

LOBSTERMAN, BOYS, DROWN HUNTING NEAR HARPSWELL by Paul Downing

The sun, setting through a cloudy haze over Casco Bay, pointed a yellow finger across the path of a single lobster boat on Friday as the craft headed for Harpswell with the evidence that three people had perished the previous evening in the waters of the bay.

Less than 24 hours before, an afternoon of duck hunting had ended in tragedy for the family of Lawrence C. Estes, Jr. The 34-year-old lobsterman, his 13 year-old son and his 16 year-old nephew had been swept to their deaths from the ledges off a little island known by the deceptively peaceful name of West Brown Cow. The solitary lobster boat was returning Estes body to Harpswell after an unsuccessful search by many boats and men for the other two.

Bell buoys along the route of Clifford Moody's boat were set in motion by its wake, saluting it in turn with their mournful cadence as it passed between Bates Island and Eagle Island, by Upper Flag Island and Little Birch Island, between Horse Island and Thrumcap, past Basin Point and up the west side of Ash Point.

The boat glided up to Maurice Moody's wharf on Ash Point, where a silent group of men waited in the last light of day for the boat and its burden. A skiff which had been towed behind the power boat was eased up to the shore alongside the wharf and a shrouded figure was lifted out. Lawrence Estes had come home to Ash Point for the last time.

Five Set Out Thursday

'Buster' Estes was an ardent sportsman, and usually went out on the bay several times during the season to hunt ducks. Shortly after noon on Thursday, he and four others set out in the 37-foot Amy E. for an afternoon's shooting from some of the island ledges. In the party were his 13 year-old son Steven (named for the boy's mother's family Stevens); his 12 year-old son Maurice; his wife's nephew, Harry Jewell, 16, of Wales, and 66 year-old Everett Gatchell, a lobsterman from neighboring Basin Point. Two Brunswick men who had accompanied Estes in previous years, had planned to go with him some time during the week, but were unable to go that day. Gatchell had not planned to go, but accepted Estes invitation that morning.

Towed behind the Amy E. were Estes' skiff, which served as the boat tender, and another boat belonging to Gatchell. Sailing southwesterly straight off Ash Point, Estes left Gatchell and 12 year-old Maurice in Gatchell's skiff near Eagle Island, where the pair were to go ashore and shoot from Eagle Island Ledge. Estes, his other son, and his nephew continued on toward the island known as West Brown Cow.

What happened after that can only be guessed from the evidence left behind by the ill-fated trio. Gatchell and the boy never saw them again.

Strong Sea Running

The two who had been left at Eagle Island did not land; a strong sea was running, and they were afraid of damaging the boat on the rocks. Instead, they hunted from the boat.

Toward dark, with snow beginning to fall, the Amy E. had not returned to Eagle Island. Thinking that the others must have found unusually good shooting and had delayed their departure from Brown Cow, Gatchell started rowing to meet them.

He had not covered much of the distance of a mile or more when the snowstorm worsened. The sea was beginning to get dangerously choppy for the little skiff, and there was a possibility that the boats might miss each other in the falling snow, so Gatchell rowed back to Eagle Island to wait. He had been unable to see the hunters or the Amy E. during the day, because the anchored boat and the hunting party were on opposite sides of the island of West Brown Cow and were hidden by it; in the storm he could not see even the island itself.

Suffering from intense cold, Gatchell and Maurice Estes sat shivering in the boat as the daylight began to fade. They knew Estes would be worried if they were not at the appointed place, so they continued to wait. Finally, Gatchell decided that they could wait no longer. He began the four-mile row home.

A Mile of Open Water

For Judy Warren

Estes would have anchored his lobster boat some distance from the ledges, to avoid running onto the rocks and so as not to frighten the ducks. They would have gone ashore in a skiff, which they would have drawn up on the rocks; there was no means of mooring it.

Several ducks were shot; they were later found with the wreckage of the skiff. There are some people who think one of the boys was out in the rowboat to retrieve the ducks, and the boat was somehow swamped out of reach of the ledges. Others think that someone, probably 13 year-old Steven Estes, an experienced boat handler who tended 50 lobster traps of his own last summer, retrieved the ducks and returned to the rocks. If the shooting was good just then, he might have drawn the skiff up hastily and joined the others instead of waiting until they were free to help him with the heavy boat. The rising tide and waves could later have set the boat adrift.

Left Without a Boat

Either way, the group would have been left without a boat. The Amy E. would have been anchored some 100 yards away, and it would be a cold and dangerous swim if any of them was willing to attempt it. For the time being they were safe, but they would have to be off the ledges before high tide. They would be safe on the island of West Brown Cow itself, but that is as far from the ledge as the boat would have been. They would have to wait for someone to see them and take them to their boat.

That no one came along and found them is obvious, but the snowstorm did come. Darkness was also coming, and the tide.

They shot off their guns to attract attention. At least some of the shots were heard by residents of nearby Cliff Island and more distant Chebeague Island.

Sanford Doughty on Chebeague heard shots at 4:50 p.m., just before dark. He had no idea where they were coming from, however, or what they signified. The tide, which was helping Gatchell in his race with darkness, was even then mounting toward their feet with each crashing wave. Those two shots may have been the last of their ammunition. They could only wait, and hope.

Soon, as they stood together on the highest point of the ledge, the icy sea was swirling around their ankles. Already numbed by the cold spray, they could then survive for only a matter of minutes as the waves crashed ever higher across the rock.

Almost exactly 24 hours later the group of men stood on the shore after Estes' body was brought up from the boat. They were asking each other what had occurred during the last hours on the ledges of West Brown Cow.

Probably Clifford Moody did not fully realize how much he said when he commented: "God only knows."

Lawrence C. Estes was born in Harpswell on June 6, 1922, a son of Joseph and Edna Moody Estes. A graduate of Brunswick High School, he was a lobsterman all of his adult life. He was scoutmaster of the Harpswell Neck troop of the Boy Scouts, and at one time was a Cumberland County deputy sheriff.

He is survived by his widow, the former Amy Stevens, two sons, Maurice Estes, 12, and Theodore Estes 8; his parents, of South Harpswell; and a sister, Mrs. Ralph Lewis of Groton, Conn.

Funeral services were held Sunday from the Brackett Funeral Home, Brunswick, with interment to be in West Harpswell Cemetery.

Steven Estes was born at Bath on May 12, 1943; he attended the South Harpswell School, where he was an eighth grade pupil. He was a Star Scout in Trout 42, of which his father had been scoutmaster for little more than a year.

Harry Jewell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Jewell of Wales, was born at Lewiston on August 24, 1940; his father operates a chicken farm. Among other survivors are two sisters and a brother, Nancy Jewell 12, Harold Jewell 9, and Beverly Jewell, 2.

Fishermen held little hope of ever finding the bodies of the two boys, although the search has continued when weather has allowed. It is thought they would have been swept out to sea by the tide.

Although he expected at every moment to hear the heartening throb of the Amy E.'s engine overtaking them, he wanted to take no chances in case she did not come. He had to reach Upper Flag Island across a mile of open water before dark — their lives might depend on it. "If I don't make Flag Island, I don't make anything," he thought. Once abreast of Flag, the boatman could find his way to Pott's Harbor through a channel well-defined by little islands on each side.

Aided by the same tide which was even then washing inexorably upward toward the top of the ledges off West Brown Cow, the boat arrived at Moody's wharf shortly after 5 p.m. the snowy gloom had just faded into darkness.

The exhausted lobsterman and his nearly-frozen companion slipped and stumbled up the steep pathway from the wharf to the reassuring lights of the Estes house. There they told their story to Mrs. Amy Estes, who had begun to be concerned about her husband's failure to return before dark. Mrs. Estes first tried to reach the boat by ship-to-shore radio. Failing to get an answer, she called the Coast Guard. By then there were less than two and a half hours until the tide would be at full flood.

Lobster boats based at Moody's wharf were not ready to put out into the bay, but their owners began to prepare them to get underway. There were other boats in commission not too far distant, including a number in the large lobster fleet based at Mackerel Cove, Bailey Island, but at that time there seemed to be no cause for undue worry. It seemed likely that the Amy E. was having engine trouble, and her radio was not on. Meanwhile, the wind-whipped tide rose upward and reached its peak at 7:46 p.m. Before then, the ledges around West Brown Cow were being swept by the sea.

As soon as they could make ready, Estes' relatives and neighbors put out to join the Coast Guard in the search. They found nothing, though they searched through the long winter night.

On Thursday evening a helicopter from Brunswick Naval Air Station joined the search for the missing hunters. Among them was Clayton Johnson, of Bailey Island, who left Mackerel Cove before dawn on Friday.

Johnson made a swing around Jewell and Green Islands south of West Brown Cow. About 8 a.m. a half mile southeast of Jewell Island, he found one of the things he most dreaded to find, the wreckage of his friend Buster Estes' flat-bottomed rowboat. The bottom was floating in one piece; the sides, held together only by the painter, were about 50 yards away. The sternboard and the outboard motor, which Estes had borrowed, were missing. Several dead ducks were floating nearby.

Amy E. Found Intact

About two hours later Johnson learned by radio that the Amy E., her frayed anchor line trailing behind her, had been found intact. The boat had been carried seaward by wind and tide, and was some six or eight miles from the place where she had been anchored off West Brown Cow.

It was obvious that the Amy E. had chafed her anchor line apart and that the skiff had been smashed on a rocky shoal or shore. There was still a slim hope, however, that the three hunters had somehow gained safety on one of the many islands that dot the bay. By late morning, however, even that hope had gone with grim finality.

There were about a dozen boats in the search from South Harpswell and Orr's and Bailey Islands during the day on Friday, besides the Coast Guard. Most of them concentrated in the area around West Brown Cow and Jewell Islands, all of them equipped with some kind of grappling gear. Favored with a clear day and calm seas, they could see quite a distance into the depths.

About 300 yards from Brown Cow the body of Buster Estes was found in 10 feet of water by Charles Bibber, William "Bill Hen" Bibber, Jr., and Ronald LeClair. On a ledge where the party had been shooting, about 100 yards from Brown Cow, searchers found the three shotguns. The shells in them had all been fired, and there were many other fired shells scattered around. There were no live shells found. The duck decoys were also there. The tragic story of what happened on the snow-swept, wave-dashed ledge began to piece itself together, and all hope was gone for the survival of the two boys.

Outboard Motor Found

More pieces of the grim puzzle were found on Saturday when Miles O'Reilly of Cliff Island found the sunken stern board of the boat and the outboard motor midway off the southeast side of Jewell Island below the high water mark, along with seven unused shells. Walter Leeman of Bailey Island found the boat's oars on the shore of Jewell.

A picture of a period of stark terror and an end by drowning is seen by experienced fishermen when all of the pieces of the story are fitted together.