

THE JOURNEY of the “BELL”

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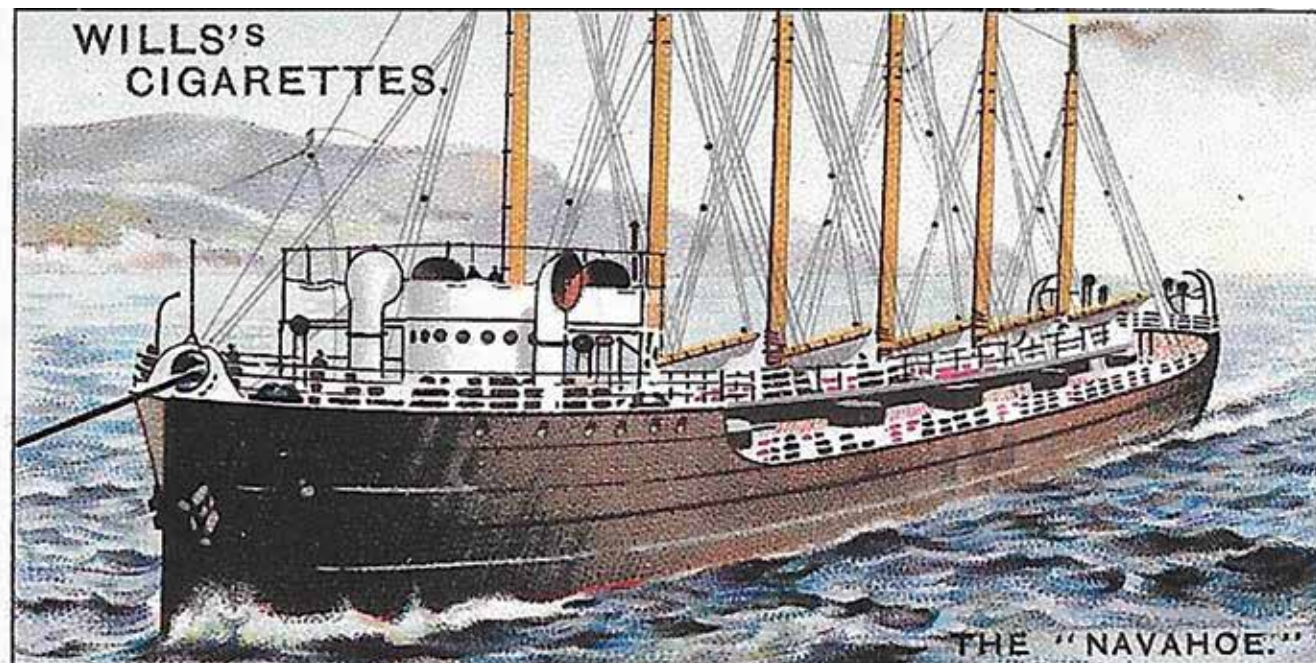
The Navahoe

“Thud, thud, thud”...muffled reports rang out across the water followed by a series of shimmering rivulets emanating from the hull of a great vessel; one that had out lived her usefulness. It was the 28th of June, 1936, about 50 miles north of Dragons Mouth, Trinidad. The Navahoe, the largest ocean going barge ever built was being scuttled...the doomed ship settled and slipped below the surface to her resting place some 400 fathoms below. Does the story end here?... it seems like it should but, in fact, it is actually the beginning of a story that continues to this day, some 2200 miles to the north, in the lower Hudson River valley in New York, at the Minisceongo Yacht Club.

To even discuss the Navahoe, we must first discuss the Iroquois and that takes us back 81 years to June 27th, 1907 and the Harland and Wolff shipbuilders in Belfast, Ireland. The shipbuilding firm

had been engaged to fulfill an order from the Anglo-American Oil Company, later to become a part of ESSO, to build a “state of the art” tanker / tow vessel and barge capable of continuous Trans-Atlantic delivery of 20,000 tons of oil per voyage. This requirement alone would result in the creation of two entirely new vessels that the world had never seen before.

An artist's depiction of the ocean going barge “Navahoe. Some liberty has been taken to incorrectly show the uptake mast aft; it was actually the foremast that served as the uptake for the steam plant onboard. This image was used as a collector's card accompanying the purchase of “Will's Cigarettes” in Great Britain. It was card #31 of 50 in the Strange Craft series.



The “Iroquois” was designed with a twofold purpose, first as an oil hauler in its own right and, second, as a towing vessel for a barge of equal capacity and size. The need for power, speed and maneuverability was accomplished with twin quadruple expansion steam engines and twin screws for propulsion. When she was launched, the commercial shipping world took notice of the first twin screw tanker ever. She was 476 feet in length with a beam of 60 feet and had a design speed of 12 knots, respectable in 1907! In addition to this, The Iroquois was fitted with a steam winch on her poop housing with 500 fathoms of 7 inch wire towing cable.

Completing the pair, the Navahoe was launched in October of 1907, and both were delivered to Anglo-American by January 18th, 1908, more than a year prior to the keel laying of the Titanic by the very same shipbuilder. Both ships bore distinctions; the Iroquois, (ship # 385), being the first twin screw oil steamer and equipped with ocean towing gear, and the Navahoe, (ship # 389), as the world's largest oil barge and capable of self propulsion. The pair were nicknamed “horse and cart” by the media and their combined design created the first “supertanker” long before the term was coined.

The definition of “barge” has enough variation to make your head spin, but to boil it all down, basically barges are designed for utility and cargo carrying with on board propulsion systems optional. Navahoe was highly sophisticated for a 1907 era vessel of this type. Her 450 foot steel hull carried almost 10,000 tons of oil in bulk for cargo and was designed with 6 sailing masts, each fitted out with 65 foot booms and 60 foot gaffs plus sails and gear. Rigged as a bald headed schooner, she retained the ability to reach port in the event of a towing mishap. She had her own boiler and engine which was used to run pumps and winches for rigging, towing, and dockside lifting as well as running pumps for the loading and off loading her oil cargo. The foremast served double duty as a furnace uptake stack. She was fitted out in every aspect as an ocean going vessel including an electric plant, Marconi wireless, and full accommodations for her crew.

Between 1908 and 1917, The “horse and cart” made 148 Atlantic crossings recording an average speed of 9 knots which is remarkable considering that the yet to be built Liberty ships of WWII ran no faster. In 1917 the duo was transferred to running from Texas to Halifax until WWI concluded in 1918 at which time they resumed their Trans Atlantic service until September 17th, 1930 when the Iroquois and Navahoe became permanently separated after nearly 23 years of tandem service.

The Iroquois went off as a solo oil tanker for the company, (now ESSO), until WWII when she was pressed into wartime service for her dual ability to carry fuel and as a powerful tow vessel. She saw service pulling mile long tows from Pearl Harbor to Eniwetok, Marshall Islands, and to Ulithi, Caroline Islands. She was scrapped at Troon, Scotland in 1947.

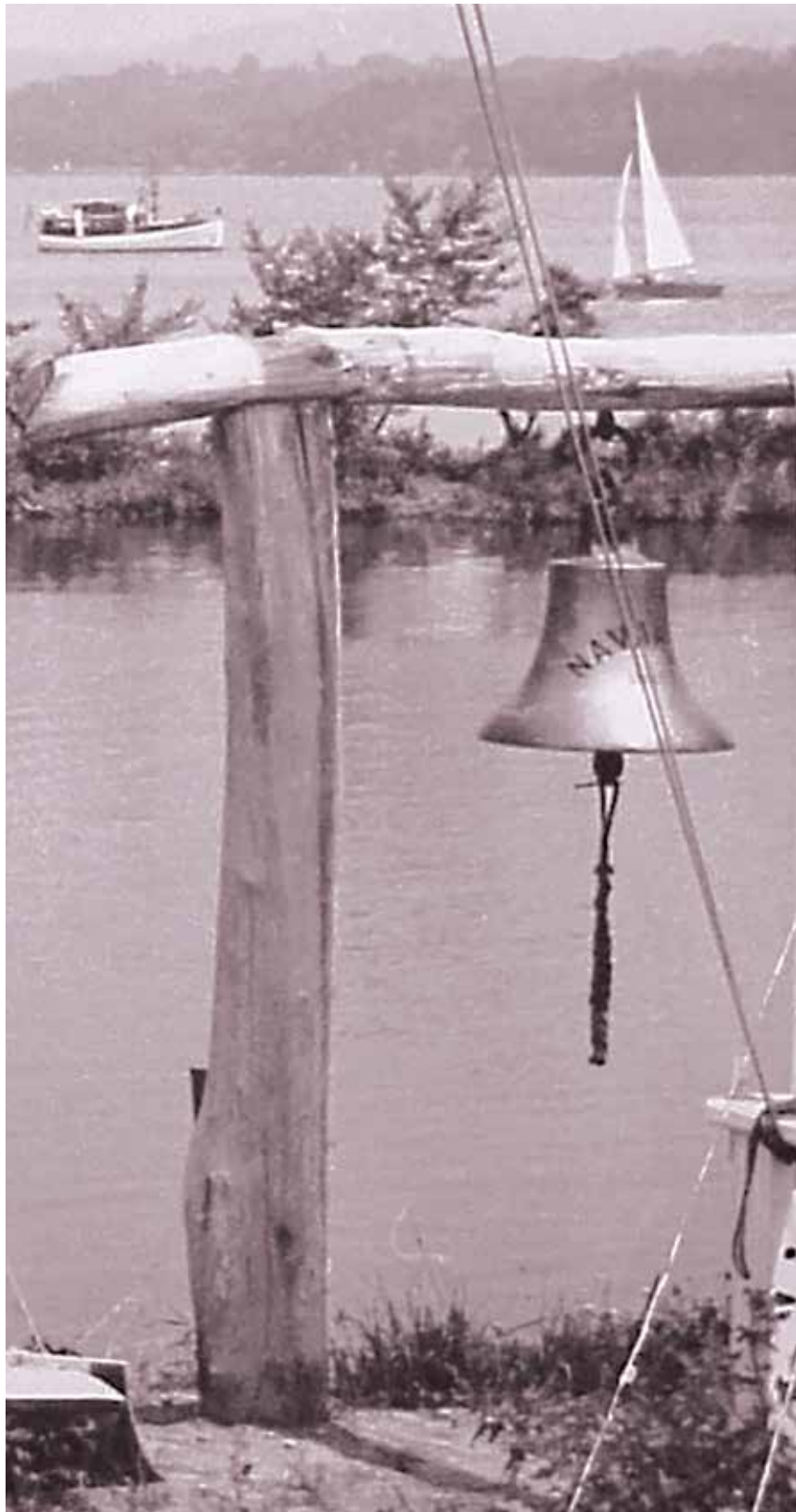
The Navahoe was moved from Baton Rouge to a point at the mouth of the San Juan River in Eastern Venezuela, acting as a floating oil supply facility. The larger tankers of that era were unable to fill to their marks at the Caripito terminal some 60 miles upriver, so the Navahoe was held there to top them off at the river mouth before continuing on to sea. By 1936 dredging and other improvements had been made to make this extra step unnecessary and the Navahoe, now no longer needed, was scuttled and this is where our journey begins.

Preparing a ship for scuttling is a lot more involved than just getting the crew off. even in 1936, before the days of “environmental warriors”, great care was taken before sending a ship to the bottom. Sails, spars and even the masts would have value for repurposing. The engine and electric plant may have been salvaged along with winches and fittings and the list goes on with the condition and service life of these items being taken into consideration. A ship's bell is considered sacred among mariners and should be preserved whenever possible. Standing with nautical tradition, the bell was saved and placed in some worthy hands for safe keeping... and further duty. As today's club members may have surmised, it is the bell from the Navahoe that has been in service with the Minisceongo Yacht Club for more than double the time it served the ship for which it was cast and inscribed.

To say that not much has ever been written about this pair of ships after their demise is really an understatement... other than dates there is nothing to be found. For the Navahoe, the story always ends the same way...“scuttled in 1936.” So, this leaves the rest of the journey up to speculation along with a bit of research, so let's take a “20/20 hindsight” look at the trip.

1936

If 1941 was the year that the Minisceongo Yacht Club was organized, then 1936 was the year it was conceived. Bill Sutherland was building a workshop on the south end of a small protected harbor. The Shankey family was building a brand new chestnut log cabin on Poppelopan Lake...it would be offered for sale a few years later. Sparkman and Stevens were designing a new type of affordable racing sailboat, the “Lightening”. Finally, the Navahoe was scuttled off the coast of Venezuela, giving up her bell. These series of events were destined to all



The bell, having survived the scrap metal drives of 1942, is shown here located at water's edge approximately where the finger 2&3 ramp now sits. Both the flagpole and bell were relocated after the clubhouse was built in 1948 indicating that this photo was taken sometime before.

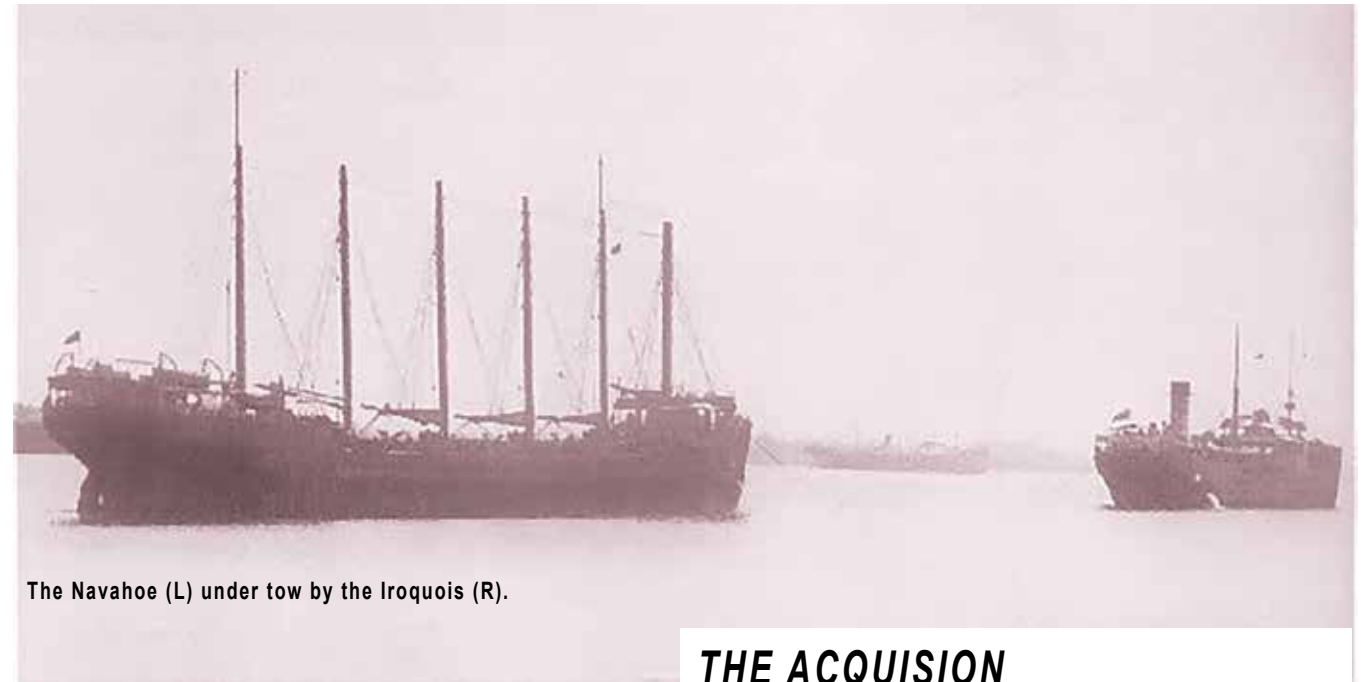
find their way to that very location where Bill re-used board and timber from the abandoned buildings of a defunct brick making industry, to assemble a modest woodworking shop. As if by some mystical magnetic force, all of these events would find their way to this place on earth.

Although she was scuttled in foreign waters, the Navahoe's bell was still the property of ESSO and, no doubt, was shipped directly back to the US on one of their company ships. Other items, like the power plant and steam winches may have remained at the port facility partially for their usefulness and added weight to the cargo of the US bound voyage, but the bell and perhaps some other artifacts made the trip. But this begs the question of why it wasn't just sent to Texas or some other Gulf port...why so far north? The answer to that may be found farther back in time than the Navahoe herself.

ESSO

In 1870 John D. Rockefeller founded Standard Oil of Ohio and began a journey of expansion. The oil market, at that time, was mostly driven by kerosene used primarily for heat and light. Rockefeller used his volume to negotiate shipping concessions from the railroads and thereby undersell his competitors and this activity raised the eyebrows of some politicians. Rockefeller, along with fellow industrialists, J.P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie, were targeted and came under legal scrutiny with the passage of the Sherman anti-trust act in 1890. They were able, however, to avoid prosecution under the protection of President McKinley to whom they donated generously. Amid this political turbulence was a new rising star, Theodore Roosevelt, taking side with the "trust busters" as part of his platform. When McKinley's Vice President, Garret Hobart, died suddenly in 1899, Roosevelt was appointed to fill the term. Their thinking was that the Vice Presidency held little power and, hopefully, by the end of his term Roosevelt would gain a new attitude when it came time to raise funds for his own presidential run. This turned out to be a complete miscalculation. When President McKinley was assassinated in 1901, the presidency was handed over to Roosevelt completely unencumbered. The new president then led a revitalized effort to break up Standard Oil, which finally came to be in 1911 when a supreme court ruling broke it into 34 individual companies. John D. Rockefeller laughed all the way to the bank as he now held 25% ownership in 34 companies...his net worth went up to \$900 million before there was even a Federal income tax!

Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company acquired



The Navahoe (L) under tow by the Iroquois (R).

THE ACQUISITION

There is a good chance that Bill had the foresight and had acquired the bell before the first Lightning hull was built in his new shop in the early months of 1941. Bill was a resourceful man and not lacking in "connections". It would also seem likely that the bell was acquired before the outbreak of WW II when such items would have been scrapped during the metal drives starting in 1942, so, using that logic, we can place it's acquisition "prior to 1942. There may also be good reason for it to have been earlier, as Bill had already had talks with other local lightening fleets, from Nyack and Chelsea, hoping to form a "district" within the association, (a request that was denied but they were ultimately granted sanction as a "squadron"). It is apparent that Bill had planned this venture well in advance and right down to the details of how he was going to signal the races. For these reasons alone, it is reasonable to conclude that Bill Sutherland had gotten the Navahoe's bell as part of his preparation.

How Bill may have actually gained possession of that bell is open to further speculation, but we know from Bill's memoirs and other sources that, before the war, Rockland County in rural New York was small in comparison with the expansion that was soon to come. Several miles to the south, Haverstraw was the county's thriving metropolis complete with political clout and Bill had access to these connections. We have seen evidence of this in the acquisition of the clubhouse and media attention that surrounded the growing club in the 50's. Bill Sutherland had had the motivation and means to obtain a good sized bell and the value of one from a scuttled barge wasn't very great before WW II. Furthermore, the Navahoe's legacy had long since been eclipsed by the much larger tankers that were then in service, so by 1936, the once great Navahoe had become a footnote in maritime history. One can almost envision Bill walking into a waterfront warehouse requesting a "big bell" and being directed to one off an "old barge" and being told to just take it!

THE HISTORY

For 110 years, from a grandiose beginning in Belfast, Ireland, a remarkable trip from Venezuela to the Hudson Valley, and a long history of calling to the needs and tradition of the watermen of a proud yacht club, the bell "Navahoe" continues to serve. Members and visitors at the Minisceongo Yacht Club can take a moment to recall this journey the next time they hear it ring it's call to assemble for a formal occasion or just for lunch break on a workday. The bell, originally cast for a working boat, continues its service at a working Yacht Club where it will continue for many years to come.

the Anglo-American oil company sometime prior to 1911. The significance here is that the Anglo-American Oil Company was an owned asset of the parent company after the break up, Standard Oil of New Jersey...which would soon be renamed ESSO. By 1936 ESSO was a giant, now engaged in selling a new product, gasoline, and remained headquartered in NJ. Besides serving as headquarters, New Jersey also had deep water commercial ports and major refining operations. Venezuela's product was crude oil and had to be shipped to refining ports, so it is not a stretch to assume that the Navahoe's bell would have been placed on a tanker bound for a refinery and port near company headquarters. This would place the bell well within the network of Bill Sutherland and his motivated group of lightening racing enthusiasts.

BILL SUTHERLAND

As for Bill's shop, and probably as much from his desk at home, a lot had been going on. To race they needed to be sanctioned by the Lightening Racing Association and for that they needed a sponsor. Bill organized his group of young locals and formed the Minisceongo Yacht Club. It was named after the freshwater creek that fed into the brackish swamp next to their Hudson River harbor. With a legitimate club in place they were granted official status by the Lightning Racing Association as Hytor Fleet #41 and things were off and running.

In 1941 the Hudson was very different from today. Other than local fishermen here and there, the shoreline was either untouched or cluttered by the ruins of abandoned brickyards. These were places to avoid as they were littered with dead heads and partially sunken barges, so races were held in the deeper water well away from shoreline hazards. The south eastern mark in the course was probably over a mile from the basin so Bill would have had a final problem to solve...how to signal his races from land.

Maritime science has long found that a large bell is highly effective in carrying across water in a multi-directional way. There could very well be a situation where a message had to be delivered to various boats scattered widely in the Hudson's upper Haverstraw Bay, so getting a hold of a really big bell would have been the simple solution.