

The LAST LIVING MOONCUSSEER

On a stormy night in December of 1952, the Danish motor vessel *Helge Jensen*, on passage from Havana to Sydney, Nova Scotia with a cargo of sawn mahogany logs and 763 cases of rum, ran hard aground off Nauset Beach. Although no lives were lost, the ship was a total loss, and her bleaching ribs could be seen high on the beach for years afterwards. By the time the authorities reached the wreck, the cargo had disappeared.

When the vessel's master was interviewed by an Admiralty court in Boston some days afterwards, the truth became obvious: the *Helge Jensen* was the last recorded victim of a Cape Cod mooncusser, an expert in the use of bogus aids to navigation to entice unwary vessels into compromising positions where they could be boarded and stripped of their fixtures and cargo. This trade was most successfully carried out on dark moonless nights, hence the name applied to its practitioners.

"Mooncussing wasn't a bad way to make a living," says "Charlie". He's the Cape's last living mooncusser, a widower who spends his days quietly in a nursing home in Brewster. He asks that his last name not be used - "the Coast Guard has a long memory" - but he has no hesitation about recalling his days - or, more accurately, nights - plying his trade on Nauset Beach.

"I learned the mooncussing trade from my uncle Pete - he's the one who got the *Helge Jensen* ashore," says Charlie with a touch of pride. "And he had learned it from his father and grandfather. It was a skill, an art, a trade kind of handed down from one generation to the next. My father got religion when he married my mother, so he couldn't be too interested, at least when my mom was around. By the time she passed away, his arthritis had slowed him down so much that he couldn't scramble up and down the dunes, so he stayed in the used-car business and pretended that it was his superior morality rather than his bad knees that kept him quote respectable unquote. My old man was a great guy, but he used to drive my poor uncle nuts. 'Self-righteous SOB' was maybe the kindest thing my uncle used to call him."

The romance - and profit margin - of the mooncussing trade declined precipitously as ocean-going vessels gradually became equipped with sophisticated electronic devices. Charlie tells of cold winter nights out on the beach, heaving the standard mooncusser kit of ropes, axes, lanterns, tarpaulins, ladders, and the like through blowing sand and spray, only to discover that not a single passing ship could be enticed shorewards for a closer look. "You could kind of tell that the profession wasn't going to be around for too much longer," says Charlie. "There was one night when we thought we had a 'customer' - that's how we referred to our prey. Bass River Jimmy was offshore in his dory and signalled us that he had spotted a ship close inshore bound north, and sure enough after a few minutes we could all make out the running lights. It sure looked big, but we figured that was because it was so close to shore. A couple of us got the lanterns lit and started waving them around

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as the ship's lights bore down on us. We thought we were in for a big score when all of a sudden, this guy shot a searchlight at us that could have lit up the beach in Portland, Maine. It was like looking into the sun. Next thing we hear machine-gun fire, and then there were flares, and then something that blew away about thirty feet of dune right behind us. In the light of the flares we could see Jimmy rowing that dory - which must have weighed nearly a ton - like he was pulling a scull in the Charles River regatta. I wouldn't have believed that boat could move so fast."

In the meantime, the victim-turned-predator continued to make the mooncussers' night a very unpleasant one. "The SOB heaves to about a quarter-mile off the beach and keeps shooting in our direction. We figured that if he had wanted to wipe us all out, he could have done it very easily, but we were too scared to move. One of the guys swore later on that he heard laughing coming from the direction of the ship. Finally they let off one more round of whatever the hell it was - we thought the dune was going to collapse - and finally headed off northwards. We never did find out what kind of ship it was - we were too shaken up to ask a lot of questions. Eddie Clement was the keeper of the Chatham Light at that time, and Uncle Pete met him in Hurley's right after all this happened. 'What the hell was going on down the beach the other night, Pete?' Eddie asks. 'I thought sure my old lighthouse was going to break apart with all that pounding.' Instead of pretending not to know what Eddie's talking about, my poor uncle instead makes up some cockamamie story about cases of fireworks that had washed ashore. He knew damn well that Eddie wouldn't believe it, but he just kept babbling incoherently until Eddie finished his drink and left."

According to Charlie, Bass River Jimmy retired to Florida shortly thereafter rather than remain on the Cape and suffer the eternal scorn of his fellow mooncussers. But before Charlie's own career as a mooncusser came to a complete end, there was one incident that he recalls almost fondly.

"It was in July of 1987 and the boys and I had long decided to hang it up," said Charlie. "There wasn't much of a living to be made causing shipwrecks any more, and by then most of us had married and had families that were depending on a more reliable income than mooncussing could provide. Times had changed too. In the old days, you could take a kind of pride out of the fact that you were a certified mooncusser. Even if we weren't exactly paragons of the community, there were still a lot of Cape Cod homes that were furnished quite nicely with the results of our labors. Sure, we had caused some damage, but nothing the insurance companies couldn't handle. We had never taken a life, and as a matter of historical fact, we had saved more than a few. But as the pickings got thinner and thinner, more of us drifted off into less questionable professions, fishermen, boatyard employees, that kind of thing. Joe Doyle took a couple of classes over at the Maritime Academy and wound up as a respected marine surveyor specializing in - what else? - shipwrecks! I think he's retired in Hawaii - we used to get Christmas cards from him all the time.

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“But the old mooncussing habit was a tough one to break. We were in Hurley’s one time and somebody came up with the idea of getting together some night for a reunion, farewell party, whatever. It seemed to make sense at the time, so there we all are a week or so later down on the beach, dark of the moon, everybody with his lantern and his flask filled with cheering liquid. It wasn’t long before we were all pretty well oiled and sentimental. P’town Clyde even brought along his guitar so he could sing us some kind of mooncusser folk song he had written, loaded with crap about the glory days and the romance of the job and Robin Hood and oppressive capitalist shipowners ... Clyde was in his hard-left folkie phase about then, but we were all kind of tired and drunk and anyway P’town Clyde - God rest him - was a lousy musician.

“But for old time’s sake we waved out lanterns around for a while, and I’ll confess to you that we all felt pretty damned silly doing it. After that we sat on the beach around our little fire eating soggy potato chips and emptying our flasks and generally feeling sorry for ourselves. Just to heighten the festivities, the weather had turned foul too. It was all pretty depressing, and we’re ready to call it a night when all of a sudden through the murk we notice a set of running lights approaching the shore. We could see both red and green, which meant that whatever it was was heading straight into the beach. It didn’t take long for the old adrenalin to come pumping back through our tired bodies - we were mooncussers, goddamit, and here was a customer heading right into our picnic area!”

According to Charlie, nobody would have had any reason to bring any gear besides the lanterns to the farewell party, but from the looks of things, none would be needed. “The running lights got closer, there was a long scraping sound as the keel of whatever it was ran into the sand. The visibility was lousy but we could tell that it was pretty big. I tell you, we were all fifty years younger and full-blooded mooncussers again! Here was our last victim - sorry, customer - and she was a big ‘un. Booty! Plunder! Flotsam and jetsam! Our mouths were watering, just like in the old days. Jeez, what a bunch of fools we were!

“Once she settled on the beach, we ran over to see what was what. But as we got closer we noticed an awful stench. It was like all the dumps ... sorry, landfills .. on the Cape on the hottest day of summer. Then we remembered the news story about the garbage barge that couldn’t find a home. Remember that? The ‘Magnolia’, it was called. It wandered all up and down the coast but couldn’t find anywhere to discharge. I forget what the problem was, maybe some kind of contamination in the trash, but it was a heck of a story. The networks and papers made a really big deal about it.

“We couldn’t see much with the lanterns, but fortunately Bert Ellis had a nice powerful flashlight. It took us two seconds to find the name on the barge’s bow with it. There it was, in big white letters: ‘Magnolia’. The barge known ‘round the world, the best known piece of maritime equipment since the ‘Titanic’, and sure enough,

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we had mooncussed the goddam thing right onto Nauset Beach. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry ... it could have gone either way for most of us. Well, we headed off - briskly, I should add - in our separate ways thinking our own separate thoughts. But that was definitely the end of the road for mooncussing as a career."

Charlie glances out the window of his room, from which can be seen a distant sliver of Cape Cod Bay. He is silent for a minute or so, then goes to a bureau drawer and begins rummaging around. "Somewhere or another I kept an article about what really happened to the "Magnolia' that night," he says, and then breaks into a broad smile. "Or what they think happened. Only us mooncussers know for sure ..."

An attendant knocks on Charlie's door to announce lunch. He never does locate the article he's looking for.

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