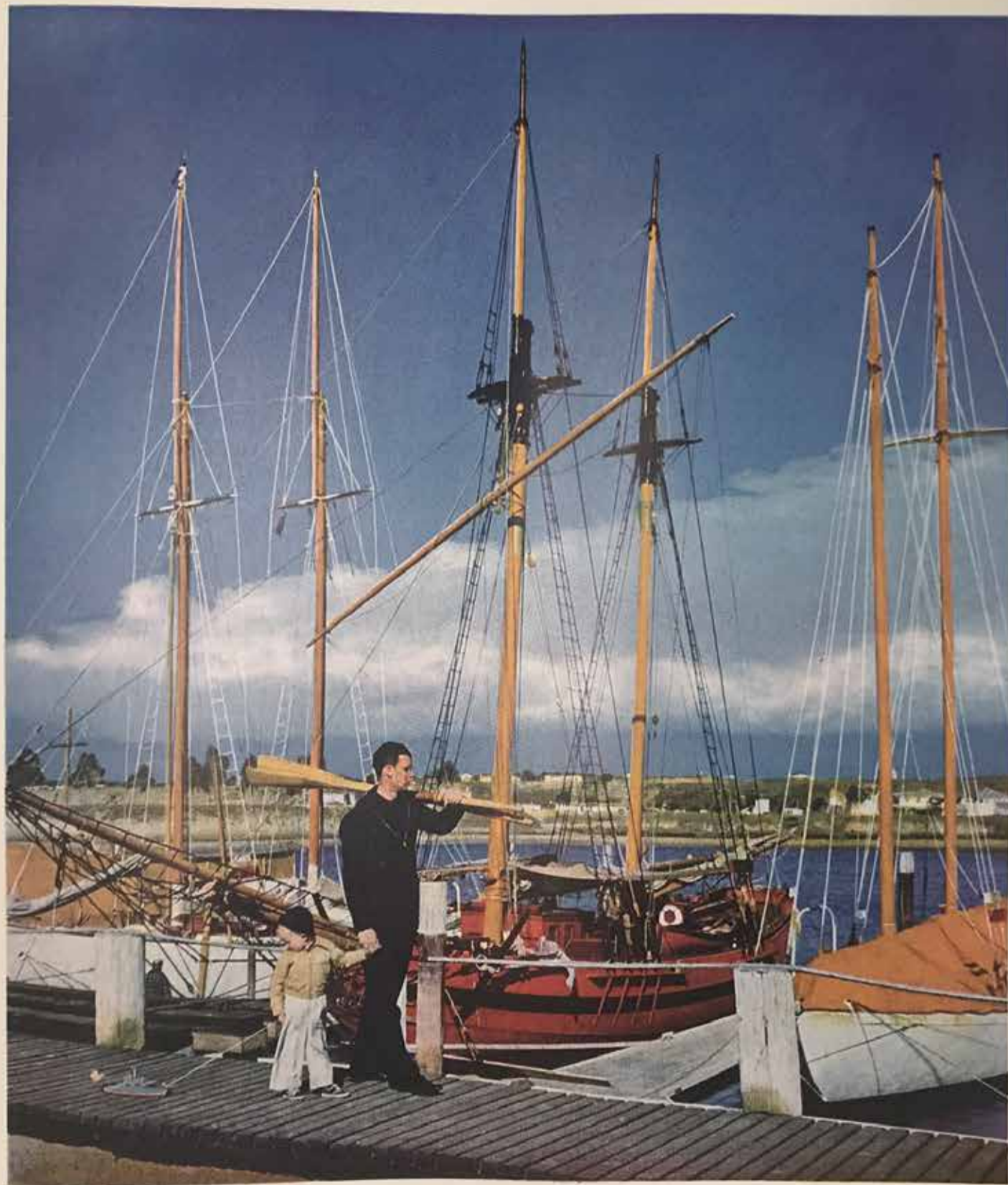


October, 1943

50 Cents

Yachting



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THE LOSS OF THE "ATHENE"

By CAPTAIN SAMUEL WEINTRAUB

"Athene" under yawl rig in her last days as a yacht, before conversion to a cargo carrier. Manning Bros. photo

THE *Athene* is gone! It is not often that a yacht built for pleasure only and sailed chiefly on summer seas finds her final resting place on the bottom of the ocean, and still more rarely does it happen while engaged in the prosaic work of carrying badly needed cargo during war time. Yet that is what happened to one of the famous cutters turned out by that master designer and builder, "Nat" Herreshoff, nearly half a century ago. For the *Athene* was built at Bristol in 1899, and launched in the spring of that year for W. Otis Gray, of Marblehead.

She was a large cutter in a day of large yachts. Of composite construction, wood planking over steel frames, she was 102 feet over all, 70 feet on the water, 19 feet beam and drew 12½ feet of water.

Always a fast yacht, she stayed in Massachusetts waters until some fifteen years ago, when she was sold to the West Coast. While there, she was at one time named *Talayha* and sailed in the Honolulu Race of 1928 while owned by L. Lippman when she finished first but could not save her time on the smaller boats.

Apparently she had been sold back to eastern interests after the war brought a shortage of tonnage for small cargo freights and, when I first met her she was owned by A. A. Washton, of New London, and was in the West Indies trade. At that time, I was in Miami, anxious to secure a master's or chief mate's berth on any large or small vessel trading between West Indian ports (which I knew) and Florida, or southern U. S. ports. When the former master of the *Athene* was taken sick and had to go to the hospital, I was sent for and asked to take over the command until he should be able to return to his duties. I accepted and was told to go down to Pier I, where I would find the vessel.

At that time, I did not know what the *Athene* was so, when I reached the pier, I stopped to look her over before going aboard. The dock was alive with activity, there being at least a dozen vessels of all types loading and discharging cargo. There were schooners from Maine, yawls, motor vessels and other types, all engaged now in the cargo carrying business, as well as several converted yachts, engaged in the same trade, carrying cargo to and from Florida and West Indian ports.

The *Athene* was a beautiful ship, the finest of the lot, and I could see at once that she had been converted from an ocean sailing yacht to a cargo carrier. There was nothing on her decks or anything about the rig to show that she was not still a yacht, but I could see a single large cargo hatch amidships, and that told me the story of her present business. However, once you went aboard, you could readily see that she had one large hold, capable of carrying at least 1,000 cases of pineapples, which product was now being shipped from Cuba to the United States in large quantities, most of it being carried by small coasters from fifteen tons up to vessels carrying a few thousand tons.

The *Athene* was 82 tons gross, carried a Marconi yawl rig



with a large amount of sail, and had a Gray Diesel motor of 165 hp. She was heavily planked and heavily constructed and I could see she was a real ocean-going vessel. I was told that she had sailed around the world on a 40,000-mile cruise a few years before. I could see that she had the finest equipment money could buy, and every sort of modern life-saving, fire, and safety equipment. There was not a single item worth having that she did not carry and I felt that here was a real ship. And she was, I soon found out, just that.

I went aboard and walked over to the crew. I soon discovered that none of them could speak a word of English except one, who identified himself as the cook. They were all Cubans except the cook, who was Mexican. Luckily, I could speak Spanish fairly well. Also luckily, the cook could speak fairly good English. I introduced myself as the new captain. They were all expecting a new master to come aboard as they had now been without a captain for over two days.

They received the news cheerfully and we soon got together. I told them what I expected of them and what they could expect from me. I was the only American citizen aboard and I soon discovered that my crew were excellent seamen, conscientious, strictly sober and really cared for their jobs. I have never had a finer lot or a more loyal crew under my command. A few days later, we sailed for Havana in ballast and returned to Miami with a cargo of pineapples. As the former captain was still sick, I stayed aboard in command.

Life aboard the *Athene* went along smoothly. I had made and completed five full round voyages between Miami and Havana. During these voyages, the prevailing winds were easterly and northeast, mostly in our favor, and we generally had favorable sailing weather. Our average running time to Havana was around 30 to 36 hours with our Diesel engine giving about three and one-half knots, and our average running time northbound, with favorable currents from the Gulf Stream, was from 22 to 26 hours; although on one particular northbound voyage, I sailed the distance of about 210 miles from Havana to Miami sea buoy in 19 hours flat. In fact, for about seven hours I had lowered the mainsail as she was coming north too fast and I didn't want to reach Miami sea buoy before daylight.

On our last voyage, once outside Morro Castle, we found a strong wind from the ENE quadrant and, setting everything that would draw, we let her go northward in the Gulf Stream. At times, she actually did twelve knots, and we expected to

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THE LOSS OF THE "ATHENE"

(Continued from page 32)

reach Miami entrance by daylight. Our course from Havana took us up just outside of the long fringe of reefs that extend southward from Cape Florida. As night came on, the wind lightened and by midnight it had nearly let go and the engine was started. As usual, my bow lookout was on watch up on the forecastle head; besides him, the only others on deck were myself and the quartermaster at the wheel.

The night was very dark but there was a clear sky with the stars showing. However, there was a black haze hanging low on the surface of the sea and this tended to decrease visibility. The sea was calm and there was no wind. These were the conditions existing when we had Carysfort Lighthouse abeam about 3:00 a.m., being about one mile off.

My next light was Fowey Rocks which is about eleven miles south of Miami sea buoy. Since the wind had let go and I was well up on my distance, I decided to take in all sail, which was now hanging loosely. I called the crew from below and all the sails were lowered and furled as I did not expect to need them again before reaching Miami, as we were too close to port and were far enough ahead on our course to finish up under power alone. It didn't take long to get the sails stowed, after which the crew went below again, except those on watch.

Proceeding up the coast through a calm sea, making about four knots under power, we soon picked up Fowey Rocks Light a little on our port bow, exactly where it should have been. With conditions unchanged, we had almost brought Fowey Rocks abeam about one half-mile off. It was now about 5:00 a.m., but night still hung on and I could just see a faint glow in the eastern sky which told that daylight would be coming in shortly. I could see the reflection of an electric light forward coming from the galley and knew that the cook was up preparing coffee and getting breakfast ready. Everything was peaceful and quiet.

I could see my engineer standing in front of the galley hatch. He had evidently come up from below to take a look around and then walked back aft to have his usual morning chat with me in Spanish. I myself was standing alongside the quartermaster who was steering when, without warning, I saw a tremendous black hull approaching us from the eastward, heading in a westerly direction directly for Fowey Rocks Lighthouse. She was coming at us at what seemed to me to be at a speed of about 14 knots. The bow lookout saw her at the same time and yelled a warning to me. I heard

his warning shout and saw this oncoming ship at the same time. There was not a light on either ship. The huge bulk was terribly close, possibly not over 200 feet away, and bearing down fast. Instinctively, I ordered my helmsman to put the wheel hard left, thinking that this maneuver would enable us to parallel the course of the steamer and either go clear or be sideswiped at the most.

But the *Athene* was traveling too slowly to answer her helm quickly and I knew a few seconds later that the crash would come immediately. Running blacked out as we were, we had not been seen by the other ship. There was no time left to try any other maneuver. Suddenly the crash came. All I could remember was the crunching of wood as this large steel ship ploughed into the hull of the *Athene* directly amidships on our starboard side. When she hit, the crash knocked me off my feet and I felt my ship being pushed through the sea as if by a mountain. I am quite sure she was cut in half as if by a knife.

As I felt the part of the ship on which I stood going down without any loss of time, I grabbed instinctively for anything I could lay my hands on. I must have grabbed the ropes that secured the deck cargo of pineapples and hung on to it. I felt myself being pulled under, so I finally let go and started to try to come to the surface. It seemed to me that I was under water a long time, and I said to myself: "This is the end, but I will fight to the last to come up." I continued to struggle to reach the surface but my breath was almost entirely gone and, in my effort to get air, I must have opened my mouth for I swallowed lots of salt water. Just as I was about completely exhausted, I came to the surface. Everything was yet pitch black but about ten feet away from me I could make out the hull of the big ship slowly sliding past, still in forward motion.

Cases of pineapples must have been strewn all over the area. I grabbed one right next to me and hung on. Looking up at the ship, I saw some of the crew lined up at the rails looking down. I cried out over and over again: "Throw me a line." They did not move, but just looked down at me. My position was about amidships of the other ship and, as she was moving slowly ahead, I feared that the propellers were still turning over. Again I yelled to the figures at the rail to stop their propellers. They did not answer and did not move. I was fearful that the suction of the propellers would catch me and drag me down. Although I was very tired, I made every effort to swim away from the hull of the ship, but couldn't do much because the suction from her forward motion kept pulling me towards her.

Slowly the huge hull slid past and was now a few hundred yards away. I finally floated close to another case of pineapples and grabbed it. Between

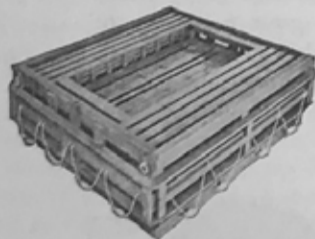


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In 1900, sailing in a screeching nor'wester, "Athene" defeated "Constellation"

the two cases, one arm on each, I was able to hang on quite comfortably. After drifting for about an hour, I was too exhausted to keep kicking my legs and just drifted. I saw nothing of any of my crew nor did I hear them shout. Suddenly I saw a light in the distance. I knew it was a boat of some kind. I began to yell and kept on yelling for at least fifteen or twenty minutes and noticed that the light was coming my way.

Finally, I heard a voice out of the darkness and it said "Keep yelling." I surely did, again and again, and the voice replied, "Keep yelling. We'll find you by your voice." They kept coming closer and paused about twenty feet away. Then suddenly a hand flashlight struck me in the face.

Helping hands pulled me out of the water and I fell into the bottom of the boat almost completely exhausted. This lifeboat was manned by the Chief Officer and six seamen of the ship that ran us down.

Already in this lifeboat were some of our crew, the engineer, and two of the able seamen, one of whom jumped overboard when he saw that the crash was inevitable. Three others of the crew were not there. I asked about them and was informed by my crew that they were missing and nowhere to be seen. Those lost consisted of the cook, who I knew was in the galley at work, one able seaman who was asleep in his bunk in the forecabin, and the quartermaster, who was at the wheel at the time, not over a foot away from me, as I was talking to him at the time of the crash.

We continued to row around the vicinity for a while looking for the others. Not a sign was seen of them, and I concluded that they had gone down with my vessel without ever having had a chance.

Daylight had now come and we could see the large transport in the distance, close to shore, lying still and still heading in a westerly direction. Military airplanes zoomed overhead close to the water. They were evidently relaying instructions by telephone to their shore bases.

A little while more, and a Coast Guard Reserve cruiser about 38 or 40 feet in length came out. They took us aboard and the Chief Officer of the steamer pulled back to his ship, now about a quarter of a mile away.

The Coast Guard boat then went alongside the ship that had sunk us and one of the enlisted men went aboard. When he returned he said that the captain of the transport wanted me to come aboard his ship and to talk to me about the collision. I looked up to the bridge deck and there was the captain leaning on the rail, dressed in pajamas. He looked down upon us and inquired, "Who's the Captain?" I answered that I was. He then said, "Come aboard, I want to talk to you." "Mister," I said, "You are comfortable and dry, I am wet and tired and have just been pulled out of the water. If you want to do any talking, you are in better physical condition than I am. Come down here and talk to me." To this he made no reply, but rang the engine room telegraph and got under way, heading south.

I looked at my watch. The time was 5:35 a.m. when it had stopped. We cruised around in the Coast Guard boat for at least another hour, looking for the three missing seamen. We never sighted any bodies but the sea was strewn with wreckage, papers and pineapples.

And so, after a full life of 44 years, the beautiful *Athene* ended her long career serving as a cargo carrier in World War II.

