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SAGA OF THE SCHOONER RUBY A. COUSINS

By Wallace E. Martin

"A new vessel is to be built on the Island (Gunther Island) at the Vernon Yard for Jos. Russ & Company. Euphronious and H. D. Cousins will be the builders. She is to be a two-masted schooner, carrying capacity about 225,000 feet of lumber, and is intended for the trade between this port and San Francisco. She will be built with an eye to speed, and it is reported she will be a smart vessel."

In a day when ship launchings were commonplace, that was all the announcement made in the Weekly Humboldt Times of February 18, 1882 of what was to be one of Humboldt's finest vessels—the schooner Ruby A. Cousins.

Captain L. J. Knudsen

Sending a vessel down the ways was always a major reason for celebrating on Humboldt Bay, so when it was announced that the Ruby A. Cousins would be launched at 3 p.m. Saturday, September 8th of that same year, the spectators gathered early.

The little bay steamer Silva, shuttling between her Eureka dock and the shipyard wharf, carried hundreds of sightseers to the launching. Other hundreds, feeling that they would get just as good a view from this side of the bay, gathered at Baird's Wharf, between D and E streets, almost directly across from the shipyard, to watch the vessel take her first plunge.

Promptly at three o'clock word was given to "block up." There was a hush as little Ruby A. Cousins, daughter of the builder, broke the traditional bottle over the bow and the vessel went down the ways. As the ship's flag was run to the peak, it was followed by cheers from the crowds and salutes from the steam whistles of the mills along the bay, welcoming the newest of the coastal lumber fleet.

The schooner was described as having "a 106 foot keel, 31 foot beam, and 9 foot hold." She was built for $17,000.

The Mendocino Beacon of February 10, 1883 revealed that a master had been signed: "Captain Jacob Petersen is about to resign the command of the schooner Bobolink to accept command of the new schooner Ruby A. Cousins, recently launched at Eureka. For the present she will run on the route between Eureka and San Pedro."

In 1889 the little vessel proved that her builders had kept their promise when they said she was built "with an eye to speed." Under command of a 26 year old skipper, Captain Lauritz Johan Knudsen, father of Kenneth Knudsen, a member of the Humboldt County Historical Society and Oscar Knudsen, the Ruby A. Cousins made headlines when she logged a fast trip between San Diego and Eureka.

"The schooner Ruby A. Cousins is reported to have made the quickest sailing passage between San Diego and Eureka," the Mendocino Beacon of November 9th reported. She made the trip in three days and 21 hours. The quickest previous trip was 4 days, 6 hours.

With a smart vessel like this, the owners of the Ruby A. Cousins didn't hesitate to send her out occasionally with a foreign cargo. In September, 1892, Captain Knudsen cleared Humboldt Bay with a cargo of 3,750 telephone poles consigned to Agiabampo, Mexico.

Tragedy struck twice, within a few months, in the seafaring Knudsen family. On September 30, 1892, Knud Knudsen, second mate on the steam schooner Cosmopolis, was swept overboard from that vessel while she was crossing in over Humboldt Bar.

A few months later, John Knudsen, his brother, a seaman aboard the steam schooner Westport, was brought to the Marine Hospital in Eureka. He died shortly after, a victim of pneumonia.

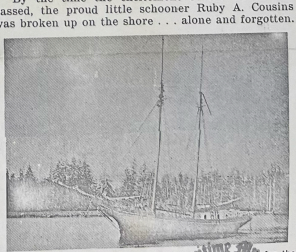
After operating in the lumber trade for nearly 16 years, the Ruby A. Cousins was sold to Captain F. L. Dowell of Seattle. He put the vessel in the Alaskan trade.

In November, 1900, the Ruby A. Cousins, loaded with a general cargo of government supplies for the soldiers at Port Valdez, was wrecked in the narrows at the entrance to Prince William Sound. She was trying to pass through the narrows without the aid of a tug.

Captain F. L. Dowell, her master and owner, was entirely familiar with the waters of the narrows but encountered adverse currents and the vessel rapidly drifted on to the shoals where she was pounded to pieces before any attempt could be made to save her valuable cargo.

The wreck was attended with no loss of life. The crew escaped in small boats and were later picked up and taken to Port Valdez, from which point they took a steamer to Seattle.

By the time the excitement of the wreck had passed, the proud little schooner Ruby A. Cousins was broken up on the shore . . . alone and forgotten.



THE SCHOONER RUBY A. COUSINS held the record for the fastest passage made by a sailing vessel between San Diego and Eureka. With a "bone in her teeth" she made the trip in three days and 21 hours.

—Photo Harry Drinkhouse Collection

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1853
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