

Loss of the passenger vessel “Tunafish Don”

Compiled by Gerry York

In June, 1941 the excursion boat, “Tunafish Don” had been engaged to take 34 people most of whom were from Rumford and Mexico, Maine, to Monhegan Island for a clam bake. This was a group outing arranged by several prominent businessmen which would include a number of their present and former employees. The boat loaded at Dyers Cove on Great Island in Harpswell, made a stop at West Point in Phippsburg and was last seen passing south of Seguin Island. Beyond this point the vessel was not seen again and all on board disappeared. While the cause of the sinking remains unknown, Only 14 bodies were ever recovered, but for some the mystery remains.

This then is the accepted usual version of the reason for, and the result, of the trip with Paul Johnson on his vessel the DON. But, of course, it is vastly over simplified description of a complicated and frustrating tragedy. So, What happened?

The fate of there victims is tied to the boat they set out on. Wreckage was reported to have been found but nothing conclusive was ever proven to have come from the Don. However, conjecture would run from the vessel having been the victim of sabotage to having been sunk by a German U-boat. Some said There was even evidence that it might have blown up or that it had caught fire. In the final analysis, what happened to the Rumford and Mexico residents who set out for a Sunday afternoon sail in June of 1941 has gone down as an unsolved mystery.

It is also unfortunate that a mere six months later on 7 December, 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry into World War II put an effective lid on the incident and five years later the tragedy had been largely forgotten by everyone but the residents of Rumford and Mexico. There are, however, a number of facts which came to light regarding the mystery that point to simple negligence rather than the possibility of foul play at sea or even an act of war causing the loss of so many unfortunate people. The vessel had no lifeboat, life jackets were not accessible, the boat had a suspect fuel system and there was only one way to exit the cabin.

Dyer’s Cove is on the east side of Harpswell above Orr’s and Bailey islands. The vessel was to make a round trip to Monhegan Island, where a clam chowder and lobster lunch was to take place. Leaving the cove at about 9:30 AM the boat stopped at Phippsburg before heading out for Monhegan about 10:15. The boat was seen rounding Small Point at 11AM by commercial fishermen and later by the men manning the light on Seguin Island at 11:40 AM. No further reliable sightings of the vessel were reported.

Concern for the Don first began to manifest itself late that day after a dense fog rolled in about 3:30 pm and the boat had not returned by 9PM as expected. The official search for her began early Monday morning, when the “Diligence”, a one hundred and twenty-five-foot Coast Guard search-and-rescue cutter set out from Portland. By noon on Monday a number of concerned Rumford and Mexico citizens had driven to Dyer’s Cove to stand anxiously on the dock, peering out to sea. Eventually reports began to filter in that the last sighting of the Don had been somewhere off Small Point or Bailey Island the previous day.

Of the 14 bodies recovered, two were men and the rest were women. The first body was found on July 2nd floating off Bailey Island near Charity Ledge. Then others were sighted and brought to shore at Mackerel Cove. The first on site examinations lead to rumors that the bodies had been burned. Though this was later changed to the effects of long immersion in the water, the story of a fire or an explosion made it into the news reports and persists to this day. The medical examiner report list drowning as the cause of death in every body recovered.

There were additional theories. One theory was that a mine had broken free from Halifax Harbor in Nova Scotia and had followed the Labrador current to the waters between Bailey Island and Monhegan, where the Don encountered it. Tales like this and the possibility that the Don had been sunk by a U-boat continued to circulate for some time.

A fisherman came forward who reported hearing a boat racing its engine as if it were trying to get off a ledge in the vicinity of Round Rock. The time was about right for when the Don would have been somewhere off Bailey Island on the return trip that Sunday evening. The most likely thoughts involved the boat itself, however. More investigation turned up the fact that the Don was less than seaworthy. She had been sitting for an extended period — at least the one whole winter — on the beach at Yarmouth Island with no cover and no maintenance performed on her engine. When the tide came in she floated and when it went out she sat on the beach. Moreover, she was a converted rumrunner on which an excessively burdensome superstructure had been added. Knowledgeable seamen thought she was ripe for capsizing. The fact that her engines hadn't been up to snuff led to the theory she had lost power, causing her to run onto a ledge. Possibly Captain Johnson had got her off the ledge only to sink from damage from the grounding.

The other theory was that she had suddenly capsized. This was backed up by the fact that none of the bodies that had been recovered wore lifejackets. If the Don had capsized there wouldn't have been time for the passengers to put on flotation gear. The cabin top was also reported not to have grab rails installed.

Of the fourteen bodies that were recovered #1,3,4,and 5 were found in the general area of Charity Ledge off the backside of Jaquish Island. Earl Decker, body #6 was found on Ragged Island. Body #2 was found by Thunder Hole at Jaquish Gut, Bailey Island. Paul Johnson(body #7) was found on the south end of Pond Island Ledge. #8 was at Mark Island Ledge west of Jaquish Island. Over several days time the other bodies were recovered further to the west and south west as the current swept them toward Cape Elizabeth.

The waters of Orr's and Bailey islands can produce serious swells, which could easily lead a top-heavy craft to capsize. There are also a number of ledges that a boat could run on. Any could punch a hole in a craft.

There is some speculation that the Don was not on a course toward Monhegan Island when it went by Seguin, but that it was headed more toward the Damariscove Island and Boothbay Harbor area. Perhaps because of the chop in the Kennebec River they tried to stay closer to shore and decided to pass through the islands north of Damariscove and stay close to shore on their way along to Mohegan just to give the

passengers some visual scenery to look at. It isn't believed they stopped at Damariscove Island because there was a manned Coast Guard Life Saving Station there and the Don was not reported to have been seen by them. That could mean that the Don didn't intend to go to Damariscove or it could mean that it never made it that far, which would lend some credence to the idea that it may have gone down in in Sheepscott Bay.

After the body of Adele Kawlaicze was recovered fourteen days after the disappearance off the shore of Cape Elizabeth, nothing more of the Don was found, and a State and Federal investigation was begun.

The conclusion of the investigation was that, although no definitive cause could be determined, the vessel was overloaded and unstable and likely rolled over and sank rapidly. It was felt that the bodies recovered, were on the cabin top, possibly because there was no room for them in the cabin. There was only one exit from the cabin through a door which was at the stern and open inward. When the boat rolled over the door would probably have had debris against it and likely it was well below the water level due to the boat being heavy in the stern because of the engine, transmission and stove. However, the board identified several regulation changes which they felt would have prevented the tragedy from happening which effected the boating industry going forward.

The following questions were asked during several discussions about the disappearance of the DON. These answers are my own, and only my own, opinion. Gerry York

How old was the Don when it disappeared.

No one is absolutely sure. When the boat had work done in 1937 in West Bath, boatyard owner Fred Larrabee said he was fairly sure it was at least twenty years old but maybe even twenty-five to thirty years old. When the boat left the boatyard there was paperwork submitted by Paul Johnson to the US Customs which indicated the Don had been built in 1937. This was obviously not true and Larrabee said he did not repair the vessel as much as refit it. Larrabee also stated "the Don was a better boat when it came into the yard than when it went out." This was not in reference to the quality of the work so much as to the way the design and stability had been changed by the addition of an extra seven feet of cabin height in the bow.

What is up with the name DON? I thought boats had women's names.

The vessel seems to have actually been called the "Tunafish Don" but this was usually shortened to just "DON" and that is what was painted on the bow in green lettering. I suspect this was a reference to possible connections that Paul Johnson might have had during prohibition with organized crime in the Boston area (a Don was a Mafia leader) when he was allegedly a "Rum Runner". The Don was said to have been used to ferry bootleg booze from Rum Row to shore during a previous career. Or I could be totally wrong.

Why did Johnson take them to Monhegan in the fog?

When the day began June 29th the fog was offshore several miles. The leader of the Rumford group had specifically said they wanted to go to Monhegan Island for a clambake.

What kind of engine did the Don have?

The Don may have originally had a different engine but no one is sure. Customs records show a 50 HP Redwing Marine Engine but Larreebee says there was a 6 cylinder 100 hp Redwing engine in it when it arrived at his boatyard and it was overhauled by Paul Johnson while it was there.

How long does it take to get to Monhegan?

Monhegan Island is about 30 miles from Small Point and about 10 more miles from Dyers Cove. It would depend on weather and sea conditions and speed of the vessel. The sea state was not particularly rough that morning. It was clear but hazy with a reported 7-8 mile visibility. Having said that, The DON was known to roll and when passing the mouth of the Kennebec River with an incoming tide or wind it can become quite choppy and unsettled so this could have slowed the headway. Apparently Paul Johnson had told passengers that the trip to Monhegan was expected to take about three hours each way. This would indicate he meant to make about 9 Knots of speed which is about right for a vessel with a 100 HP engine. (The engine HP varies in the descriptions by witnesses from 50 HP to 100 HP to 150 HP depending on who was testifying. My guess would be that it was not a new engine, but not more than five or six years old in 1937 and was a 6 cylinder 100 hp .)

Why were only women's bodies found?

Actually two male bodies were recovered. Albert Melanson was discovered on the shore of Ragged Island and the body of Captain Paul Johnson was found near Pond Island Ledge. Both men were striped to their underwear which would lead me to believe they were attempting to swim and or rescue others. It has been assumed that most of the men were below in the cabin while about a dozen women were riding on top of the cabin as they had been when last seen off Small Point.

Why were there no Lifejackets?

The boat had life jackets for all the passengers [40] but they were stored in the forward part of the cabin over the fuel tank and were not accessible to most passengers especially not to those on the cabin top.

I heard the Mafia blew up the DON as an insurance scam and Johnson's partner was in on it.

The Don (then named "Elcid" had reportedly been used to transport rum during prohibition when it was owned by Lucifer Ingraffia. Ingraffia and a man named as "Dodo Henry" along with Paul Johnson were known to be engaged in smuggling activities of the Maine and Massachusetts coasts. The boat reportedly was sunk at the dock on purpose by rivals in the bootleg business but was quickly salvaged. That was in the late 1920's. There were rumors later on that Joe Bernier and Paul Johnson planned to sink the Don for insurance but, there was no insurance on the vessel when it disappeared and it is risky to scuttle a boat when you do not have a lifeboat to get into, coupled with the lives of your passengers in the balance. The rumors of an insurance scam were likely just rumor.

Wasn't the Don found by a dragger in the 60's?

The answer to that ismaybe. In 1963 Bernard Johnson of Bailey Island was dragging for ground fish near Round Rock which is just under one mile west of Ragged Island. The net caught down and when brought to the surface it had what looked to be the wreckage of a boat with foot gear and other debris. Some of the contents of the net were lost back overboard but reportedly a few items were saved and brought in to Mackerel Cove at Bailey Island. This was nearly 25 years after the Don disappeared and none of the items were positively identified as being from the Don. One item in particular lead everyone to believe that this debris came from the sunken vessel. A pair of opera glasses (small binoculars) with the initials L.S. were found. Leila Sanders was known to have had a pair. Larry Bailey also dragged up debris in a net close by and believed he had snagged the stern of the Don which had a gimble flag staff on it. The present location of these items is not known. There is a rumor that some items may have been given to Bowdoin College but this has not been proved.

I read in an old newspaper that the Don had been owned by a man in Rumford named Kerr.

This trip in in June 1941 with the Don was apparently the first trip passenger carrying trip Johnson had made in the Don. He had previously owned and run a boat called "Mruka". Johnsons deckhand has testified that Johnson removed the stove from "his other boat" and installed it on the Don. The Mruka had been owned by James H. Kerr, a wealthy Rumford contractor and investor, who had at one time been vice president of the Mt. Zircon Spring Water Company. He died in Sept. 1940. The Mruka was built in Nova Scotia and is said to have been a Jonesport design. What happened to the Mruka is not known but it definitely was not the same boat as the Don.

HISTORY OF THE CABIN CRUISER DON

A preliminary investigation at Boston Massachusetts in 194 indicates that the cabin cruiser Don was built more than 40 years ago for a Mr Bond of the Waite & Bond cigar company and was named the "Elcid". Its registered number was E-590 and it was a Cabin Trunk type vessel with a full glass cabin. The vessel was 42 feet in length with a 10 feet beam and was driven by a 10 horsepower two cylinder Murray & Tregurtha Motor.

The investigation also showed that the estate of Mr Bond sold the Elcid on May 6th 1919 to William Boyce Newhall of Lynn Massachusetts. The boat was moored at the Lynn Yacht Club and on his death, the estate of Mr Newhall sold the vessel August 1st 1928 to Chester Porter of Lynn Massachusetts who continued to moor the boat at the Lynn Yacht Club for nearly three years during which time considerable work was done on the boat in addition to repainting and the installation of a six cylinder McFarlane motor.

Chester A. Porter was a prominent real estate and insurance broker in Lynn. He was born about 1880 to ex Lynn mayor Thomas Porter and he and passed on 10 Sept. 1948. He was well known yachtsman, builder of boats and had been the Vice Commodore of the Lynn Yacht Club and member of several others. He left a wife Grace and a son and daughter, Donald Porter and Avis Topping. Porter only owned the Elcid for three years.

On June 27th 1931 the boat was sold to Herman Clavel of 238 Forest Street, Medford, MA. and was moored at Point of Pines Yacht Club in Revere, Massachusetts. After approximately one year, Mr. Clavelle sold the boat to Lucifer Ingrassia of 21 Dorset Road, Waban, MA .

The boat continued to be moored at Point of Pines Yacht Club after the sale of the vessel to Mr. Ingrassia, however, the rightful ownership of the boat was generally regarded as vested in Louis Fox of Revere, Massachusetts who was reputedly associated with Edward Langes, another member of the Point of Pines Yacht Club.

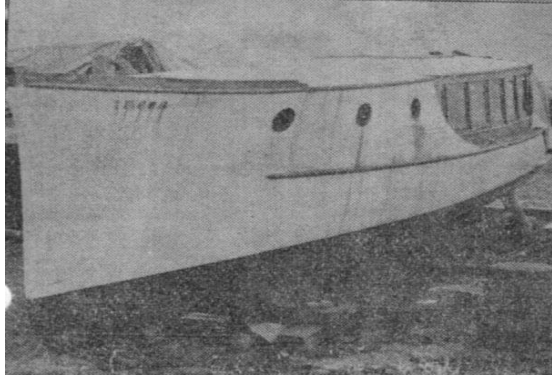
Mr. Ingrassia and a man named as "Dodo Henry" along with Paul Johnson were known to be engaged in smuggling activities of the Maine and Massachusetts coasts.

After the boat had been operated for some time from the Point of Pines Yacht Club it was taken to Black Rock, Nahant by Mr. Ingrassia where it was moored for several years becoming weather beaten and damaged from lying idle and semi submerged. Paul Johnson salvaged the boat [circa 1936] and brought it to Maine at which time the boat was not seaworthy.

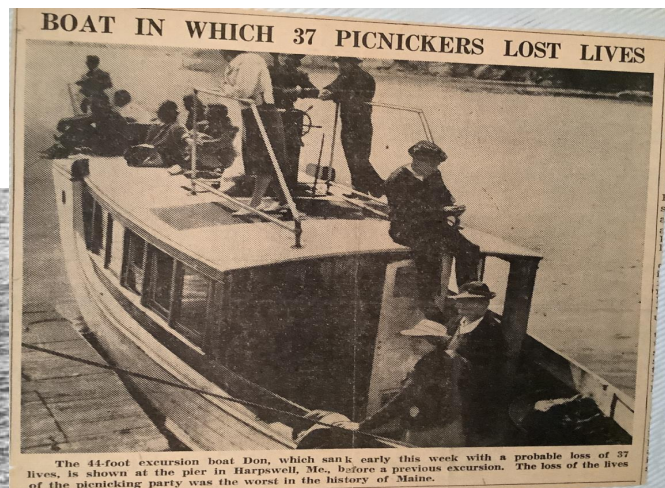
Records of the office of the US Collector of Customs for the port of Portland reveal that the motorboat Don reg. #1-F-666 was registered June 10th 1936 as a new boat powered by a 50 horsepower Red Wing motor. The boat was registered in the name of Consuelo Johnson. Consuelo Johnson, since divorced and remarried, was the wife of Paul Johnson at the time the boat was salvaged in 1931. Investigation indicates that money due to Paul Johnson as a federal government bonus was used for repairing the Elcid as it was then known, at the New Meadows River boatyard of Fred Larrabee at West Bath, Maine. At the time the boat was brought to Maine by Paul Johnson he was

employed by Mr. Larrabee as a machinist. This employment covered a period of two years 1936 and 1937 .

After he acquired the boat Johnson removed the glassed in cabin. raised the forward deck to give a free board at the bow of from seven to eight feet in place of the original free board of from four to five feet. The boat was refastened where needed and new ribs were sistered in to accommodate the raised cabin.



The records of Mr. Larrabee show that the rebuilt boat measured 44 feet in length and the beam remained at 10 feet and the depth of the boat was six feet and the boat was classified as a torpedo stern cabin cruiser. The rebuilt boat, named don, had considerable work done on it according to the records of Mr. Larrabee, the bow having been raised port[hole] lights were installed at each side of the cabin about four feet above the water line, the cabin timbers were lengthened, it was thoroughly caulked, inside two tanks were located one at each side of the engine which was set a little aft of midships, the chain locker was set up in the bow with a brass manhole plate measuring approximately 19 inches, new bits were installed, the boat was then perfectly sound with no bad wood to be found and it had a cast bronze skeg and rudder. One other change in the Don, which the board of inquiry has discovered, was the installment by Albert Foster of Dyer's Cove of a new vent in the gasoline tank. [Foster only said he helped with install]



On July 30th 1937 the Don was seized by the U S Marshall at Portland and was sold by the Marshall to Morris Sacknoff of Portland on August 11th 1937 for \$585. The Harris Company of Portland in turn, seized the boat on a bill due [from Johnson?] in the amount of \$700 and re-resold it to Johnson who had entered an agreement to pay \$25 a month on the \$700 bill. (unsure how Sacknoff got his money back)

On May 18th 1939 the boat was repurchased by John W. West of 135 Marginal Way, Portland, and on July 26 1940 the boat was again purchased at Marshall sale by Morris Sackoff and on this same day it was resold to Paul R Johnson of East Harpswell.

Throughout these transactions the power of the vessel is continually listed as 50 hp on the records of the United States Customs for the Port of Portland.

The former Mrs. Paul Johnson, now Mrs Williams, has stated that in the early 1930s (this would be before Johnson owned the boat) the boat was deliberately sunk at Nahant, Massachusetts in a spite operation. On this occasion the seacocks were opened. She has also suggested that the hull of the boat was mahogany and that the boat was notoriously heavy at the nose before it was rebuilt by addition of a new cabin. This construction of course made the boat still heavier. *[Gertrude Consuelo Johnston Johnson Williams is not called as a witness nor is she listed in the documentation for the investigation so how do they have her statements?]*

By all accounts Paul Johnson was an easy going affable fellow who could charm any and all. My Mother, Marjorie Adams Bridgham, said he was very friendly and use to come to her house when she was a child to see his Uncle Bert (her Father) and take them for a ride in his big Pierce Arrow. Mother also said he was a chauffeur for millionaires in the Bath area when Mother was working down there. . He knew engines. Mother also said he had a girlfriend Sybil " No one ever said if they were married." She had two children by him. Another cousin of his, Murial Adams Sanford said" He could charm anyone. He looked Italian- swarthy, not very tall. Murial's mother, who was rather proper and uptight, loved him. He was charming, glib and talkative. She remembers going to a clam bake he had and he served "Soused " clams. They were cooked in beer. She said he drove for Henry Ford. She would not have been surprised if he had been a rum runner." My Mother also said she wouldn't put it past him if he was a rum runner. His obituary says 'He attended the Auburn schools and Porter Military Academy in South Carolina. He was in the automobile business at Auburn until going to Harpswell about 10 years ago where he started a lobster business."

From an online letter to Stacy Welner in response to her book Tradgedy in Casco Bay.



Paul Johnsons grave in the family plot Auburn, Maine

Waitt & Bond, Inc. was an American cigar manufacturer that was in operation from 1870 to 1969. During the early 20th century it was the largest cigar manufacturer in New England and one of the largest in the United States. Waitt & Bond was established in 1870 by **Charles Henry Bond (1846-1908)** and Henry Waitt. They began manufacturing cigars in a small shop in the Cliftondale neighborhood of Saugus, Massachusetts. In 1902 the business was incorporated in Maine. In October 1917 it was incorporated under the laws of Massachusetts.

On July 7, 1919, workers in all of Boston's major cigar factories walked off the job. On August 13, Waitt & Bond announced that it was leaving Boston and relocating to Newark, New Jersey.

Once in Newark, the company switched from manufacturing by hand to manufacturing by machine. They were able to resume production six months after the strike was called. After Waitt & Bond

adopted the use of machinery, other cigar manufacturers began to follow suit and by 1924 almost every other large cigar manufacturer was either using it or experimenting with it. The switch to machine manufacturing allowed Waitt & Bond to substantially increase its production. This, along with the move to a more central location for distribution, gave the company the ability to go after the national market.

On July 3, 1908, Bond was found dead in a bathtub in his summer residence. Medical Examiner Joseph G. Pinkham ruled the cause of death as drowning and that the death was accidental. However, it was reported that Bond left a note in his bedroom which read, "I have been killed by my friends and enemies. It is more than I can bear. I can stand it no longer. My heart is broken. I leave everything to my wife." At the time of his death, it was believed that Bond's real estate ventures threatened his fortune. One month before his death, all of Bond's properties were placed in the hands of trustees. The Washington Post reported that Bond's dissatisfaction with the trustees' actions may have caused him to take his life.

William Boyce Newhall

When William Boyce Newhall was born on 13 January 1860, in Lynn, Essex, Massachusetts, to William Oliver Newhall and Mary Elizabeth Boyce. He died on 2 May 1928, at the age of 68, and was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery, Lynn, Essex, Massachusetts. He appears to have been a Florist and was not married.

Lucifer Robert Ingraffia

Ingraffia seems to be a career criminal. He is married in New Hampshire in 1934 and divorced in California in 1940. He reportedly has two children. He is mentioned in newspapers of that time for robbery and forgery. His WWII draft paperwork cites his address as Harbor City, Los Angeles and the contact person is his probation officer.

Joseph “Dodo Henry”

Dodo Henry is named in several indictments for being part of a bootleg organization which included the Mayor of Chelsea, Massachusetts in the mid 1920's

Morris Sacknoff

Morris Sacknoff was a Russian immigrant who came to Portland in 1896 and engaged in the waste paper business, real estate and Iron and steel trade. He was a supporter of the Portland Jewish Home for the Aged.

Red Wing Thorobred Marine Engines

Two and four-cycle gas or kerosene powered, water-cooled inboard motors called “Red Wing Thorobreds” achieved world-wide recognition. Orders came from a long list of distributors in locations such as New York, Boston and Newfoundland, Canada. They were a popular and reliable work engine. The 2-cycle were phased out in the late 1920's and the 4-cycle were manufactured from 1 cylinder, 4-5 HP up to 6 cylinder, 200 HP. Many motors were used in commercial fishing. Various governmental agencies also purchased motors, including the Canadian Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard.

