

Mysteries from the Clayoquot: Graveyard of Ships. A Series

Part 1: Finding the S.S Tonquin

The discovery of a two-century-old anchor, believed to be from the Sailing Vessel Tonquin in the waters of Clayoquot Sound, just off Tofino, British Columbia, means a great deal to some. To others, it simply means a great deal of speculation.

The allure of the Tonquin mystery brought Rod Palm, the 61-year-old diver who helped recover the anchor in February of 2003, to search these waters almost 30 years ago, and although he has pulled many anchors from Clayoquot Sound over the years, this find, if confirmed, is widely considered the 'holy grail' in terms of West Coast maritime history. To historians and scholars, this re-opens a controversy that has shrouded the centuries old mystery of the resting place of the vessel sent to establish Astoria, one of the first American settlements on the West Coast, and then mysteriously disappear off Vancouver Island in 1811. To some long time inhabitants of Tofino, a once sleepy fishing village turned tourist haven, that have heard the Native oral history of this tale their entire lives, the discovery comes as no great surprise.

The saga of the Tonquin begins with John Jacob Astor, a German immigrant who having built an empire on the fur trade, embarked on a grand scheme of commercialization and colonization in the United States, to be crowned by a settlement at the mouth of the Columbia River. In 1810, his company, the 'Pacific Fur Company' was formed and a fine ship was commissioned to make a round-the-continent trip from New York City. A young naval captain, John Thorne, who had made a name for himself with daring raids during the Tripolitan war, was to be put in charge. In a final letter from Astor as the Tonquin was about to set sail, he foresightedly warned "to be particularly careful on the coast, and not to rely too much on the friendly disposition of the natives. All accidents which have as yet happened there arose from too much confidence in the Indians."

As recorded history has it, some 10 months later, on a trading mission in Nootka sound, an irritable and arrogant Thorne snubbed the local Native Chief, Wickaninnish, by rubbing his sons face with a beaver pelt that the Chief was trying in earnest to negotiate a price for. Then, with little haste, he showed him off the ship. The following day, in an apparent act of retribution, 20 or so natives stole their way aboard the ship and set in motion a chain of events that first resulted in a slaughter of most of the crew and their attackers and finally a defensive and suicidal detonation of the ships' powder magazine. News of the demise of the Tonquin didn't reach Astor and the outside world for many months.

Almost two centuries have washed over the Tonquin, eroding and diluting the definitiveness of its passage. If Rod Palm's discovery does lead to the remains of the ship, it will forever shine a light of truth on an event frozen in time, from an era when in the name of commercial trade and exploration, cultures and men collided with catastrophic and momentous results that plunged their possessions and secrets deep to the ocean floor. For archeologists, only time and a slow, methodical investigation stand

between this find being just another piece of ‘sea junk’, or it being the key to unlocking what has been one of the most enduring mysteries in maritime history.

“*Mysteries from the Clayaquot: Graveyard of Ships*” tells the story of the Tonquin and its significance in the world today. Through the use of modern photo realistic computer animation, much of the story will be dramatically re-created in accordance with the most accurate textual accounts that exist. Period photos and dramatic voiceovers will punctuate and breathe new life into the saga of the Tonquin and we’ll compare the accounts of scholars with the oral history that the local First Nations people have been telling for generations.

We’ll also examine the controversy surrounding the Tonquin. Thomas Beasley, a maritime lawyer and expert on the Tonquin, takes the counterpoint that Captain Thorne, by his very nature a highly disciplined naval mariner, wouldn’t have sailed his vessel into the Clayaquot Sound when his mission was in fact to sail to the aboriginal community of Nawhitty at the very northern tip of Vancouver Island. And for Rod Palm, maritime law creates a dilemma as to the physical ownership of the anchor and any further discoveries, and threatens to take away his long sought after prize that he had hoped to make the centerpiece of a future, *local* museum.

We’ll look to the scientific and forensic experts knowledgeable of this recent discovery. Most of them, though hopeful for this to be the anchor of the Tonquin, say it’s premature conjecture that will require verification through exhaustive testing and expensive investigation. We’ll examine the techniques of radiocarbon dating and see what’s in store for forensic archaeologists who could very well be presented with a massive graveyard frozen in time. What new discoveries will accompany the physical evidence and will they support and align with generations of oral history?

As Tofino awaits the onslaught of professional scrutinizers and curious tourists surely to descend upon them, our eyes and cameras will be there, above and below the sea as history forges its way into today’s headlines. Does the Tonquin reside beneath hundreds of feet of ocean just off the coast of Tofino? Well, certainly Rod Palm and others believe it does.