

Guest Column: The shipwreck of the Brother Jonathan: July 30, 1865

July 17, 2022



July 30 is a momentous day in Crescent City history.

On this day, 157 years ago, the Brother Jonathan paddle steamer crashed in a roaring gale over then-uncharted rocks, eight miles north of Crescent City Harbor. Its 225 passengers and crew perished as the vessel sunk in 275 ft. of the foreboding Pacific. Only 19 survived the harrowing ordeal.

Also going down with the ship was an estimated \$30 million in several thousands of \$20 Double Eagles used to pay Army staff and Indian treaties.

I wonder aloud if this California history is taught in our schools. Instead of teaching 7-year-old second graders the LGBTQ curriculum, wouldn't it be refreshing and spark the curiosity in our kids to learn about this historical event? Teachers, please tell me if you've ever prepared a lesson plan on the Brother Jonathan shipwreck.

The Brother Jonathan tragedy is quite fascinating. In 1862, the Brother Jonathan unknowingly spread the dreaded small pox, infecting and killing an estimated 14,000 indigenous Native tribal members in British Colombia and southern Alaska

The vessel had seen various service from the Eastern seaboard to the isthmus of the pre-Panama Canal era. During the Civil War, The Brother Jonathan rounded Cape Horn and was ported in San Francisco Bay. The ship was enroute to Portland and Victoria.

The ship arrived in Crescent City in a horrific summer storm. Captain Samuel DeWolf was first spurned in an attempt to navigate northerly, and returned to Crescent City for safe harbor.

The second, albeit fateful attempt about an hour later struck Dragon Rock north of Crescent City.

The hull of the paddle vessel was ripped open and destroyed; the ship was doomed and quickly sunk.

There, at the bottom of the sea, the vessel's location remained undiscovered and unknown for 137 years. Despite many attempts by salvage entrepreneurs, the remains of the 221-ft. long Brother Jonathan was not discovered until 1993.

Ultimately, over a three year period, modern mini-submarine vessels and its salvors retrieved 1,206 Double Eagles, freshly minted in San Francisco.

The Golden State fought and lost the fight at the Supreme Court as to who owned the booty. Realizing the State was not going to quietly walk away, salvors decided to pay off California with 20 percent of the gold coin auction proceeds.

Are there more Double Eagles temptingly close to Del Norte's shoreline? Salvors all agree perhaps as much as 75 percent of the Brother Jonathan's treasure remains undiscovered.

This fascinating history is all chronicled at the Del Norte County Historical Museum on H St. On this anniversary of the shipwreck, check out the fascinating Brother Jonathan story, the now-obsolete and remote St. George Reef Lighthouse, and the Brother Jonathan Park at the corner of Ninth Street and Pebble Beach Drive to see some of the actual gravestones in Brother Jonathan Park Cemetery. The history and folklore is intriguing, a must see for visitors and locals alike.

Roger Gitlin is a retired teacher. He resides in Crescent City.