

Melbourne Argus
August 10 1929

The Mahogany Ship

A Memory of Warrnambool

By Crauchan

It was Kipling who proclaimed the power of scent over sound and sight to bring to mind forgotten memories. The cold type of modern newsprint can be equally effective. A small paragraph in the Camera Supplement on June 22, referring to the "Mahogany Ship", carried my mind back to many happy days spent among the wind-swept sand dunes near Warrnambool, days when, armed with wooden swords and blessed with vivid imaginations, we scoured the hillocks for traces of the long lost wreck and its treasures.

Every mound had to be probed to ascertain whether it hid from our sight the hull of a Spanish galleon; every piece of driftwood suggested a mahogany spar; pieces-of-eight, golden candlesticks, and bejewelled swords were all within the bounds of boyhood's possibility. That we found nothing daunted our enthusiasm not at all. Every Saturday came as a fresh opportunity for search, and menial tasks performed, off we would go, sometimes as buccaneers, sometimes as less bloodthirsty explorers, sometimes as unfortunate castaways, doomed to years of solitude on a desolate island.

What was the foundation of our faith? What made this story of a "Spanish" or "Mahogany Ship" common talk among our elders? In 1836 while two men, themselves wrecked, were walking along the beach they came upon the half-buried remains of a vessel high up among the sand dunes, midway between Warrnambool and Belfast (now Port Fairy). Arriving at Belfast, at that time a tiny whaling station, they reported their discovery to Captain J.B. Mills, to whom we owe much of our information with regard to the vessel. The captain, who was afterwards harbour master at Port Fairy, immediately visited the scene of the wreck, and took a sight-bearing, which placed it east of Gorman's Lane, about six miles from Warrnambool, and well up among the hummocks. Twice later he stood upon the deck. Once he tried the edge of his knife upon its timber. "The claspknife glanced over it as if it were a bar of iron", he said.

As an old sailor, the ancient appearance of the vessel impressed him immediately, and later observers testified to the foreign build. Captain Mason in a letter to "The Argus" in 1876 declared that she appeared to him to be a vessel of a model altogether unfamiliar to him and at variance in some respects with the rules of shipbuilding so far as known to himself.

About 1847 the wreck was lost sight of, but at intervals of a few years it seems to have appeared from its hiding place beneath the shifting sands. It was visited by a score or so of people, till 1880, when it disappeared beneath the dunes for the last time.

"A Marine Jack-in-the-Box"

What distinguished this from any other of the many wrecks that lie along our coast? Apart from its "Jack-in-the-Box" appearances and disappearances, what sets this case above the ordinary? The evidence is scanty, but extraordinarily perplexing.

Its unusual build has already been referred to. Added to that, all who saw the vessel agreed that it lay well inland, the distances given varying from 100 yards to 400 yards. How it got there we can only surmise. Did the vessel come ashore so long ago that in the intervening years the sea receded and left it far up in the sand hills, or was it hauled up the beach by some mighty wave caused perhaps by a convulsion of the neighbouring Tower Hill volcano? Even the latter possibility places the time of the wreck before white occupation of this country, for we have no record of such a disturbance.

Other points are interesting. The incident of Captain Mills's clasp-knife raises the question of what timber was the vessel built? Early settlers in the district had tales of old whalers huts floored with mahogany, a wood which it was believed was to the Spanish shipbuilder what oak was to the English. Spanish and Portuguese coins have been picked up round about Warrnambool. The local aboriginal tribe had legends of the coming of "yellow men" in the dim past. In 1836 natives apparently 70 or 80 years of age stated that they could not remember the wreck of the vessel occurring. It has always been there, they declared.

Buccaneer or Trader

So the riddle remains. Was it Spanish buccaneer or Dutch trader; treasure-laden, or empty derelict; 17th century or 19th? It is an interesting subject for speculation and one which has already formed the subject matter of two novels by Australian writers. It is likely that it will ever remain an unsolved riddle, but the hope that springs eternal in the breast of man as of boy will yet send me to poke about the sunlit, windy sand-dunes for a sight of that ancient vessel.

It is certainly there; who will find it?