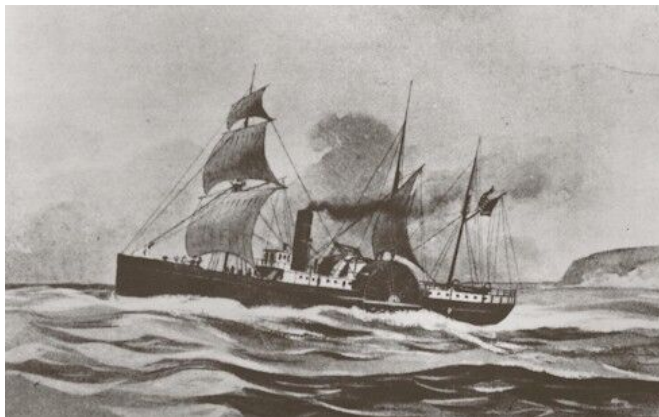


A Fortune of Gold Coins Still Looms Tantalizingly Close to the Del Norte Coast

August 5, 2024



The Cursed steamer Brother Jonathan was blamed for the spread of Small Pox. Killing thousands of indigenous people

159 years ago, Tuesday, July 30, the paddle steamer, the Brother Jonathan slammed into Dragon Rock (later named St. George Reef), when 225 passengers and crew perished off Crescent City's coastline. 19 survived the ordeal. Beside the Brother Jonathan's passenger / crew manifest, the vessel carried an estimated (at current value) \$50 million in gold coins in different denominations and gold bars heading up to Portland and Vancouver for annual payment to tribes and salary payments to troops.

The Brother Jonathan earned a rather ignominious reputation. In 1862, the Jonathan traveled north from San Francisco, arriving in Victoria, British Columbia. A gold miner traveler who was infected with Small Pox was a passenger on the vessel. Upon his disembarking the Jonathan, the miner began to unsuspectingly infect Indigenous people camped around Victoria. Local colonial authorities forced the Jonathan to leave but as the vessel returned home, allegedly infected native populations throughout the Pacific Northwest. From Puget Sound to southern Alaska, Small Pox began to spread. According to historian John Lutz, “citizens of Victoria panicked and deliberately drove the Indigenous people out of town, spreading the dreaded disease back to their home communities. Thousands of native tribal members succumbed.

Immediately after the shipwreck tragedy, divers and ships began looking for the Wells Fargo crates of gold coins which were intended for the newly established mint at the Dallas (Oregon) Mint. The search was unsuccessful. The Mint never opened.

The coins, bars and artifacts remained undiscovered for 125 years until 1993 when salvors from the Deep Sea Research (DSR) conducted a search for the treasure; it was learned the Brother Jonathan had drifted about two miles from where it smashed into Dragon Rock.

On August 30, 1996 the DSR mini-sub passed a “glint” on the bottom of the Pacific at a depth of 275 feet. Eureka! Divers recovered 875 gold coins in 1996.

Ultimately, 1207 coins, Mostly \$20 double eagles, were recovered.

The State of California challenged for the salvors treasure. The State claimed it owned the rights to the wreckage. California lost that argument in a Supreme Court decision in 1999.

Nonetheless, salvors reluctantly agreed to share 20 percent of the sale of the gold coins with the Golden State after a 2000 Los Angeles auction collected millions in sales of the rare coins.

The legacy of the Brother Jonathan is profound.

- The St. George Reef Lighthouse six miles off shore was initiated in 1881 and completed in 1892. St. George Reef Lighthouse was deactivated in 1975 and is presently operated by the St. George Reef Lighthouse Preservation Society. The Society conducts seasonal helicopter tours and never-ending maintenance.
- A Memorial for the deceased, California Historical Landmark No. 541, was established at Brother Jonathan Vista Point Park, 9th Street and Pebble Beach Drive. The shipwreck is listed in the National Register of Historical places.
- DSR set up a conservation lab for the recovered artifacts, operated by the Del Norte Historical Society, H Street.

Despite the gold coins already discovered and brought to the surface, crates of gold from Brother Jonathan still remain hidden and undisturbed. The large safe with its millions of dollars of jewels, gold bars, and gold

coins was never found. Salvors estimate 80 percent of the booty is still waiting to be discovered, tantalizingly close to the Del Norte coastline.

30 years later, perhaps it's time for the Deep Sea Research to spruce up its 2024 high-tech mini-sub and travel up to Del Norte for another look-sea.

Credit for research of this article is attributed to the Del Norte Historical Society and author Dennis Powers who authored *The Treasure Ship: the Legend and Legacy of the S.S. Brother Jonathan* (2006).