



JOHN JUDSON AMES, editor of the *San Diego Herald*, was in a quandary. He had come to California in the Independent Line's little 593-ton, propeller-driven steamer *Union*, and had formed a warm friendship with her master, Captain James Marks, who was also her part owner. Now Ames had his struggling little newspaper in San Diego; he enjoyed the advertising patronage of the powerful Pacific Mail, and he had taken an editorial stand against "opposition" steamers—which, he hinted, frequently ran only long enough to discourage the Pacific Mail and then leave some luckless outport high and dry.

And now, here he was with his first big local story—the wreck of an "opposition" steamer some 25 miles below San Quintin, Baja California. It was a chance for an editorial field-day; in an era when libel laws were sketchy, editors loved to blame each wreck upon that incompetent ogre the captain, and his wicked and miserly owners.

There was only one catch to it: this was Captain Marks' own ship, and Captain Marks himself had taken the trouble to sit down and write, for his friend the editor, a first-hand account of the wreck. Under such circumstances, could Ames castigate the "opposition"? It was unthinkable—and so the *Union* got, in San Diego at least, what we now call "a favorable press."

The *Union*, Captain Marks wrote, had left San Francisco for Panama on July 2, 1851 on her second southbound voyage after coming to the Pacific Coast earlier in the year. She carried 230 passengers and a considerable amount of gold. At around 3 a.m. July 5, the voyage terminated with great finality among the rocks which strew much of Baja's shore.

Details of the stranding are not clear. There is mention neither of storm nor fog nor other "... acts of God, over which the master has no control." Later, however, a spritely story got around San Francisco to the effect that July 4 had been celebrated aboard the *Union* with such vim that not all of her people were able subsequently to navigate themselves, let alone a ship.

So there was Ames, with the captain's own written account; a survivor (there were no casualties) had brought it up overland from San Quintin, and on July 17 the *Herald* covered the wreck in a big way. Captain Marks praised his passengers for their conduct under stress, and Ames praised the captain for his solicitude and for his courageous handling of some lowly scoundrels who got ideas about the baggage and gold-boxes. The cause of the wreck was left pleasingly vague; Ames commented editorially that it was no fault of the captain and was due, no doubt, either to "a faulty compass, or the man at the wheel steering the wrong course." Either of these, he solemnly assured his readers, could have dire consequences.

The *Union's* back was broken, and little was salvaged. On July 24, the Panama-bound *Northerner* of the Pacific Mail, fortunately with a small passenger list aboard, stopped at San Quintin, where most of the passengers and crew of the wrecked ship were camped on the beach, and picked up passengers and gold. Ames was thus able to close the *Union* saga on this pleasant note:

"Mr. Sam L. Vought of the steamer *Northerner* here please accept our thanks for files of the San Francisco papers and also the 'fixins' necessary for the proper compounding of sundry whiskey punches."

JERRY MACMULLEN
San Diego Historical Society