

Thrasher Rock:

By Ivan Bulic and Joyce White

On a warm July evening in 1880, the steam tugs *Etta White* and *Beaver* left Departure Bay with the American barque *Thrasher* in tow. The big Yankee collier was bound for San Francisco with 2600 tons of Dunsmuir coal.



Entrance Island lightkeeper Robert Gray noted the little fleet's passing in his log. He watched the dilapidated paddle-wheeler *Beaver*, a far cry from her 1836 arrival under the Hudson's Bay flag; the first steamship in BC waters. But those days were long gone and the old *Beaver* was now reduced to hauling coal barges.

At 10 o'clock the tugs were passing Gabriola Reef, when the *Thrasher* struck hard on a sunken rock, two miles east of Silva Bay.

For the next 12 hours, the *Beaver* and *Etta White* tried to pull the big ship off. By morning only the bow of the collier was above water. The crews focused on salvaging what they could from the *Thrasher*, now stuck hard on the reef.

The *Thrasher's* master, Capt. Robert Bosworth, estimated his loss at more than \$80,000; an enormous sum at the time. The *Thrasher's* owner, Arthur Sewell of Bath, Maine, sued the tugboat owners, the BC Towing Company and the Moodyville Sawmill Company.

The case was heard in March 1881 in Victoria by the legendary “hanging judge” Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie, first chief justice of the United Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. The case dragged on for months, after which Begbie decided that Bosworth failed to properly instruct the tugboat captains and ruled in favour of BC Towing and Moodyville Sawmill. Sewell appealed.

He hired Victoria lawyer Theodore Davie who took the case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, where in 1884, Begbie’s decision was overturned and the tugboat owners were ordered to pay \$80,000 to Sewell. At the time the case set a number of legal precedents. It also sparked Davie’s political career. He became Premier of BC in 1892.

The *Thrasher*, meanwhile, did not fare as well. Salvors failed to get her off the rocks and focused instead on recovering her gear and cargo. By January 1882, only a few beams were visible of the once proud ship. The site remained popular with salvage divers, who as late as the 1960s, reported finding encrusted iron bolts and anchor chain.

The Dominion Marine Department tried to prevent further wrecks on Gabriola Reef. In 1882 an iron buoy was placed over what was now called Thrasher Rock. But that didn’t stop the Canadian Pacific steamer *Sardonyx* from grounding on the reef in 1886. Unlike the *Thrasher*, the tough Scots-built iron steamer managed to float off on the next tide.

In 1892, the light on Entrance Island was re-aligned to show “a red sector on Gabriola Reef ... intended as a guide to vessels.” But it was not until the early 20 century, and the advent of battery-powered electric lights, that a permanent beacon on a stone tower was finally built over Thrasher Rock.