

# Belle

By Marie Burnett

At 8:24 on the morning of February 5, 1856, nine miles above Sacramento, the steamer Belle's boiler burst.

Earlier that morning, the Belle, Captained by Charles H. Houston, had been waiting for twenty-two minutes in a heavy fog at Sacramento landing. She had on board fifty to sixty men, passengers and crew included, and a cargo of "treasure" and dry goods belonging to Wines and Co. and Pacific Co. Expresses. At 7:22 a.m., Captain Houston told W.J. Eirick, first engineer of the Belle, that he was ready to depart.

Eirick went into the engine room and ordered the fireman, William Green, to fire up, but not to hurry as there was good, dry wood and they were in no particular hurry. He then rang the ready bell. The Belle backed out of the Sacramento landing with sixty pounds of steam.

Eirick then went into the engine room and told the second engineer to carry eighty pounds of steam and no more as it was still foggy and that it was best for the Belle to run slowly. After breakfast, Eirick checked the steam gauge and found there was 86 pounds of steam. He immediately stepped out on the guard to key up a crank pin and was in the act of doing this when the explosion occurred. The time was 8:24 a.m. The Belle, except for about 40 feet of the after portion of the vessel, began sinking immediately.

The Belle's back had been broken by the explosion, her forward part was wholly immersed and not a plank of her main deck was left. Her wheel lay in the water by her side; her pilot house blown to bits left no recognizable remnant. The floor of the main saloon and hurricane deck were both torn in the center, fore and aft, and had collapsed. The main saloon was in "horrid confusion." No berths were standing. Dirty blood-clotted furniture, goods, and wearing apparel was scattered about. There were snapped timbers, broken lamps, curled and twisted iron bars, and human brains "dashed together in strange confusion."

Surviving eyewitnesses recounted that:

Immediately before the explosion a Mr. Mix of Shasta was standing in the main saloon talking with a friend. As he was about to leave, a piece of iron propelled by the explosion struck his friend on the head and dashed his brains all over Mr. Mix's coat..

A passenger named Mr. Alphin says that when the explosion took place, there was a man sitting with a leg on either side of the stove. The stove was forced through the hurricane deck but the man was uninjured.

A Mr. Powell of Colusa had just gotten up from the breakfast table and gone aft to hunt for a seat where he might find some peace, when the explosion forced him through the lattice door of the washroom.

The bartender of the Belle was standing in the vicinity of a number of persons at the time of the explosion. An iron missile cut off a portion of the rim of the hat which he was wearing. The leg of one of his boots was torn from the top to the bottom. Most of the people who were near him were killed.

The steward, Mr. Hyland, was walking through the main cabin aft and his hat, which was on his head, was cut in two. His body was not even touched.

An unidentified survivor states that only a moment before the explosion, one of the waiters politely asked him to leave his seat in the cabin so that he could clean up. He did so and "had got back but a little ways toward the wheel" when the ship exploded.

Dr. Reddick, who owned a ranch on the Yolo side of the Sacramento River, heard the explosion which he reported as sounding "not louder than a small piece of ordnance." He ran to the bank where he saw the Belle sinking, with passengers struggling for their lives as they clung to the floating spars and other portions of the wreck. Dr. Reddick put his boat in the water and hurried to save them. He was the first person at the wreck site.

Two men hung onto the forward portion of the drift and called out to Dr. Reddick for assistance as he approached. Before he could reach them, their strength gave out and they drowned. Dr. Reddick was able to rescue a few of the men he perceived to be in the most immediate danger. By 10:00 a.m. the wreck site was

swarming with onlookers who sought information about friends and family who had left Sacramento aboard the Belle.

The steamer General Reddington, owned by the wood dealers Messrs. Hoag and Co., arrived at the wreck site about 12:00 noon with the Captain of Police, expressmen, reporters, the press and friends. The General Reddington towed the hulk of the Belle to shore where she was made fast to the bank, 1/2 mile below Big Mound. She then returned to Sacramento carrying some of the Belle's dead and wounded. At 1:00 that afternoon, the steamer Gem, which had on board drag hooks and other apparatus for searching the river, arrived on the scene. By then barrels, boxes, splinters, and other fragments of the wreck could be seen floating in the river.

Nothing was left of the Belle but the sides of the upper works and they were hanging bent and torn in every direction. The sides of the hull, from the engine forward, were blown clear out of her. However, all of the cargo belonging to Wines and Co. and Pacific Co. was salvaged and brought to Sacramento on the Gem.

That afternoon, three or four small boats searched the river for bodies, but few were found. There were even fewer survivors. A partial list of her dead would include Captain Houston, mate Ell Sheats, deck hand John White, engineer John Cunningham, and pilot William Shalleros. The explosion aboard the Belle mystified those who sought to understand its cause. There was an inquest held, as to the cause of the Captain's death, but the evidence did not provide an explanation for the explosion. Samuel W. Green, Inspector of Steamboat Boilers and an engineer of seventeen years, testified that he had examined the engine and boiler of the steamer Belle just a short time before the explosion and had found it in good working order. He hypothesized that the explosion was caused by a defect of the iron.

Belle's Captain was a sober and careful man. The coroner's inquest recorded that he "came to his death on February 5, 1856, from injuries received from the explosion of the boiler of the steam boat Belle and from drowning about nine miles above Sacramento.

Leonidas Taylor, who also died as a consequence of the Belle's explosion, was commemorated by a marble monument with the following inscription:

Erected to the memory of Leonidas Taylor, born in the City of Philadelphia on the 3rd of July, 1832. He grew to manhood in the City of Saint Louis and was killed by explosion of the steamer Belle opposite this spot on the 5th of February, 1856. His body was never found. Far distant from those who loved him, the waters of the Sacramento will roll over him till that day when the sea shall give up its dead.

#### Sources Cited

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