

Of ships passing in the night toward their fate

By Jerry Bowen

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Every once and a while you come across stories with a series of coincidences that it is almost bizarre. This is such a story - about two oil tankers that were built at the Union Iron Works in San Francisco.

So what do two ships that were oil tankers have to do with Vacaville?

Well, one ship just happened to be named, the Frank H. Buck. That name will ring familiar with many old Vacaville old-timers and history buffs. I must admit that I can't prove conclusively that the ship was named after Vacaville's early pioneering agriculturist and prominent citizen, but as the story unfolds you will see that it is a very high probability.

The senior Frank H. Buck was born in 1859 in New York and moved to Vacaville in 1875. He met Annie Stevenson, from another pioneer family of Vacaville and they were married in 1886. Frank H. Buck Jr. was born in 1887 and later became a U.S. senator.

Over the years, Frank senior became a nationally known agriculturist but he also invested wisely and as a result became a very wealthy man. One of his investments was the Associated Oil Co. and therein lies the basis for this story.

In 1914, two oil tankers were launched within days of each other from the Union Iron Works at San Francisco. They were identical "sister" ships in every respect and were built within 50 feet of each other. One was named the Lyman Stewart and was owned by the Union Oil Company. The other tanker was named the Frank H. Buck, owned by the Associated Oil Co. Since Frank H. Buck Sr. owned a substantial number of shares of Associated Oil, I believe it was named after him although I have yet to find any official proof of this.

Both ships went their own ways, delivering to various Pacific, South American and East Coast ports without any significant happenings. But that was to change over the next few years in a series of events that would be concluded in one that was somewhat bizarre

During the First World War, the Frank H. Buck was taken over by the U.S. Navy on Jan. 25, 1918, and commissioned the same day as AO-1, with Lt Cmdr. G. E. McDonald, USNRF, in command.

After loading a full cargo of oil products at Port Arthur, Texas, she set sail for Devonport and Scapa Flow, Britain, where she discharged her oil into Navy storage tanks on Feb. 19, 1918. She made an additional five voyages to United Kingdom ports without incident. Then, on Sept. 1, 1918, while homeward bound, the ship was attacked by the German submarine U-155.

The Buck crew fought for their lives and scored at least two hits on the submarine, inflicting serious damage. Some accounts say the submarine was sunk.

At the end of the war, the Frank H. Buck was decommissioned at New York on Jan. 29, 1919, and two days later turned over to the Shipping Board for return to her owner.

In October 1922, the Lyman Stewart collided with the SS Walter A. Luckenback in a heavy fog off Point Lobos and foundered on the rocks near the famous old Cliff House of San Francisco. There was no loss of life among the crew and the ship was abandoned where she lay. It was a total loss and you might say it came home to die near its birthright at San Francisco.

The Buck continued transporting oil to various Pacific, South American and East Coast ports uneventfully until 1919 when she ran aground near San Francisco's Point Montara. Following the Point Montara mishap, the Buck suffered other problems at various Pacific Coast locations.

In October 1923, she went aground on the Columbia River Bar off Astoria, Ore.

On May 3, 1924, the Buck ran aground at Point Pinos in Monterey Bay on a clear night during calm weather.

The Buck's captain, Sigmund Anderson, had set a course that would have taken his vessel safely into Monterey Bay. After setting his course, Anderson went below deck as third mate George Allen came on watch. Allen, who had never been to Monterey, saw the lights of Point Pinos and ordered a change in the course that sent the ship racing at 13 knots toward the rocks of Point Pinos. Allen then went below to check with the captain and get verification of his change. While he was talking to the captain, the Buck slid over two reefs and came to a shuddering stop on the jagged rocks of Point Pinos.

The Buck began taking on water and the ship began to show signs of breaking in the middle. Captain Anderson quickly ordered a lifeboat lowered from the seaward side and 19 men, including the ship's second mate, boarded it. The boat got tangled in the rope attached to the ship and nearly capsized before the crew was able to get control and row to shore.

Fifteen members of the crew remained aboard the stricken vessel. At 5:45 the following morning, the Associated Oil Co.'s tanker Alden Anderson - probably named after another Solano County prominent citizen - steamed into Monterey Bay with orders to stand by until further notice.

Word of the Buck's plight spread rapidly and soon Point Pinos was alive with hundreds of people snapping photos of the stricken ship.

Patches were placed on the hull of the ship and elaborate preparations to refloat the vessel were made. Plans called for all repairs and preparations to be completed by the middle of May, to take advantage of maximum high tides that were due at that time.

On the night of May 17, 1924, the Buck, with the aid of the maximum high tide, was pulled free of the rocks and sent to San Francisco for repairs.

Frank H. Buck Sr. died in 1926 and as a result was never witness to the final events that took place with his namesake ship.

Following the touch-and-go salvage operations at Point Pinos, the Buck served the Associated Oil Co. faithfully until a dreadful day in March 1937. On that fateful day the ship was slowly making its way through the fog near the Golden Gate, as her sister ship Lyman Stewart had done 15 years before.

Suddenly, out of the fog, loomed the massive President Coolidge of the American President Lines. A collision was unavoidable and within seconds the Coolidge dealt the Buck a crippling blow.

Frantic efforts were made to tow the stricken vessel to port, but the Buck appeared to have a mind of its own as the strong currents of the Golden Gate channel took charge. The Buck drifted toward Point Lobos and soon broke apart on the jagged rocks.

With the Buck settling on the rocks near San Francisco's Cliff House, she found a final resting place alongside the rusting hulk of her twin sister, the Lyman Stewart!

Not only did these two vessels meet their demise within the shadow of where they had been built, but in a bizarre string of events they met their demise in the same manner, under the same circumstances, in the same area of the treacherous Golden Gate channel, and, possibly most remarkable of all, in their demise these twin tankers were separated by the same distance they had been separated in their launching cradles nearly a quarter of a century before!

John Ranacis, who used to race at the Vacaville drag strip that was located across the

freeway from the Pacific Gas & Electric Co. substation near Dixon, is looking for photos during its heyday. If anyone has any photos, please contact me via e-mail or John at 557-3416.

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