

Steamer's hull still embedded in Gulf surf

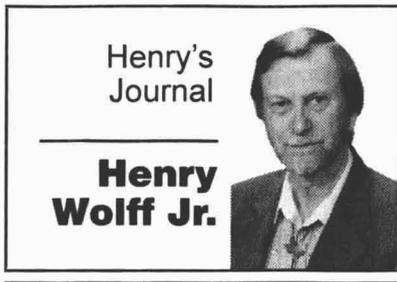
It was on this date in 1914 that a group of nine local and area "genial and kindred spirits" returned from an expedition to the wrecked steamship Nicaragua on Padre Island.

"The steamer's bow is on the beach, the stern is on the first bars; two anchors are set out, one on each side of the bow," wrote naturalist J.D. Mitchell of Victoria, the appointed recorder and photographer of the group. "Sand and shell have accumulated on the south side to the rudder; on the north side the length of the boat."

Wrecked about 90 miles south of Corpus Christi Pass by a hurricane two years before, the hull of the 226-foot steamer remains in the surf to this day, but being so far down the island at the time had pretty much been left alone.

Mitchell noted that a copper plate on the beam of the upper deck was inscribed "Bergens Mikaniske, No. 81, Beren, 1891, Vaerksted," just one of many things found during an exploration of the vessel "from top to bottom."

"She had a complete blacksmith's shop, carpenter's shop, paint shop, and various other tools and appliances which might be useful on the high seas," he wrote. "There was wagon loads of plunder in the



shape of ropes, chains, timbers, etc. If she were near civilization, all this could be utilized."

"The desire to loot was strong in the entire party," he further noted, "and a pile of junk that would have tested the capacity of a box car was accumulated, but the size of our autos cut it down to one souvenir for each man."

Mitchell got the log book of 1909-1910; Tom O'Connor, the builder's copper plate; Martin O'Connor, the ship's bell (would be interesting to know where it is today); John Young, some tools, Eugene Low, the ship's red light; E.L. Fairis and L.A. Fritz, the ship's flags. For some reason, C.A. Keeran and H.C. Edwards had stayed in camp and it's not mentioned if Stanley Smith took a souvenir.

"We, the undersigned," those who visited the boat wrote on its cabin

wall before leaving, "visited the Nicaragua wreck on June 25, 1914, in two Ford cars from Corpus Christi Pass, remained all night and left at 4:15 a.m., June 26."

Soon after leaving the wreck, the O'Connor's car broke down and was "trailed to the Young car" until both cars bogged down and had to be dug out, with the crippled car being left on the beach near a half barrel of gasoline that had washed ashore. They filled the tank of the good car with gas and all eight men piled on and started for the pass.

They let Smith off at his motorcycle which he had left about 10 miles from the wreck on the way down the beach.

It was about 9:10 when "a fool yearling which was bathing his feet in the Gulf, startled by the auto, made a break for high land in front of us," Mitchell related. "The auto took him amidship, knocked him broadside and he slid 20 feet on the hard sand."

The impact did not kill the calf.

"Young and the writer occupied the front seat and were not disturbed," Mitchell wrote, "the balance of the party who were hanging on loosely, were badly scattered over the beach. The first words the writer heard was a voice out in the dark, saying, "My God, is anybody

killed?"

With a few bruises and a little scared, they continued on toward the pass where the next morning they launched a search party to look for Stanley Smith, who had not yet appeared on his motorcycle, and to bring back the damaged car. Smith was found where he had been crippled slightly when his motorcycle "cut a somersault" and had "twisted itself out of commission."

They would return by boat as they had come to the island from Port Lavaca without any major incident, except for one of their chickens that escaped from a cage under one of the automobiles and flew overboard — the chickens being along to provide fresh eggs.

"Gene Low jumped overboard and swam to its rescue," Mitchell wrote. "Will Smith and Keeran got in a skiff and saved Low."

Two days from Port Lavaca a Kangaroo Court was organized to adjudicate "all misdemeanors committed on the trip" with all sentences being suspended and, before beginning the last day's voyage at 4:30 a.m. on July 2, all hands took a plunge into the bay.

They had been to see the Nicaragua.