WOOD ISLAND IS HAUNTED BY JINX, SAY MAINE MARINERS OF TRAGEDIES THAT HAVE MADE IT SHUNNED SPOT

Murders and Shipwrecks Brand Once Verdant Resort of Picnickers

By ALFRED ELDEN

Right in the mouth of the Saco river lies Wood island. Despite its proximity to the mainland and busy hives of human industry, it seems an eerie place. An island of mystery—of tragedy. Its very name is a misnomer, for indeed it is almost bare of woods. Yes, decidedly short on trees and long on rocks.

Cold, icy, slippery are those rocky shores just now. Snow covers its fields. Only the light keeper and his family inhabit the island. Even the seagulls apparently keep clear of this outpost in the little Saco river archipelago. Strangely enough, they soar over and around it, but seldom alight. A quarter of a mile inshore, however, the other islands and rocky islets are all a-flutter with the white of their wings.

The light is one of the older ones of the Maine coast, and the 13th in the United States, I believe. It was authorized in 1806, and built in 1808. In 1838 it was partly rebuilt, and in 1858 entirely reconstructed. Up in the tower a red eye winks once every 60 seconds through the long night hours. Balefully or benignly, as you will! Mariners familiar with the island's history note the warning and keep their vessels a little further offshore. "Give Wood island a safe offing," is one of their rules. It has claimed many a good ship in years agone.

SAILORS SAY JINX WAS PLACED ON THIS SPOT

Sailors are superstitious—the veteran sea dogs even more so perhaps than a younger generation of seafarers. The old-timers believe a jinx was placed on this barren bit of terra firma in the silent Saco's mouth. And how? Well within the memory of the oldest, Wood Island was not always the bleak, inhospitable place that it is today. No more than 60 years ago it was well covered with a dense growth of fir; a verdant spot, rich in beautiful trees, fragrant sweet ferns and wild flowers. Its vegetation was almost tropical in nature.

What brought catastrophe—tragedy—suicide—murder even, to this garden spot? Grizzled fishermen shake their heads ominously. They will tell you that something bred a jinx that has never been dispelled! Nothing has happened lately, they admit, but—wait!

Silly, of course! Yet strange things have transpired there during the past 60 years. Nobody can deny that. The winter of 1869 brought with it a terrific gale. It seemed particularly to pour its wrath over Wood island. The waters off the Saco's mouth were lashed to soapsuds. Giant waves pounded adjacent shores with an incessant roar. The tumult on the island itself was thunderous—disconcerting—terrifying! Old Boreas charged that challenging, defiant red eye in the light tower, even as the maddened bull charges the matador's scarf of scarlet.

"I'll show 'em!" he snorted. And he did! With a crash he bowled over and through the fir forest. Like ten pins the timber crashed right and left! Morning's light showed what amounted to a wide pathway mown through the woods the length of the island. That was the beginning of the treeless, or woodless, Wood island of today. Subsequent tempests swept into the break in the firs and they all took further toll. Soon none was left. A disastrous



"Hobbs, in a frenzy of fear and rage, fired at the lobsterman."

and more bitter, more taciturn and gloomy. For hours at a time he would pace back and forth on the shingle of the little beach at the west end, muttering to himself. One day, just 10 years after he moved to Wood island, he rowed ashore, went to Saco, engaged a room on the top floor of a hotel there, dove head first out of his window and was instantly killed.

Wood island has specialized in shipwrecks. Thirty or more years ago three St. John wood boats, as those little schooners carrying cord wood from the provinces to Boston were called, got caught in a terrific winter gale. Returning light from the west they presented a fair mark for the wild elements to shoot at and were quickly turned turtle—bottom up! All three drifted on to Wood island. Several lives were lost. When the storm abated two of the craft were righted and towed into Biddeford pool. The third was rent to splinters.

Fifty-seven years ago this February Wood island was the scene of a strange mishap. One night, with a light wind and a calm sea, a schooner came ashore on the rocks outside where the Fletcher's Neck life saving station has since been erected. The helmsman must either have been asleep or else miscalculated his offing. Anyway, he saw the vessel was in no immediate danger, so let go the anchor to prevent further motion when the tide rose, for it was then low water, went below and turned in!

Learning that a vessel was ashore, a volunteer crew from Biddeford Pool manned a big dory and rowed around. There were no signs of life aboard, but when the dory bumped alongside the vessel's side the skipper appeared. He expressed appreciation at the efforts in his behalf.

"But," he explained, "I must tell you my wife is below pretty damn sick with smallpox!"

Local historians recall with a chuckle that all but one of those volunteers jumped 15 feet from the vessel's deck back into their dory. One, Capt. Simeon Baker, stuck, and took the stricken woman, her husband and the schooner's crew of three to Wood island and in the schooner's boat.

Although Albert Norwood, then lightkeeper, had a wife and several children, he sheltered the woman until one of the rough buildings on the island could be made livable. A stove was set up in the old farmhouse and the captain moved in with his stricken wife. The crew went to a small building nearby, but to a man they turned to and helped their skipper minister to his patient.

A physician from the mainland went off with proper food and medicines. The woman recovered and strangely enough not another person contracted the dread disease despite the number that had been exposed.

Not more than 20 years ago the schooner Marshall Perrin dragged anchor in a winter gale from under the lee of Stratton island, near Old Orchard Beach, and drifted broadside on to Wood island. Two men were drowned. One was rescued.

Forty years ago a Frenchman named Pete Perreault camped on the west end of Wood island and sold liquor to the men from the big fleet of Gloucestermen that used to anchor in Wood island harbor or Winter harbor. Brawls and fights were numerous. One night somebody set fire to Perreault's shack and it burned to the ground. As the heat reached his stock of liquors the bottles burst and the seething alcoholic blue flames created a bonfire that was seen 30 miles at sea.

Probably all these mishaps were just "happenstance," as one lightkeeper jokingly put it. 'Neath the blue skies and balmy breezes of mid-summer many a picnic party enjoys an outing on Wood island. But mostly they are carefree young folks to whom one island or one locale by the seashore is much like another.

Over at the pool the oldsters look off at the barren isle and its white light tower and mutter to themselves. They remember when there were woods aplenty on Wood island. That was before the arrival of the jinx. Catch them picknicking there!

toll. Soon none was left. A disastrous fire helped along the denudation of the coniferae.

About half a century ago a Biddeford Pool lobsterman named Milliken moved over to Wood island with his wife. It was a good point from which to set his pots. He built a rough house on some land that was then owned by an uncle of his. In addition to being a lobsterman Milliken held an appointment as a special policeman, having served in that capacity on the mainland. He was around 35 years of age and a veritable giant in strength. Elderly residents of the Pool recall some of his prodigious feats of strength and recite them with gusto to this day.

A few months after the lobsterman had moved to Wood island he was followed by a young fellow of possibly 22 or 23, named Hobbs. Upon different occasions fishermen had lived for a while on the west end, and there was one fairly good farmhouse and outbuildings, the ruins of which stand today.

MURDER ON THE ISLAND

Hobbs was not particular in his tastes. He selected what had once been a henhouse, tinkered it up a bit, and "squatted" there. This little shack also stands at the present time. A dissolute chap, the young squatter apparently had no visible means of support. He fished or lobstered a little and earned enough money to keep from starving and to buy liquor. Many times he rowed his battered dory back from the Pool in a sadly befuddled condition. Those were days when liquor was easily obtainable.

One day, while in quarrelsome mood he had some sort of an altercation with Milliken. He was carrying a rifle and threatened the burly lobsterman with it. Milliken ordered him to give it up. Hobbs with an oath refused. Milliken went back to his home, pinned on his official police badge, and returned to arrest the offender in legal style.

Doubtless realizing that if it came to force he would be a mere plaything in the hands of the muscular Milliken, Hobbs in a frenzy of fear and rage fired at the lobsterman. Milliken, shot through the abdomen, fell. His wife came running from the house and with the help of the assassin got her husband into the bedroom.

Hobbs, still belligerent, is said to have asked Milliken: "Want me to finish you, Milliken?" To which the stricken man moaned, "You've finished me already, Hobbs."

As Hobbs began to sober up the enormity of his offence overwhelmed him. For hours, while the lifeblood of his victim slowly ebbed away, he paced up and down in front of the house. But when the agonized wife tried to go for assistance he stubbornly drove her back. Finally, she told him her husband was dead.

Then Hobbs sought out the keeper of the light at the other end of the island. This man was one George Orcutt and to him the murderer confessed and asked for advice. Orcutt told him there was only one thing to do—give himself up to the authorities. Hobbs nodded in seeming acquiescence and walked slowly back to his henhouse hovel. Almost immediately there was the loud report of a firearm. The murderer had put a bullet through his own brain.

A few years later a man named Webber took up his abode in one of the rude dwellings on Wood island. He kept a flock of chickens, had a good garden and sold his fowl and produce. He further supplemented his income and cut down expenses by lobstering and handlining. But he had lived in the cities, and gradually the isolation, the loneliness of living apart began preying on his mind.

As the years passed he grew more