

# La Paz

By April Van Wyke

The La Paz, a ship of Chilean registry, was wrecked in dramatic sea disaster in Mendocino harbor which resulted in the loss of a total of three vessels. The La Paz, a graceful windjammer, was reputed to be the largest sailing vessel to have entered Mendocino Bay up to that time.

On what was apparently a deceptively calm morning, the La Paz, bound for Valparaiso, was lying in port along with the brig Kingsbury and the brig North Bend. All three were accepting cargo. The La Paz was loading a "mixed cargo", which included lumber, and was lying east of the loading zone in order to intercept some stripped logs at the mouth of the Mendocino River. These were intended for use as spars and were being floated down the river.

The Kingsbury and North Bend had entered the loading zone, while the acting captain of the La Paz, Eugene Tablot, lowered one of the ship's boats and went to meet the spars. Enroute to intercept the logs, the ship's boat was struck by what was described as "the heaviest [west] swell...that has been experienced on this coast for many years." The wave literally crashed into the steep-walled harbor. The ship's boat, broadside to the wave, capsized, drowning Captain Talbot and at least one other man.

Waves, increasing in size and force, continued to invade the harbor. Both the North Bend and the Kingsbury set their storm anchors. At two o'clock that afternoon the four men aboard the North Bend, all crew, elected to seek solid ground because the brig was leaking badly. They lowered a small boat and rowed to the south loading chute, clambering up it just in time to escape a huge wave which demolished the chute. The crew of the Kingsbury chose to remain on board their brig to ride out the storm.

The first mate of the La Paz had ordered her anchors dropped at the onset of the storm, hoping to prevent the vessel from going ashore. But she began to drag her anchors during the afternoon and slowly advanced towards the bar at the mouth of the river. At some point the four year old son of Captain Chazelles, who with his widow remained aboard the La Paz, was lowered into a small boat in a desperate attempt to get him safely ashore. The boat overturned and the boy drowned. The La Paz was finally pushed onto the bar and those remaining on board--including the owner of the ship, the wives of Chazelles and Tablot and Tablot's infant daughter--climbed into the rigging to try and escape the waves sweeping the deck. Meanwhile, in spite of the many attempts to get a line to the ship, the two women and the mate were knocked overboard by a swinging boom and drowned.

The Kingsbury had held her anchor all afternoon but by 4:30 p.m. she too went on the bar, close alongside the La Paz. An attempt had been made to maneuver her into the river, but it was unsuccessful. After rolling on the bar for some time, the Kingsbury sheered close enough to the cliffs for those on board to get on shore. Five minutes later she grounded on the rocks. At about 6 p.m. the North Bend also struck the rocks and was wrecked.

Somewhere between fourteen and seventeen people, depending upon which account of the tragedy is consulted, remained on board the La Paz at nightfall. By 3:00 a.m. the vessel had washed up to the bluff with the flood tide and ropes were finally lowered. The survivors, including the child of the mate, were brought up. The La Paz soon after "went to pieces."

At least five people were lost in the disaster of the La Paz. Only one body--that of the Captain's wife--was recovered. The victims were cared for under the supervision of J.B. Ford, agent for Godeffroy, Sillem and Co. in the town of Mendocino. The child, according to one source, was cared for by a Mrs. Ford, then by a Mrs. Hill. A tragedy of great proportion, the La Paz-Kingsbury-North Bend incident has been called "Mendocino's greatest maritime disaster."

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