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Oct 1965

F111-4A

WE ARE LOST, THE CAPTAIN SHOUTED!

It's a great pity that no one ever has seen fit to regard history as an exact science, or a matter of legal evidence. If more historians and near-historians had done a little soul searching, and said to themselves ("I am about to make a statement; if need be, could I get up in court and prove what I am about to say?" students and historians who followed them would have been spared a vast amount of sorrow. Too many people have picked up a choice little nugget, and without stopping to see if it was gold or brass, have rushed into print with it -- and later on, others, without checking, have accepted it as fact. I call these people The Happy Historians; they are happy because they spare themselves the sometimes wearisome work of verifying their material, or the sadness of discarding it when it turns out to be merely a Tall Tale.

In no field of history is this more true than in maritime history, where you are thrown into contact with seafaring people -- and old sailors' yarns are notorious. The man who says "Do I know the old Wyoming? Why -- I put her in commission!" generally turns out to be a seaman second class who joined her with a draft of recruits the day before she sailed on her maiden voyage. A master mariner from New York -- a delightful chap with a VanDyck beard, a broken nose and a cauliflower ear; he had once been chief mate in the four-masted bark Daylight -- once handed me some valuable advice about mariners. "Be slow," he said, "to accept the unsupported statements of pelagic perégrinators with poorly developed senses of terminology and exactitude."

