink because we could've had enough off the front end of her because the hole was just below the water's edge.



Portrait of Roy Hiscock,
taken in his home in
Champney's West, 2015.

The *Hazel Pearl* was carrying a load of fish as well as over one hundred barrels of cod liver oil. As she continued to fill with water, some of the local fishermen managed to haul in barrels that had fallen overboard, while the men on the ice worked to help the captain save some of his cargo. Roy says,

... Eventually, we took it upon ourselves and went aboard and hoist off a hundred and thirteen barrels of oil and hoisting the motor, a new motor and different things. And there were some miscellaneous stuff that there was no account for it, you know, because the wreck commissioner would claim it if he knew it was taken out of her but there was a bit of stuff sneaked.

Over the next few hours, the ship settled lower in the water, until she finally slipped beneath the waves. The amount of time it took for her to sink depends on who you ask, with the shortest time being 15 minutes, and the longest being sometime overnight,

WRECK

between one or two o'clock in the morning. Clayton Moody learned of the ship's sinking from his father the next morning.

When my father got up the next morning, (we couldn't go in the woods for the weather was rough) he called us, saying 'Boys, I don't see any sign of that vessel.' When we found out, she was gone down right in Champney's harbour, canvas and all on her. You could see her spars and that was about all. Mifflin came up in a bigger vessel and tried to get the *Hazel Pearl* up, but they didn't get it refloated. They had to try to salvage the schooner in order to put a claim in for insurance.



Bluenose Schooner Stamp.

SALVAGE

Now that the *Hazel Pearl* was on the bottom of the harbour in Champney's, it was up to her owner, S.W. Mifflin, to try and refloat her. During the summer of 1945, Mifflin chartered a couple of vessels to make a salvage attempt. Ben Hiscock describes the scene that summer:

They came the next summer to try to raise her. Mifflin owned her. That's who owned that one. They came the next summer with a couple of ships. The Hood I think one was to try to raise her up but they stirred up the mud but they couldn't raise her. But there was no loss of life there because they had standing ice to get on but that's what happened to her.

All the salvagers work was in vain – the *Hazel Pearl* could not be moved. Mifflin officially declared her “Lost At Sea” and her registry was closed.

For years, locals could see the ships white spars below the surface. As Albert Hiscock of Champney's West describes:

She went down there it must be 15 fathoms of water. You could look over the boat you know and you could down at her mastheads that's the tops of her spars that was painted white for years and then they dropped off and sink down ... Like I say you could only see the mastheads because she was out on the side and because they were painted white. The mastheads she got cross streaks in them that's all with schooners they have that painted white and the others was varnished. The other part of the spar.

SALVAGE



Portrait of Albert Hiscock, taken Ella Freeman Heritage House, 2016.

Eventually, the spars and masts decayed and drifted to the bottom of the harbour. Then, one day, one of them was salvaged completely by accident. Albert continues:

Well that was Wayne, pulled it up with the seine. Yeah he had a seine out. He put it out there to clean it, got hooked up and I guess he had quite a time to get the old spar up.

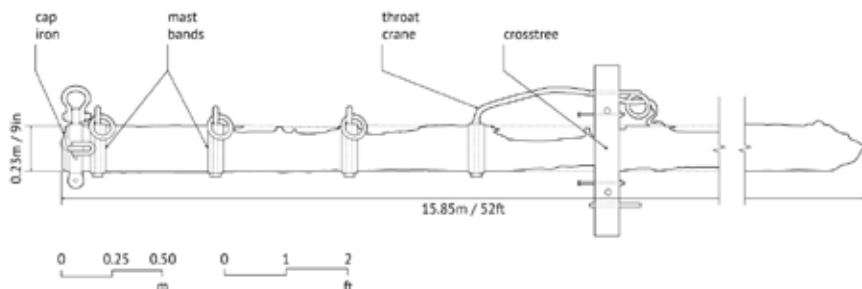
Ben Hiscock says:

Wayne there he salvaged that when he had out his, he had out his seine for, seine for, catch herring you got fall with it, raise it to the top of the water. Her spar was standing up out there, standing up straight there for years and years and years and years. You can still go there now just out a little better than half over the harbour you can still see the form of her there now in the mud.

Fisherman Wayne Freeman describes finding this surprise catch in his nets.

We were cleaning our seine out, our capelin seines with the long liner and we shot it out there and the tides were a little bit down and it sort of hooked up in the spar I guess. We thought we were a long ways clear of it but when we went to pull the seine back

SALVAGE



Drawing of the masthead, by Michael Philpott, 2016.

aboard we couldn't get it aboard until we had to pull really hard and all of a sudden something snapped. So when we got that pulled up it came to the surface and we didn't know what it was. It didn't look like a pole. So we hauled it into the wharf and when we looked at it there we saw pieces of cable sticking off so I realized it must have been a mast or something. So we towed it and put it into the slipway and cleaned it off and we realized it was the mast of the *Hazel Pearl*.

Once the spar was brought ashore specialists from Memorial University reviewed the artifact. Although the initial thought was to replace the spar in the water they decided to allow the Champney's West Heritage Group to put the spar on display due to the community's connection to and interest in the *Hazel Pearl* ship wreck. An excavator hauled the spar from the slipway to the Ella Freeman Heritage House where it is currently displayed.

SALVAGE

The spar that Wayne brought up in his fishing net is most likely one of the mastheads (the highest part of the mast) of the *Hazel Pearl*. The hardware at the very top is called a “cap iron”, and the other rings are the “mast bands”. Each mast band would have a different name, depending on what sort of rigging was attached to it. Towards the centre of the masthead, there is a rod that is bent out of shape. This may have been a “throat halyard crane”, used to raise and lower the sail.



Li Xingpei measuring spar in Champney's West. Photo by Michael Philpott.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling is an important tool in building community, and in collectively remembering significant events. The sinking of the *Hazel Pearl* stands out in the memory of many people in the community either from firsthand experience and memories of the wreck or from stories told over the years and through generations. While the spar itself does not signify very much on its own – taken in the context of the community and their experience with fishing, boating, and shipwrecks as well as story telling – the spar is an important tool for expressing memories of the past and keeping those memories alive for future generations.

Champney's West Harbour. Photo by Dale Jarvis.



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About the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador

The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador is a nonprofit organization which was established in 1984 to stimulate an understanding of and an appreciation for the architectural heritage of the province. The Foundation, an invaluable source of information for historic restoration, supports and contributes to the preservation and restoration of buildings of architectural or historical significance. The Heritage Foundation also has an educational role and undertakes or sponsors events, publications and other projects designed to promote the value of our built heritage. The Heritage Foundation is also involved in work designed to safeguard and sustain the intangible cultural heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs. This is achieved through policies that celebrate, record, disseminate, and promote our living heritage.



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COLLECTIVE MEMORIES PROJECT

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