

Tequesta:

Wreck on the Reef

By JOSEPH M. CHEETHAM

The extent to which the early settlers along the lower Florida coasts depended upon an industry that is now all but forgotten is scarcely realized today. By the beginning of this century it had all but ceased to exist. It was an extremely lucrative industry, but most irregular and undependable.

Prior to the arrival of the railroad at Miami, supplies of all kinds were brought by steamship to Key West and then re-shipped in small sailing vessels to settlements along both the lower Florida coasts. Money to buy these goods was scarce, supplies from the outside world were limited to necessities, and shipments uncertain and irregular.

Even after the railroad's coming, tradition and habit lingered on with the people, especially along the Keys (for years untouched by man's progress after the railroad reached Miami). A wreck was to these people like a heavy rain after a long drought, manna from heaven. It meant replenishment of home and larder, a thrilling event in their lives. Wrecks on the reefs and hurricanes were the two big events in the lives of the settlers. They broke the monotony of isolation, and they often came together.

It was not surprising then that on a summer day, as late as the year 1905, the cry "Wreck on the reef!" sent a thrill through the people at Coconut Grove, then just a small fishing village just south of Miami. Within minutes almost everyone with a sizeable sailboat was rushing food and water aboard and heading for the reefs. Among them my brother, cousin and myself, all in our mid-teens, shipped on a sloop owned by an old Bahama colored man we knew only as Uncle Ben. He had a Wrecker's license and therefore could, if needed and chosen by the wrecking captain, share in salvage operations. The first skipper with such a license to reach the vessel in distress was made 'Wrecking Captain' and had the right to take on as many other boats as needed to float the wreck or, if that was impossible, then to save as much of

her cargo as he could. The cargo when removed was taken to Key West and sold at auction by United States District Court and the proceeds shared by the owners and crews of the salvage boats according to the tonnage of each. This court was commonly called "Wrecker's Court" as that was about all the litigation it handled in those days.

And so, after plenty of hustle and excitement getting supplies aboard from Alf Peacock's general store at Coconut Grove, we sailed away to the reefs and high adventure. We arrived at the reefs and dropped anchor near the wrecked ship late that day and we used our dinghy to pull alongside and board the wreck to see if we could get in on the party. Many other wreckers were there ahead of us. We could see, high above us, her name "Alicia" on her bow. We learned when we boarded her that she was a tramp steamer from Bilbao, Spain, and loaded at Liverpool with a cargo of general merchandise valued at more than a million dollars, and a million was a million in those days. She was bound for Central and South American ports and had struck fast on Ajax Reef, off Ragged Keys, about thirty-five miles south of Coconut Grove, the night before. While her officers and crew were all Spanish, this fact offered no difficulty as many among the wrecking crews spoke Spanish also, or enough to get along.

The "Alicia" had followed the southward course of myriad other ships and hugged the reefs too closely in order to avoid the drag of the Gulf Stream's northward flow and, as a result, had with great force driven to about midship on the reef. Her seams were badly sprung and she was filling with water. All attempts to float her were futile. Her cargo was rich and varied: Irish linen, English ale, pianos, machetes, paint, sewing machines, hardware and tools of every description, laces and silks, foodstuffs, canned goods of all kinds, even a steel railroad bridge. In short, a wrecker's dream!

What a supreme thrill for Uncle Ben's crew of three to experience. It was like living "Treasure Island" in reality, fabulous and romantic — a ship out of old Spain on a Florida reef, where many another of her nationality had passed into oblivion in times past. But, alas, all was not well aboard. We asked an interpreter why the captain of the "Alicia" was pacing back and forth on the bridge high above us and what he was shouting. His reply was that the captain was saying, "I thought this coast was inhabited by civilized people!", and that he was cursing his luck in having fallen into the hands of the 'wreckers'. The warm English ale had been consumed in large quantities by the wrecking crews and they were out of control. Fights were in progress and much of the cargo would never reach the "Wrecker's Court" in Key West.

There was no radio then, only sailboats, slow and uncertain means of getting messages ashore. There was only the old United States Revenue Cutter Service, without planes like its successor, the Coast Guard of today. The nearest United States Revenue Cutter was at Mobile, Alabama, and it finally arrived a week later to restore order, after a wire was sent from Miami, the nearest telegraph office.

Soon New York newspapers were arriving in Miami with ship captains' stories of strange sights along the Florida Keys. These captains had seen through their binoculars, as they sailed well off shore to take advantage of the northward flow of the gulf stream, Irish linen and other goods from the "Alicia" stretched out to dry on the mangrove trees along the Keys for more than a hundred miles.

We saw a fist fight between an ebony giant from the Bahamas and an equally husky Key Wester, both stripped to their hips and standing in a hatchway on cargo in water waist deep. They fought until both were exhausted and had to be rescued from drowning.

We saw, as each tally of bundles of six machetes were lowered over the "Alicia's" side to small boats below, that frequently a bundle would go overboard into sixteen or eighteen feet of water and land on the clear, white bottom, to be retrieved later by the 'wreckers' and never accounted for. We saw other valuable goods disappear the same way. We saw fighting among the crews of the small boats.

Our captain, Uncle Ben, chose not to take part in the salvage of the "Alicia" of Bilbao, and we sailed away for home with never-to-be-forgotten memories of sights and experiences. The United States Revenue Cutter "Bear" arrived before we pulled away and stood near the hapless tramp and order was soon restored.

The "Alicia's" engines were removed eventually but she never moved again off that fatal reef. The great hulk could be partly seen above the shifting currents for many years thereafter. Perhaps even today parts of this famous wreck can be seen resting in Davy Jones' Locker in the crystal waters of that lonesome Florida reef.

It is said that when Cortez reached the Continental Divide and looked down on Montezuma's great Indian city in the valley of Mexico, he was the last of the earth's explorers to discover an unknown city. I believe, too, that it can be written of the "Alicia" of Bilbao that she was the last shipwreck on the reefs of Florida in the old tradition of such wrecks along the Spanish Main, that when she struck that reef she struck an era from Florida history.

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