

THE CHESLAKEE

A passenger ship - built elsewhere - a heavy superstructure added later - rough seas - a sudden powerful gust of wind - a list to port side and taking on water - a limp back to the wharf - sinking - lives lost.

Most of us have heard about the tragic sinking of the Union Steamship *Cheslakee* at the Van Anda wharf on January 7, 1913.

First-hand accounts tell of Captain John Cockle bravely rescuing passengers, the snapping of the starboard line to the dock, the sinking of the ship within four minutes, and the drowning of seven people (mother and baby, two lady schoolteachers, two loggers, and Chinese cook). It was the only loss of life in the Union Steamship's 70-year history serving BC's rugged coast.

The *Cheslakee*'s hull and main deck had been constructed in Ireland in 1910 and, without a superstructure, she resembled a barge as she travelled around South America to Vancouver on her 89-day maiden voyage.

Wallace Shipyards of North Vancouver constructed the 21-ton superstructure atop the deck but the *Cheslakee* was never re-examined for stability.

Many claimed she was a "tippy ship" with a permanent list to port. Some even refused to travel on her.

Though there were many conflicting rumours as to the cause of the sinking, a Court of Enquiry concluded that the added superstructure was "...heavier than allowed for by the designer".

The *Cheslakee* normally sailed with sea surface less than two feet below the freight deck level. The enquiry concluded that a fierce Malaspina gale (winds gusting 60 - 70 mph) pushed the ship 25 degrees to port side. Seas then flooded in through poorly-secured (or open!) freight doors. The *Cheslakee* was already doomed as she turned back to Van Anda.

It took a whole month to raise the ship and float her to dry dock. Five months later the *Cheslakee* had been cut in half and a 20-foot section added (to improve stability?). To overcome nautical superstition her name was changed to the *Cheakamus* and she served another 25 years.



Westcoast seas are unrelenting and will challenge any design or structural weakness. The *Cheslakee* tragedy brings this reality close to home.