

LUMBER SCHOONER *COMET* RECENT RESULTS FROM FIELDWORK

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This poster examines the recent exposure and field investigation of the bow section of a three-masted lumber schooner rediscovered at Simonton Cove, San Miguel Island. The 429.74-gross ton wooden sailing vessel was christened with the name *Comet* for her owners Hooper Brothers and C. F. S. Lass. The schooner was originally built in 1886 at the Hall Brothers shipbuilding firm of Port Blakely, Washington and was registered with the following dimensions (feet); length 144.6, breadth 35.2 and depth of hold 11.4. She was built of Douglas fir with the exception of her hardwood stem and stern post, and had an elliptic stern and billet head. Equipped with a centerboard, she had one deck, including bow and stern ports for loading lumber cargoes. During the *Comet's* twenty-five year career she delivered lumber to many coastal ports along the Pacific West Coast.

The *Comet* departed Aberdeen, Washington on 23 August 1911, with her holds full and decks covered with a cargo of 500,000 board-feet of lumber destined for San Pedro, California. On 30 August at 8:00 pm while sailing in heavy seas with a thick fog, the *Comet* struck Wilson Rock, 2.5 miles northwest of Harris Point, San Miguel Island. Today's modern Coast Pilot states: *this locality should not be approached in thick weather, as the dangers rise abruptly from deep water and are not marked by kelp; soundings give no positive warning of their proximity.* After the vessel struck the treacherous rock, it was pulled off by the current and began drifting south towards San Miguel Island. The crew lowered the sails to ease the strain and then grounded the schooner in Simonton Cove. The *Comet's* master, Capt. Nicolas Boregenson, noted:

"I thought when the *Comet* was freed from her first perilous position, that I would be able to bring her to Santa Barbara, but she filled rapidly and I soon found that she was badly stoved in. She became water logged and I knew the best I could do was to beach her on San Miguel. She is lying in a favorable position and unless the seas become heavy, we may be able to get her off. Her hull must be in bad shape. There was a hard wind as well as a heavy fog when she struck. The ship's chronometer must have been faulty for we were about ten miles off our course."

It was later reported that the *Comet's* chronometer was in San Francisco being repaired, and the vessel was using one on loan, which was not accurate, putting the schooner eight to ten miles off course. The Captain with his wife and part of the crew made their way in a small boat to Santa Rosa Island after a failed attempt to land on San Miguel Island due to the heavy surf. Assisted by employees of Vail and Vickers, who operated a cattle ranch on the island, the survivors were taken to Santa Barbara aboard the company's power schooner *Santa Rosa Island*.

Simonton Cove, also known as the "catcher's mitt" of the Northern Channel Islands, has been collecting flotsam for centuries. Contemporary photographs of the stranding confirmed the identity of the *Comet* and her location at Simonton. The scattered remains of the *Comet* lie in the Channel Islands National Park (CINP) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary (CINMS). Although in the 1970s and again in 1984, photographs were taken of the site clearly identifying the ship's capstan, one of her anchors, bow structure, and associated machinery, no archaeological investigations were conducted prior to being covered over by sand in 1984. In October 1993, Matthew Russell of the National Park Service's Submerged Cultural Resources Unit (SCRU) and Coastal Maritime Archaeology Resources (CMAR) members attempted to excavate sand from the site to record the vessel remains. After three days of working on the site, complicated by sand constantly reentering the excavation, only the anchor was successfully recorded.

San Miguel Island Ranger Ian Williams has been monitoring the site on a regular basis to check for signs of sand erosion, that would expose the wreckage. On 13 March 1999, Williams discovered the site clear of sand revealing the bow section after being entombed for fifteen years. Contacting Park Archaeologist Don Morris on the radio, who was in the middle of a site investigation on Santa Rosa Island with leading mammoth paleontologist Dr. Larry Agenbroad, Williams was instructed to mobilize the shipwreck reconnaissance team. On the evening of March 13, a call was placed to Robert Schwemmer, Cultural Resources Coordinator for the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum (SBMM) and CINMS, to assemble team members from CMAR to be dispatched to the island. On the morning of March 14, Schwemmer made contact with Williams and Morris who shared a concern of

an impending storm scheduled to arrive that evening that could possibly redeposit the sand over the site. After communication with CINP dispatch, it was confirmed there was only one flight departing at 9:30 am for San Miguel Island with room for one passenger. Schwemmer was left with only one option “pack equipment, clothing, and food in ten minutes for a possible three-day stay on the island,” he accepted the challenge. Departing Oxnard airport the plane arrived at the island at 11:00. After a quick transfer of equipment to the backpack and a four-mile hike to Simonton Cove, Schwemmer arrived at the *Comet* site at 12:15 pm.

As revealed in the 1984 images, the sand had scoured down to a point exposing the anchor, capstan, and portions of the wooden bow structure (Figure 1). In addition, the sand terrace towards the interior of the island had eroded revealing iron machinery not documented in the earlier photographs. This new machinery was identified as two purchase rims that are components of the hand lever windlass system, and still attached to the rims are the pawls or traveler arms. The pawls would attach to connecting rods that went up to the pump brake mechanism located on the foredeck above the windless. The inner dimension of the purchase rims was recorded at 23.5 in. The original dimension would have been closer to 24 in. before iron expansion occurred due to years



Figure 1. The bow section of the *Comet* was exposed after being buried in sand for 15 years.

of exposure in the corrosive environment. This information was substantiated in the *Comet*'s surviving construction contract where it was stipulated the vessel was to be equipped with a 24-in. windlass purchase. Further study of the capstan revealed that it was still attached to the wooden foredeck, which greatly assists archaeologists in comparing the site dimensions to the wooden dimensions called out in the construction contract, confirming the vessel's identity. Schwemmer spent the next four hours recording the site, taking field drawings, and photographs before the storm arrived (Figure 2). After the initial investigation of the *Comet* site it was recommended that a more detailed study be conducted during favorable weather and tide conditions.

A multi-agency shipwreck reconnaissance team is scheduled for April 1999 to continue the field studies, assuming future storms do not cover the wreckage with sand. The multi-agency team will be represented by CINP, CINMS, SCRUI, SBMM, CMAR and the Mineral Management Service Pacific OCS Region (MMS). Not only will this information provide historical documentation of the little known construction methods during the latter part of the nineteenth century, but will be disseminated to the public at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum's CINMS and CINP shipwreck exhibits.



Figure 2. R. Schwemmer measuring the *Comet*'s capstan and wooden fore deck.