

A Mystery Solved For The Good Folks of Liscomb.

By: Will Johnson

As a boy I used to hear my mother telling how four first cousins of my father had been lost in the First World War on a schooner off the coast of Brazil. In my book "Tales from My Grandmother's Pipe", I mentioned the following: "...Quite a few Sabans lost their lives on schooners torpedoed by the German U-boats in World War I. In one case alone my great-grandparents on father's side namely George Rodney Johnson and Sarah Elizabeth Vlaun lost four grandsons at one time on a schooner called the "Bessie A. Crooks", which was lost on January 26, 1917 in the Gulf of Pernambuco, Brazil."

After the advent of the internet someone from Caribbean Consulting posted the entire book on the internet. They never asked my permission of course but that is the way it went.

Last year I received a letter from Mrs. Ruth M. (Rumbley) Legge from Liscomb Canada who is doing a history of her town. I will quote parts of what she wrote to me as her book is not published yet but the story of the "Bessie A. Crooks" is of interest to Sabans as well and to the readers of "Under the Sea Grape Tree."

Mrs. Legge writes: "One of the enduring mysteries amongst Liscomb folk was the disappearance of the "Bessie A. Crooks". The late Allison Pye recalled that often, after church, people would stand and discuss whatever might have become of the Liscomb-owned vessel that disappeared without a trace during W.W.1.



Built at the D.C. Mulhall shipyard in Liverpool, Nova Scotia in 1913, the "Bessie A. Crooks" was a three master ("tern") schooner, a popular vessel at the time. With an official # of 131,203, she measured 112.6 x 28.6 x 10.4 ft. and her registered tonnage was 198.62. Her master, Capt. Arthur Crooks, was also

her Managing Owner, holding sixteen of her 64 shares. He was also part owner of a number of other schooners during his lifetime.

The “Bessie A. Crooks” began a career in the West Indies & Brazilian trade. It was very common for Nova Scotian vessels to transport principally dried fish and/or lumber to the Caribbean islands or South America and bring rum, molasses, sugar and other goods back north. While specific cargoes for this ship are largely unknown, it is likely that many of them fell into these categories. Her first port of call was St. John’s, New Foundland, and from there she sailed to Bahia, a state in Brazil, where she arrived on 26 February 1914, and on to Barbados, arriving 10 April, thence to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and Newcastle, New Brunswick and on to New York. For three years she plied a similar route, between the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, Brazil and the Caribbean, occasionally calling into northeastern U.S. ports.

Capt. Arthur Crooks was listed as her master on every trip she made until the beginning of November of 1916. According to oral history passed down through the Crooks family, his wife, Elizabeth A. “Bessie” (Redmond), for whom the vessel was named, had a dream or premonition that frightened her, and she forbade her husband to go on the next voyage. Be that as it may, while in Halifax, the vessel took on a new master, Capt. Frederick Lorenzo Walley, of Hantsport, Nova Scotia. She left Halifax in late October for St. John’s, arriving there on the 31st and loaded a cargo for Brazil. Sometime prior to 5 December, she set sail once again for southern waters and was never heard from again ... at least not back home in Spanish Ship Bay and Liscomb.

Although Capt. Crooks was not on board on that trip, two Liscomb men were and both were related to him: his younger brother, Seth “Murphy” Crooks and his nephew Kenneth Hartling, both of Spanish Ship Bay. Descendants of Seth Crooks, Sr., who for many years was the lighthouse keeper on Liscomb Island, and his wife Sarah (Robinson), all of the Crooks family were very well aware of the dangers of going to sea, but to have two of their loved ones disappear *such mysterious and unsettling circumstances undoubtedly plunged the entire community into turmoil.*

The world was at war and, as time wore on, the assumption was that the “Bessie A. Crooks” had been sunk by the Germans. After the war, when there was still no word, and they were not among the prisoners who were returned, hopes faded.

And there it stood ...gradually talked of less and less, but never forgotten around Liscomb: “What ever happened to the “Bessie A. Crooks?”. It was one of those enduring mysteries.

With the advent of the internet, research capabilities that would have been totally unimaginable to those directly affected by this 1917 tragedy opened new windows of opportunity. Descendants of the Crooks family and of Capt. Frederick Walley, by then spread far and wide, connected by e-mail through on-line interest groups, and shared the sparse stories told to them of this family tragedy. The posting of a history of a tiny Caribbean island called Saba provided an important breakthrough. The posting is the one referred to earlier.

Pernambuco had been a frequent port of call for the “Bessie A. Crooks” throughout her career. That is the name used by foreigners for the seaport Recife, the capital of the state of Pernambuco; this city is

located near the extreme eastern point of South America. In 1917 it was a city of approximately 190,000 and a regional commerce center with exports that included sugar, rum, cotton, hides, skins, was, fibers, dyewoods, pineapples and other fruit. The schooner had arrived in Pernambuco by January 1917 and was reported departing on 21 January, bound for Barbados ...then as overdue for Barbados ... then as missing.

When contacted by e-mail, Will Johnson, the author of the historical work on Saba, was able to provide further information. No one in Saba knew where the "Bessie A. Crooks" was from or anything more about her, but somehow word had filtered back to the tiny Caribbean island as to what happened to her and when... more than had made it's way back to Spanish Ship Bay. A mere five sq. mi. in area, Saba had a navigation school at that time and a strong maritime tradition.

According to Johnson, Sabans also bought schooners for trading in the West Indies from Gloucester Mass., from Maine and from Nova Scotia. Of the Sabans lost on the Bessie A. Crooks he is sure of four names, Norman Zagers, James Hubert Every, John Henry Johnson, and Lorenzo Johnson (sons of Henry Johnson) and perhaps John Simmons who disappeared around the same time and who is also suspected to have been on board and one or two other Saban sailors.

Johnson goes on: "I also have a remarkable story from Madge and Agnes Johnson, born Zagers. They told me that their brother Norman Elmore Zagers was torpedoed on his way from Brazil. After World War 1 their brother Ralph received a letter from Germany stating that it was from his brother Norman. The Roman Catholic priest at the time, Father Mulder, advised him not to answer the letter as it must be an impostor. Some years ago I saw a documentary on World War 1 submarine operations and understood that the Germans in that war would take crews back to Germany. The family never heard from him again. Perhaps he thought they were not interested and death which escaped him in the first World War took him in the second world war. That is a mystery which hopefully can still be solved if by any miracle records from the First World War survived in Germany."

At last finally there is an answer for the folks of Liscomb "What ever happened to the "Bessie A. Crooks?". Sadly, it has come much too late for the old Liscomb residents who used to pause after services at St. Luke's church to ponder her fate."

It is important to record events of the past. Just this past week, I received an e-mail from a descendant of the Vaucrosson family of Statia who ended up in St.Barths. He had read my article on the internet. He informed me that the Vaucrosson gravesite is an elaborate one on St.Barths and that he will be coming to Saba soon to get more information from me on his great-great-grandfather whose property I now own on the historic Lower Town "The Bay" on St. Eustatius. With this article I have included a photo of the "Bessie A. Crooks" so that our people on Saba can at least see one of the schooners on which so many Saban young men in the past lost their lives. I wrote this article more than a year ago. At the request of Mrs. Legge I delayed publishing it until her book would be ready. I just received word from her that her book is now published so that I can go ahead and share this remarkable story with my readers. Her book " ...shreds&nooks of land" by Ruth M. (Rumley) Legge will be presented on Saturday June 25th, at 2.30 pm at St. Luke's Anglican Church, Liscomb, Nova Scotia. This

book presentation should finally lay to rest for the people of Liscomb the nearly one century old question as to "Whatever happened to the schooner the "Bessie A. Crooks"?"
