

**THE "ADA HANCOCK" DISASTER**

Reprints from the Los Angeles Star of May 2, 1863.

(Although many local history buffs have heard of the terrible explosion of Phineas Banning's steamer, few have seen the original account. We follow our policy of offering interesting articles from the past with this dramatic report. We are indebted to Warren Scherich for obtaining a copy of it for us.)

**HORRIBLE CATASTROPHE!**

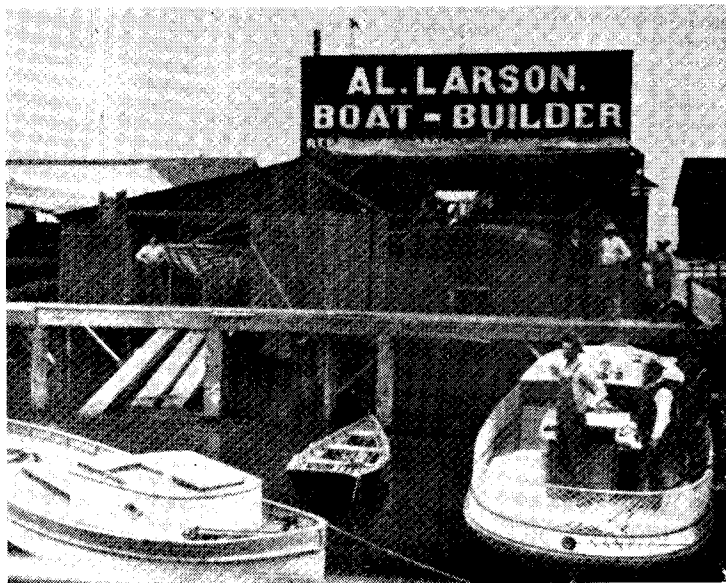
**Explosion of the Steamer Milton Willis at New San Pedro!!  
Twenty-Six Lives Lost!—Several Wounded and Missing!!**

On Monday evening, about 8 o'clock, our city was thrown into a state of the utmost alarm and terror by the arrival of a messenger from New San Pedro with the frightful announcement that the steamer Milton Willis (known here as the Ada Hancock), belonging to Mr. P. Banning, had exploded, killing Captain Seeley and most of the passengers.

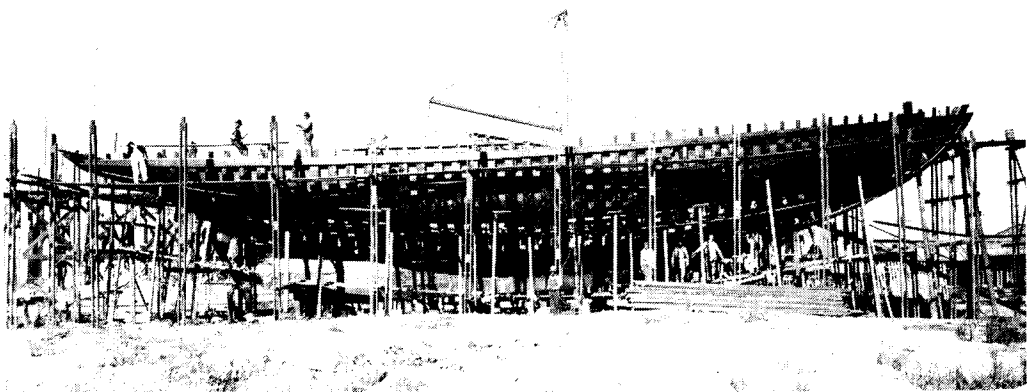
As may be imagined, the story ran over town like wildfire, carrying horror to every household, for few there were who had not friend or relative on the boat. At once, every vehicle and means of conveyance that could be obtained, were put in requisition, and all who could, started off for the scene of the terrible disaster.

On arriving at the town, we found the dead bodies of Capt. Seeley and Mr. Ritchie (messenger of Wells, Fargo & Co.), in the quarters of Captain Morris; also, Mr. G. L. Tucker, who had sustained a fracture of the leg. In the warehouse on the wharf, were the bodies of Mr. Sanford and others, some of which were dreadfully mangled and mutilated. The men in the boats were engaged in searching for the bodies, and on the wreck, which we visited at daylight, were stationed a number of soldiers from Camp Drum, to aid in the search and protect such property as might be discovered.

The steamer ADA HANCOCK (by which name only she was known to our citizens, although her engineer calls her by a different name) was employed as a tug and passenger boat by Mr. Banning, to tow freight and convey passengers to and from the steamers and vessels in the harbor of San Pedro. On the day in question, Monday last, April 27th, she was employed in taking freight and passengers to the steamer SENATOR, and had made one trip in the forepart of the day. In the afternoon, about



The Al Larson Boat-yard in East San Pedro,  
Terminal Island. Photo 1906-07.



The schooner PASQUALITO under construction at Muller Shipyard,  
1922. The building at right, with Muller sign, still stands at  
rear of Wilmington Marine Service, Berth 162, Mormon Island.

---Photos courtesy Muller Marine.

five o'clock, she left the wharf, having on board a large number of passengers, many of them on a pleasure excursion to San Francisco. The boat had proceeded about half a mile, and was attempting to round a sharp bend in the creek, when a squall of wind arose suddenly and struck her, causing her to careen so much that her port guard was under water. When in the act of righting, the explosion took place. The reason assigned by the engineer for the explosion is, that while careened, the tubes on the upper side became heated, and as the water rushed back a gas was generated which burst the boiler of the boat. In the proceedings of the inquest, which we publish below, will be found the explanation of the engineer, which exhibits one of those accidents incidental to small steamers, and which no foresight or precaution can guard against. Whether this be a correct solution of the casualty or not, we cannot say, but at all events it sounds plausible. The doubt, however, suggests itself whether there were sufficient water in the boiler. As the Grand Jury will be soon in session, we presume they will investigate fully the sad catastrophe, to find its origin. This course is due to all concerned, the proprietor and engineer, as well as the public.

The explosion was, perhaps, the most fatal of any on record, in proportion to numbers, there having been but few uninjured, and the mortality dreadful. We have heard of only seven persons escaping unhurt.

The following is the list of the killed whose bodies have been recovered up to the latest hour: -- Hubbard, -- Kimball, H. M. Oliver, H. R. Myles, Albert Sidney Johnston, Jr., -- Pratt, -- Hall, Capt. W. F. Nye, Thos. H. Workman, W. T. B. Sanford, F. Kerlin, Capt. T. W. Seeley, W. Ritchie, Wallace Haggart, Jos. Lindsey, -- Gardiner, -- Sweeney, Richard Price (colored), -- Laws (colored), Chas. Kinney, a Sonoranian, name unknown, -- Adkinson, and Capt. J. S. Bryant.

MISSING--Messrs. Schlossinger, Levi, Rogers and Repetto.

WOUNDED--In Military Hospital--Henry Beer, Chas. Cunningham, J. F. Geretmyer, W. W. Waddell, Wm. Jackson, A. C. Yarey, James Phillips, James Walsh.

Also, Mrs. Banning, Mrs. Sanford (dangerously), Miss Hereford, Miss Wilson, Mr. Banning, A. C. Clark (engineer), and -- Antonio.

NOT INJURED--Of the whole number of passengers we have heard of but seven escaping unhurt: Mrs. Colin and two children; two children of Mr. Banning, an Indian girl and the fireman.

So frightful a calamity seldom visits a community. We long felicitated ourselves on the fact that no accident ever occurred on our waters, but at length a disaster has visited us which is, for mortality, without a parallel in the history of explosions.

Among the dead we find the best men of the community--Captain Seeley, in noble generosity, whole heartedness, in all the attributes that distinguish the highest type of manhood, who could compare with him? Dr. Myles, too, and Sanford, and Fred Kerlin and Ritchie, young men in the full bloom of manhood, and the noble aspirations of ambitious youth; and J. L. Bryant, captain of the ill-fated steamboat, and Thos. H. Workman, whose obituary is elsewhere published--and that noble boy, the young, ardent, gallant Albert Sidney Johnston, the darling hope and stay of a widowed mother, where is she to turn for consolation in all this wide, wide world? --and Capt. Nye, of Sacramento; and Mr. Oliver, full of mining adventure--and so of all the others--all of them, the picked men, as it were, of the community, all of them called without a moment's notice, from the (Illegible) their joys, their pleas-

ures, their emulations. Truly has it been said, "In the midst of life we are in death."

The mutilations of poor humanity were awful. Bodies were brought ashore without heads, or arms or legs--in one case, that of Mr. Oliver, there was nothing but from the chest upward, the head being dreadfully shattered--limbs were afterwards found said to belong to him. Fragments of bodies were found at great distance from the wreck, and so general was the destruction that many lives have been lost, of which no record will ever be found.

#### CORONER'S INQUEST.

(Illegible), Justice of the Peace, acting as Coroner, issued an order to J. M. Maxey to act as Constable, and summon nine citizens to act as a jury of inquest.

The following gentlemen answered to the call of their names: M. Keller (appointed foreman), J. Jones, F. J. C. Johnson, R. S. Carlisle, N. Narbone, G. Allen, J. L. Morris, A. W. Timms, O. Macy.

Allen C. Clark, being duly sworn, deposes and says: I was on board the steamer Milton Willis, on last evening, at the time of the explosion; have known the boiler since 8th of December, from which time I have had charge of it; saw it first in August last; am an engineer by profession; considered the boiler very good; made of best quality of material, well braced; it was perfectly safe with anything less than one hundred pounds of steam; the safety valve was set to blow off at ninety pounds; the most steam I have ever had on was ninety-one pounds; deemed it safe at that; had on at the time of the explosion seventy-two pounds; had no indication whatever that an explosion would take place; had tried my water ten minutes before; we have a glass gauge on one side to indicate the height of the water in the boiler, and cocks on the other side; it was a horizontal boiler; Coffey & Ridsen, of San Francisco, were the manufacturers; a few moments before the explosion took place, looked out of my window and saw that a squall had struck the steamer and careened her to the port side until the port guard was under water; in the moment of her righting the explosion took place; when she careened, left my post at the engine and went toward the boiler; it was about fifteen to twenty feet from my post at the engine to the boiler; my intention in going to the boiler was to shift the coals so as to right her; had not got more than half way when the explosion took place; the next thing I knew I found myself in what was the ladies cabin; the steamer had gone down in eight feet of water; got Mr. Banning's child and Mrs. Sanford, and drew them on to a part of the deck which was floating; next rescued Miss Hereford and Mrs. Banning, when Miss Wilson called my attention to Capt. Seeley's body, which was floating near me; could not let go the hold I had on the ladies and called to my foreman to save the body of the captain.

By J. Jones--We generally carried seventy-five pounds of steam.

In my opinion, the explosion was caused by the extraordinary careening of the boat, in the squall which struck her a few moments before, causing the weather tubes to become heated, and when the boat righted the water coming in contact with the heated tubes created a gas, which caused the explosion; were running head on to the wind, and just turned a point which brought her broadside to; Captain Seeley was dead when I first saw him after the explosion.

(Cont. next page)

**A SAMPLING FROM MY GATES OF HEAVEN**

By Betty Buzzini

(Betty Buzzini, one of the Society's long-time members, has recently published a little book containing her recollections of growing up in San Pedro. With candor she tells of experiences that we can all "identify with" whether we grew up at her "Gates of Heaven" or someplace else. Following are excerpts which we thought you would enjoy. For the complete account, secure a copy from Betty. ---Kathryn Schultz, editor of this article.)

THE GROWING YEARS. I was born in a little house across the street from Point Fermin School in San Pedro. A midwife was in attendance. Soon after World War I, there was an epidemic and many children died. We lost one of my brothers when he was only fourteen months old from the epidemic. He is now buried under the First Church at Harbor View Cemetery. It was a Red Cross plot for all the little children taken at that time by this dreadful disease. My eldest brother was the only one to have been born in a hospital. There were five children in all. The county hospital still stands today. Private transportation was nil. We had Pacific Electric Red Cars that would travel from Main Street in Los Angeles to the Harbor and from the Harbor out to Pacific Avenue, then to Cabrillo Beach, through Stephen White Drive to the Point Fermin Park and return. The hospital was a long ways away—we lived out in the sticks.

The years before I was born in 1923, there was a big fire at the General Petroleum reservoir located where the present Marine View Apartments are standing. The fire burned for three days. The oil was pumped from there out to the breakwater and onto tankers. The oil boiled over and ran down what is now Alma Street and when it came to the end of the road, it went into the front door of a house and pushed the occupant's piano through the wall . . .

(Cont. on page 19)

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**"ADA HANCOCK" (Cont.)**

James Green, being duly sworn, says: Have known Capt. J. S. Bryant; know that he is dead; came to his death by the explosion of the steamer yesterday.

Charles Wilson, being duly sworn, says; I know Capt. J. S. Bryant; know that he is dead.

**VERDICT.**

Upon consultation the jury returned the following verdict:

We, the jury, duly sworn according to law to make inquest and investigate the causes which led to the death of the persons whose bodies we have had in view, find that they came to their death by the explosion of the boiler of the steam tug MILTON WILLIS, whilst on her way from New San Pedro to the anchorage in San Pedro harbor, and about half a mile from the wharf, on Monday, the 27th day of April, 1863; and further find that no culpability can be attached to the officers or owners of the boat, but that the accident is entirely attributable to the overpowering force of the elements.

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