

Introduction

Sometimes the biggest stories begin with the smallest discoveries. In 2003, research divers with the Office of Marine Sanctuaries of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) came across a small and almost insignificant accumulation of brass sheathing tacks, a few nails grouped together in a cuplike hole in the reef. This might have seemed relatively unimportant were it not for their location. These first traces of a possible shipwreck site were near Green Island at Kure Atoll, the most remote coral reef on the planet, in the geographic middle of the North Pacific Ocean and 1,200 miles across open ocean from the nearest port—Honolulu, Hawai`i. After the nails came the discovery of anchors and cannon and steam-engine equipment; in fact, a whole trail of historic destruction lay beneath the breaking surf. The wreck turned out to be the remains of the navy gunboat USS *Saginaw*, a wooden side-wheel steamer that was lost at this tiny atoll on October 29, 1870, her bones resting underwater for more than 130 years. The survey of the physical artifacts and the history associated with the ten-year service of USS *Saginaw* open a window onto one of the unique maritime narratives of the Pacific Ocean.

The importance of finding such artifacts underwater goes beyond the initial excitement of discovery. The survey of shipwreck sites like *Saginaw*'s, with the application of a little historical and archaeological imagination, is actually a form of time travel. Archaeologists do not see just the encrusted iron or bronze shapes, but watch in their mind's eye the cannons sliding wildly across the deck in the final moments of destruction. They feel the stout wooden hulls being broken apart by the ocean, dropping the copper fasteners onto the reef, and hear the rigging and topmasts crashing down into the waves. Shipwreck sites are often tragic in nature. Over time the artifacts become a unique record of the historic event. So even at the moment of discovery, with a little imagination, it is possible to look into the

past more directly than through any document. The primary physical evidence is a kind of frozen time capsule, slowly becoming part of the reef.

In 2003, I had the good luck to be the lead investigator with the NOAA team diving at Kure, having been inexplicably taken up with the story of USS *Saginaw* a few years earlier. My involvement with the maritime world has something of an obsessive quality, beginning with sailing on my father's boat *Brunhilde* as a young child and continuing through a professional diving and academic career in underwater archaeology and history (indebted to Lloyd Bridges and the old black-and-white television series *Sea Hunt*). I am fascinated with the fluid and ever-changing maritime world, where so many mysteries remain below, typically unseen beyond the flat expanse of the ocean's surface. And I am amazed at how all mariners have struggled to survive on and relate to the sea, for we evolved toward the land and, unlike certain other species, never went back. This relationship between people and the sea is of central importance, for our planet is mostly water, and our connection to and understanding of the ocean is the single most important environmental issue that we face today.

I don't know what it is specifically about USS *Saginaw* that first captured my imagination, but it may have been just the existence of Civil War artifacts there in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean. The Civil War, after all, had been fought exclusively in the eastern and southern states, had it not? What was the navy doing in the Pacific? What were these sailors doing on a remote coral atoll in 1870? What explained the footprint of this site? What was the whole story behind it?

The history of great events is often told only from the narratives of famous admirals during major naval engagements or the movements of large and powerful fleets of capital ships across the world's stage. But even the smallest ships can occasionally do great service in the vast ocean, and history is more than just the combined biographies of famous leaders. The enlisted men serving before the mast tell their own tales, as do the young ensigns and lieutenants just setting out on their first commands at the very beginning of their careers. The daily drills and common sights, and the sounds and even the smells capture the common realities of life at sea that are lost in the grander narratives. And this is particularly true for the maritime history of the Pacific during the mid-nineteenth century for the United States had no great fleet or powerful flagships, or anything more than a handful of young former Civil War officers, to chart our nation's path in that ocean. Frankly, the Pacific Squadron consisted of whatever the east coast could spare. Throughout *Saginaw's* service career, spanning

1860 to 1870, America was decidedly an Atlantic nation, but was also just as decidedly making its way slowly westward, one stepping-stone at a time—a shipyard here, a port there, a lonely American flag far overseas. The wreck of USS *Saginaw* at Kure Atoll, the location of her last mission in the middle of the Pacific, is literally one of those stepping-stones.

The Pacific Ocean one hundred years ago was not the cruising ground of great fleets, but the arena for the humblest of vessels. And the men who served on board those small ships were witness to some of the most important world-shaping historical events in the nineteenth century. It made no difference that they walked the foredeck of a fourth-rate gunboat and not a powerful ship of the line. They saw a Pacific that held vast potential for a young nation.

This is the ten-year story of a small side-wheel steamer, the first vessel built at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in California, America's first navy yard on the west coast. USS *Saginaw* was launched in the days before the American Civil War, receiving her commission in 1860 and setting out for East Asia and the China seas. There the gunboat played a unique role protecting American citizens and property during the incredible turmoil of the Second Opium War (also known as the Arrow War) and the massive internal social upheaval of the Chinese Taiping Rebellion. During her service on the China Station, *Saginaw* called at numerous ports in Japan as well, an empire recently opened to Westerners by Admiral Matthew Calbraith Perry. Conditions in Japan were uneasy at best. Loyal samurai naturally resisted the incursion of foreign merchants and outside powers. *Saginaw* was the nation's new player on the international scene, though with so few ships and men, America was a relatively minor member of the foreign coalition in East Asia at the time.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, *Saginaw* returned to the United States, with the crew and officers in such haste to join the action that they managed to arrive before their own ship, which they had abandoned overseas to the great surprise of their superiors. Rescued from that fate, *Saginaw* stood wartime duty in the Pacific, an ocean often considered a peaceful backwater compared to the naval engagements and blockade duties on the southeast coast. However, the Pacific included a huge stretch of coastal territory, guarded only by a handful of Union vessels. And the treasure-laden Pacific Mail Company steamers carried a continuous stream of gold from San Francisco to the Bay of Panama, from there headed east over the mountains by rail and then onward to New York. This was the critical Pacific communication route, the marine highway to the Atlantic.

Confederate soldiers shaped their plans to cross the isthmus and capture those steamers, and ships like the tiny *Saginaw* cruised to foil them. And there were other troubles along the coast as well. In France, Napoleon III took the opportunity during the American Civil War to intervene in Mexico, establishing military support for the puppet regime of Austrian emperor Maximilian I, hoping to end the struggle with the Mexican revolutionaries and create a permanent foothold of European empire in the new world. Naval service on the west coast was not easy.

Following the war, *Saginaw* ventured north. The 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia by the American secretary of state, William Henry Seward, though ridiculed by some at the time as an immense waste of funds, ultimately had enormous consequences for the United States. *Saginaw* headed to the inside passage in 1868 to assist in the early military administration of the new territory and to survey for anchorages and new sources of coal. The land was beautiful but rugged, and the jagged channels, with their treacherous rocks and strong currents, formed a maze of passages. Merchant captains took advantage of the departure of the Russian America Company, leading to a booming smuggling trade in weapons and liquor. *Saginaw* found herself amidst the winter gales and incessant cold rains, and the drunken and disorderly garrison life at Sitka. During the transition from Russian to American administration, conflicts between the new military occupation forces and the native inhabitants were not infrequent, and *Saginaw* was (unfortunately) a part of those as well.

The ship's final Pacific service in 1870 took her far into the vast emptiness, to the end of an uninhabited and remote archipelago. The assignment involved supporting a team of Boston hard-hat divers in their efforts to blast open a channel into the lagoon at Midway Atoll, a strategic but isolated island claimed by the U.S. government only a few years earlier in 1867. It was clear that the nation's government, even back then, recognized the potential of Midway Atoll. At that time, the creation of a coal depot there would have bolstered all of the country's maritime activities in East Asia. It would have fueled coal-hungry ships in their lonely and difficult passages across the largest ocean in the world. Of course, the islands at Midway were later developed into a crucial naval air facility and submarine base, central to offensive operations in the Pacific during World War II, and later on the front line of the distant early-warning system of the subsequent Cold War. In 1870, however, the Boston engineers, experienced in breaking apart solid rock but completely unfamiliar with

the realities of coral reefs, soon gave up their futile battle with the sea and packed up their gear in defeat. The channel was not to be created in 1870. *Saginaw* embarked the sunburned divers and turned her bow for San Francisco, for home. But the ship never arrived at port.

If you had served for ten years on the deck of USS *Saginaw*, the ship would have taken you all the way around the rim of the Pacific Ocean, encountering Taiping rebels, Confederate spies, Mexican revolutionaries, Alaskan natives—and, finally, the clacking gooney birds and oily monk seals of a distant and uninhabited barren island, Midway Atoll. *Saginaw's* service, her life on the Pacific, is a slice of history taken at the eventful and exciting midcentury point. The ship's end is one of the great tragic tales of maritime lore.

While transporting the working party home to San Francisco, *Saginaw* ran aground in the middle of the night, October 29, 1870, on nearby Ocean Island (as Green Island at Kure Atoll was then called). The ship was making only two knots at the time. It is possibly the world's slowest shipwreck, but it was inevitable, nonetheless. At the moment the lookout spotted the surf, the ship was beyond the point of turning back. And once on the reef, the sea turned the ocean swells into crashing breakers, and the dark and quiet night into a chaotic fight for survival. The ship's battered crew salvaged what they could from the disaster and spent two very difficult months on the low sand spit of Ocean Island, while five volunteers made their way in one of the ship's boats across more than 1,500 nautical miles of open ocean in search of rescue. When they finally did manage to come ashore, four died in the surf, leaving the sole survivor to carry word of his castaway shipmates to the local American minister and His Majesty Kamehameha V of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. One hundred and thirty-six years later, the underwater survey of the shipwreck site was completed, capturing new aspects of this story and our maritime heritage that can be discovered in no other way.

The sea was the highway that brought the world to the doorstep of the United States with each and every port touched by USS *Saginaw*. San Francisco was an isolated town on a distant and undeveloped coast, but the wharves of the city were literally the gateway to Hong Kong and Nagasaki, to La Paz and Sitka and Honolulu. And that highway was (and is) an ever-changing passage, one often fraught with hazards. Mariners know that the ocean at all times provides a challenge to the vessels that plough its surface. And, as sailors know, the ocean is consistently intolerant of