

SAME TIME, SAME STATION!

— The grounding of the *MV Trucilla*

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Heaven! — The Garden of Eden! — Paradise!

I've seen them all. Too bad I was so young I couldn't really appreciate them to the absolute fullest! But I was just fifteen weeks over nine years old and at that time I didn't really understand that I was living in a time — and in a place — that just doesn't get any better!

We lived on Vancouver Island at a small town called Comox. But to be more precise, about half way between Kye Bay and Point Holmes. We rented a big comfortable old home on a large farm, from a "Mr. Paul." Whether "Paul" was his 'sir' name or his "first" name I don't know. All us kids knew was he was "Mr. Paul" to us. We went to a small two story school in Comox, about 10 to 12 miles away.

It was an idyllic life — lovely beaches within walking distance in either of two directions — the farm with cows, a horse or two and lots of chickens who became more like pets than farm fowl. Somehow — I was too young to know how — we became the proud owners of two baby goats — "Butt" and "Inskey". They became like one — no, two — of the family. They were clean, didn't smell, and were very friendly and loved to follow us all around the yard.

But one hot sunny afternoon — Friday, August 6th, 1939 — an event took place which interrupted our simple, tranquil life style (as we call it today) and which quite literally splashed us across the front page of our local paper. The first thing we knew about it was when a rumour quickly spread throughout the area that a freighter had run hard aground on the rocky shores below the clay cliffs at Point Holmes! When my dad came home for supper that night, he announced he had heard that a large tug was going to try and pull the freighter off the rocks at high tide that very night. This was the most exciting event that had ever happened during my entire — but relatively short, life!

After resisting eating my carrots and rushing through supper, we loaded up all the lawn chairs we could find and drove a mile or two over to a grassy area several hundred feet above the rock strewn beach where the tide was slowly inching its way ever upward. Even at a distance of perhaps two hundred feet, the freighter looked enormous since it was balanced on a group of barnacle encrusted rocks. All the front half of the hull was out of water and it was lurching skyward while at the same time it was tipping to the starboard side — just the way the sea had left her when the previous high tide receded.

We arranged our chairs in several rows amongst the wild oak trees so we could have the best view over the top row of thorny bushes which covered half of the steep bank. What excitement! What anticipation! Never in my life had there been anything which could remotely match an event like this! As the sun slowly dropped out of the sky it left a deep red afterglow and a sunset unlike any we had ever seen before. The sea was steel blue-grey and reflected the glowing red of the sunset.

As if as a result of the sun dropping into the ocean, the tide raised gradually but relentlessly. Inch by inch it rose and as we watched, more and more of the ship's hull was devoured by the calm ocean. Then, from around the point came two huge tugs, proudly pounding the waves aside as they tested the waters depth and approached the floundering ship. Men appeared and took their positions on both the tugs and the ship. Thick ropes were twirled and thrown. Hatches and doors

were slammed shut and secured. The tugs — one on each side — tested the ropes and stretched the loose loops until they were deadly straight.

As the tugs gently tested their grip and took their positions and as the sea slowly rose - the ships engines roared to life — the generators began supplying electricity — and one by one, lights broke through the increasing darkness. Light after light appeared, producing a dotted line the length of the ship and then the lights in the wheelhouse appeared. All these lights reflected in the black water and produced a dancing light show. Shortly after, several searchlights stabbed the now dark night skies, swinging in circles looking for a good target on which to lock and anchor their beam.



From our vantage point, it appeared the salvage operation was well planned and superbly executed. As the tide finally peaked, the tugs increased their power and even the ship herself threw out a plume of thrashing water as every last ounce of power was thrown into the battle. The tugs slid sideways — back and forth — to see if any change in direction of their massive pull could prove advantageous. The roar of the huge diesel engines echoed off the cliffs but in spite of all their power the ship laid firmly wedged on the rocky bottom!

When the tide had reached its maximum height it was obvious the battle was lost! Gradually the tugs relaxed their thrust and the ship slowed her engines. The lights turned-off one by one giving back the night to the black sky. The ropes were released and thrown back to the tugs, where they were gathered and rolled into coils on their decks. The noise seemed to have been absorbed by the blackness of the night. Slowly, as though thoroughly beaten, the tugs turned around and reluctantly returned, in defeat, to their home base.

We sat mesmerized for a few minutes, then began to collect our chairs and prepared to leave for home. But all of a sudden, a single searchlight stabbed through the night and illuminated a sailor in black coveralls standing on the ship's bridge, spread-eagle and with his hands raised high above his head. In his left hand he held a megaphone which he lowered and then he called out to us:

“That’s all for tonight, ladies and gentlemen! But please tune in tomorrow night — same time, same station — for the next exciting instalment!”

And with that, the light snapped off. We were once again wrapped in total darkness!

The rest of the story is anticlimactic. The next night we all tramped back to our vantage point and the effort was repeated — just as though it was all enacted for our benefit alone. But this time the tide was just a tiny bit higher and the tugs were able to gently nudge the ship off its captive perch. Within a few minutes there was no



sign left of the dramatic events which had unfolded before our very eyes.

You might find the above story of little interest. But to a young male kid the events became etched in my memory. Not one of the greatest movies I have ever seen or the best efforts of today do mind numbing, commercial television shows can come even close to that dramatic, unrehearsed, spectacle we were so privileged to see.

EPILOGUE

In March of 2003 I proceeded to write the above story. But what was the rest of the history of this tough wooden ship? What was her name? How big was she? Where was she built? What was the date she ran aground? Shouldn't I try and tell "the rest of the story" ?

As a result I emailed both the *Town of Comox*, and the *Comox Archives and Museum Society*, asking if they could help me with the project. Rick James from the Museum contacted Mr. Fred Rogers, a historian and author from Qualicum Beach. Krista Kaptein from the *Comox Archives and Museum Society* soon wrote to me and provided a copy of a letter from Fred Rogers, who had searched his files and provided Rick with the first clue — the ship was called **TRUCILLA**. Fred also sent photocopies of newspaper articles from the *Vancouver Sun* of Thursday May 14th, 1925, telling of a fatal gasoline explosion on the **TRUCILLA** at Barnet — a small town on Burrard Inlet, long since disappeared. In addition, Fred provided photocopies of the *Comox Free Press* dated Friday, April 18th, 1983, which gave further **TRUCILLA** history and actual photographs of her on the beach.



Wendy Ostapovich from the *Town of Comox* contacted Bruce MacInnis, who worked for the *Comox Valley Record* newspaper in Courtenay. He kindly wrote a small article titled "Info on old-time wreck sought" and he received two calls as a result. One from Mr. Gordon Blackhall

who lives in Comox had four pictures of **TRUCILLA** on the beach. I contacted Gordon and he sent me the pictures, three of which I have used in the above story.

I am extremely grateful to all of the people mentioned above for their help in tracking down the information and photos I was able to use.

But in 2009, a very good friend of mine and expert on any ship that has ever sailed the waters of British Columbia, found out I had written about the grounding of the ship. My friend is called Frank Clapp, and lives in Victoria, B.C. And so, as a result of all of the information mentioned above, plus new information provided by Frank, the following life and death of **TRUCILLA** can finally be told. She was not really the huge ship my mind's eye remembered, but I do not intend to let facts in any way cloud my recollection of those two memorable evenings so many years ago.

For those who might be remotely interested in "The Rest of The Story" the following is a chronological history of the 125-foot Motor Vessel **TRUCILLA**, Registration Number ON150650, she was a wooden boat registered in Vancouver, BC. She was built in 1916 by the *Puget Sound Naval Yard*, Bremerton, Washington. The engine was a 26 cylinder *Standard Motor Construction Co.*, Jersey City, NJ, 660 BHP (Gasoline), Speed 11 knots. In 1926 she was re-engined with a 16 Cylinder, 135 BHP, *Standard Motor Co.* (Diesel). She was built for the *United States Navy* as SC310 (Submarine Chaser).

1922/05/03 Registered by Coal Harbour Wharf and Trading Company, Limited, Vancouver, B.C.
1924/10/31 Sold to the Vancouver-Courtenay Transportation Company, Limited, Vancouver, B.C.
1930/11/18 Sold to the Vancouver Barge Transportation Ltd., Vancouver, B.C.
1958/01/07 Sold to Raymond Lawrence, Vancouver, B.C.
1959/05/12 Sold to Laurence A. Beale, New Westminster, B.C.
1962/04/14 Scuttled in the North Arm (Indian Arm) of Burrard Inlet.
1962/05/18 The MV Trucilla's Registry was closed.

Three reports about the grounding of the **MV Trucilla** as printed in the papers of the day do not quite agree on dates. The stories as printed were as follows:

1. 1939/08/06 — *Victoria Daily Colonist*, page 1. The tug **TRUCILLA** ran ashore at Pointe Holmes when bound for Powell River from Comox. She is apparently undamaged and was pulled off tonight with assistance of **ETTA MACK**. The barge was pulled free this morning by J. Urquistad's **CHIQUITA** and was towed to Comox in shelter of the Goose Spit.

2. 1939/08/07 — *Vancouver Sun*, page 21 (Monday) Comox. A large salvage derrick will be used today in a second attempt to refloat the 125-foot tug **TRUCILLA**, which ran aground early Saturday in shallow water just inside Cape Lazo, near here. Other tug boats were used last night in an unsuccessful effort to tow the stranded vessel into deep water at high tide.

Vancouver Barge Transportation Limited, owner of the vessel then requested the *Pacific Salvage Company* to send a salvage derrick from Victoria, a distance of 150 miles.

The **TRUCILLA**, in charge of Captain George Wooten was on her way from Comox to Powell River with a large covered barge in tow when she went aground. She was not believed to be seriously damaged. The tug **TARZAN** of *Aitken Tug & Barge Company* picked-up the barge and took it to Vancouver.

3. **1939/08/09** — *Vancouver Sun*, page 18. The tug **TRUCILLA**, Captain George Wooten was refloated on August 7th.

4. **1939/08/09** — *Victoria Daily Colonist*, page 3 (Wednesday) Vancouver, August 8th. The tugboat **TRUCILLA** arrived in port today after being refloated from shallow water near Comox where she went aground Friday night. The *Pacific Salvage Company's* barge, **GIANT** and a floating derrick were used to free the boat owned by *Vancouver Barge & Transportation*, last night.

She was finally laid-up at Port Moody for a considerable time and sank at anchor in 1961. Fred Rogers remembers seeing the wreck with the mast and top of the wheelhouse exposed at low tide. The owner had abandoned the vessel which was alongside mooring buoys for scows. She became such an obstruction to navigation that she was removed — towed up into deep water in Indian Arm, and there she was scuttled. So ended her exciting life!