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THE MUSTY PAST.

**A Great Disaster in Which
20 Men Lost Their Lives.**

I have always contended that in no country in the world have the people been subjected to greater danger, hardships and miraculous escapes than the fishermen of Newfoundland. It is only when we enter into conversation with those who participated in the adventures that we can form any idea of the hardships they have undergone, more especially at the seal-fishing during the days of our great sailing fleet. Very few of the old heros who participated in the days when the great fleet was at the zenith of its glory are now alive, but yet, now and then, we come across one of them. Mr. Richard L. Wells of Salmon Cove, Port-de-Grave, is pretty well the last of the Old Guard. Mr. Wells is a regular encyclopedia of information connected with the fisheries of our country, more particularly in the days of the musty past. His personal experiences with many of our famous seal-killing and planters seem more like romance, and the dangers, adventures and escapes from death have indeed most marvellous, and almost beyond belief. There is nothing more interesting to the mind of the Newfoundland than to listen to stories of our great sailing fleet, commanded by such "jowlers" as Hester, White, Jackson, Dawe, etc., and were not that many of these adventures opened during the lives of those who have passed the three score years and upwards, it would indeed be most beyond belief. Mr. Wells is in the flesh, hale and hearty, and made his first voyage to the ice in the Spring of 1858, when he sailed to the seal-fishing in the brigantine Sarah McBride, owned and commanded by his uncle, William Wells. In those days there were not the modern appliances and improvements that we have today. In those days they cooked their food in the open galley or cauldron. The Sarah McBride was a vessel of 1500 young harps. The price at that year was forty-seven shillings per quintal. They struck the ice in the neighbourhood of Cabot and in the years 1859 and 1860, Mr. Wells

H. F. SHORTIS.

sailed from Brigus in the brigantine George, Capt. Job Harvey, but they were not successful in either trip. In 1861, he sailed with Capt. Thomas Munden in the "Sisters," owned by Capt. Az Munden. The crew numbered 30 men, the most of whom were from Placentia Bay. As was usual they sailed on the 1st March, and on the 1st April the crew "managed." They were driven South by the strong N. E. winds, and when they made Cape St. Francis, again bound North for old seals, the crew decided that the ship should bear up for home. Needless to say this voyage was a blank. In 1862, 3-4-5-6, Mr. Wells sailed with Capt. Sam Wilcox of Frogmarsh, Brigus. In the splendid brig "Gladiator," which carried two royals and was about 120 tons, with a crew of 55 men. Capt. Sam was considered one of the most competent and successful seal-killers sailing out of the country, and to handle a square-rigger he had no superior. The average for the five Springs, was 2500.

In 1867 he sailed with Capt. John Bartlett, familiarly known as "Honest John," in the S.S. Wolf, and secured only 2200 seals. In 1868 Mr. Wells was again with "Honest John," but in the brigantine Deerhound. They sailed from Brigus on 1st March. This vessel was built the previous year in Trinity Bay, and was over 100 tons. The same year the S.S. Panther came to the country, and was commanded by Capt. Abraham Bartlett, of Brigus. The Spring of 1868 will live in the memory of the people of Conception Bay, owing to the great loss of life that occurred on Spy Wednesday, April 8th of the above year.

The day opened very fine and clear, and young seals were very numerous all around the vessel on loose ice. Every man was in high spirits, and no time was lost after the dawn of day in getting the boats (eight in number) out. They were each manned by four men, leaving the Captain and only two men (including the cook) on board. The cook was an old man named Critch. The two quarter boats were the first to leave the vessel, and Mr. Wells had charge of the starboard boat, and the Captain's son, Isaac, was his gunner. The vessel was kept on a westerly course till all the boats were dropped, giving each boat a space of about half a mile, so that when the eight boats were dropped in the water the vessel would be about four miles from Mr. Wells's boat. The vessel was then hoisted round and headed for the first boat, which was dropped, and the wind was very light from the South until about noon, when a terrific storm of wind and blinding snow-storm suddenly burst from the South East, and out of eight boats containing 22 men, only 3 reached the vessel in time to have their canvas which had been clewed down, and not tied up before the boats left. Mr. Wells's boat was one of the fortunate ones to reach the Deerhound. They had no sooner reached the deck of the ship, when the storm took hurricane force, and they immediately realized that there was very little hope for their comrades in the other six boats. It was impossible to see anything in the blinding snow-storm. Mr. Wells's boat was the first to reach the vessel, and the other was in charge of Joe Morgan, who reported that the boat

his (Wells') brother had charge of was near him, taking seals, and was nearly loaded when the storm sprang up. Morgan was on his way to the vessel when the storm commenced. The Captain thinking that Wells's brother would probably hang to the skirt of ice, ran in that direction, hoping to pick them up, but saw no sign of them. He then concluded that they must have steered for the vessel, expecting that she was "laying to" in the lake of water. At this time there were eleven men, including the captain, on board. The vessel "lay to" all night, and when daylight broke, ran to Eastward with the hope of finding some of the missing boats. The vessel continued in that direction under bare poles for five hours, the wind having veered from the N. W. during the night; but during the night it seemed more violent than the S. E. gale of the previous day. About 8 a.m. they sighted a boat, and went to leeward and hove up under close reefed fore-sails, main staysail and jumbo, and so manoeuvred the vessel till the boat dropped down to her—the men on board keeping her head to the wind and sea, for that was their only chance to avoid being swamped. Finally one of the vessel's crew dropped a heaving line from the jib-boom, which they caught. One of the men in the boat had given up exhausted and was hoisted on board. Their guns and ropes were frozen to the boat which was heavily coated with ice. They were all badly frostbitten, and one of the number was thought to be beyond human aid, but with a supply of warm, dry clothing and a supply of "spirits" the Captain and crew were successful in saving them all. During the excitement of the rescue, no thought was given to anything, except to save their lives, but after the rescued men had been made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, they suddenly realized that the poor fellows were not part of the crew of the Deerhound, but it revived hopes in their hearts that some other vessel had done the same as they had, and saved the lives of their missing comrades. The boat and crew picked up, belonged to Capt. Samuel Dawe, formerly known as "Northern Sam," and they were fortunate enough to get under the lee of a large iceberg until after daylight, when the sea became too rough around the berg for them to remain close to it, so they were then at the mercy of the wind, and all they could do was to keep her head to

the wind and sea. They had no seals and had given up all hope as the night was a desperate one on the deck of a vessel, not to mention in a small boat. A few days after the storm, which lasted for several days, the crew of the Deerhound learned with delight that one of the boats was picked up by Capt. Hiscock of Carbonear, and the four occupants saved. Five of the boats have never been heard of since. The following are the names of the men lost:—
No. 1 boat—Jordan Wells, Salmon Cove, in charge; Isaac Hussey, sr., Isaac Hussey, jr., both of Port de Grave; John Kent, Spaniard's Bay.
No. 2 boat—John Hefferin in charge; John Armstrong, Thomas Martin and William Martin, all of Port de Grave.
No. 3 boat—Abram Muford in charge, and his son Abram; William Butler, Clarke's Beach, and George Hussey, Salmon Cove.
No. 4 boat—John Roberts, Brigus (better known as John Tor), and son, George Roberts, Moses Roberts and Ebenezer James, all of Brigus.
No. 5 boat—John Ploughman in charge, but I cannot give the names of the other three men in this boat.
The 6th boat was picked up by Capt. Hiscock of Carbonear, and the names of the crew were:—George A. Wells, Salmon Cove; Joseph Jameson, Richard Hennessey and Will Burke.
The Deerhound spoke every vessel that they came across for the next three weeks after losing their men, and kept the flag half-mast in the hope of getting some tidings of them. They bore up for home on the 8th of May, arriving about 15th. The news of the disaster had reached home before their arrival.

In 1869 and 70 Mr. Wells sailed with the famous Capt. Az Munden in the brigantine Atlantic, and the first Spring they secured 2800 seals, but unfortunately got jammed in Green Bay, while off Exploits the seals began to "run," and they landed there and brought off oil casks and filled them with the pump. While they were in this position a vessel from Harbor Grace was wrecked by the rafting ice. The Captain gave orders to save some of her cargo of seals, but for some time previous the crew being on an allowance of three cakes of hard bread per day, objected to the salving of the cargo.

Mr. Wells had quite an experience at the seal fishery both in sailing vessels and steamers, and the following is a list of the ships in which he sailed in search of the whitecoats:—

| Date | Ship | Master |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1858 | Sarah McBride | Wm. Wells |
| 1859-60 | George | Job Harvey |
| 1861 | Sisters | Thos. Munden |
| 1862-3-4-5-6 | Gladiator | Sam Wilcox |
| 1867 | S.S. Wolf | John Bartlett |
| 1868 | Deerhound | John Bartlett |
| 1869-70 | Atlantis | Az. Munden |
| 1871-72 | S.S. Commodore | Az. Munden |
| 1873-4-5-6-7-8 | S.S. Vanguard | " |
| 1882 | S.S. Vanguard | Thos. Green |
| 1883 | S.S. Iceland | Wm. Wilcox |
| 1884-5 | S.S. Iceland | Az. Smith, Cupids |
| 1888 | S.S. Nimrod | Moses Bartlett |
| 1891 | S.S. Newfoundland | Chas. Dawe |
| 1892 | S.S. Vanguard | Chas. Dawe |

Few men in the country had more practical experience than Mr. Richard Wells, and the following little adventure will give your readers of the day, some idea of the grit, hardihood, daring and miraculous escapes of our hardy countrymen in the days past and gone—the most romantic period in our country's history.

Nearly forty years ago, Mr. Wells was at Grady, Labrador, in the little schooner Active, of about 25 tons. This was late in the month of November, and the schooner was frozen up for two or three weeks, after all the other craft had left the coast. The s.s. Vanguard, Capt. George, of Spaniard's Bay, came to his assistance and towed the schooner out. Mr. R. D. McRae, the agent of the Active, was

on board the Vanguard, and about 10 o'clock at night, blowing and snowing with the wind in on the land, he was compelled to chop the line to save the little old schooner from foundering, and run back for Grady in darkness, snow and wind. The Vanguard had to harbor next morning up the shore. The little Active fortunately made Grady Harbor about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. They were only safely anchored when the wind chopped off from the N.W., and blew with hurricane force, and the frost became so severe that before noon that day, their water cask on deck froze solid, and burst the hoops, and finally the harbor and "runs" froze over, and it looked as if the only alternative was to land everything, unbend sails and remain for the winter. There was no other craft on the shore, and the steamer Vanguard had gone on. The agent, Mr. McRae, was on the Vanguard, and that steamer had to harbor also, but in due time arrived at Harbor Grace. After several weeks, the little schooner Active and her heroic crew were given up for lost. There was no such thing as a steamer being sent down to look for the poor mariners in those days, although they numbered nine with the skipper's little boy 12 years old—his elder brother and two sisters being in the Vanguard, and, of course, arrived home safely. Some time about the last of November or first of December, Mr. McRae drove up from Harbor Grace to Salmon Cove to console the wife and family of the skipper of the little Active, by telling them that they should not want for bread while he lived—he being the supplying merchant. What was his pleasant surprise to learn that the schooner had safely arrived. The little schooner had been built on Labrador, and was badly in need of repairs, and the hero of this event and his crew, offered themselves to bring her home. After arrival it was thought best to condemn her, and, for years after, her ribs could be seen on the beach in front of Skipper Dick's house at Salmon Cove—as a relic of the most memorable voyage in all his experience. Who but Newfoundland fishermen would risk their lives at that season of the year, surrounded as she was with Arctic ice, and encountering a continuance of gales of N.W. wind and blinding snow storms during the first week in December?

Mr. Wells is a brother of the respected magistrate of Little Bay, Thos. B. Wells, Esq.

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