# The Waterspout: A First-hand Account of an 1869 Shipwreck

*This first-hand account of an 1869 shipwreck and the waterspout that caused it was originally published in the Iowa Register around 1890, and later in the Belfast, Maine Republican Journal. It was dictated by Oliver Winslow Park, second mate on the bark TROVATORE, commanded by Captain James M. Blanchard. Oliver was the son of a Searsport captain, Oliver Crary Park, who died in 1865 leaving a wife and five children, and forcing Oliver, the oldest son, to ship as a cabin boy to help support the family back in Searsport.*

## Shipping Out

One summer day, the year I was nineteen, while I was spending a few days at home in Searsport Harbor, Maine, after a voyage, I was in my mother's hayfield getting in her crop when a telegram came from Captain James M. Blanchard in Boston, asking me to ship with him as second mate on board the barque TROVATORE.

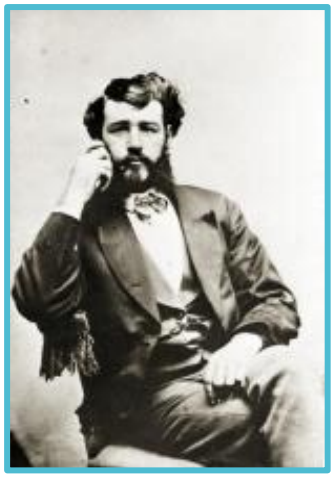

*Figure 1 Captain Oliver Winslow Park (Ship Captains Collection, LB2008.3.258.)*

I forthwith dropped my fork, packed my sea-chest and bag, and was on my way the next day. Arriving in Boston, I found the Trovatore, a nice trim barque, had been undergoing some needed repairs. She had just been rigged out with a new set of standing rigging, which was something new in those days.

Captain and Mrs. Blanchard (Emma W. Pendleton Blanchard of Searsport) were young married people with their first baby, a little girl three or four months old. The baby had taken sick in New York with cholera infantum. The doctor said the only way to save the baby's life was to buy a milk goat and take it aboard. So they made a little place in a sailor aboard knew how to milk. Captain Blanchard knew I had milked mother's cows from the time I was a little shaver, and he asked me to milk the goat. When the baby needed to be fed I took a cup and went and milked enough for the occasion.

After a few days of getting ready we took on ballast and went around to New York. We loaded with kerosene in barrels to go to Trieste, Austria. After an uneventful voyage, with only one severe gale, and that not dangerous, we reached the Straits of Gibraltar After going through the Straits we proceeded on our way into the Mediterranean Sea.

## The First Storm

When we got to Messina, on the Island of Sicily, we went into the little harbor….then as we started from Messina for Trieste, after crossing various gulfs we entered the Adriatic Sea When we got about halfway up from the entrance to the Adriatic Sea, we had a very severe storm, what they call in that country a borer. The wind blew so hard we couldn't carry sail; only enough to keep our vessel steady under lower fore and main topsails. It blew two days and two nights. It blew us right across the Adriatic Sea. We couldn't go ahead. We could only keep enough sail to keep ourselves steady, headed up toward the wind as we could head.

We heave-to, under loose winged topsails. It was so dark at night that we couldn't see. Wind kept blowing us steadily across the Adriatic. We were so nearly across that the captain decided that if we should blow so near that there was no hope of keeping off shore, he would turn the vessel head-on, and run on-to the shore.

Of course we did not know where we were. Some parts of the shore were rocky and some sandy. If we struck the rocky part we would be dashed to pieces. If we struck the sandy, we would only lose our spars from the shock. In preparation for such an emergency, the captain's wife had made an oilskin suit for the baby and one for herself. The baby certainly looked cute. It was decided it was my duty in case of an event of that kind to take Mrs. Blanchard and the baby up into the foretop. If the vessel struck shore "bang," the sea would wash right over her, but it might not reach so high as the foretop. But I thought that plan was foolish, for if we struck on a shore, the spars would be broken with the shock.

Fortunately in the morning, we found ourselves in plain sight of shore. Wind was moderately fast. We were able to put on more sail….and had an uneventful trip to Trieste.

We discharged our cargo of oil and took on ballast for Palermo, on the Island of Sicily…After squally weather all day we got as far as the coast of Italy. That night the sky was fierce looking dark, heavy black streaks, with streaks of copper in between. We were expecting bad weather. We had taken in all light sails….it was the second of December, 1869.

**The Waterspout**

In the second dog watch which was my watch below, I was in the dining room eating supper, and chatting about some home affairs with the Captain's wife, who had been my schoolmate Emma Pendleton, when the call came for all hands on deck. In going below I had taken off my boots and put on my slippers. When the call came of course there was no time to change back again. Consequently I was on deck in my slippers.

*Figure 2 Bark TROVATORE (Robert B. Applebee Collection, LB1980.222.465.)*

When I came on deck I found a severe squall a-coming. We stood by, with axes to cut away the mast if it seemed that it must be done. The mate stood by the fore rigging, and I stood by the main rigging. But the squall passed without the necessity of doing it.

When the squall passed, which it did almost instantly, there was not a breath of air stirring. When it stopped, it stopped all at once. Voices sounded like hollering in a barrel. We staid [sic] in that state for a few moments. Then I saw that the little breath of air was taking her aback. I said to the captain, "She's all back forward." He gave the orders to "haul around the yard ," which we proceeded to do, when a downpour of wind and water struck us. The last I saw was yards flying in all directions.

Then I was submerged in water, and knew that the vessel was blown over on her side. The water was coming over me in such torrents that I thought the vessel was upside down and I was under her. But I happened to be on the upper side, and having to catch my breath I found I got a little air, and I hung on.

Almost instantly the downpour of water stopped, and it stopped all at once.

A waterspout is like a tornado that picks up houses, only on the ocean it sucks up water into a big balloon-shaped body of water on a neck. When that neck hits something the water in the balloon comes down.

**Disaster**

At the moment when that deluge of water poured over me, it was pitch dark, so I couldn't see a thing, but in all probability the neck of the waterspout hit the vessel, and the water in the balloon-shaped part came down on us. When that downpour of water stopped so suddenly, the darkness grew less, and I could dimly see the state we were in. The masts were in the water, and the broad side of the vessel was up. I managed to climb up on the broadside . There I found two or three of the sailors. In looking aft I saw that the companion-way door was open. Not knowing that she was badly stove, forward, I thought to shut the companion-way doors to keep water from going in the cabin. I threw a rope down and slid down the companion-way, and found that the doors were gone. I turned to catch my rope and climb up on the broadside again when I noticed that there was a fire in the cabin. I suppose that the cook's lamp had been overturned in the pantry. I turned to go in and put the fire out. The way the ship was lying now, the door was overhead. I got up into that hole overhead. I looked down and saw the bedding and pillows from our room. I took one of the wet pillows and slashed around, and put the fire out. Then I was in a predicament; dark hole; no light; had to get out through that opening; sunk down, sinking all the time, so I barely had room to hold my mouth up to breathe till I could get out and get my rope, and climb up on the outside.

When I got up on the outside that time, was the first time I had seen the captain. He saw me come up from there. He wanted to know

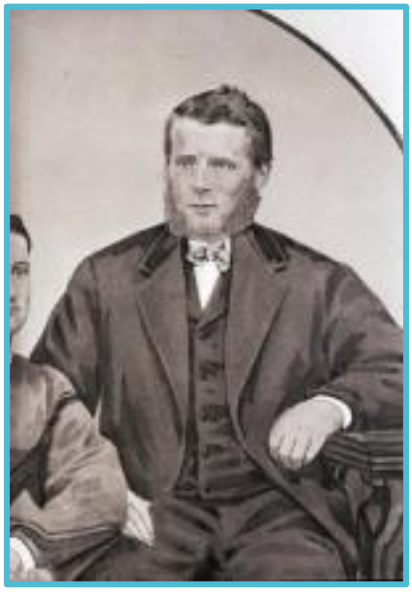

*Figure 3 Captain James M. Blanchard (Ship Captains Collection, LB2008.3.18.)*

if I had his wife. I said no, and that the cabin was full of water. Just then I heard her call. I said, "She is hollering, now, from the sky-light." I suppose she had climbed up on the table in the dining room, and was at the skylight, standing on the side of the firmly bolted table. The captain answered her, and she called again, saying something about the baby. Then she wanted to know if she couldn't come out. Captain told her yes. I threw a rope down to where she was. Captain slid down on the skylight. She reached out and he took her by the hand. But he could not save her, for at that very moment, as we could tell by the sound, she died with her hand clasped in his. Instantly the vessel pitched forward, going down. I started and ran, and jumped right off the keel.

**In the Water**

The next thing I knew, I was being tumbled and jumbled upside down, going down in the suction of the vessel. But being a good swimmer from childhood, I knew what to do when I was in the water. I began of course swimming for the top of the water. But at one time I found my head sticking up between two rattlings [sic] of the mizzen rigging. I backed my head out of that, and began swimming again, when my legs became tangled with a small running gear; and by good fortune of not having had time to put on my boots, I disentangled my limbs by pushing off first one slipper and then the other.

I proceeded, then, to make my way to the top, which I did with the very last atom of breath I had, having held my breath all the time I was under water; probably helped immensely by the reaction of the vessel striking bottom or meeting equal displacement of water.

Nearly exhausted from the want of breath, I could do nothing but move my feet and hands under water while I was getting my wind again. For what seemed to me the next hour I did nothing but keep myself on top of the water. There wasn't much [sic] waves, but there was choppy sea, which made it quite difficult. Sometimes my head was under water, and sometimes it was out again.

**The Hatch Covers**

In my aimless swimming I finally chanced to face west where a glimmer of light sky showed the breaking of the storm; and between me and that light streak I saw a dark object bobbing up and down. I proceeded to make my way toward it forthwith, and found it to be one of the main deck hatches about three feet wide and six feet long. It was made with the cracks filled with pitch and oakum. I found it would partially bear me up by lying lengthwise on it, concave side up, with my hand paddling at the side, stomach down.

I floated around on that for an indefinite period of time until I accidently ran afoul of another exactly like it. I got that other hatch and I wiggled around, and worked around and got under that other hatch crosswise. When I had the two of them, I could sit up instead of lying down, with only my legs in the water, but I didn't have any rope to fasten them together, so I had to hold one against the other.

In the meantime the clouds had all rolled away, and a bright moon had come out. Somewhere along after that I heard voices and soon two of the sailors drifted along coming near me on the bottom of the long-boat that had been washed overboard, and drifted along, overturned and pretty badly stove. The boat was deeper in the water and would drift faster in the water than I would. That is how they overtook me, because they took more depth of water. I preferred to take my chance on what I had rather than on an upturned boat, so I didn't make any effort to join them. But as they came off abreast of me, we had some conversation. It seemed there was a lazarite [sic] hatch (lazarette hatch), an object about three feet square, its rings in two corners, drifting near the boat. Half crazed with fear, the two men wished they had that thing….I left my hatches and swum to that hatch, and towed it to them. One of them had a long knit Norwegian scarf. They tied one end to a ring in the hatch and fastened the other end to the bottom of the boat by sticking a sheath knife through the scarf into the bottom of the boat. A sailor never wears suspenders. He has a leather belt with a sheath, as he always has to have a sheath knife. He generally uses the same knife to eat with.

I swum back to my hatches, and the men drifted out of sight and hearing.

**Rescue**

Along in the morning, about four bells or six bells, the air became dense, with a haze something like fog, but not wet, so that it was not possible to see any great distance…I kept up a hollering all the time….Along about eight bells, I should judge, I heard the sound of a fog horn. Then I knew someone had heard my voice and was answering with a fog horn….About seven o'clock when the haze lifted, we found ourselves quite close together, so that they saw me and put out a small boat to come and get me. When the boat came up to me I reached out and caught the gunwale of the boat. But at that point the reaction set in and I had no control of my muscles. The men reached out and hauled me into the boat. I was so benumbed and bewildered I couldn't speak.

It proved to be an Italian vessel. I wasn't able to understand their speech, but I could see by their motions they were asking if there were any others. I held up two fingers, and motioned in the direction that I thought they were, and patted on the boat.

Before they went in search, they took me to the ship, where the other sailors rigged up a boswain's [sic] chair which they put me in and hauled me aboard the vessel….and put me in a bunk…When I waked up some five or six hours later the sailors were there and they were all eating dinner. …According to their reports, that lazarite hatch served them well.

*One of only three survivors of the waterspout disaster, Oliver Park shipped back to New York aboard an American brig. His mother had heard the report that the Trovatore had been lost, and only one officer and two sailors saved. Captain Greene Park, a captain with whom Oliver had served in the past, had reassured her and the whole neighborhood that "*if swimming had anything to do with it I was the officer saved, for I was like a duck in water.*"*

*Oliver continues: "*I thought I had had about all the sea-faring life I wanted. I thought instead of going home from New York, then going out west.*" However, he did not have enough money and eventually went to sea for another two years, briefly commanding the bark Helen Angier in 1874. He found his nerves "giving out" in bad weather. Eventually, Oliver traveled to Iowa where relatives had settled. He became a farmer, married and stayed there for the rest of his life, far from the ocean.*

# Glossary

**Ballast** – Any heavy material carried in a vessel to provide desired draft and stability. "In ballast" means the vessel is sailing without any cargo, just with ballast in her hold.

**Bark** – *Barque* – A sailing vessel with three masts; square-rigged on the fore and main masts and fore-and-aft rigged on the mizzen.

**Bells** – Time is marked at sea by striking the ship's bell every half-hour during each of the seven watches of the day. At noon, the helmsman strikes eight bells; at 12:30 one bell; and so on through the afternoon watch, adding one bell each half-hour, until 4 p.m. when eight bells is sounded again. The process is then repeated.

**Boswain's chair** – *Boatswain's chair, bo'sun's chair* – Pronounced bo' sun's. A swinging seat used in scraping and slushing (greasing) down the masts.

**Broadside** – The side of a vessel above the water line. Broadside can also refer to a printed notice.

**Cholera infantum** – An often fatal form of diarrhea occurring in infants, not of the same cause as cholera but having similar symptoms.

**Dog watch** – Two half watches of two hours each into which the period from 4 pm to 8 pm is divided. The purpose of dividing this watch into two parts is to produce an uneven number of watches in 24 hours, 7 instead of 6. This ensures that watchkeepers in ships, do not keep the same watches every day.

**Foretop** – The platform at the junction of the foremast and the foretopmast.

**Gunwale** – Pronounced gun'l. The upper edge of the side or bulwark of a vessel.

**"Haul around the yard"** – To tack a square-rigged vessel.

**Hove** – *heave, hove to* – Hove may be used as the past tense of to heave, or throw. "Hove to," when used to talk about a vessel, means that the vessel stops.

**Keel** – The chief timber or piece extending along the length of the vessel bottom from which rise the frames, stem, and sternposts.

**Lazarite hatch** – *Lazarette hatch, lazarette, lazaret* – A lazarette is usually a storage locker used for gear or equipment that a sailor or boatswain would use around the decks on a sailing vessel. It is typically found below the weather deck in the stern of the vessel and is accessed through a hatch from the main deck or through a doorway from below decks.

**Long boat** – The largest boat carried aboard a sailing ship.

**Mizzen rigging** – The rigging attached to the mizzenmast.

**Rattlings** [sic] – Correct spelling is ratlines. Part of the ship's rigging.

**Rigging** – The term for all ropes, wires, or chains used in ships and smaller vessels to support the masts and yards (standing rigging) and for hoisting, lowering, or trimming sails to the wind (running rigging.) Running rigging lines move through blocks and are not wormed, parceled, or served.

**Spar** – A round timber or metal pole used for masts, yards, booms, etc.

**Stove-in** – Pushed in; a vessel damaged from the outside.

**Winged topsails** – Sails that are spread to both sides of the mast.