

Nauticapedia.ca Project Article

**Messages in Bottles Reveal Fate of SS *Pelican*
(a former Seater, White and Co. Steamer)**

by George Duddy 2018



A Photo of SS *Pelican* could not be found. The vessel shown SS *Olympia* is by the same builder and is believed to be very similar but slightly larger than *Pelican*. - McKeown family photographs, Alaska Historical Society collections, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska, Anchorage

Introduction

In 1897, only ten years after regular steamship service had been established across the North Pacific, the steamer SS *Pelican* disappeared after leaving Puget Sound with a cargo of railway sleepers on her fourth voyage across the Pacific. In an age before marine radio, no messages of distress originated from her, and her fate was not known until several years later as a result of messages found in bottles washed up at widely separated beaches on the Alaska coast.

Personal Foreword

The SS *Pelican's* employment and history is of special significant to me as she was originally built for the Leith pioneering steamship firm of Seater, White and Co, founded by my great

grandfather George Smith Seater in Scotland about 1870. Her story is told from my personal family prospective.

After growing up near Victoria on Vancouver Island and maintaining an interest in nautical matters throughout my life, I was surprised to discover the intriguing and tragic story of this vessel that had visited this area long before our family moved here in 1944. I would be remiss in relating the story without referring to "Aunt Mabel" (my dad's aunt, and my great aunt and who also my god mother, as well as to my second cousin Marilyn and perhaps others). Apart from my dad, she is the only one from the Seater family I knew in person during my youth. Aunt Mabel is my ancestral link to the *Pelican* story as she was the fifth daughter of George Smith Seater, previously mentioned. Further, together with my immediate family, she had a geographical connection to the waters transited by the *Pelican* during her final days. I suspect the reason we ended up on beautiful Vancouver Island is largely related to her influence. She preceded us to the area in 1925 and remained as our only local Seater family connection until her death in 1952.

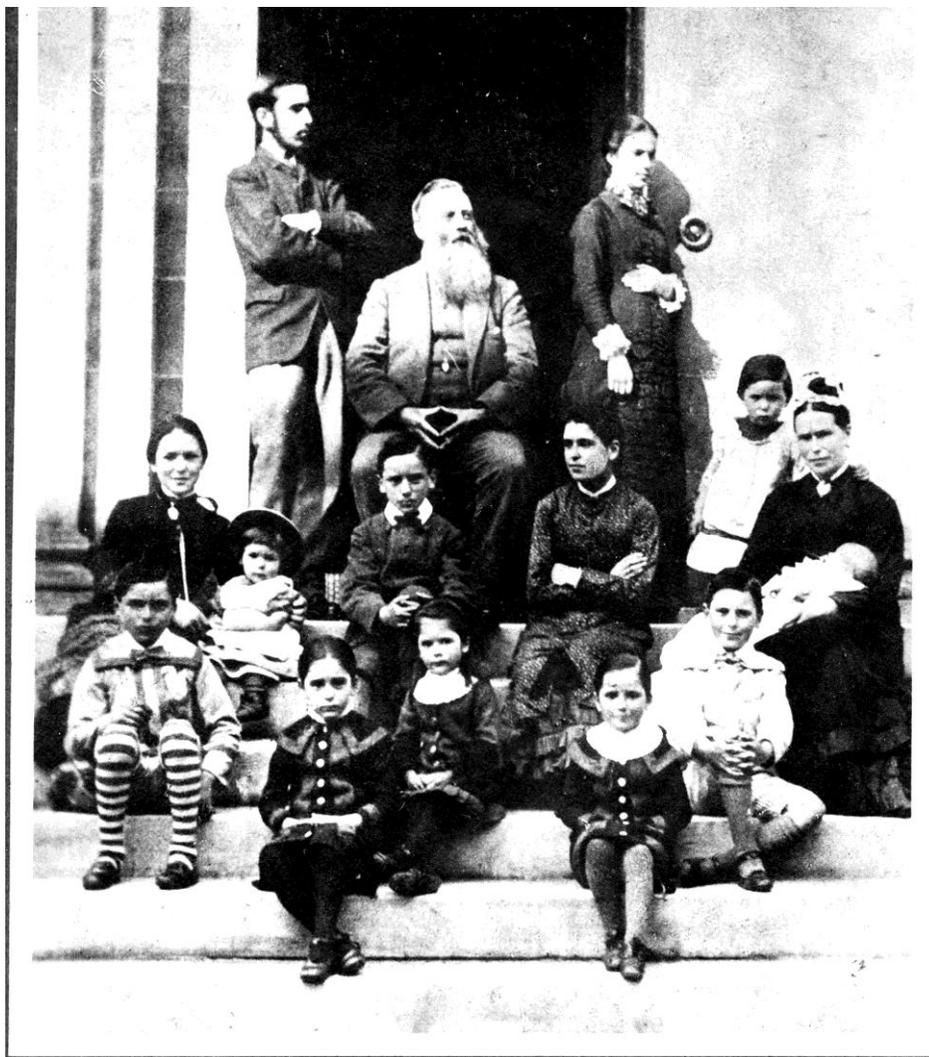
Although she never married, she had a Canadian family. Aunt Mabel came to Victoria as an adopted family member of the Sir Richard Lake family. Known to that family as "Bunty", she actively participated in the raising of their children and remained a vital member until her death. I am informed that her contribution was financial as well as with her time and energy. It was from her Victoria home that this small, quiet but determined woman, communicated and travelled to see members of her original Seater family, helped with the needs of those still living and ensured those who had past were well remembered.

Her connection with the Lake family was curious. While visiting family in Canada about 1915, Mabel was invited to stay at Government House in Regina when Richard Lake was serving as the Province of Saskatchewan's third Lieutenant Governor, then an unpaid position at time (Lake a former farmer and politician from Grenfell had been active in the creation of the Province that occurred in 1905). Mabel extended her visit to help when the children's governess became ill and had to leave for treatment. In the end she stayed and made her permanent home with them - it was basically a process of mutual adoption. In 1925 she moved with the family to Victoria when Lake had to refuse an extension of his appointment. I fondly remember family interchanges between mine and the Lake family and with our respective matriarchs "Aunt Mabel" and "Lady Lake". When Aunt Mabel came to visit our home, driven in the latest edition of Ford car from National Motors by Lady Lake, she always arrived with a huge batch of sausages for us from her favorite Oak Bay butcher.

Seater, White and Company - *Pelican's* Original Owner

Seater White and Company was a creation of my great grandfather George Smith Seater. The unusual name of Seater or Setter is thought to be Nordic in origin and has a meaning associated with a shelter, barn or settlement. Our Seater family roots go back to Westray in the Orkney Islands. I am a descent by virtue of Flora my grandmother, George Smith Seater's fourth daughter, and as such did not inherit the family name. However, both my father and myself retained his first and last names in our given names; he being George Seater Mercer and myself George Harry Seater Duddy.

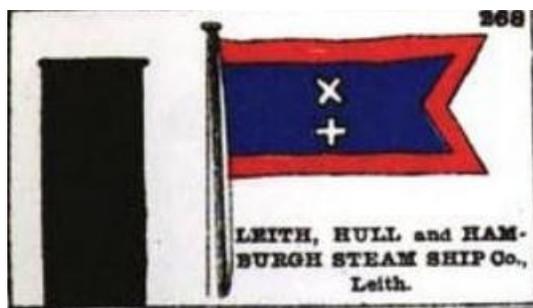
George Smith Seater was born on a small holding in Caithness, Scotland in 1823. About the time Queen Victoria was taking up her reign in London, he moved to Leith, the port suburb of the city of Edinburgh Scotland, and he entered the shipping business as a clerk. His employment in this business at that time was extremely fortunate. As the age of sail was giving way to that of the steam ship, Britain controlled most of the world's shipping as well the related industries of ship building and marine insurance. Seater thrived in the business and learned quickly. By 1851 he was a head clerk and by 1861 a ship owner and a partner in the well-known steamship firm of Leith, Hull and Hamburg Steam Packet Company (the Packet Company) which operated in the North Sea out of offices on Bernard Street in Leith. In 1860 he married Margaret White, my great grandmother, daughter of Captain John White a well-known ships' master in both sail and steam. They soon started a large family that grew ultimately to thirteen children. Their eventual home was a large stone house, Bonnington Bank House, on Ferry Road in Leith.



George and Margaret Seater surrounded by their children at Bonnington Bank House about 1883 My great aunt Mabel, one of the girls pictured in the foreground (along with my Grandmother Flora), lived in Victoria when I was boy. John, the eldest son at the top, farmed in Manitoba. He and Flora are the only ones of the thirteen children with living descendents.

After Seater's marriage to Margaret White, the association between the Seater and the White families and that with these families and the Packet Company was enduring in both personal and business ways. In 1865 Captain John White left his previous employers and joined the Packet Company as a steamship master where he quickly rose to the position of Marine Superintendent. Also employed as a master was Seater's cousin Captain John Seater who unfortunately was lost with his ship SS *Vienna* in huge storm in the North Sea in December 1867. It is not known if Captain White's son John was also employed by the firm but he later joined Seater in the shipping business after Seater established his own firm. Not much is known about the younger White's contributions to the firm.

As opposed to ownership of shares in a limited liability company, ship ownership in the type of firm in which my relatives were engaged involved the purchase of shares of specific vessels. In the British system of ship registration ownership of each ship is (and still is) divided into 64 shares, enabling one vessel to have several owners. One of the owners would be the nominal company owner who undertook the duties of ship's manager (or ship's husband) for the vessel. While I have no direct evidence of my great grandfather's investments, they were mostly likely to have been in the vessels of the Packet Company with whom he was employed.



Lloyd's Distinguished Flags of Steamship Owners 1882 - Leith, Hull and Hamburg Steamship Company Leith, (later Hull and Hamburg Stream Packet Company) - from Goggle

Seater gained considerable experience and made valuable contacts with Victorian steamship pioneers while with this firm. These included his manager James Currie and Currie's brother Donald, who became the controlling owner after leaving the Cunard Line. Later Donald went on to form the Union Castle steamship line. Another important association was with the Barkley family who in addition to ownership in the steam packet company were involved in the ship building firm of Barkley Curle of Glasgow. This firm built many of the Packet Companies ships and all but one of those of my grandfather's firm.

In an announcement in the *Edinburgh Gazette* of May 4, 1869, it is noted "George Smith Seater, Shipping Agent, in Leith, ceased to be a Partner" with the Packet Company, as of December 31, 1968. Shortly thereafter Seater founded his own company which was initially known as Seater

and Company. About 1871 he was joined by his brother-in-law and the firm became Seater, White and Company. It continued with this name until about 1888 when George Smith Seater at the age of 65 retired and took up new pursuits. These included serving on the board of a coal company and as a member of the local Board of Trade. In the 1881 census his occupation is shown as being a "farmer" on Catslackburn Farm in Selkirkshire. After his retirement and until the death of John White in 1892 the remnants of the shipping company operated as John White and Company.

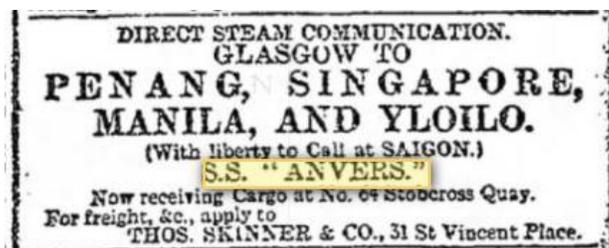


Lloyd's Distinguished Flags of Steamship Owners 1882 - from Google

When he started his own business, Seater did not compete in the North Sea market of his former employer. Instead he sought a totally new one. Together with his associates and with their encouragement, he realized a huge new opportunity had opened up to British shipping with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. His focus was on Ceylon and India. Soon after the canal opened, telegraphic connection from Britain to India was established. Direct communication from Bernard Street in Leith to Calcutta was then possible. With coaling stations available at Malta, Port Said at the entrance of the canal, and Aden; shipping passages employing steamships became much quicker than the traditional route employing sailing ships around the Cape of Good Hope. The traditional route was one that his former employer and now associate Donald Currie was intimately familiar with and participated in. Although the new route through the Mediterranean was fraught with hazards (posed by poor charts and minimum aids to navigation, that resulted in the wreck of many ships), it proved to be a highly profitable one.

During its operation from about 1869 to about 1887, Seater's company employed ten different ships. Details of the vessels are shown in Appendix A. Although the ships were registered at the Customs House in Leith and were managed from there, it is unlikely any of them ever entered that port. Mostly they operated from the Port of London to Calcutta on the service known as the Bird Line. *Pelican* is consistent with the convention for naming the ships of the Bird Line, which all carried pelagic bird names.

employment principally in the Western ocean running now and again to Buenos Ayres", but her tramp voyages appear to be even further ranging than that based on an ad published in the *Glasgow Herald* of May 29, 1896, which indicates she was taking on cargo at Glasgow for a trip to the far east.

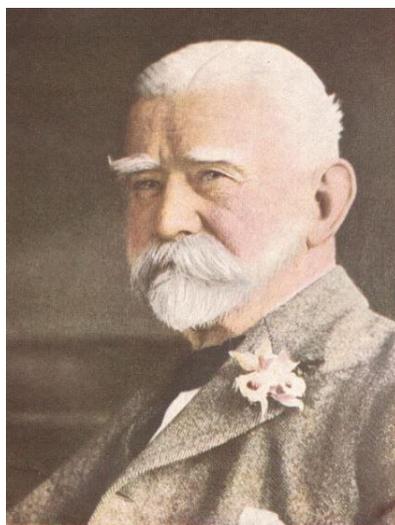


Ad from *Glasgow Herald* of 29 May 1896

Based on newspaper notices announcing shareholder meetings, it seems the owners were facing bankruptcy and liquidation of assets in late 1896. At some point in 1897 Anvers was sold and reverted to British registry under her original name SS *Pelican*. The buyer was a Hong Kong based owner Mr E.S.Whealler, a director for Messrs Dodwell, Carliff and Co. a well known Hong Kong trading company.

Operation as SS *Pelican*, as a Charter Vessel to the Northern Pacific Steamship Company

The Northern Pacific Steamship Line (NPSS) was a creation of brilliant Hong Kong trader and shipping manager George Benjamin Dodwell to employ British ships on the north Pacific to compete with a new service being initiated by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). The CPR service employing new company owned ships operating under the banner Canadian Pacific Steamships (CPSS) started in 1891. These were the first "Empress Liners", the *Empress of China*, *Empress of India* and the *Empress of Japan*



George Benjamin Dodwell "Tai Pan" of the trading house of Messrs Dodwell, Carliff and Co. later Dodwell & Company Limited, London per Wikipedia

Dodwell's business exploits were many and famous but his pioneering shipping trade from Asia to North America is most relevant to this story. It was he who had personally accomplished this for the CPR after the railway had been completed to the coast at Port Moody. Under a three year chartering arrangement employing three idled ex-Cunard liners- the *Parthia*, the *Batavia* and the *Abyssinia* - he organizing service between ports in Japan and China and Canada to interchange goods and passengers at Port Moody and later at Vancouver. The arrival of the *Abyssinia* in Vancouver on 13 June 1887 marked the start of the age of the famous CPR silk trains that sped across North America to deliver their valuable and vulnerable cargoes of imported raw silk to eastern markets and for forwarding to Europe. These trains enjoyed superior running rights over any other trains including the fastest passenger expresses.

When informed by the CPR that his contract would not be renewed because of the creation of their own fleet, Dodwell quickly made alternative arrangements. Refusing an offer to manage the new service for the CPR under a lucrative salary, he immediately instituted the formation of the North Pacific Steamship Company, a British syndicate to employ members' vessels to interchange goods and passengers with the Northern Pacific Railway (NPR) at the port of Tacoma in Washington State. This venture was enormously successful and it turned out Dodwell had the last laugh over the lords of the CPR. In Chapter 6 of S. Jones' book *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading* this report appears concerning his refusal of their offer:

'It is the worst day's work you have ever done, Dodwell, ' Van Horne threatened, 'I will crush you.' Shaughnessy, the CPR 's vice president, added 'Don't you attempt to start a steamship line of your own. If you do, we will run you off the Pacific'



ARRIVAL OF THE PHRA NANG, THE FIRST STEAMSHIP FROM THE ORIENT, JUNE 17, 1892

Historic Photo courtesy Foss Waterway Seaport Tacoma

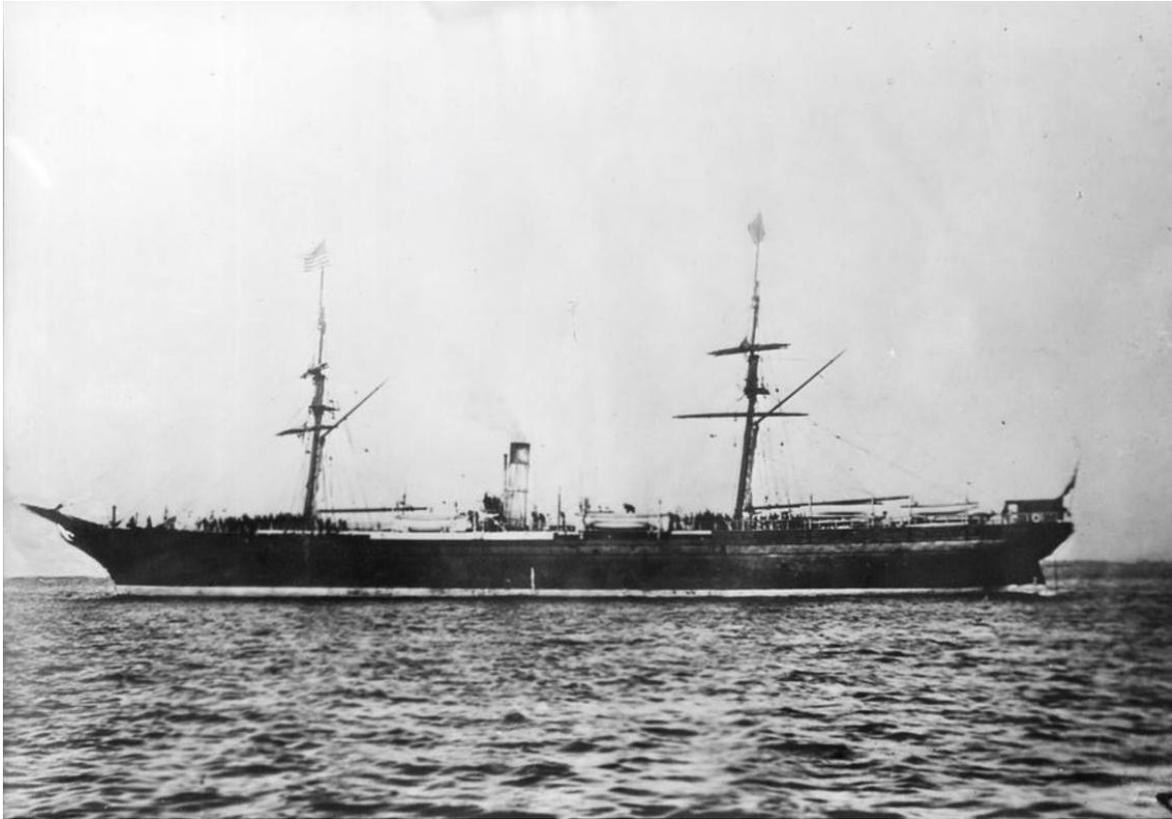
Dodwell was never interested in the owning and operating of steamships, only the organization of passengers and cargos and the agency work for which he received fees and commissions. Most of the stock of the syndicate was held by Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company Ltd. (Fairfields) in Scotland and other of the ship owning and chartering firms which had supplied vessels for the CPR contract and were to supply other vessels required. The president of the firm was Sir William Pearce chairman of Fairfields, who had also been involved with the earlier CPR venture. The NPR were eager to be a partner and an interchange agreement was quickly arranged. Dodwell also opened a branch of his agency to service the new line in Victoria so as to compete in the Canadian trade. He intended to employ two of the former chartered vessels, but even before the ex-Cunarders could be released and prepared for the new service, he opened the trade employing chartered vessels. The first vessel the 270- foot coastal freighter SS *Phra Nang* departed Hong Kong with a cargo for Tacoma on May 21, 1892. She arrived in Victoria on June 15 and Tacoma June 17 attracting considerable attention at both ports. She and sister ships SS *Loo Sok* and SS *Devawongse*, all built by Fairfields for the Scottish Oriental Steamship Company, were early charter ships for the Northern Pacific Steamship Company service.



SS *Loo Sok* - University of Glasgow Archives & Special Collections, Adamson Robertson collection, GB 248 DC 101/0372, used with permission

Unlike the CPSS which operating with a fixed fleet, the NPSS was flexible employing chartered ships, adding them as trade warranted. The *Pelican* was one of these vessels.

In 1887, the year in which *Pelican* was employed, the regular "ticketed vessels" consisted of the following British registered steamships: SS *Victoria* (former Cunarder SS *Parthia*), SS *Tacoma* (former Cunarder SS *Batavia*), SS *Arizona* (the former Guion Line Blue Riband contentor) and sister Barkley Curle-built vessels SS *Olympia* (former SS *Dunbar Castle* Yard No. 317) and SS *Columbia* (former SS *Methven Castle* ,Yard No. 318).



Courtesy UBC Open Collections, Chung Collection, Item CC-PH-0248 - "C.P.R.M.S. *Batavia* at sail " (later to become SS *Tacoma*)

Whealler chartered *Pelican* to NPSS and they began to use her on North Pacific service between Asian ports and the Pacific Northwest. In accordance with articles in the *Victoria Colonist* she made four voyages to the Pacific Northwest in 1897, usually calling in at Victoria to undergo quarantine inspection; discharge Asian goods, including matting material mixed goods and tea and disembark passengers, mainly Japanese and Chinese labourers. Afterwards she proceeded to Puget Sound to discharge similar goods and to take on a return cargo of flour, cotton goods, lumber and timber. Her steaming time across the Pacific from Japanese was about 18 - 20 days. It is interesting on her third voyage all the passengers were Japanese except one American bound for San Francisco. The *Colonist* report of July, 16, 1897 indicated 115 Japanese. Typically, she would make her first call at Victoria to clear quarantine inspection and discharge Asian goods

In accordance with an article in February 8, 1897 of the *Colonist* the steamer *Pelican* 20 days out of Yokohama reached Victoria to discharge 70 tons of her cargo before proceeding to Puget Sound to discharge the bulk of her cargo and to take on cargo reported to be for China. While in Victoria it was found that one of her Chinese stockers was suffering from leprosy. He was detained at the William Head Quarantine Station pending the return of the vessel with her Puget Sound loaded cargo. As reported in the *Colonist* of February 21, 1897, she left the Sound bound for Japan with cargo of 1,503,625 feet (sic) of lumber from the Port Blakely mills valued at \$12,000. Presumably her unfortunate stocker was picked up en route.



Courtesy UBC Open Collections, Chung Collection, Item CC-PH-02528 - The Outer Docks, Victoria. This is where *Pelican* would have discharged passengers and freight on her in-bound voyages. Photo shows arrival of Duke and Duchess of York aboard *Empress of India* 1901

Pelican arrived at Victoria on her second trans-Pacific voyage on May 7, 1897. The *Colonist* reported she discharged 400 odd tons including large quantities of "curios matting etc." Besides freight she brought 64 Japanese passengers who despite a clean bill of health were removed to the William Head Quarantine Station for disinfection and fumigation of passengers and baggage. Thirty of these passengers were destined for Puget Sound and the others for Victoria and Vancouver.

Her third arrival in Victoria was on July 15, 1897. At this time she landed a considerable quantity of mixed freight but principally tea. All of the 115 passengers except one, a Mr Flood who was travelling on to San Francisco were Japanese labourers. All of these except twenty hoped to find employment at canaries of the province. The twenty had been engaged by Mr. Hyashi a farmer on Salt Spring Island who was developing a fish fertilizer business based on exports to Japan.

It is not clear if *Pelican* called at Victoria on her fourth voyage. It was to be her last from Victoria and Puget Sound, as it was planned after that, she would operate on a new service to Asia from Portland Oregon.

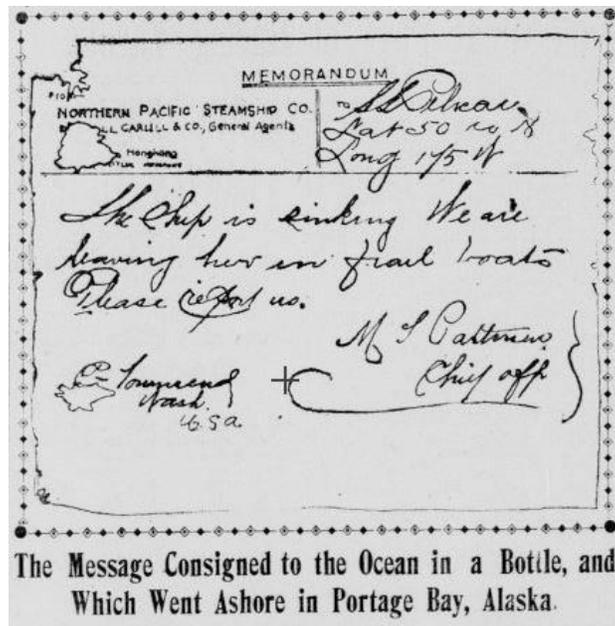
Tragedy in the North Pacific

On her final scheduled voyage and indeed her final ever, *Pelican* sailed from Port Gamble in Puget Sound and presumably after leaving Juan de Fuca Strait set a great circle route for her destination Taku China. She was carrying a cargo of Oregon Pine (Douglas Fir) railway ties which was the very first instance of this type of commodity exported to China from the Pacific Northwest. She was under the command of Captain Gove and her first officer was M.T. Patterson whose home was at Port Townsend at the mouth of Puget Sound. The vessel was never seen again.

Weeks later, ships arriving in the west from Asia reported that there had been huge storms along the route which *Pelican* would have taken. They reported floating debris and even abandoned life boats which were initially thought to belong to *Pelican* but later were found to be of a different type than those she carried. In February 1898, the ship was classified as lost by insurer Lloyds of London, but both Captain Gove's and first officer Patterson's wives rejected any settlements believing that their spouses were still alive.

In early 1899 reports of floating debris consisting chiefly of rail road ties, a unique cargo in those days, off the China coast were reported. It was speculated that they may have originated from the break-up of the wreck of the *Pelican* near the China coast and that they were carried southwards by ocean currents, but as events unfolded this theory proved unlikely.

It wasn't until May 15, 1899 that any definite news about the fate of the *Pelican* was discovered. Amazingly, a note was found in a bottle on a beach on the Aleutian Peninsula near Kodiak Alaska signed by her chief officer indicating the vessel was sinking and the crew was taking to lifeboats. It was written on stationery of the Dodwell and Carlill & Co. Trading Company (later Dodwell, Carill & Co., Ltd.) and signed by first officer Patterson. Incredibly the bottle was found more than 900 miles north-northeast of the of the reported abandonment site of 50°N, 175°W.



From *San Francisco Call* May 31, 1899

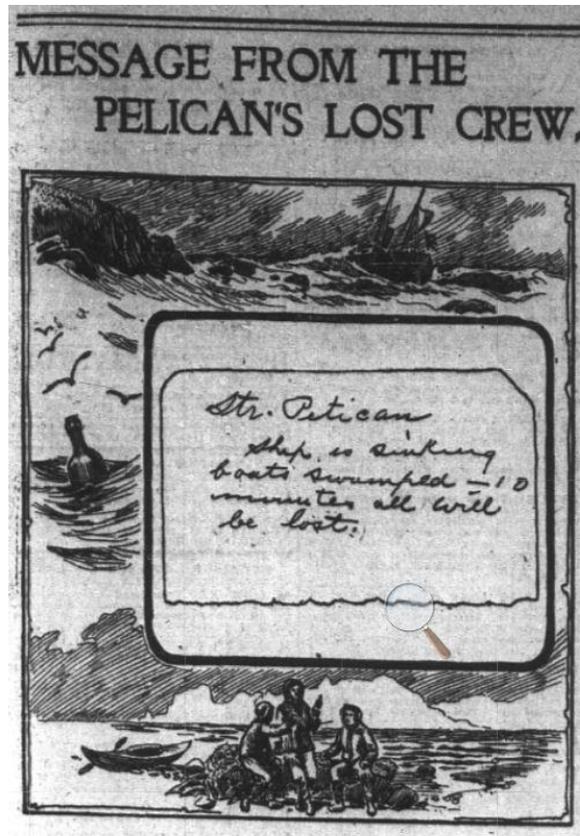
Many newspapers published accounts of this bottle washing ashore. One of the most complete, which contained a facsimile (shown above) of the note, was published in the *San Francisco Call* of May 31, 1899. The full text of the article assembled from clipping segments is included as Appendix B.



Map showing Locations of Bottles, Wreckage and Location of Foundering

Remarkably in August 1899 as reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of October 20, 1899 a second bottle containing a message from the *Pelican* was found. A lot of wreckage including a stool was also found, recovered by natives on the northeast shore of Unamak Island. The article opened with the following statement:

"There can be no longer any doubt regarding the fate of the British steamer *Pelican* which foundered near the Aleutian Islands, off the coast the coast of Alaska, and her crew, all of whom perished in the disaster."



From *San Francisco Chronicle* of October 20, 1899

But sadly that may have not been the end of their story. The *Daily Colonist* of September 11, 1901 carried a story of four skeletons found on a beach just above high water mark on the rock shores of Akutan Island during the summer of 1901. The article said they were believed to members of the crew of the *Pelican*. Two of the dead men had uniforms with buttons leading to a conclusion that they were officers of a steamer, which would give credence to a belief that at least some of *Pelican's* crew made it ashore, only to perish in the inhospitable eastern Aleutan Islands.

Conclusion

George Smith Seater (1823 - 1913) embraced the Victorian age and this era (1819 - 1901) likewise embraced him. He was part of a revolution that saw Britain come to dominant world trade and the age of sail being replaced by one of steamships.



Three generations of Seaters: George Smith, his son John and grandson George visiting him from Manitoba in 1902. George's son Edmund who passed away in 2017 was the last blood male descendent using the Seater name - the descendants of one of Edmund's adopted children (of his wife by a previous marriage) still use it.

The remnant of the steam ship fleet he created and once managed was the SS *Pelican*. Built on the Clyde in 1882, she spent her service making wide ranging ocean voyages. In her final years these extended to the west to Montreal and to the east through the Suez Canal to Victoria - from coast to coast in Canada by sea. She sank, believed due to severe storm damage (with tragic loss of human life) at a lonely location in the north Pacific in 1897. Her fate, which for many months remained a mystery, became known only because a member of her ill fated crew wrote an account of her demise on separate pieces of paper, placed them in bottles and tossed them into the sea - an ageless practice of desperate mariners. The fact that even one made it ashore from such a remote location is remarkable. The fact that a second bottle was found on a rocky shore hundreds of miles from the first is miraculous.

Even though ship wrecks were no stranger to the Seater family, they no doubt were horrified and grief stricken when they heard the sad news. Their thoughts likely returned to that of Captain John Seater and the *Vienna* in the North Sea in 1867, as it in many ways mirrored that earlier event. The relatives and loved ones of both vessels would have first endured the long fear and desperation of the lack of knowledge and then after an acceptance of their loss, years

of sorrow and loneliness. The only small difference in *Pelican's* case was that there was some last communication of her fate.

It is amazing to me to realize that this vessel, long before my time, travelled through the waters where my dad and I used to troll for salmon and landed passengers and cargo at Victoria, a port where Mabel Seater made her home. Mabel passed away in 1952 outliving nearly all her siblings. Her remains reside in a pleasant cemetery in Saanich near Victoria, a long way from her original home, but not quite so far as that for a steamer named *Pelican*.

APPENDIX A - SEATER WHITE FLEET

Name	Org	Subsq	Official Number	Owners	Year Built /Owned	B Curle Yard No.	Tonnage Gross	Tonnage Net	Length Feet	Breadth Feet	Depth Feet
Albatross			62285	G Seater & Co, Leith	1869	NA	1031	660	241	29.1	21.9
				Hallings Tatham, Guernsey	1875						
				1879: Missing, sailed Grimsby for Alexandria, with coal cargo and crew of 22. No subsequent trace							
Sea Gull			62289	Seater, White & Co, Leith	1870	200	1580	997	272.6	33	24.5
				1879: Loss Maldives Islands							
Penguin			65765	Seater, White & Co, Leith	1871	212	1741	1123	291.5	33.3	24.6
				1879: Wrecked on Jabal Zuqar Island in the Red Sea on a voyage from London to Calcutta.							
Flamingo			70761	Seater, White & Co, Leith	1875	248	1852	1209	301	33.2	25
				1881: Wrecked in St Margaret's Bay, Kent on passage London for Calcutta. Broke in two.							
Gannet			70789	Seater, White & Co, Leith	1878	282	1824	1187	301.6	33.2	
				1882: Wrecked off Seaford Head on passage Calcutta for London with general cargo 01/01/1882 broke in two.							
Adjutant (1)			79148	Seater, White & Co, Leith	1878	284	1825	1186	301.4	33.2	25
		Duart Castle		D. Currie & Co., London	1879						
				Chr. Furness	1891						
				Pickford & Black, London	1892						
		Oruro			1900						
				Bedford SS Co., London	1915						
				E. Kazi, London	1920						
				Anglo-India & Colonial Nav, Co., Bo	1920						
			Dada Mia Khadwani, Bombay	1923							
				1924: Scrapped in Bombay							
Adjutant (2)			82002	Seater, White & Co.	1880	293	2275	1478	310	35.7	25.4
				A replacement for the vessel sold to Currie in 1880 1884: Wrecked off Fort Tigne, Malta on passage Calcutta for London.							
Cormorant			84923	Seater, White & Co.	1881	300	2255	1466	315	35.7	25.4
				1886: Grounded on Whale Chine, Isle of Wight and abandoned.							
Pelican			84933	Seater White & Co	1882	306	2586	1689	325.1	37.2	27.3
		Pelican		J. White & Co.	1889						
		Pelican		Columbia Steamship Company	1893						
		Anvers		Soc. Columba Belge de Navigation	1893						
		Pelican		E.S. Wheller, Hong Kong	1896						
				1897: Missing after sailing from Port Townsend for Taka with railway sleepers.							
Avocet			87262	Seater, White & Co	1883	319	2747	1792	335	38.2	27.4
				1887: Sank in the Red Sea after hitting a reef on passage Middlesborough for Madras and Calcutta with railways materials.							
NOTES:	Albatross was built by John Key, Esq., at Kinghorn Fife, Scotland.										
	All other vessels were built by by Barkley Curle & Co. Ltd. in Glasgow, Scotland.										
	Yard Numbers shown show the sequence of construction of the vessels in the shipyard.										
	Information compiled from Lloyds List, Scottish Built Ships (clydeships.co.uk) and other sources.										

APPENDIX B

Copy of Text from *San Francisco Call* of May 31, 1899

MYSTERIOUS LOSS OF THE PELICAN SOLVED

Foundered in a Gale Off Alaska.

The first authentic news bearing upon the loss of the British steamer Pelican

was received from Kodiak, Alaska, yesterday by the Merchants' Exchange. It was a memorandum from the chief officer, stating that the vessel was sinking and the crew was taking to the boats. The memorandum was put in a bottle some time in October, 1897, and was picked up on the 15th inst. on the beach at Portage Bay, Alaska, by the master of the sealing schooner Herman and sent to San Francisco.

The memorandum was written on the form used by Dodwell, Carill & Co. (now Dodwell & Co., Ltd.) of Hongkong, agents for the Northern Pacific Steamship Company, and was as follows:

S. S. Pelican.
Latitude 50 north, longitude 175 west.
The ship is sinking. We are leaving her in frail boats. Please report us.
M. T. PATTERSON, Chief Officer.
Port Townsend, Wash., U. S. A.

The letter accompanying the above was as follows:

KODIAK, Alaska, May 18, 1899.
To Merchants' Exchange, San Francisco:
Inclosed please find a letter extracted from a bottle and plucked up on the 15th of May on the beach in Portage Bay, on the peninsula of Alaska. Latitude 57 degrees 34 minutes north, longitude 145 degrees 25 minutes west. It will probably throw some light on the mystery of a missing vessel, probably the Pelican.

F. THUNELL,
Master American Schooner Herman.

The Pelican was an English tramp steamer owned by E. S. Wheeler of Hongkong and under charter to the Northern Pacific Steamship Company. She took a cargo of general merchandise from Hongkong to Puget Sound and then loaded railroad ties at Port Gamble for Taku, China. She sailed from Gamble on October 3, 1897, and was never seen again. On February 9, 1898, she was given up as lost and Lloyds posted her as "missing."

After leaving the Sound, the captain must have taken the "great circle" route to China. The bottle that was thrown

overboard took a northwest course and after covering 420 miles of latitude and 1235 miles of longitude landed on the beach in Portage Bay.

About the time the Pelican went down the Japanese steamer Kagoshima Maru, the barkentine Skagit and schooner Maweema were out in a fearful storm off the Aleutian Islands. The steamer had her cargo shifted and nearly went down, the barkentine was badly battered and the Maweema had to send several of her crew to the hospital when she reached Tacoma, they having been injured during the gale. On March 23, 1898, the British ship Falkirk reached Tacoma from Shanghai and Captain Helmes reported passing a waterlogged lifeboat off the Aleutian Islands. It was a lap-streaked boat and was generally supposed to have belonged to the Pelican, but later the Northern Pacific people after looking into the matter said it was not one of the Pelican's boats. The steamer carried a crew of forty all told and Captain Gove was in command.

The Pelican was built in 1882 by Barclay, Curle & Co. of Glasgow for Seater, White & Co. of Leith. She ran for a number of years on the Atlantic and then was sold, her new owners changing her name to Anvers. She was again sold to E. S. Wheeler of Hongkong, who renamed her the Pelican and placed her in the China trade. She was 233 tons gross and 108 tons net burden, 227 feet 6 inches long, 38 feet 9 inches beam and 27 feet deep.

As a verification of the foregoing, a dispatch was received late last night from Tacoma saying: "M. T. Patterson was chief officer of the missing steamer Pelican. His family resides at Port Townsend."

References and Acknowledgments

Most of the books, websites, archival sources and articles used for reference purposes are mentioned directly in the article or shown as notations on the exhibits and watermarks on the photographs.

The following book were used as sources for the article: *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading* by S. Jones, specifically Chapter 6 *Trade in the Far East: Companies in Hong Kong, China and Japan, c1870-1939* . On-line versions Lloyd's Registers of Ships have been used to help compile ship data as well as the Scottish Built Ships website (www.clydeships.co.uk). Newspapers Publishers Extra (newspaper.com) and the British Colonist (britishcolonist.ca) websites were used extensively for research purposes.

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END

